

Vanderberg valedictory

(Letter addressed to Cinema Canada's associate editor)

I was in my office yesterday afternoon (Feb. 3) when I got a phone call from my Art Director who had just seen your "Vanderberg" article ("Requiem for a Canadian hero," Cinema Canada No. 104). I picked up a copy last night and read it. Really, I'm quite stunned; especially after all the disappointments and letdown.

Today I'm sending copies to various members of the cast and production team, all of whom had believed so deeply in what we were doing and shared in the pain and shock of seeing it all dumped on, and seeing the series dropped when we all thought it would be back.

What angered me the most, not that it really surprised me (nothing a Canadian newspaper TV critic could say could truly surprise me), was to be accused of ripping off Dallas and Dynasty and the like when our concept and inspiration were so totally and utterly Canadian. (If there was a single "inspiration" it was *The Acquisitors*, by Peter Newman.) I appreciate your noting the Canadian-ness of what we were doing, and the Calgary viewpoint. It was fundamental to the whole idea. Rob Forsyth is from Saskatoon and he thinks like a western Canadian, not an American. None of us connected with the series have the remotest interest in those American soaps. Of course while some complained of us trying to imitate Dallas & Co., others were annoyed that we weren't enough like them - too much confusing business detail, not enough violence and sleaze.

There's a great deal I could say about your article. At the moment I'm in a bit of a rush because I'm on my way out of town for a week. Perhaps I should confine myself to sincere thanks. I know it wasn't written to feed our egos. But all of us involved - and a lot of us have been feeling a bit fragile lately - are touched and appreciative.

Meanwhile I see that to others of my colleagues in the same issue you are something of a villain. Well I haven't seen the film in question so I can stay nicely out of that one.

Sam Levene
Executive producer,
Vanderberg,
CBC Toronto

André Carrière

PRODUCTIONS

Sons pour images

Des·Car

7077 MOLSON, MONTREAL
QUEBEC, H2A 3K2
TEL. 1-514-725-0331

The Canadian screenplay debate : two views

I whole-heartedly support Frank Barillaro's call for an assessment of the state of Canadian scriptwriting instruction ("The Canadian Screenplay: A modest proposal", Cinema Canada No 103). Why, indeed, shouldn't we expect our film-school graduates to write saleable scripts of high quality? However, I believe that analysing and defining standards for screenplays, as advocated by Barillaro, is a backward step for creativity.

The case is put that, generally speaking, present courses of instruction fail on two counts. First, they fail to define a standard of excellence in screenplays, and second, they do not provide ways of analysing that standard. It is felt that the student can detect and examine consistent mistakes if they have some way of analysing their script by comparison with an ideal structure.

I have four questions.

First, whose standards would we use? Those determined by writers, producers, the public or (God forbid) a royal commission, would quite probably differ radically.

Could we transcend these standards, and the means of analysis that identify them? I would contend that we have already achieved the ability to create what Barillaro calls the "ideal, conventional film story," but are artistically incapable of consistently moving beyond it. I would need to be convinced that introducing models and standards into scripting courses would not be the equivalent of chiselling prettier gravestones.

Would students be discouraged from working outside the course methods? When new structures or perceptions emerge, the accepted methods tend to censor them as inferior, inappropriate, or incomprehensible. If the entire media are incapable of altering their standards, then developing talent may be forced to pursue work in more receptive centres.

Finally, is analysis itself compatible with creativity? Analysis (from the Greek 'to loosen') is principally concerned with isolating any part of a finished whole quickly and efficiently, and examining it in detail. At most it can only tell us that the pieces can be sensibly related as parts of a whole.

Artistic learning, I believe, arises from discovery by doing. The biographical material on Western artists in any medium, in any documented period of our history, shows us that they learned their craft by copying the masters and studying nature, often feeling their way by trial and error. By introducing analysis as a major component of course instruction, we might well find ourselves turning potential scriptwriters into practising critics.

Far from diminishing the chances to make mistakes, we should be increasing them. Canada lacks a National Film school of the sort found in many European countries, nor can it claim a university with the calibre of instruction of an NYU or UCLA.

In this regard, Barillaro rightly blames the industry for not contributing its share; at present they are merely trading acres of forests for cords of presto-logs. It would greatly help our writers, and their pocket-books in the long run, if a pee-wee league of writing, production

and exposition could be established.

Despite its defects, I do not believe the "read aloud and wait for comments" workshop course should be discarded. I have also had my share of glib, disappointing comments like "It doesn't sound right..." or worse, scattered nods of polite toleration. However, there is one great advantage, especially if the class is very small, the course long, and the students honest and able to develop trust amongst themselves. The participants tend to adopt each other's scripts, and support them with well-reasoned criticism, writing tips, or pooling ideas and resource material from other sources.

The one improvement I might recommend for workshops is to have student scenes acted out, or at least read aloud, by other members of the class. I am constantly amazed how few people actually hear their own scripts. The other writers would also gain by the experience of being in the actor's robes, of having to stumble over stilted, dry, or tangled dialogue.

Of far greater damage to scriptwriters is the absence of published screenplays of Canadian films, English or French. Certainly one may read the writers of international repute and learn much about scripts. But if we are to achieve excellence (and generate revenue in the Canadian film industry) we must have examples drawn from our own works which can be referred to for inspiration as well as instruction.

While I remain skeptical of screenplay analysis, the value of written exercises, mentioned almost as an aside by Barillaro, cannot be doubted. And characterization is the key here. Study people, not methods; analyze emotion, not scene structures. If we are to blow life into the Canadian screen, then surely our first task as writers is to populate our works with people capable of more than just inhaling and exhaling. We must study the sigh, the snort, and the sneeze.

Kenneth Banks
Les Productions Granf
Montreal

I agree with Frank Barillaro in his January, 1984, "Opinion" in Cinema Canada. We do need quality screenplays written in Canada. And I agree that Film schools have a role to play in teaching screenwriting. I do feel, however, that his concentration on the shortcomings of the way screenwriting is taught, is too ambitious an answer, for the shortcomings of the dramatic film problem in Canada.

At York we offer screenwriting at three levels for undergraduates and we currently have half a dozen screenwriting students with writing experience working on their MFA degrees. My first observation about screenwriting instruction is that it is not as difficult as Barillaro suggests. Perhaps because our goals are different. The underlying assumption in all of Barillaro's comments is that teaching screenwriting can spark the type of creativity that will produce exceptional screenplays. I disagree. Courses in screenwriting can

teach students the craft of screenwriting and these courses can accomplish the craft goals quite well.

What screenwriting courses cannot do is to teach would-be writers the *art* of storytelling. Screenwriting courses can teach discrimination between what is a good idea for a screenplay. But screenwriting courses cannot teach a writer that dramatic vitality is a strange blend of the expected and the unexpected, a compression of the extremities of behaviour and feeling, and that the involvement with the story depends on empathy with the characters of the story rather than on admiration for its writer.

The impression that there is something magical about a good screenplay is quite apt. Barillaro feels that magic can be kindled in the classroom. If the film industry rarely ventures into the realm of storytellers - the wonderful novels and short stories of this country - why would the film industry be any more likely to find that magic in the classroom? Or look for those stories in the seminar rooms that house screenwriting courses?

Another implicit barrier to Barillaro's scheme is the dearth of experience of our producers, and the absence of a class of experienced story editors in the dramatic film infrastructure of this country. We have producers who produce and we have story editors who edit, but if these people don't have the developed acumen to recognize the magic screenplay when they read it, it won't matter what we do at the film education level. A producer has to have an eye and ear for the commercial viability as well as the tasteful or tasteless uniqueness of a potential project. A good story editor has to know how to work and how to solve dramatic problems in the promising work of writers who may become good screenwriters.

Finally it is very difficult to write and produce good screenplays in a country where perhaps 100 hours of film drama are produced each year in film and television. The competition is so great that faced with too many choices producers will favour writers they know. We live in a big country with a small market.

What then can the film schools do to encourage as Barillaro puts it, "quality screenplays"? I don't think an anthology of Canadian screenplay criticism is the answer. We can encourage students to learn the craft of screenwriting. We can encourage students to acquaint themselves with film - see everything, past and present, and think about why those great films have worked. We can encourage film students to read. This is not a facetious comment. Film technology demands so much attention and energy that it leaves the student insufficient time to attend to ideas, and to the difficulty of articulating in a stimulating way, those ideas for film. And we can encourage the film student to study Canadian culture and the Canadian film industry with a critical eye. The film student has as much to learn from the mistakes of his elders as from his own.

Ken Dancyger,
Chairman, Film Department,
York University.