

In their own words

An interview with Bill Gough & Anna Sandor



by Tom Shuebridge

An almost unprecedented wave of acclaim poured into CBC television headquarters after the January televising of Charlie Grant's War. It brought into the limelight two television professionals whose talents had long been recognized by their colleagues, but who were suddenly 'discovered' by radio hosts, entertainment editors, *The Journal*, and by the public-at-large.

Bill Gough and Anna Sandor, a husband-and-wife team whose co-credits stretch back nearly five years, had collaborated as writer (Sandor) and producer (Gough) to create *Charlie*, the compelling, true story of a Canadian who risked his life to help Jews in World War II. Over two million Canadians watched it; hundreds poured out their praise and their personal feelings in telephone calls and letters; and one critic reflected the general feelings of his colleagues when he called it, "perhaps the best drama on Canadian television in the past ten years."

John Kennedy, head of CBC television drama, was especially pleased that *Charlie* had outdrawn the much-publicized Robert Kennedy mini-series which premiered opposite it. "The

response was fantastic. The depth of the feelings expressed was quite moving." For him, also, the show was proof that his long-term faith in Bill and Anna's "sensitivity, taste and extraordinary range of ability" was indeed justified.

The show could not have been aired at a more opportune time as CBC was being attacked for its mismanagement, its glut of personnel, and its "bloated" budget. The CBC brass could indeed proudly point (not without some hypocrisy as the following interview shows) to *Charlie* as an example of the world-class products that the national network could produce if given the money.

But to see the airing to *Charlie* as crass manipulation is to denigrate the dedication and talent that went into its four-year development. It must be more properly seen as the masterful creation of the two major creative forces behind it.

Anna Sandor is a Canadian by adoption, coming here from Hungary at age eight, speaking little or no English. After a brief career as an actress, she began script-writing professionally 10 years ago and now has had more than 50 of her scripts produced on television — a record that few writers in Canada can claim.

Bill Gough jokes that he too spoke a second language in childhood — he was born and raised in Newfoundland. There he learned his writing and producing skills with a varied and highly productive career in radio and television broadcasting and journalism. In the two media, he has been involved in

literally hundreds of productions in a variety of capacities — writer, producer, editor, host, director, narrator, etc. At CBC television drama, he has developed over 10 hour-long drama and television movies, a number of which have won national awards. Along the way, he has made time to publish his poetry, write advertising jingles, create lyrics for popular songs, and, last fall, his first novel was published to strong reviews.

In 1982, they turned their talents to writing together for *Seeing Things*. (A somewhat risky course considering the strain this industry puts on personal relationships, even without working together!) Their success was instant, and they now act as story consultants as well as write a number of the hour-long scripts themselves.

Louis Del Grande, co-creator and star of the series, enthuses over the pair. "They are the consummate television professionals. They 'think' television, and they always deliver." *Seeing Things'* co-producer and co-creator, David Barlow, concurs. "They are gifted and totally versatile... and they work with a minimum of their own egos and a maximum for the show as a whole." High praise indeed in the battleground of deadlines and conflicting egos and interests.

In the following interview, they demonstrate how they complement one another as writers, and yet retain a strong sense of their individual approach and talent. They speak quite candidly about their creative processes and the world of the screenwriter in Canada.

Cinema Canada: You must be very satisfied with the public's reaction to *Charlie*?

Bill Gough: Yes, especially to have over two million people watch it when it was opposite the Kennedy mini-series which had been on the cover of most TV guides, and both shows would normally attract the same type of audience.

Cinema Canada: Why do you feel that so many people watched it?

Anna Sandor: It had a very good publicity campaign, both on-air and in print. Also, we received some reports of people who were just going to watch for a few minutes, but who said that they just couldn't turn it off. People sit with their channel changers and so *Charlie* must have captured them in the first few minutes. However, it wasn't designed with a particularly dynamic opening as we do, say, in *Seeing Things*. Here it was strong music and images, with a very likeable character. It was sort of an old-fashioned introduction where the central character is both figuratively and literally setting out on a journey.

Bill Gough: I think that its success is proof that many people underestimate the television audience. Given the strong elements Anna has pointed out, the audience is willing to let a piece unfold in its own time. That, in essence, is what makes the best of our television a good deal different than the best of American television. Ours is closer to a European sensibility.

Cinema Canada: Where did the idea for the story come from?

Anna Sandor: In 1981, I read a newspaper article about Charlie Grant and found his story to be absolutely riveting.

Tom Shuebridge teaches at Algonquin College in Ottawa.

I had always wanted to do a story about the Holocaust, one that wouldn't be an exploitation of the event.

Here was a man who had done nothing extraordinary, wasn't a member of a minority and was comfortable. Like the majority of the television audience, he was initially just a spectator to the events. So, and this is a cardinal rule in television, here was a protagonist whom the audience could like, could identify with and one that they would invite into their homes. On top of that, the story intrigued me, and from there it was a lot of research, aided by Charlie's widow, Eleanor.

Cinema Canada: Was it difficult to sell the idea to CBC?

Bill Gough: Initially, John Kennedy and the CBC accepted it readily. However, as the production time approached, John had an increasingly difficult time to sell it to senior management who provide the finances. I never did find out precisely why, though I suspect they questioned our doing such a story and perhaps the cost of creating a totally European setting and feel for the show. At one point I was told that it wouldn't be made. So I said that if that happened, I wouldn't remain at CBC. John went back yet again and got the go-ahead. My big fear is that at CBC they are yielding to the alleged pressure of the marketplace to produce only series, "popular" ones, and not period pieces. It is my fear that, at the moment, CBC would not make *Charlie Grant's War*.

Cinema Canada: Anna, what is Bill like as a producer?

Anna Sandor: Because he is a writer, he understands what the writer goes through. And because he is full of humour and never loses his cool, he is good to work with. He is presently working with Howard Engel, and Howard will tell you the same thing.

Cinema Canada: Bill, what about Anna as a writer?

Bill Gough: I think that the strength of *Charlie*, and there are a lot of strengths—wonderful direction by Marvin Lavut, an incredible performance by Robert (R.H.) Thomson—but the strength of it lies in the beginning with the script. As a producer, you are crazy not to go with the strongest script because it is your backbone. Writing is the soul of television and film.

Cinema Canada: As always, there must be a certain amount of healthy scrapping that goes on in the final shaping of the story. How do you handle that as husband and wife?

Anna Sandor: When we work together as writer and producer, we work it so that the disagreements stay at the office. We always have a story editor, Jim Osborne, and he acts as a sort of buffer. Bill will have a meeting with him and then I will meet him and so on.

Bill Gough: Sometimes the story consultant is in our house, and he goes from room to room meeting with us individually. It is occasionally bizarre, like living a sit-com.

Anna Sandor: Sometimes, however, there are times when it is a point that is vital to my vision as a writer and I will deal directly with Bill. In *Charlie* we did that over one scene that I had to re-write, because of economic and other considerations, but I kept the essence of it. You have to know when to fight for something that is dramatically impor-

tant and when to give in on minor points.

Bill Gough: We do argue and defend our respective points, but you do that with all writers. Basically, if it is going to be a good script, you are going to have a lot of argument on the way through.

Anna Sandor: As long as the argument isn't based on ego, and you are arguing about the script.

Cinema Canada: How does it work when you write together?

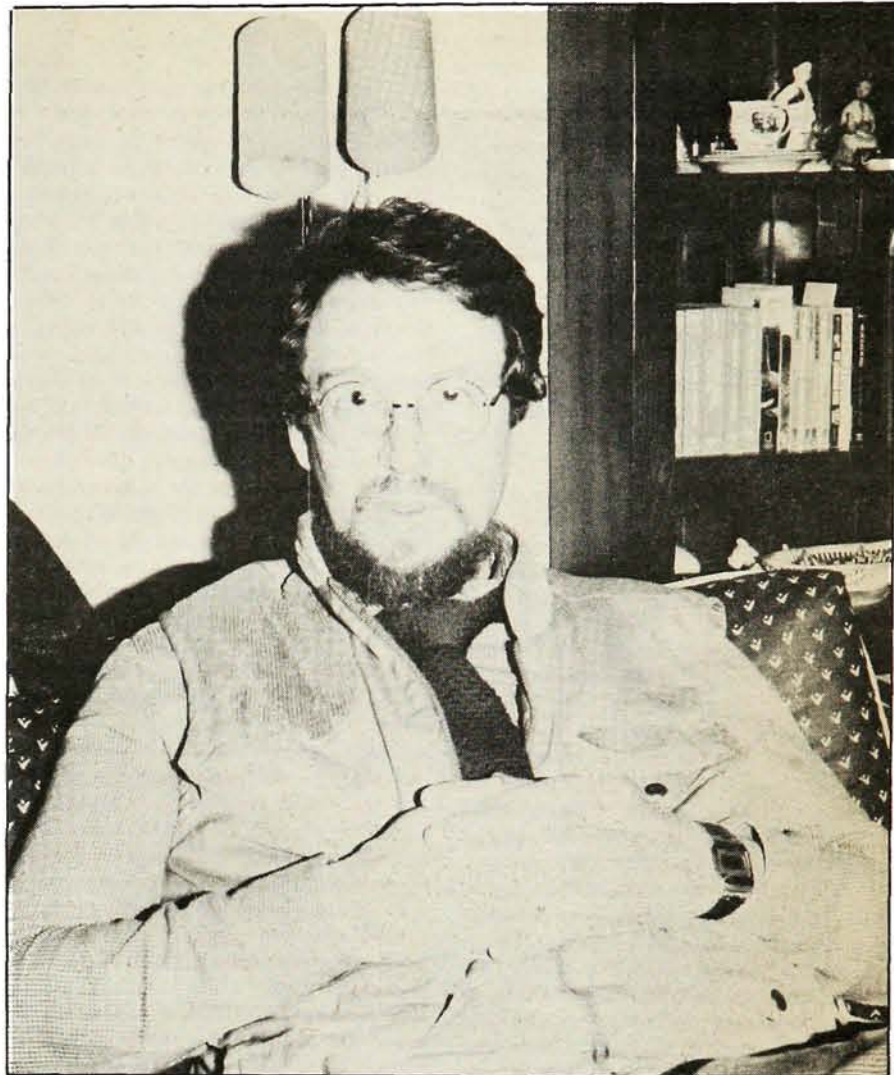
Anna Sandor: Well, one of the things that keeps us sane is that we do our individual writing so we're not always working on the same thing. When we write *Seeing Things* together, we work out the outline together. We both feel that a strong outline is essential. Then we go from there with one of us writing one scene, the other person re-writing it and so on until it is finished. Pretty soon we don't remember who wrote what.

Bill Gough: Sometimes we re-write a scene four or five times. I never thought that I would be able to write with anyone else, but Anna is the only person I've met who thinks the same way. We also have the ability to counterfeit one another's style.

Anna Sandor: And yet we think quite differently. We have very different approaches to things and bring (to them) our own life experiences.

Cinema Canada: *Seeing Things* is often quite humorous. How do you two write comedy?

Anna Sandor: When you are writing comedy, you don't actually think about



putting in jokes, they just happen. As a matter of fact, I was trained in sit-coms and when I wrote my first serious piece, a television movie called *Population of One*, I just kept putting in jokes. I had to take out the humor and that was painful as that was the way I wrote naturally.

Cinema Canada: *It must be hard to get up in the morning and say to yourself "Be funny today."*

Bill Gough: Well, it is a lot easier to write 'unfunny' than it is to write funny. Actually, you write some of the funniest things when you are really feeling the worst. That's where humor comes from, out of despair.

Anna Sandor: We wrote one of our funniest scripts a year or so ago when Bill's father was dying, and we had just gone through a very bad experience, and yet we wrote this script which people say was marvellously funny.

Cinema Canada: *Anna, you started off as an actress. Does this help you as a writer?*

Anna Sandor: I think that I made a misguided decision when I became an actress. I used to have "nightmares" as a child where each night in bed I would tell myself continuing stories. Sometimes they would continue for months, numerous characters with full dialogue and all. It was as though someone else was doing it. I thought it was the actress in me but it was really the writer. My acting experience helps me write things that actors can get their tongues and emotions around. Also, I know the importance of writing-in transitions for the actors.

Cinema Canada: *How did you get into writing?*

Anna Sandor: Louis Del Grande, who was then the head-writer of *The King of Kensington* and who had directed me in several plays, saw some of my writing and encouraged me to develop stories for the *King*. Martha Gibson (his wife both on and off the screen) and I went on to write a few episodes together, and I've been busy ever since. Writing seems to give me all the things I wanted as an actress, only I enjoy this more as I am

basically a very shy person.

Cinema Canada: *Bill, how does a Newfoundland end up a senior CBC producer?*

Bill Gough: It is easier to trace the writing side of my career. As a child I was very sick and spent a year in bed. I read, listened to the radio and made up stories to amuse myself. That use of the imagination to move away from reality has stayed with me as a writer. Then through my years in broadcasting, I learned about audiences and how important a strong story is to them. Before I came to Toronto, I had to prove to John Hirsch (then head of CBC drama) that I could produce good dramas so I started writing them for radio and television. The first show I produced, *Certain Practises*, won me and a lot of people involved in the production a number of awards and things have evolved from there.

Cinema Canada: *Is there such a thing as a TV story as opposed to a film story?*

Anna Sandor: No, although there are the obvious elements like the kind of language or degree of sex or nudity. In a film you are freer in the way you move between events without commercial breaks. But commercial breaks can be good things as they force the writer to create effective plot-points so that the audience will come back after the commercial.

Bill Gough: The difference is that the wave of plots don't come at regular intervals. What is thought of as being non-cinematic on television is in fact predictability of shots and action. R.H. Thomson was saying in an interview about *Charlie* that a lot of people found it to be "cinematic." He pointed out that what happened in that show is that the viewer was given a number of master-shots where he could make the decision about what he wanted to concentrate on. If a scene is well-written, like sand it will slowly gather towards the focal point of the scene, as opposed to being told how to view the scene by the director.

Cinema Canada: *Bill, what's your*

next project?

Bill Gough: *The Marriage Bed*, a wonderful story of an intelligent woman making important decisions, by herself. It has a strong narrative. A good story is where the main character tries to do something about his or her life, and a good test is to take away all the technology, the frills, etc., and if you can't sit down and tell the story, it won't work as a film.

Cinema Canada: *And you, Anna?*

Anna Sandor: Well, writing *Charlie* has given me a real taste of what it is like to write a story which might make a difference in people's lives. For a month or so, I thought that I could *only* write issue-oriented stories. But now I realize that everything you write can be important. I want to write light entertainment also as people need that, but I don't want to write that for the rest of my life. I don't have any definite five-year plan. I'm fortunate to be at a stage in my career where I do have some choice about my projects, so I want to choose things that will make people react with great passion, as they did to *Charlie*. That's a response that's rare among Canadians.

Cinema Canada: *Is Canada a good place to be a screenwriter right now?*

Bill Gough: Well, one of the best things is that you can work on all types of stories. They don't typecast writers here.

Anna Sandor: Everyone in the States was stunned when James Brooks did *Terms Of Endearment* after all those years as a television comedy writer. In Canada there wouldn't have been that much of a surprise. In the States most writers never get that chance. Brooks had to have a lot of money and security behind him before he got that opportunity.

Cinema Canada: *Are you people ready for feature-film work?*

Anna Sandor: We have had some offers but neither the right property has come along nor the right kind of people to work with. And there is no sense giving up the kind of freedom we enjoy to make a movie. We also have a

certain reputation of success on television and if we make a flop of a first feature, it would stereotype us as being able to only work on television. Also, the writing of a feature is a big commitment. It takes over your life until it is finished. Whereas with *Charlie*, I have done a number of other scripts while it was being made.

Bill Gough: I would love to be able to take advantage of the technology and the big screen. Also, it would be nice to get away from the tyranny of the exact length and let a story find its own length. The film audience has more of an attention span because there are no household distractions.

Anna Sandor: And I would love the opportunity to design a wonderful story for the large screen where the audience makes a big commitment to come for the experience of your story. Film lets you work out longer scenes so that you can set the rhythm of the action and character development more leisurely.

Cinema Canada: *Bill, you once commented that there were some real advantages in being a producer in television in Canada.*

Bill Gough: For me, it seems like the most interesting place to be working, partly because of the American domination of the theatrical distribution system. Many good Canadian films never find an audience. I know that my dramas have between one and two million viewers on opening night, and nearly half that on a re-run. Not many Canadian movies are seen by that many people. Therefore, my work has been very satisfying and that has not often been the case for most independent producers, through no fault of their own.

Cinema Canada: *What is your advice to aspiring screenwriters?*

Bill Gough and Anna Sandor: Write, write and do more writing. Watch a show that you like, and then work out stories for it. Read all the scripts you can and see films or television shows more than once to get a sense of how the script works. Then pray that CBC doubles or triples its dramatic programming so that you will have an opportunity to hone your skills by practising your craft.

TALK OF THE COUNTRY... TALK OF THE COUNTRY... TALK OF THE COUNTRY...
TALK OF THE COUNTRY... TALK OF THE COUNTRY... TALK OF THE COUNTRY...

THE TORONTO STAR, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1985/D3

Catering for stars is a challenge

Cooking stars' food may mean meal for 1,000 on short notice

EDMONTON (CP) — Sid Estrin says catering to the taste quirks of movie stars and musicians can be a challenging responsibility, but he enjoys his work.

Kirk Douglas, in Edmonton last year to film the movie *Draw*, insisted on simple, bland foods.

"He would have been happy eating boiled chicken and boiled potatoes every day," Estrin says.

Actor Robbie Benson, a vegetarian, wanted whole grains, fish and natural foods. Jazz player Al Jarreau had a 36-page rider in his contract listing the foods his band could eat.

"The whole band was macrobiotic, so there were only certain foods they could eat. They even provided recipes."

Estrin says he works hard to maintain his reputation as a catering expert to the entertainment industry.

"It's demanding — these people on the road a lot, maybe for five or six months at a time, and they want wholesome, nutritious and different food."

"You're looking at a wide diversity of tastes and if you're working with them for 14, 15 or 16 weeks the trick is to offer a wide variety of foods."

He says actors and musicians are selective about the food they eat, often listing definite preferences such as freshly squeezed orange juice or a certain brand of mineral water.

Estrin, owner of the Hot Box restaurant in Edmonton and a caterer for 11 years, says he knows backstage and film catering. He says he gets most of his assignments through referrals from film producers and production managers.

In most cases, he says, back-

stage concert jobs involve catering several meals over 24 hours.

"But when we did the Willie Nelson concert we were there for four days around the clock while they built the stage and tore it down."

Film assignments can last for months, Estrin and his staff follow the crew on location with a trailer stocked with food supplies.

Estrin recalls a shoot in which the crew travelled around Quebec and Ontario for several weeks and at one point found themselves in an isolated farm field in southeastern Ontario.

"We had a crew of 180 to feed but one day we had 800 extras and we had to be creative in cooking for 1,000 people with limited resources. I would walk into local stores and clean out their inventories. It's logistically a wonderful challenge."

Estrin says caterers often develop a personal friendship with entertainers after working closely with them for several weeks. "You get on an intimate level with them because after all, what's more important than their stomachs?"

But because of their often unique food preferences, Estrin says, many entertainers are hesitant to trust a new caterer.

Actor Christopher Plummer, for example, asked for a fresh fruit salad every day for the first few days he was on a film shoot with Estrin, but gradually switched to regular meals.

"By the time they end a film shoot with us they're usually converted. I remember one actor calling me over one day and saying, 'Sid, we're getting too healthy. Send over some junk food.'"



Stars' caterer: Sid Estrin of Edmonton has spent 11 years catering to recording and movie stars' culinary quirks. Tastes range from bland food for Kirk Douglas to whole grains for Robbie Benson.

SYDESTRIN, 11639 A Jasper Avenue, Edmonton AB
T5K 0M9 (403) 482-2111