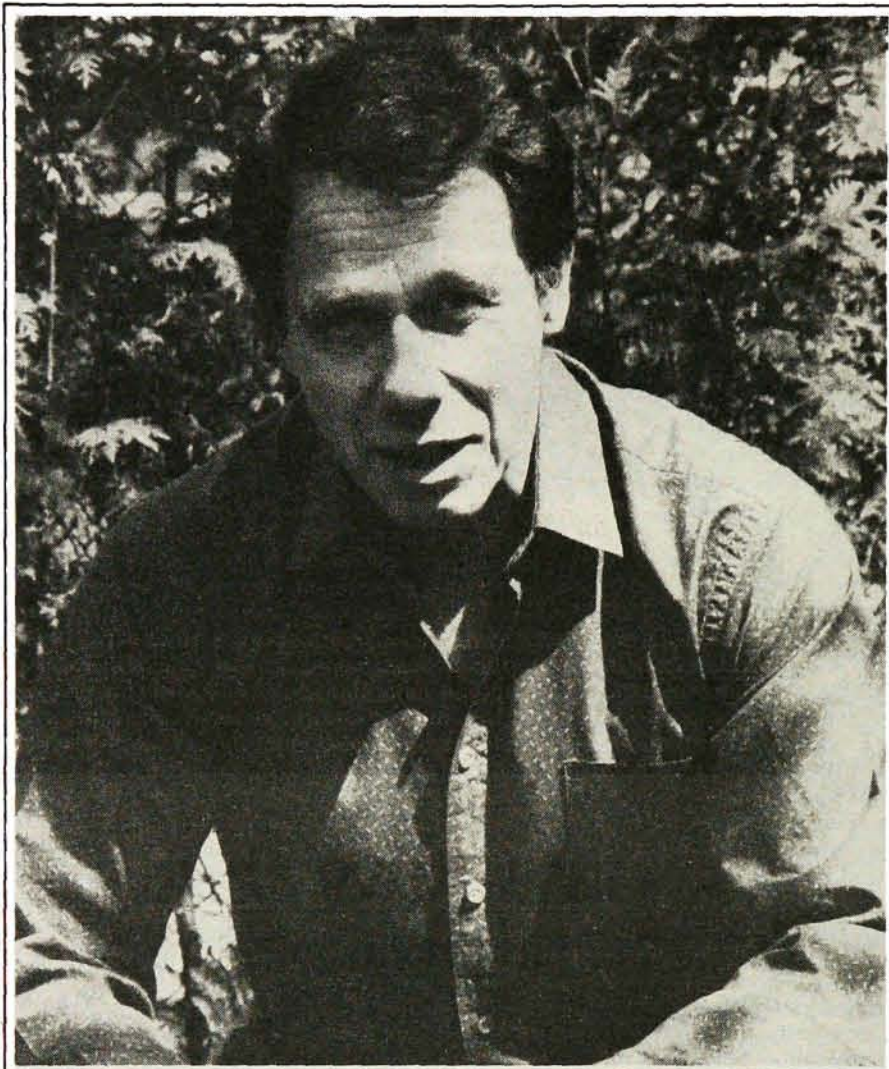


An interview with Charles E. Israel



photos: Moira Goodman

by Lucie Hall

Few people can match Charles Israel when it comes to sheer output. In his prolific writing career that spans over 34 years in both Canada and the U.S., Charles Israel has amassed over 600 writing credits in radio, television and feature films. He has also published six novels and two biographies. In addition he has served as story consultant to hundreds of aspiring screenwriters hoping to develop their craft. To those who know him or who have been helped by him he is affectionately referred to as the "Godfather" of the Canadian screenplay.

In recent years Charles Israel has been contracted to write *Louisiana*, a Canada-France co-production (ICC, Canada; Gaumont, France; HBO, US) of a six-hour miniseries, plus the adaptation of this material into a two-hour theatrical film. As well, Israel has written the four-hour dramatization of Peter Newman's *The Bronfman Dynasty*. Most recently he has worked on eight hours of dramatized episodes for CBC about the Hudson's Bay Company, based on material from Peter Newman's upcoming book, *The Company of Adventurers*. This drama is reportedly the most expensive drama the CBC has ever undertaken to produce.

And yet, for all the supposed glory and accomplishments of his present career, Charles Israel still talks nostalgically about the early days of Canadian radio and television: those years in the '50s that both he and others refer to as the "Golden Era" of Canadian media. From his perspective as a native-born American, as well as from the perspective of a screenwriter who has lived through a lot, Charles Israel provides unique insights as to where we've been as a country in terms of our media, where we're going and how best to develop screenwriters for the upcoming years.

Lucie Hall is an independent producer in Toronto.

The Godfather of the Canadian screenplay

Cinema Canada: What situations or circumstances in your early life lead you to becoming a screenwriter?

Charles Israel: I came relatively late to screenwriting and to dramatic writing. I started out to be a doctor and went through part of pre-med. But physical chemistry, among other things, made me realize that I wasn't oriented in the hard sciences. Anyway, I probably would have been more interested in psychiatry than in anything else and, as a matter of fact, for a while my pre-med major was psychology which I really enjoyed.

But I always wrote since I was a kid. I published quite a bit at the University of North Carolina magazine. Short stories mainly. Bad short stories and little profile pieces, sort of character sketches. But I was at loose ends and after graduating from university I decided to enlist Merchant Marine. The war was

going on and I knew that I could be whatever I wanted to be in the Merchant Marine. What I wanted to be turned out to be engineer in the engine room. It got a little hairy at times because mainly I was sailing Liberty ships and the steel plates were 5/8th of an inch thick which separate you from the water. When attacks were made on the convoy, even if your ship wasn't under attack, you got the depth charges all around you and boooooouuummmmm! And I remember when I went to see *Das Boot* I went alone. After all those years when the depth charges were going on I was still feeling very squirmy!

Anyway, I was in the Merchant Marine for almost three years and I wrote constantly aboard ship. Really really bad short stories. Terrible ones. The thing is that what I didn't know and what most young writers don't know is that

the short story is the hardest form. The very hardest. And everybody starts out that way because it's short. I mean the short film is terribly hard to do. Short stories, I didn't realize it, but you know I should have waited 25 years to write them. Then, when I felt I was confident enough to write short stories I was no longer interested.

Cinema Canada: What was it that attracted you to writing in the first place? Were you trying to develop a perspective in your own life? What were you hoping to achieve?

Charles Israel: It wasn't in the short story. It was in the writing. The writing itself. And the short story just seemed to me to be the best medium at the time. In university I wrote poetry. I never wrote poetry before or since. It was pretty bad poetry. But writing gave me a feeling and I've never defined it and I don't know quite how to put a name to it even now. But I have a compulsion to write and yet that doesn't come anywhere near expressing it. It's like you see things and are affected by them and they're filtered through you and you want somehow to give them a form. And that, you know, is a very naive statement. And yet I think it's as simple as that!

And I still feel the compulsion a lot of the time and it's a good thing because I wouldn't get as much writing done otherwise. A lot of the time the compulsion is the mortgage tacked up on the wall and I don't think that there's anything wrong with that.

Cinema Canada: So after the war you never thought about writing as a career?

Charles Israel: No, I was tempted to go back to North Carolina and get a doctorate in English Literature and teach. Instead, I joined the United Nations to work with the displaced persons in Germany. This was for me a very wild, exciting time and also a tremendous indoctrination and education. I learned I think more about people in the first year-and-a-half after the war than I could have in years and years of ordinary experiences. I learned what it meant, for example, for people who had been through the concentration camps and who had lived by their wits that this is not necessarily an ennobling experience. Anything but! After the war they

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were still living by their wits and they could not easily make the transition between a despotic authority and a benign authority. And you know it was engrained at that point. They had lived by learning how to defeat and exploit authority. That's how they had survived! And they continued! So there was a great dichotomy between my feelings when I came in, the feelings of enormous compassion for all the displaced persons but particularly for my fellow Jews, and to find that I was considered in many ways, because I was an administrator—as much an enemy as the kapos and the S.S. in the camps had been. And this rocked me! It took me a long long time to come to terms with that whole German situation.

I was in Germany until the fall of 1950. Just about five years. Part of that time I went down to Italy and lived there and wrote a novel. It was based on my experiences in Germany. A fairly superficial one. It didn't work. Parts of it did. But what I did later when I finally got up to Canada and got to write a lot of things, I took that novel and made an hour play out of it and it worked very well. It was a love story that centered around the conflict between the U.S. Army and the Jewish displaced persons.

Cinema Canada: Was the novel ever published?

Charles Israel: Parts of it were published years later.

Cinema Canada: That didn't dissuade you from continuing to write?

Charles Israel: No. By that point I had written two or three unpublished novels. The University of Wyoming has my papers. That's where they are now, sitting on a shelf. They'll never be published.

Cinema Canada: Were you discouraged at the time?

Charles Israel: Sure, oh yeah. Very much. I wanted desperately to have an audience. I don't know if the reason they weren't published was they weren't good or just untimely.

Cinema Canada: What do you think of Isaac B. Singer's comment that the writing in itself is the reward for the writer and that it doesn't matter to him if nobody ever reads it?

Charles Israel: Not much! I write for an audience. I want an audience and this is one of the big heartbreaks, not only in Canada but in Los Angeles too and that is, unless you're at the very top, in a very top echelon, maybe about one-tenth to one-quarter of what you write gets on the screen. And that sometimes is a reflection on your writing but sometimes it doesn't have anything to do with it. Some of my worst work has been produced. Some of my best work is still sitting on the shelf waiting to be produced. And this is a great frustration. I want my work to be read as a novelist, and seen as a screenwriter. I don't write in a vacuum. I have great respect for Singer but I wonder if he isn't indulging in the same kind of pose that Faulkner indulged in when he said that he never read reviews. I think that he was god-

damned lying. I don't know why he felt that he had to say that he never read reviews. Some sort of defense or something. So I simply don't believe Singer when he says he doesn't need an audience.

Cinema Canada: So how did you ever break into the business of writing?

Charles Israel: Well, when I left Germany in 1950 I was on my way to India to do more work with the UN. On my way I stopped in Los Angeles to visit my mother who was living there. There I met Mort Fine, an old friend with whom I'd grown up with in Baltimore. He was an already established radio writer. He later went on with a partner to do lots of things including creating the series *I Spy* and they wrote *The Pawnbroker*. So Mort said that I'd always been talking since we were kids about being a writer and he asked me to stick around L.A. and put my typewriter where my mouth was and stop talking and do it. And so I decided to stay on and do just that. Mort taught me a great deal. He was a tough teacher but he taught me a great deal. He used an expression which as I get older I feel more sensitive and defensive about. He said that my dialogue sounded like old people fucking. He got me my start in radio writing.

And in radio I met Stacey Keach, the father of the actor. Stacey was doing a series at that point called *The Texas Rangers* and I worked for Stacey for a year on that. Then we moved over to Columbia and started doing it for television. Stacey was an entirely different kind of teacher but he was another who formed me as a radio and screen writer. He had his M.A. in dramatic arts from Northwestern and loved to teach. When I started to write for television without knowing anything about the screen medium he would say, "No look. You've written this particular thing and now let's go out to the Columbia ranch and act it out". He loved acting and so he'd get up on a horse and say "Now do you see why this dialogue can't really play this scene? What do you think we ought to do?" And he was marvelously patient and we would figure it out and we got to be very close friends. Still are. He taught me. So between Stacey and Mort Fine, they taught me quite a bit. Then later I began to have some of my own ideas about how things should be done and gradually I formulated a craft of my own until now I pride myself on being a damn good craftsman. And I've been on both sides of the desk. I know what makes the script go. I can't always do it for myself. Sometimes I get too subjective and too close but I can take a script and look at it and this where it goes wrong and what will fix it. I know I'm good at that. I think that's craft, experience. That's trial and error over the 34 years that I've been a full-time professional writer.

Cinema Canada: It sounds like you had a golden opportunity by having both Mort Fine and Stacey Keach as your mentors.

Charles Israel: At the time I wasn't so sure it was a golden opportunity to have to work with Mort. At the time it felt like

hell because I felt like I was never going to make it and I remember the first script I sold down there was to CBS. I got this idea for this one thing and told it to Mort who said it was a good idea and that I should write it. I wrote it and rewrote it and rewrote it and rewrote it and I guess there must have been about 14 or 15 drafts and I was beginning to get pretty discouraged. Finally Mort said it was good enough to submit to John Meston who was the story editor at CBS. Then John went to work on it and there were even more drafts! But finally I sold it and it went on the air and that was my breakthrough credit. And you know, it's such a terrible vicious cycle that writers are in and I am very aware of it now with young writers. They try to get a job with a producer and most producers are very nervous and skittish. You know they're dealing not too often with their own money. They're dealing with money and so they're afraid to hire somebody without a track record and the writer who comes to them may be a marvellous writer. But the producer says that the writer hasn't really done anything and that he should come back when he's got some credits. It's an awful thing because how's the guy going to get any credits unless producers hire him? In the end he's got to sell that first script and sometimes a second and a third too. And that's often a matter of breaks. It has nothing to do with talent. I had a break because Mort Fine, Stacey Keach and John Meston and I got along and because they needed something at the time. And so I got a credit. And once you get the one credit it's so much easier to get the rest.

Cinema Canada: How long did you stay in Hollywood?

Charles Israel: I stayed in Hollywood for three years at that point. Then I was writing mainly cop shows. I've never been terribly good at cop shows. I never really liked writing them but I think it was a good discipline. It was an enormous discipline. You have to have a very very tight structure. You can't vary. And it's formula but you had to make it appear as if it isn't formula by making characters come alive.

Cinema Canada: Was it alienating for you at the time to be writing cop shows after having experienced the war and D.P.'s after the war? Did you have to justify to yourself why you were writing something as banal perhaps as cop shows?

Charles Israel: I didn't justify it at that point. My justification was they didn't accept a social conscience at the grocery store. I was writing to make a living. That was my only work. I wasn't doing anything else.

Cinema Canada: But as a person did you feel it was the right thing for you to be doing?

Charles Israel: At the time I had tried to write about Europe and about refugees and about intrigue. And you could not sell intrigue then. You couldn't get arrested with an intrigue story. Nobody wanted it. It just hadn't taken hold yet. When the LeCarré movement came

in, then suddenly it was in vogue, a rage. But then nobody wanted them. On the other hand, *The Texas Rangers* wasn't entirely a cop show because Stacey tried to give it some documentary aspects. We went down and travelled around with the Rangers. Stacey encouraged us to become involved and write stories with some social content. And it was a popular show. It worked. I did *Texas Rangers* for about three years. At the end of the second year there was a program sponsored by the Ford Foundation, organized at UCLA by the head of Anthropology there called The Ways of Mankind. I was hired to do four stories about the Eurock Indians in Northern California.

Then (CBC producer and dramatist) Lister Sinclair was working also on the show and when he came down to California he said to me that if I came to Canada I could write anything I wanted, not only cop shows. I didn't believe him but it turned out to be true. He said that if I came up he'd try and see that I got work. So at the end of 1953 I came up and Lister was marvellous. He introduced me to everyone. And the pay was abysmal at the time. I had to work around the clock to make a living. But I was working and I was writing all kinds of stuff that I had never been able to write before. Suddenly I was free. I was writing sociological, psychological stories mainly for radio. I did a 5-part biography on Freud. I did a case history of a woman with involuntional melancholia as it was then called and how she went through a mental hospital. I did satires. I did documentaries on taxi drivers, about police, about almost everything. I did original plays. I had been thinking about a story about a sex criminal, a child molester and I had done a lot of research on it in California. There was no way an American radio or television show at that point would talk about child molesters. So when I came up here I wrote a play and it was done on the Stage Series for radio. I also wrote it as a television play and Arthur Hiller did it on Canadian television in 1955 which was pretty early for that kind of stuff. Then I made a novel out of it called *The Mark* and it was produced as a movie by Rod Stieger. He made a good film out of it.

At this point in my career I had a great time. I did anything, anything. There was no restriction. Then as I moved into television, there were people like Paul Almond, David Greene and Norman Jewison. And it was a golden age. No question. I mean we were doing all kinds of wild things. And I did a lot of work with Arthur Hiller. So that's why I came to Canada. Because it was the golden era.

I went back to Los Angeles in 1969 because the Golden Age was beginning to cross. What was happening mainly was the CBC had begun to run scared. They had their enormous budget which was getting bigger all the time. Unfortunately most of their budget went into administration. They needed more money. They went into commercials. They began to try to imitate what was going on in the United States and what the Americans were doing. It was a fatal decision. There is no way that the CBC



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can ever do shows as are done by the studios or the networks there. I've worked for both. I know. I know for example that when an hour show is done at Universal you were given six days. You came in and if you were not out of the studio at 7 o'clock the night you were supposed to be, they moved you out. I mean there was no "Oh, oh, oh, I haven't got that shot yet!" Tough! They moved you out. Struck sets. New sets. And that didn't always make for marvellous television but it sure made for a lot of very highly qualified and slick techniques.

And we can't do that here. There's no reason why we should. We don't have the resources. This should never have been our bag. We were doing social problems in drama that the American networks are just doing now and congratulating themselves. We were doing them a full 10 years and 15 years before they even thought that they could do them. And we could have stayed with that and developed that to something beyond what the Americans now have. And we didn't. We blew it.

Anyhow it's at that point that I decided to leave for the U.S. I thought that if I was required to be doing American-type shows that I might as well be paid for it. The pay at that point in Canada was about a third of what you could get in the United States. Now you get paid well up here, even by American standards. Anyhow, I went down.

Cinema Canada: *So you went back to Hollywood in 1969. Was it a shock returning there after all those years in Canada?*

Charles Israel: I had been back for visits to see friends. But it was a strange kind of shock but it was lessened a great deal by the fact that the minute I got there I went to work full time flat out until the industry recession hit in 1970. I was doing *Marcus Welby, MD*. Then Vince Edwards of the *Ben Casey* series had a new series and I did what was the first show for them but the series didn't last very long. The usual 13 weeks. I did a show called *The Psychiatrist* that was interesting. I was doing things on that show that I was doing in Canada in the '50s. I did a story about an Indian boy who married a white girl and then became impotent. So that story would never have been done earlier in the States but now they were suddenly into that kind of genre. I did *The Bold Ones*. That sort of thing mainly.

Cinema Canada: *So what led you to leave L.A. a second time?*

Charles Israel: Like I said, when I returned to Hollywood in 1969, the Americans were into social drama and I was having a great time. Then in 1970-71 one of their periodic depressions hit and I did virtually no work. So I was doing some work up here and there was more and more work opening up for me in Canada and so again it became a kind of conflict of what shall I do. Then enough work picked up in Hollywood and I could have stayed on there. The showbiz recession was over and then there were some changes in my personal life at the time which ended up with me leaving L.A. for Montreal. I lived in

Montreal for 5 1/2 years. It was a personal thing. So I had in a sense to start over again at that point.

Cinema Canada: *Does it really matter where you live when you are a writer?*

Charles Israel: Yes, it does matter. I don't want to live in Los Angeles. I will put it that baldly. In 1978 I had to make the choice whether to move back to Los Angeles or to Toronto. It was a very hard decision and I thought about it for all of three seconds. No question. In the most literal sense of the word Los Angeles is a corrupt town. It's corrupt in values. I have seen it rub off almost imperceptibly but inexorably on many of my friends there. I mean what kind of town is it and what kind of sense of values and morality do you end up with when in an industry where a man is caught with his hand in the cookie jar, you do not want to take his hand out of the cookie jar first of all and say let's keep him around anyhow? And then, when you're finally forced to fire him your competitor picks him up immediately. I'm talking of (David) Begelman. I mean it's bizarre. For many it's lotus land and it's stimulating. But for me it isn't. For me it's stultifying.

Cinema Canada: *With you back in Canada, why couldn't we have successfully duplicated the kinds of television series you were writing for back in Hollywood?*

Charles Israel: We tried. We tried at the time and some of them were quite successful. *Wojeck*, for example, was an extremely interesting series. But here in Canada we discontinue things and there doesn't seem to be any logical reason for it. The Americans on the other hand go to the other extreme. They run everything into the ground which long since should have been discontinued. But we've also tried to be slick and when we do that they don't succeed. We become too interested in stereotypes. Now I know there are people who want to change that and who have made valiant efforts, but I think that they are pretty tired by now and just realize that the effort involved just does not pay off.

Cinema Canada: *But can you develop an intrinsic Canadian programming style when you're in the economic bind of having to please established tastes for American-style programming? Are we not in an economic bind of having to emulate the Americans?*

Charles Israel: The danger is a fallacy. A dangerous fallacy. It's more dangerous than it might seem because it makes sense on the surface. I think that if with Canadian production we continue to imitate we might find, *might* find an immediate sale for some of our product but eventually, because we don't make them as well, we haven't got the resources for example, eventually it's going to be known as schlock filler and we don't need that. We're better than that. I think we have to have the courage to decide that we want to do something and if it happens to be in an American locale, fine. But chances are it will be in a Canadian locale. Give it the locale, the feeling, the texture and it will find a market if it's good. If it's no good, then

forget it anyhow.

I've been thinking and I don't know whether I should talk about it. There is a CBC production that I have seen the executive producer about. His name is Peter Kelly and he has produced this thing called *Gentle Sinners*. It's a very very gentle story but with enough movement and thrust. It's about growing up in a prairie atmosphere and it's not got any of the real clichés or stereotypes of growing up in a rural background. It has a quality about it that I think is distinctively Canadian. It will probably be broadcast in the winter of '85. Eric Till directed it. It's beautifully done. I think it's the kind of thing that we should be doing. And I know it was done on not very much money. Now it had the CBC behind it, but I think that an independent producer could have done it but would have hesitated and said "This is not what the Americans like and I don't know if we can sell it." Possibly on the script they couldn't have sold it. I didn't see the script. But the realization of it was very effective and I think that they will probably sell it in a lot of places around the world.

And, as I hear myself say what I'm about to say, I know I've heard it many times before, as you have too. That is, what we seem to lack is courage. And this is an endemic quality in Canada, I suppose. I don't feel a foreigner anymore, but as a foreigner coming in, I know it used to bother me a lot more. I used to get furious when I first came to this country and people seemed to have no sense of their own worth. They had no sense that here is a fantastic country with a colourful background. Having grown up in the United States, I remember when in our history classes we learned about Lewis and Clark. Lewis and Clark fought their way across the Continent through incredible obstacles and eventually got out to the Columbia River. Now my research leads me to believe and know in fact that the fur traders of the Hudson's Bay Northwest Company used to run back and forth across the country like they were on a commute. And the colourful personalities that we have here make Lewis and Clark look bland by comparison. They're nothing.

Cinema Canada: *Tell me when you first got contacted about working on Peter Newman's Hudson's Bay company project with the CBC.*

Charles Israel: About a year ago I was called by Peter Kelly who is the executive producer of the series. He told me about the project. I had heard vague mutterings about it around the film community and I knew that Newman was writing a book about it. So we discussed it and I said I'd be interested. Then began the negotiations with the CBC. I have a very hard-nosed agent who decided what the fee for that sort of thing should be. After a while the CBC and my agent came to an amicable arrangement which pleased me and so I started work. I met with Peter Newman

who had not yet begun writing the book but who had assembled an enormous amount of material. We spent quite a while discussing the personalities involved in the history of the Hudson's Bay. This was after I had begun to read. I knew nothing, absolutely nothing. Peter Newman oriented me in my readings. He had begun with six or seven hundred books and out of that he had culled a hundred. So I started to read. As I became a little better versed in the subject, we could talk the same language. It was obvious from the beginning that the fictional approach to this material would differ from Newman's very documentary, journalistic approach even though the subject matter would pretty much be the same. Nonetheless we had a few false starts.

Cinema Canada: *Before we continue, tell me what is the scope of this project? How many hours of material were you contracted to write?*

Charles Israel: Eight hours. It started out as eight 1-hours and after discussion we decided on four 2-hours because the one-hour format is a very bitty one, particularly when you're trying to develop a dramatic sweep and also especially when you're trying to create a family. I have created a family which goes from 1790 until about the 1840's.

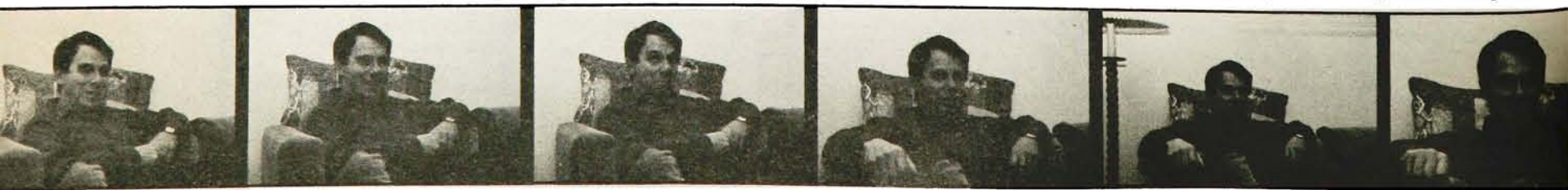
Cinema Canada: *What is your approach to writing about historical figures? How much do you rely on the facts? How much do you invent?*

Charles Israel: I rely as much as I can upon the facts. I feel however that I almost always must use flexibility in time. In other words, sometimes there are two momentous events and for dramatic purposes it may or may not be important for them to appear close together. Let's say they occurred five years apart. Dramatically you may want them to occur a year apart or ten years apart. Then, unless they are of such importance like the beginning and end of World War II, which are universally known dates, then I think you have to take this liberty. I know that there are a lot of historians and historical dramatists who would differ with me on this but this is what I feel must be done with historical material.

What I also try to do is go by the principle that perhaps it didn't happen but it might have. I know that's a fine line but there is no way that you can take straight factual material, unless you're dealing with court transcripts of a particular trial - something that focused. But if you're dealing with a saga taking place over 50 or 60 years, there is no way that you are going to be able to remain dramatically literal. If you do, you're going to have a very literal script, not a dramatic one!

Cinema Canada: *In seeing other films dealing with historical material I am always shocked to see the loose connection between what I know happened and what is shown in the film.*

Charles Israel: If you are doing historical material, I think you have to very opt early for one or another. Either you are going to do a very strict interpreta-



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tion or not. If I were doing something to be used in universities or high schools, I would be much more strict of my interpretation. When I used to work for CBC Schools Broadcast, I tried to be as factual as possible and if I hadn't been I would have been told to be in any case. But when you're developing an entertainment, it is really something which is based on the spirit rather than the letter. And I think that as long as you can stay true to that, it's okay. For example, in the Hudson's Bay, I will be using George Simpson, Lord Selkirk. There will be events that actually happened to them, some good dramatic events that I can make use of. There will also be imagined events as well when they come in contact with my fictitious family which never lived. There's no way that those events did happen. But it *might* have.

Cinema Canada: *In essence you are truer to the spirit than to the fact.*

Charles Israel: That's what I've opted for. There are writers who say that they never ever do any dramatic historical work or docudrama without something to base it on - be it court records or letters or newspaper accounts which quote them. I have never probed into the method that far, but I don't believe them. I don't believe it's possible. Take for example the Woodward-Bernstein method of reporting Watergate which was supposed to be journalistic reporting. A great deal of it was conjecture and imagining. In essence they are dramatic writers.

Cinema Canada: *Going back to the time when you got the Newman project to do, an awesome project in terms of length. Not one feature film but four, all connected. Did you read all of Newman's recommended 100 books?*

Charles Israel: Pretty much, as well as others in addition. I spent the first three months in research.

Cinema Canada: *Did you write notes?*

Charles Israel: Well, we started with a more historical approach, a sweep through a broader period of history. And so I was attacking my first research with that in mind. I made notes and I decided at that point which personalities I wanted to concentrate on. Then later when we changed tack and instead of the straight historical approach, we decided to develop a fictitious family. Then of course I went by my research differently. And all of that preliminary research was still valuable, but then I had to shift focus and come in closer, choosing a 50-year period rather than a 300-year period, which I wouldn't have been able to do in any case. Once I had decided on my four personalities it was easy to do.

These four personalities epitomised certain periods. The material just coagulated around them and crystallized. With my family, it was easy in a different way because, as I would read, things would suggest themselves. I conceive in fragments. That is, I get a fragment of an idea and start to pursue it and it eventually develops into a full-blown scene. These fragments and pieces of scenes I get are my feelings and I've learned to

trust those instincts. Eventually one scene attracts other scenes and they grow and grow and something else would be growing and growing and then the two would meet and either they would fit or they wouldn't. If they didn't fit, one would go. And if they did then that would gradually strengthen and merge as a core entity in whatever segment I was writing.

Cinema Canada: *Does throwing out segments become easier with time?*

Charles Israel: No. It's still hard. Particularly if you can see it and if it's good. It's not as hard to throw out early as it is to throw it out after you've written it. Sometimes it's a real heartbreaker.

Cinema Canada: *What qualities do you look for in a scene for it to be good?*

Charles Israel: My feeling is, and of course I'm not alone in this, is that as I've developed my craft over many years I've come to realize that no scene should ever exist on only one level. Every scene to work must have a linear existence and beneath it at least one or two subtexts so that they're all working together and fermenting together and in the process progressing the structure of the story, never stopping anything dead. A set piece is useless if it stops you dead. Maybe it's beautiful but if it doesn't progress the story, forget it. Throw it out.

Cinema Canada: *Is the ability to write scenes on two or more levels the skill of being a screenwriter?*

Charles Israel: Very much. I'm sure that there are people who get it very early, immediately. It's taken me years to develop the skill. It's only in the past few years that I've mastered or am beginning to master that particular technique. Now it's at the point for me where I can do it without thinking. I instinctively subject any scene I write to that test. If it's a simple linear scene, my question to myself is, "What can I do to it to give it a little depth and richness and still keep the pot fermenting, the story and characters moving?" I mean any of this should also be character revelation. You should know a little more about the principals after each scene. Now it doesn't always work but that's what I'm after.

Cinema Canada: *Okay, once you've settled on the approach you're going to take, how do you go from the conceptualization of the material to the actual script?*

Charles Israel: I myself am a very very strong believer in structure. I will agonize for weeks or even months if necessary over structure. I know this has to be done. I know from experience. This is not any sense of self-righteousness on my part worrying about structure. It's just I know too many times I haven't paid enough attention to structure along about Act II somewhere things begin to fall apart, and almost invariably I find that it's a mistake I've made earlier - it's a structural mistake. So I have to go back and repair it and often enough I have to go back and take the whole thing apart and start all over again. So why not do it

right before you sit down and write? For me a good half of the work is over when I've finished structuring. Then you have fun.

Cinema Canada: *What do you mean by structure?*

Charles Israel: You arrange scenes in the order of their occurrence in the form of what we call in the industry a Step Line which is Scene One, Two, Three, Four, Five etc. It's as simple as that. I would do this for myself anyhow but usually any producer wants an outline. Sometimes they want it in treatment form which I mainly think is a waste of time. But always they want to know where you're going and I think that's a justifiable request because you should know where you're going. If you're not then you're bullshitting, and there are too many people in this industry who can talk the hell out of a story but when they sit down to write, it falls apart because they hadn't structured it. So a producer, a knowledgeable one, will want to know your step line.

And if you're working with a really good, knowledgeable producer who has a sense of story and form, that's a wonderful thing for a writer because the producer is usually not going to try to kill your story but is going to try and help it. So he will ask about things that are not clear to him. He will ask why you have done certain things and this is not the time to be defensive. If you don't know and he's uncovered a flaw then that's time to say "I don't know, let's work on it." And if it's a knowledgeable person, you'll be able to create between you a tighter structure and even at that point most of the time I prefer not to let it rest. I would say "Okay, we've got something pretty good. It works, but let's see if we can squeeze a little more out of it. Let's see if there's any more richness in it." Even then we can make mistakes but it minimizes your chances of making errors.

Then at that point you can sit down and begin to dialogue your script to flesh it out and, as I said, that's the fun part because then your characters can begin to grow but always within the scope of that framework. There's nothing wrong with letting a character run, but you have to be aware that you're writing for the confines of a very restrictive medium. You have two hours. You have one hour and 40 minutes. Or whatever you have, so that your character is going to have to display some of the discipline imposed on him or her by the medium. Now this does not mean that you can't give the character richness within this framework, but you have to be aware of the fact that you must concentrate this richness and that's why I hope that I can be economical in my scenes. That's certainly what I mean when I say everything has to work two or three times for you otherwise it's a wasted scene.

Cinema Canada: *In terms of Hudson's Bay, what stage are you at?*

Charles Israel: I'm about to write my first draft script.

Cinema Canada: *So it has taken you a*

year to get to this stage?

Charles Israel: Yeah. Usually it doesn't take that long. We've had some false starts.

Cinema Canada: *How are you in terms of criticism? Are you sensitive to it? Personally, I think that criticism always hurts.*

Charles Israel: Well, I'll tell you about criticism. I have developed what I know is a certain arrogance about it. I think criticism is invaluable. I really do welcome it. I mean I know that many writers say, "Yes I welcome criticism," but they don't do anything about it. I do welcome it *but* it's got to be from somebody who knows as much as I do or more and I can tell that in five minutes. I've been in this business too long, have spent too long learning my trade and I want to talk about professionals.

Cinema Canada: *It's a profession where everybody feels competent to comment.*

Charles Israel: Unfortunately yes! Everybody watches TV, everybody writes letters, everybody speaks, therefore anybody can write. Sometimes I am appalled, particularly with young writers. The big criticism I have with many young writers who are on one level quite inventive and full of energy and full of the joy of writing, but they won't take the time to learn their craft. And the learning of the craft is not a dull and didactic thing. It's as organic and as exciting as the writing itself. There are certain rules as in almost any art. There are certain rules that you learn and you learn how to break. I mean this is all cliché but you've got to learn them.

Cinema Canada: *What is the most common mistake young writers make?*

Charles Israel: One of the most common things that I run into as an editor is, and this is generally accepted in the profession, that each scene must have conflict. But the trouble is that most young writers will parrot this axiom and say "Oh yes, conflict" but the conflict is not in what they write. The result is that the scenes lie dead and don't move. There's no energy. They are flat and unpredictable. They roll over and play dead. Their conflict exists mainly in the head of the writer, not on the page. These writers say they know all about conflict and what makes a script go, but often enough they don't.

Cinema Canada: *There's a real craft to writing screenplays isn't there? You really do have to go through the struggle of learning it over time.*

Charles Israel: There is no mystique to it, but, on the other hand, it is not a simple thing that you can just move into and do. I mean nobody would ever get into a commercial aircraft with its four jet engines and say "Okay, I can fly" but many many people come to screen writing and say "Oh, of course, that's simple. I can do it!" They can't. Mostly as they start out they are quite awful. There's only one person that I've actually met, I've heard of others, but there is only one person that I know of who had an instinctive sense for screenwriting,



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even though she hadn't started out as a screenwriter but she was already a very talented writer. Alice Munro. I worked with her when I was the story exec on *The Newcomers* and she did a beautiful Irish story. She absorbed the techniques very quickly and although she didn't turn out a perfect screenplay the first time around, it was miles and miles and miles past any usual first efforts. And I've seen a lot of first efforts. I think that's because she has her own inherent sense of structure which she was able in this case to transfer from one medium to another. She is extremely talented and intelligent a writer with a fine sense of character, a sense of story. All the things which unfortunately too many novices lack and don't feel they need to know.

Cinema Canada: *Is writing something that you take with you everywhere in the sense that you live with the material every waking moment? Do you find yourself completely absorbed by it?*

Charles Israel: Well, you know, I've done this for so long that I don't know how to answer that question because I think it's true. I think that every waking moment is permeated with what I'm doing, but I'm not conscious of it. In terms of a writing regimen it's fairly simple and almost invariable. Between 8:30 and 9 a.m. I get to the desk. Usually I work till 11 or 11:30. Then I go out to get the cobwebs out. This I do in any kind of weather. Then I'm back at my desk between 1 and 1:30 and work until 5 or 6 depending when I get tired and when I see a natural break. At the end of the day I like to stop and drink wine and I don't think I take too much of that day into the evening. But often in the middle of some intense problem I will wake up in the middle of the night and start to think. I lie there and think about the script and pretty often a solution to a problem will come to something that seemed absolutely insoluble at six o'clock the evening before.

Cinema Canada: *You put in a long day.*

Charles Israel: I've got to turn out a lot of material. I'm almost always under pressure of a deadline. Graham Greene only wrote 200 words a day because he liked to polish them for immortality. But I get caught up in the deadline and it's involving.

Cinema Canada: *Do you ever get writer's block?*

Charles Israel: I've had writer's block from time to time but usually when I've had time to think about something, I can write anywhere. When I first came to Canada I did a lot of documentaries for CBC and the NFB and I travelled over all parts of Canada, including the North Pole. Just sit me down at a typewriter and give me a piece of paper and a bit of pressure and I can write. Writer's block sets in when I have time to consider something for a long, long time and I have time to get scared of it, to think that the project is too big for me. But to write on command is not so hard. I mean I start to write and, if it's not right I change it, but I start writing. I move.

Cinema Canada: *When you say you move, what does that mean? How fast do you move?*

Charles Israel: Well, take for example the film *Louisiana* which I was contracted to work on. My contract stated that I had to rewrite 9 hours of previously written material down to 6 hours as well as write a screenplay for theatrical release. It was a massive project inasmuch as I had to rewrite quite a bit. I started around the first of July and we were supposed to be on location shooting in early October. So I had to do my 6-hour rewrite and have the first draft ready in six weeks, which I did. The first two weeks of this time I met with the director and the associate producer to suggest changes. So, really, the rewrite took four weeks. With my present project, the Hudson's Bay story, I plan to write out the first draft two-hour script over the next month. That is, I plan to average 8 finished pages a day. Each page will average about 45 seconds of screen time. Some days however I may write as little as six typed pages, other days as much as twelve pages. But my average is 8 pages or 6 minutes a day screentime.

Cinema Canada: *You have stated that by now you have over 500 hours of film credits to your name.*

Charles Israel: Now it must be 600 hours.

Cinema Canada: *Well, during that time there must be a few films that you weren't satisfied with, had some unfortunate experiences.*

Charles Israel: I took my name off *Jack London's Klondike Fever*. I used a pseudonym, R.J. Dryer. My work had been changed so considerably that I didn't want my name on it. Dryer is my mother's maiden name. I use it whenever I'm dissatisfied. The reasons for being dissatisfied can be numerous. Sometimes the blame is easy to fix. It can be a lead actor or actress. It can be the director or producer. Individuals who put their particular stamp on a work and sometimes you feel you have to take your name off. But often it's such a committee medium that you can't easily affix blame. Nobody starts out to make a bad film. It becomes bad through a lot of circumstances and through a lot of personality and if it becomes too bad or let's say if it is too much of a departure from what you feel is your work, then you have to disassociate yourself from it. And there are times when I should have disassociated myself from a piece of work when for one reason or another I didn't and I've regretted it. And yet I've also been in situations where something I've written has been taken by the director and good actors and suddenly they have illuminated what I've written in a way that just amazed me. I could never have done as well myself in terms of pointing them towards an object. They've done it. They've taken it and run and that's when the collaborative experience is at its most rewarding.

Cinema Canada: *That's the flip side of collaboration then.*

Charles Israel: Yeah. But it doesn't flip often!

Cinema Canada: *Have you ever been tempted to produce your own material?*

Charles Israel: Not to produce. I'm not interested in the logistics of producing nor the wheeling-dealing. But what I have felt tempted in rash moments is to become a director. The thing that has stopped me is that I haven't wanted to spend a year to a year and a half in the cutting room learning how to become a director. And every time I say this to directors, they say that it's nonsense and that I don't have to spend any time in the cutting room and I think that they are either being naive or nice. I think that you must cut in a camera. You must know what you're doing. I've seen too many directors shoot around the clock 50 takes to a scene and I go crazy. They just don't know what they're doing. But seeing a director misinterpret my material is what really upsets me.

A while ago a director who will have to remain nameless, a producer and myself were sitting in a story conference and the producer and the director had talked about a particular approach and I said "Well, I'm afraid I have to disagree with that approach." And the director turned to me and said "Well, who are you? You're just the writer!" And he was smiling but I think he meant it. At the same time in this continuing feud between writer and director, I know it is *de rigueur* for a writer to say that directors don't understand and they're insensitive. They understand and often if they don't they'll do everything they can to bring what the writer intended onto the screen. But very often they're rushed. Very often they are insensitive. Very often they have an ego which if possible is bigger than the writer's and they will say that they know how a scene is to be played. And of course it's often the actor who throws the whole scene out the window by rewriting lines for himself. You can get very paranoid about it because when the film is shown and critiqued it's very seldom that you see that something worked because of a script. When it works it's because of the acting and the directing. When it doesn't, everybody blames the writer.

Cinema Canada: *At this point in your career is there enough work of interest to keep you in Canada?*

Charles Israel: First of all, there is enough here in terms of living to keep me interested in Toronto. But if something comes along that I consider that I would like very much to do, it doesn't matter if it is here or L.A. I would prefer to work here but as I'm sure you've heard many times, if you depend entirely on the Canadian marketplace you can wake up hungry one day and perhaps for many days afterwards.

Cinema Canada: *In recent months there has been an ongoing debate in Cinema Canada about the best way of developing new talent, new writers in Canada. You've mentioned over and over again that writing is a craft and that most scripts do stumble on the craftsmanship level.*

Charles Israel: I hear myself talking about learning the rules and I sound very school-teacherish but it's true.

Cinema Canada: *How do you feel about teaching screenwriting in the schools?*

Charles Israel: I agree with Ken Dancyger (chairman of the Film Department, York University) on that one (see *Cinema Canada No. 106*). I remember that he said that you can teach writers a lot of short cuts and techniques but you can't teach them to write. I think that's the essence of what he was saying and I agree with him completely. You can teach anybody a lot of the techniques of film writing. There's no mystique to film writing. I can teach anybody the short-cuts in a very brief time. I can't teach them to write. If they don't have the imagination, if they don't have the characters, if the characters don't have the energy, if they're not straining to get out of the confines that you've put them in, the techniques are going to be dull. And I am just now learning to do that.

I really feel that in the last two or three years I've begun to get some of the energy and thrust and understanding and humour into my characters that I haven't been able to get before. It's just coming now and it's marvellous to feel it. But I know what work went into it. So I don't know; I wouldn't teach writing at a film school. I wouldn't know what to do. I would be able to look at a script and say "Look, I think this and this could be improved if you did this and this," but I couldn't tell a scriptwriter how to construct a script so that it was more than a mechanical thing.

Cinema Canada: *Have you ever taken script courses?*

Charles Israel: Never!

Cinema Canada: *Do you have any feeling about them being possibly destructive?*

Charles Israel: Yes, but that is only because I am distrustful of anything academic when it comes around the craft fields. I feel that the apprentice system, because it's what I went through, is probably the most effective. Trial and error. I think the organization of the principles of screenwriting into academic tenets can potentially be dangerous.

Cinema Canada: *So basically you believe in a one-to-one transfer of skills with a developing writer?*

Charles Israel: With any writer. I mean you're a developing writer always. I welcome a good story editor when I can find one because the creative process goes much faster then when you're out there alone.

Cinema Canada: *Do books help?*

Charles Israel: For me books don't help. They only confuse me. I've looked at a few of them and put them away because I find "Oh God, I don't do this and I don't do that and maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I should do this." So I put books away because if ever the centipede started worrying about how he walks, he'd be pretty confused!

