In their own words

An interview with Bill Gough & Anna Sandor

by Tom Shuebridge

An almost unprecedented wave of acclaim poured into the CBC television headquarters after the January telecasting 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 attracted 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 naturally attract the same type of audience.

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 the 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...
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. I kept the essence of it. You have to know when to fight for write, because of economic and other considerations, but I kept the essence of it. 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 selling 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 rewrite, 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-
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 People, 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 as an actress. Does this help you as a writer?

Anna Sandor: I think that it made a real difference when I became an actress. I used to have "nightdreams" as a child where each night in bed I would tell myself continuity stories. Sometimes they would continue for months, numerous characters with full dialogue and all. It was all about someone else doing it. I thought it was the actors in me, but it really was 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, who was his wife then, and who was writing for the King, was very helpful. We used to write scripts 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 Newfoundlander end up as a senior CBC producer?

Bill Gough: It is easier to trace the beginning side of my career than the end. 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 left to go to John Hirsch (then head of CBC drama) 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 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 scenes 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 later.

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 'cinematic.' R.H. Thomson was saying in an interview 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 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.

Anna Sandor: Everyone in the States was stunned when James Brooks did The Marriage Bed, a film which made a big 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 the same enthusiasm as they did to Charlie. That's a response that's rare among Canadians.

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

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Cinema Canada: Do you recommend a place to 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 what films or television shows are showing more than once to get a sense of how the script works. Then read that CBC doubles or triples its dramatic programming so that you will have an opportunity to hone your skills by practising your craft.