Douglas Bowie
Screenwriter at the crossroads

By Tom Shoebridge

Hollywood's respect for screenwriters—
"Did you hear the joke about the starlet who was so dumb that she slept with a screenwriter because she thought that he could help her career?"

Hollywood's definition of a screenwriter—"The first draft of a human being."

Douglas Bowie, one of Canada's most respected screenwriters, is not suffering from any such abuse. Rather, he is in a position that would be envied by screenwriters from any country. Last year, CBC aired his 14-hour mini-series, Chasing Rainbows, the most expensive in its History, and entrusted him to write the entire series. Afterwards, the head of CBC English Drama, John Kennedy, was quoted as saying that he is eagerly waiting for Bowie to bring in a new project. And this fall, Bowie's second feature in three years, Hitting Home, will be released. Meanwhile, he's regularly receiving numerous, well-paying offers while he contemplates developing a project of his own.

Yet, to talk to him is to catch whispers of ennui, frustration, and restlessness. After more than 20 years in the screenwriting business, with more than his share of awards, impressive audience reaction and widespread critical acclaim (more on the slings and arrows later), Bowie is reflective about being a screenwriter in the Canadian milieu.

To understand this questioning, it is useful to know how screenwriters in general are faring internationally.

From the first, flickering Edison Vitascopes, screenwriters in America's dream factory were put in their place—at the bottom of the heap. The studio system, with its autocratic bosses and an assembly-line production model, barely tolerated the creatures. Writers were hired in huge numbers, herded into barren facilities, and then paid to produce a certain number of pages per week. Even respected literary giants, attracted by enormous amounts of money for three days, were given a simple desk and their output, too, was measured by the page. (William Faulkner later confessed to stretching his handwriting to meet his quota.) To see things haven't changed very much. One only has to read William Goldman's revealing "Adventures in the Screen Trade" or to follow the current bitter screenwriters' strike.

And then there's the British tradition wherein the film and television industry affords its screenwriters the opportunity to create heroes almost as sacred as screenwriters' names are known, their work anticipated—people like Graham Greene, Robert Bolt, Harold Pinter, and recently, David Hare and Hanif Kureishi. In Britain, it is still common for the story to be the sparkplug of the deal, and remain the centre of interest and anticipation.

On the continent Down Under, often thought of as the ultimate model of the small, English-language film industry for Canadians to follow, the situation is a muddled one. National stalwarts such as Paul Cox ("Man of Flowers, My First Wife, Vincent") and David Williamson ("Travelling North, Year of Living Dangerously, Don't Party") stay at home and seem to get their stories to the screen with impressive regularity.

Other Aussies get seduced by Hollywood, with mixed results. For example: after nearly 30 years as a playwright and screenwriter, Eleanor Witcombe wrote the pioneering Australian hit, My Brilliant Career. Hollywood producers flew out to "do lunch", and she was swept off to what she now disparagingly calls "cloud cuckoo land." After being paid huge amounts of money, her year's work was nonchalantly written off as a development deal. Now back home, she co-produces her own scripts, even though she hates the front office wheelings and dealings. She claims that co-producing is necessary to protect the integrity of her work in the present Australian climate of fee-induced deals and arrogant directors.

Here at home, we have the oft-repeated story of our publicity-funded institutions of Canadian screen culture, the NFB and the CBC. In these vast corporations, with a few notable exceptions, the politically astute bureaucrat had most of the power and basked in what little glory there was. (Bill Mason, creator of some of the National Film Board's most popular and successful films, always bemoans how he hears that the NFB has won this award or that prize. "The NFB has never made a film. It's the filmmakers who win these awards.")

In Canada's almost nonexistent independent film industry, the screenwriter was ignored—partly because there was no market for his or her skills, until the last 10 or so years.

It was at just the beginning of yet another production cycle, that Douglas Bowie got hooked on screenwriting. In 1967, on a dare, he wrote his first screenplay and won a prize with it. He then baked in relative obscurity until the universal acclaim for his six-hour mini-series, Empire Inc., made him, as he puts it, "into an overnight success, after a 12-year night."

To visit him, you don't have to venture into Canada's bustling filmmaking centres where deals are made around trendy cafe tables or in pricey hotel suites. Instead, you wander down one of Kingston's quiet tree-lined streets to a modest but tastefully decorated red brick house. In his airy third floor office, Bowie methodically creates a page or so on his electric typewriter. Then he doodles on it, crosses things out and rewrites it with a pencil, finally typing up the final copy of his state-of-the-art computer. Slow, but very steady.

Bowie strikes one as the consummate professional: dedicated to his craft, well-versed on an impressive number of aspects of the screen industry, and passionate about the future of film and television in Canada. He has a reputation of being open about his script ideas, discussing points with producers and directors right down to the final filming. The give-and-take of collaboration during the development of a script is something he seems to enjoy.

On this day, he is still pondering the reaction to Chasing Rainbows, in which he invested nearly four years of his life. The audience, not overly large at 1.4 million, held steady over the 14 hours, ending at 1.1 million. Impressive, especially when one considers the irresponsible scheduling of the series. (Doesn't the CBC realize that only hockey nuts or couch potatoes will commit themselves to viewing the equivalent of seven feature films in 10 days?)

The scheduling was only part of the problem. As the first drama in the world shot in High Definition Television (HDTV), Chasing Rainbows was viewed and toured around the world. But not for the story or the acting or the drama. Even CBC's own promotional material focused on the technology, which in the end could hardly be noticed on the average home television screen. It was drama versus hi-tech, and the new toy on the block won.

Bowie, however, is delighted with the engrossing index for the ambitious production, which showed that the audience enjoyment ranged from a high 78 the first night to a towering 85 in the final episode. A check with Mother Corporation's audience research department revealed that a record number of phone calls and letters to the CBC—far outrunning the number elicited by the legendary "Arm of Green Cables"—testified to the depth of the audience's involvement in the series.

Yet the reviews were, to be gentle, "mixed." The Globe and Mail's John Haslett Cuff savaged it in a Saturday Entertainment front page (in a tirade that had his peers privately questioning both his motives and his professionalism). Among the numerous positive reviews, the Calgary Sun, no love of the CBC.
Cinema Canada: Is there something that you feel the screen—theatre and television—can deliver about stories that the other means can't?

Doug Bowie: There is, of course, the notion that television and film are the art forms of today. There is something very satisfying that these media allow a lot of people to respond to your work. And that you can get immediate feedback—good and bad so that you can continue to learn and improve.

With a screenplay you can delude yourself into thinking that 'this is great' while it's just on paper. But when it is produced, that's when the little cracks appear, and the guywires start showing, and that your 'wonderful' scene could have been 25 per cent shorter and so on.

But the feedback is proof that what you do matters and there are people who do pay attention. It's the immediacy and relevance of the media that is exciting.

Cinema Canada: Do you have an overall guiding approach to screenwriting?

Doug Bowie: I try to focus on the emotions of the characters. Film is primarily an emotional medium rather than an intellectual one. The viewer has a gut reaction to it, and that reaction is to the characters and emotions and feelings. It might not be fashionable but I think that there is some basic truth to the old Hollywood cliché of 'Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em come back next week.'

When I write, sometimes I literally tack little code words up in front of me: emotion, suspense, pace, surprise. These are the kind of things I want to build in. Easy to say, difficult to do.

Cinema Canada: Is there something special that you try to achieve in the first draft of a script?

Doug Bowie: Yes, readability. You can't shop a treatment around so the first draft is what decisions are made of, and it's often read by someone whose primary job may not be reading scripts. Therefore, I tend to over-write, explain more things, give more stage direction, make it perfectly clear what is going on and why.

Because a lot of people are going to make suggestions—everyone thinks he or she has a better idea. You know that you can prune it down in the rewrite. Someone once said that screenwriting is rewriting. Your primary job is to improve it while maintaining the integrity of the initial story that people were excited about in the first place.

Cinema Canada: What are the downsides of screenwriting?

Doug Bowie: One of the minor but constant irritants is the sloppiness of the critical reaction to your work. Partly, it comes from being blamed or even praised for something that is part of the result of your screenplay. And you can't turn around straightening out things for the record, though you would like to take the script then and say 'See, it was in the script or that was not what I wrote,' and so on.

Some examples: A character in Ray in Blue says 'They'll wait. They'll wait.' But in the film it sounded like 'No way. No way' due to low sound recording and the actor acting drunk. In Empire Inc., the director had an actor say 'nice house' during a dead spot. In Love and Larceny a scene explaining what happened to the main character's child was cut in the editing room. The reviewers lambasted me for, in turn, using modern slang in a period piece, resorting to a bland cliché and leaving a gaping hole in the story.

A finished production is like a chemistry experiment where all the elements have dissolved into something new and it is impossible to take it apart.

Cinema Canada: How can the screenwriter collaborate and yet preserve the integrity of the story as he or she sees it?

Doug Bowie: There is a fine line between being a pain in the ass and having to fight for what you know is important to the story. You can't get upset because they are changing your precious little words. Yet, are you letting them change an essential part? Knowing what to fight for and how to fight for it is an essential aspect of being a screenwriter. Ernest Lehman said that, "to make it as a screenwriter, you have to know what battles to lose." Sometimes I think that's a miracle that a decent film ever gets made.

Cinema Canada: The major problem is...?

Doug Bowie: Certainly a number of my things have been a whole lot different on the screen than they were on the page. It's not the best way to get your stories delivered in a pristine manner. It is a constant hassle. There are two
The ways to respond: become a poet or novelist or even a tennis player. Or, do you try to get more control of your work yourself by becoming a director or producer, cutting out some of these middlemen?

Cinema Canada: Are you moving in that direction?

Doug Bowie: Yes, I would like to direct or produce one or two things myself.

Cinema Canada: I’m a little bit in despair over what I did before, or something totally new and Canadian drama ever being a big mainstream phenomenon in the face of the American reality. The number of people watching Canadian drama is actually going down, due to the fragmenting of the audience. At one time two million viewers was a hit, now it’s down to 1.5, even 1.2. It seems ridiculous to declare a nice drama like Family, Seeing Things, Hill Street Blues a failure.

Surely the message of the bad old tax-shelter days in films is that that approach didn’t work and I doubt that it will work in television either.

Cinema Canada: Is there a form that seems to be the best bet for television’s future?

Doug Bowie: It’s a mug’s game to worry about form. It’s difficult enough just to write a good script. And shows that do well like The War Is Over (1977) Short film script (co-author), NFB production. Nominated for four Canadian Film Awards including Best Screenplay.


The Boy In Blue (1982-84) Feature film script. Produced by John Kemeny for Twentieth Century Fox.


Hitting Home (1985-87) Feature film, a Telefim Canada production.


We should allow made-for-television movies to try and find a theatrical market. One of the frustrating things about working for television movies is that the finished product seems so disposable, now you’ve seen them, now you don’t, after all that work and money. Telefim has made a big difference, but we have to be careful not to plan our entire industry around it indefinitely, priming the pump on a permanent basis. I’d like to believe that the Canadian film industry can stand on its own.

Cinema Canada: What effect do you feel the pool of well-trained crews is having on the industry?

Doug Bowie: I think that the value of our industry of all these wonderfully experienced people is overrated. Sure they are here, and we need them. They are a necessary condition but they are not a sufficient condition for a national screen industry. It is a little like a housing development which has all of these well-built foundations but no house designers. What is needed is more faith in the few creative individuals whose courage and determination can utilize these crews for more and better Canadian productions, rather than runaway American productions. It is true that we have a very efficient industry, but servicing films is not the same as making films.

I see a lot of talent and time being used to feed another industry while Canada’s lags along because of the shortage of people able to do their own productions due to a lack of production money, etc.

Cinema Canada: Are there any advantages or disadvantages in living in Kingston?

Doug Bowie: It’s a very pleasant place to live and is fine as long as I want to continue just being a writer. I can get to Montreal or Toronto in a couple of hours. However, if I want to move into producing or directing, it will be a problem. I would have to base myself somewhere the productions are.

Cinema Canada: After over 20 years in the business, are you optimistic?

Doug Bowie: I guess I am, as there seem to be some very good and talented people within the industry who have the will to create something permanent. But I doubt it will happen with a single, big dramatic breakthrough. It is more like three steps forward and two steps back. It will require a lot of little successes, and those will require a lot of perseverance, dedication and patience…and good scripts.
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