

---

# stan colbert

# cbc's godfather ?

In the States, the agent is now the pivotal person in the packaging of a film. As a breed, 'agents' are relatively unknown in Canada; the Canadian counterpart does not begin to wield the influence of his American cousin. Increasingly, agents are finding their way North. Some are even settling down. Below, Paul Kelman speaks with Stan Colbert to find out who he is and what he does.

---

by Paul Kelman



Stan Colbert chairs the acting seminar.

It's nearly two years now since Stan Colbert came into the CBC as Executive Producer of Film Drama. In a short time his track record is impressive, not only at CBC, but also within the Canadian film industry. He has been consulted on, or helped develop, over forty Canadian screen-plays. He worked with writers Richard Benner (**Outrageous**), Ian Sutherland (**Rituals**) and Pat Watson (**Who Has Seen the Wind**) among others. He has seen CBC's *Sidestreet* move into the top twenty shows in the network and can boast that every CBC production he's done has been written, produced, directed and acted by Canadians. This is parti-

cularly significant since, up until last June, when he became a landed immigrant, Colbert was an American whose remarkable career had spanned a quarter of a century in show business.

He was born in the lower west side of Manhattan in what then became the very fashionable Greenwich Village. After high school in Washington he took his degree in Journalism at the University of South Carolina and then enlisted in the Air Force as a correspondent in World War II. In 1943, he was back in New York first as a writer, then as a book publisher, who made it possible for Jack Kerouac to get 'On the Road' in print. In the early 1950's at the age of twenty-six, the William Morris agency sent Colbert to California to be head of their literary department. "There, I think, is maybe the most fortunate thing that happened to

---

*Paul Kelman is an actor/director who has worked at the Passe Muraille Theatre in Toronto for the past three years.*



me. It was a job of tremendous responsibility that instantly put me into the most ideal circumstances. I was dealing with the most exciting clients in the business: directors, John Frankenheimer, Arthur Penn, Elia Kazan, writers, Rod Serling, Gore Vidal and actors, Katherine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, Clark Gable. I used to go to the studios every morning and literally live on the sets, wherever I had a client”.

Dealing with screenplays as properties, he was only a step away from becoming a producer. He packaged **The Magnificent Seven** and **The Hoodlum Priest** and started writing and producing himself. He won contracts with Columbia Pictures, Twentieth Century Fox and United Artists working in film and television. In 1968 he became Executive in charge of Production for Ivan Tors studios in Florida supervising feature film and television activities in conjunction with the major studios and all three American networks.

It was when NBC called him up to help with a co-production it was doing up here called *Starlost* that he was first introduced to Canada. Out of this came a dialogue with Twentieth Century Fox, the co-producer of the series. The series didn't do well and Fox partially blamed the lack of good writers in Canada for the failure. When Fox asked Colbert to help develop another series co-produced with Canadians, he insisted they use Canadian writers. “I guess it was symptomatic of a perversity I've always had that made me say ‘yes, providing I can only work with Canadian writers’. Fox said Okay. I came up here; I'd already done a Bible on it, and had open meetings in my hotel room with anyone who had a story. Out of it we got six scripts and it worked”.

Some time later Roy Moore called Colbert asking him if he'd be interested in coming up on a regular basis to work with writers. Moore went to the Canadian Film Development Corp. and it took a full year to arrange for an American consultant to come up three days a month. Colbert found himself spending five days a month here, and then the phone calls started coming from other writers without CFDC grants who wanted help. He now had forty writers. The Ontario Arts Council got wind of this and offered to help pay his expenses.

Colbert was having a love affair with the Canadian writer. Later, when ABC in New York wanted to do a one-shot 90 minute daytime drama called **Can I Save My Children**, Colbert hired two Canadian writers to do the job. It was worth the risk. The show won two Emmy's.

Meanwhile, filmmaker Allan King introduced Colbert to John Hirsch, then head of CBC Drama. “It must have been a day when John had read some bad scripts”. Two weeks later, Hirsch offered Colbert the job of Executive Producer in charge of Film Drama. He accepted on the condition he could still work with his CFDC writers. “I knew what I could do here. It was a predictable success experience”.

Colbert brought with him a new concept of the producer. “Very few people are producers as I understand the word and as I respect the implications of it. The producer is the person who is the custodian of the concept of what's being done, the protector of the talent and the person who is accountable to both the business and the creative people who are involved in the venture. It's a very large responsibility. What I find too much of are people who call themselves producers and only perform one of those functions. You have to be able to do it all”.

This is not surprising considering the difference between an American producer and his Canadian counterpart. The latter spends the bulk of his time looking for money, whereas the former is busy looking for things to produce.

When comparing the networks south of the border to our own, Colbert looks favorably on CBC. “As a place

for a creative person to work, I find more freedom here than at any of the other networks in the States. You can take on subjects and themes and treat them in ways that have less restrictions on you as a creator”. Colbert, however, feels there is not enough programming devoted to Canadian drama. “I've less quarrel at CBC in that regard than I do with CTV or Global. I'm always amazed at the fact that everybody zeros in on CBC for what it doesn't do, and isn't putting more pressure on the other networks to do drama. I don't for a moment believe that CBC had been anointed as the only place for drama to happen. I don't buy it”.

If the industry is to grow, Colbert sees the hope lying with the development of producers and writers. “I find we have all too few producers in this country, and until we have more who are able to function from the very beginning on a project with a writer... not just fund raising but in a total producer function... it's going to be hard as hell to have a permanent industry. For example, I feel that there's far more to be gained by increasing the amount of an Arts Council screenwriting grant to allow for a portion of it to pay for a producer, so that a producer can be subsidized in that same period of time working with the writer. Because in the final analysis, for anything to happen to the piece, there has to be a producer who cares enough about it to want to do something”.

As far as Colbert is concerned, there is definite room here to develop an industry in view of the fact that it no longer exists in Hollywood. “It's less of an industry and more of a place where people have settled in and bought real estate”.

What makes an industry, according to Colbert, is the ability to provide continuous employment for a large number of people. We can say then we have a growing industry in Canada, since more and more are working and more and more films are being made. There is a growing opportunity. “The instant Canadians get over the idea that whatever they want to make has to be either narrow in its content or theme to appeal in this country, or dressed up in funny clothes to appeal in other countries, then they can start to have an industry”.

The emphasis should be on making good films, not marketable ones. A well-made film, then, will find its market any place.

The question then comes to mind; do we need a star system? Colbert says, yes. “We definitely need a star system. We have people now who are recognized in the supermarket, yes, but in terms of bankable names, no, we haven't any. It's an economic situation. You can make stars. Anybody who doubts that a star can be made can just look at Farrah Fawcett – everything but talent. It's the Barbie Doll culture. Here in Canada we have the opportunity to make stars for the right reason – talent. I think it has to happen. The CBC and other parts of the industry have to realize the necessity of stars. First, though, we have to come to grips with whether the public will accept stars. The answer there is that there is no problem in their recognizing Darryl Sittler as a star”.

What makes Stan Colbert happiest is when he is being useful to somebody else and to himself. “I try to perceive a need and try to fill it. The real word is usefulness, not achievement”. His main priority in this country is to find a way to develop producers with a capital ‘P’ ... “not hustlers, entrepreneurs and festival operators, but producers who know their work”.

At the CBC, Colbert's involvement is as much or as little as the needs of the producers under him. He's there when they need him. “You're really there, in a sense, as a Godfather”.