The fifth Summer Institute of Film
Writing Canadian means having the guts to be different
by Leslie Goodson and Warren Neill

For an author, a blank piece of paper can be a harrowing sight. For a screenwriter, there is the additional fear of what his script will look like on the big screen. If novelists, poets and songwriters have some luxury in meandering through a story, breaking down conventional structures and creating new ones, screenwriters must adhere to structure and avoid "literary" showing off.

"I write novels, poems and songs," says Bill Gough, CBC producer, director and writer, "and I find writing screen plays the most difficult. Structure is vital. While writing a screenplay, you have to hold the structure in your mind all the time: an overview of the story combined with an attention to detail."

Doug Bowie, an experienced screenwriter who has done a lot of work for the CBC, finds screenwriting hard and demanding. "It must be very spare and lean," he says. "Everything has to be to the point, therefore, you have to be very tough with yourself and it's really hard."

These insights into the craft of screenwriting were at the heart of Ottawa's Fifth Annual Summer Institute of Film held by Algonquin College and the Canadian Film Institute during June. Professionally-led workshops devoted to directing, producing and writing drama for television and film were the raison d'être of the Summer Institute of Film (SIF).

One hundred and twenty aspiring producers, directors and screenwriters from across Canada this summer converged on Ottawa to attend workshops led by Australia's Eleanor Witcomb (My Brilliant Career), England's June Roberts (Experience Preferred, But Not Essential), and Dan Petrie Jr. of the United States (Beverly Hills Cop), as well as Canadians Gough, Bowie and others.

The basic goal of this year's Institute was to explore how Canadians can create quality films that reflect Canadian themes, and thus raise the profile of feature films within and without this country. SIF founder and executive director Tom Shoebredt chose to focus on the notion of a good, structurally strong story this year because he believes it is essential.

Leslie Goodson, a graduate of Carleton's Journalism School, is a freelance writer in Toronto. Warren Neill helped organize the Institute.

Shoebredt acknowledges that English Canadians do not write as well for film as they do for other media. "We're technically competent (in film)," he says, "but we're lacking a spark which can excite (the audience's) imagination." During the past two decades there has been some success in bringing English Canadian stories to the screen. If not highly commercially successful, most are not quality films that can attract a large audience. In the transition to dramatic film production in the mid-60s, the documentary tradition dominated at the expense of the imaginative and the fantastic. Thus, a succession of Canadian films which can be generically described as "stark realism"—films in which stories are submerged to observation and analysis.

Veteran film producer Harry Gulkin, who worked on such films as The Witches of Eastwick and The Wind and the Lion, adds, "The audience has to be cultivated, or the audience has to be a necessity."

Yet if we compare — and we do constantly — our fiction-creating ability with the Hollywood dream factory, it is difficult not to emerge significantly weaker in imagination and extravaganza. As Robert Fetherhill put it: "It must seem that our filmmaking fraternity has dreamed for us a recurring and demonstrating dream of a condition Canadian...because that dream but flies itself upon us inscapiably. And if, aside from the question of art and entertainment, the films don't attract a public, may be because the dream is not an alien one, but only too familiar. Canadian films are seldom escapist or invigorating."

If Canadian films are to achieve a distinction and uniqueness that attracts an audience, they need to be less self-consciously and less artificially Canadian, yet still remain true to ourselves.

But, as the workshop participants agreed, they needn't be parochial either. June Roberts says a British television producer recently turned feature-film writer, achieved success with her first feature film-script Experience Preferred, But Not Essential. It became popular in her native England as well as in America.

"It is not feasible to make a British film with only a British audience in mind," Roberts says, "but this doesn't mean compromising the content and making it American. It just means it has to be interesting enough to touch people outside of Britain."

Allan Kroeker has similar feelings. "If you're true to the place you write about and have really human characters, it's a universal story," he says.
From a producer's point of view, says Gough, "the big problem with a lot of scripts that are shown to me is that they are reflections primarily of shows the writer has seen on television. It's second- and hence third-hand experience because you have the vision so far removed.

"As a reader reading a script," continues Gough, "I'm looking for something that is the simplest and the most complex. I'm looking for a story. A (good) story is almost always a simple one that can be described in one sentence: King Lear is a simple story, so is Macbeth, so is Hamlet.

"And without structure, the story isn't revealed. You can only build the structure when you know what the story is," Gough adds. "While writing a screenplay, you have to hold in your mind simultaneously the sound of the dialogue; the sound of the atmosphere surrounding the dialogue; the knowledge of where the different pieces of the story are; how it's being looked at; what kind of day it is, etc. It's a craft which can grow into an art."

To Petrie, "The most important contribution a screenwriter can make is to design a dramatic structure in which characters, dialogue and all the other aspects exist and flourish to the best of their abilities.

"This dramatic structure is straightforward, easily understandable, but still the biggest trick to pull off," he adds.

As Bowie says, "It takes a long time to learn what works and what doesn't. It's a very specialized occupation."

It is no coincidence, then, that common themes appear in the traditions of good screenwriting - the notion of sense of self and place, coupled with dedication to, and enjoyment of, the chosen subject.

For it becomes clear that it is the responsibility of the producer and the director, as well as the writer, to ensure that there is, indeed, a story in the script. But, above all, as workshop participants reiterated, story and structure are the essential elements of a good script.

Unfortunately, as Bowie puts it, Canadians haven't had the guts to say we're different.

"I don't think, really deep down, Canadian films have become an essential part of the country," he says. "They're not (considered) important to our image of ourselves, to our daily life."

Bowie's parting words to Canadian screenwriters are ominous: "Good luck! We don't need you like we need teachers and bus drivers. Too bad we don't, I wish we did."
