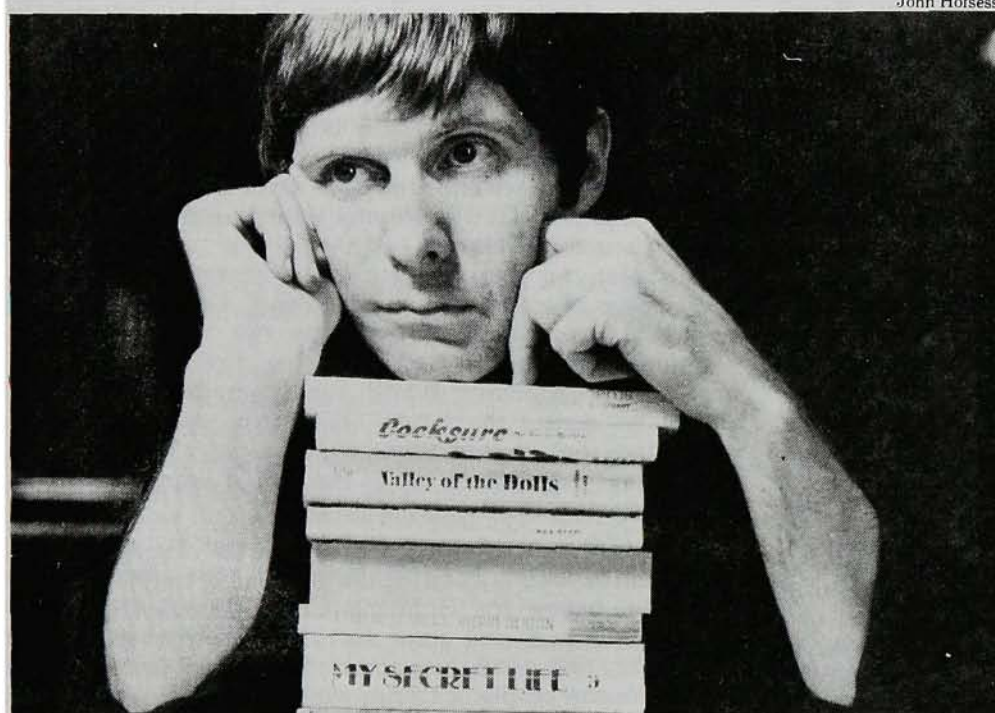


OPINION

goodbye to all that from a banned filmmaker to a banned writer

by John Hofsess



Gothenburg, Sweden, is not one of Europe's legendary cities. Indeed, most visitors would probably consider it a cultural backwater of no importance. With a population of barely more than 400,000 (declining steadily through migration since 1970) it is smaller than Winnipeg, or the Hamilton-Burlington area. If numbers alone determine what a city can support culturally, a night out in Gothenburg should be every bit as lively as one spent in Ottawa.

There are three newspapers (in addition to daily delivery of all the leading British papers), five theatres for live drama, concerts and opera, 23 cinemas (five specializing in hard-core porn), 12 museums, 26 libraries, numerous cabarets and night-clubs (three of which feature "live sex shows") and several restaurants that serve

meals (ranging from reindeer peppersteaks to fluffy soufflés and quenelles) that would be raved about in Montreal and Toronto but which are considered almost unremarkable here. Most of the movies shown are American (Woody Allen in *Död Och Pina*, seventh week; Richard Dreyfuss, Robert Shaw and rubber shark in something called *Hajen*, twelfth week; or *Exorcisten*, just opening) and immensely popular. The Swedish film industry is hardly booming (the *only* Swedish film on view during the 10 days I spent in Gothenburg was a porno flick) and likely to decline still further with the forced exile of Ingmar Bergman, following his nerve-wracking tax wrangle with government bureaucrats. The flood of US product is not called "cultural imperialism" here. No one seems worried that

Swedes need their own *Sting*, *Towering Inferno* or *King Kong* to preserve their "identity" through geopolitically distinctive entertainment. But then, Sweden is an old country, willing obviously to experiment with progressive ideas, but offering no emotional home for gauche illusions. It accepts its fate, and its limitations as a minority culture, and obviously in its film-making policies feels no compulsion to compete with Hollywood.

For years I have accepted the perimeters of Canadian society as being those of "reality". Oh, I knew there were places that did not have our silly snip-and-prune film censorship regulations, our absurd liquor laws and prices, our "blue laws" employed to hound groups such as Toronto Free Theatre and entertainment acts such as the Maclean Bros., but somehow I believed that no other place could be so desirable as to justify moving. Even when my film, *Columbus of Sex* (it was not in retrospect a good film, but it deserved its chance in a free marketplace) was seized and confiscated in 1969, I did not make the connection that what was happening to me, and my work, was happening because I lived in Canada, and that there were many other countries (beginning with the US) where I *would* be allowed to grow and develop – that there were countries where "sex" was no dirty word, and where an interest in making erotic films was not something that had to be apologized for. It is only in the last year that I have been forced to realize how much of my life has been wasted in Canada, and how much punishment I have accepted trying to cope with, negotiate with, reason with film-funding agencies and magazine and newspaper editors interested only in creating, and reinforcing, a Canadian *bourgeois* culture, that caters to middle-class and middle-brow values and prejudices. That's all that Canada allows.

For the past six years, five of them as *Maclean's* film critic, my working philosophy has been that if I couldn't develop as a filmmaker in Canada, at least I could make a living as a writer. I did not dwell resentfully on the obscenity conviction given *Columbus of Sex* (in 1969, and upheld by the Ontario Supreme Court in 1970) despite the obvious injustice and provincialism inherent in the decision (there were no hard-core scenes in the film, no genital close-ups; the nudity was fully in keeping with legal limits then established in films such as *I Am Curious – Yellow*). Instead, I rationalized the event away, saying it was a student film made for less than \$5,000, it didn't represent the best of my capabilities, and soon.

Last year, however, when I produced a new screenplay, *Tenderness*, in which I *did* make a major effort to do work of some importance, I found it makes little difference to the forces of repression in this

country whether one's work has merit or not. Three different drafts of the screenplay were written – the original set in New York, the last two in Toronto. I told prospective producer Dick Schouten (**Black Christmas**) that the film didn't make nearly as much sense, set in Toronto, but he assured me that such compromises were necessary, as the Canadian Film Development Corporation would never back a film set in New York.

In my view, most of the people who supported the bid for "script development funds" from the CFDC were highly qualified professionals who knew what they were talking about. **Black Christmas** had grossed \$600,000 in Canada, and Schouten was enthusiastic about the commercial potential of **Tenderness**. Director David Cronenberg, whose latest film **Shivers** is likely to end up being the largest-grossing Canadian film made to date (certainly the one with the highest profit ratio) had agreed to direct **Tenderness**, providing the script could be developed more fully to his liking. Even as it was, the screenplay had the support of such varied people as Allan King, Claude Jutra, Graeme Ferguson, Kate Reid and Margaret Atwood, among many others. The CFDC wasn't being asked to finance the entire film, but to invest "up to \$10,000" in further scriptwriting, to bring its potential to fruition. Given the quality of support I had, and because it was necessary to have legal clearance to use the biographical materials contained in the screenplay (two of the main characters in **Tenderness** were US "porno stars" Georgina Spelvin, from **The Devil in Miss Jones**, and Marc Stevens) I obtained a personal bank loan of \$5,000 to buy the rights to their stories, and all future material that might be used based on their real-life exploits, as well as retaining them as actors in the film.

When the CFDC refused to participate – and, as is their unhelpful custom, refused to say specifically what objection they had to the film's development – I was left with a \$5,000 debt (plus rapidly mounting interest) to cope with, on a freelance writer's salary. In Hollywood if any studio heads had invested, and lost, as much money in films as the CFDC has, they would long ago have been booted out by disgruntled shareholders for having terrible business sense. My chief criticism of the CFDC, as presently administered, is that being a government agency it is more concerned with politics than show business.

Several years ago, when Cinepix hit a winning streak in Quebec with its low-budget, high-return "skin flicks" the CFDC backed away sharply from further investments. Several writers in English Canada had written sensationalistic Canadian-Taxpayers-Are-Financing-Porno-Films articles which caused a brief, heated, irrational uproar. In response to this controversy, the CFDC virtually blacklisted Cinepix's future productions (sex and horror stuff that nearly always repaid its investment) and instead pursued more uplifting films (the kind that Marshall Delaney could approve of, and members of Parliament doze off in the middle of) which the general public showed little interest in attending.

When David Cronenberg was trying to make **The Parasite Murders** (renamed **Shivers** in Canada, and **They Came From Within** in the US) he was repeatedly turned down in his request for low-budget production funds (a category now being eased out because Michael Spencer claims it hasn't been rewarding – despite the fact that Cronenberg's film alone financially redeems the entire program) because the CFDC found the project "distasteful." Cronenberg was told, at one point, that the Corporation wasn't set up to make horror films, and it was with great reluctance that they finally gave him \$135,000 to make the picture. (It has already grossed more than \$2 million.) A different kind of controversy was being avoided when Michel Brault had so much difficulty getting CFDC backing for **Les ordres**.

To the CFDC, film means "culture" (a concept that means half the blood has been drained from the body to begin with) and preferably "high culture"; but failing that, the cinematic equivalent of Norman Rockwell *kitsch* will do. But what we must never, never have are films like **Last Tango in Paris**, **Dog Day Afternoon** or (heavens!) **Emmanuelle**, films with bite and verve which, whatever their artistic merit, strike a nerve among filmgoers and prompt lineups around the block. A Canadian film should be "worthy" rather than "exciting" – the kind of film that gets polite applause. No lightning and thunder please. No passion or shock. No stretching of sensibilities, no violation of genteel taboos.

The absurd paradox is that this country, which is the last Victorian culture in the western world, seriously proposes making films for an "international market" that is more sophisticated than this country. The CFDC is not only responsible for many box-office bombs but it is also responsible for God-knows-how-many films that *didn't* get made because they were too original, potentially controversial, and didn't get the *Good Housekeeping* (or is it *Chatelaine*?) seal of approval. Others innovate; Canadians imitate, from a safe distance of cultural lag.

Added to my existing financial obligations, I figured I could pay off the \$5,000 in four to five years. With interest over that period, the debt would come close to \$7,500. Naturally there were days when I wished I had never written **Tenderness**, and never taken any psychological or professional risks. Living in a bourgeois culture is always dampening to one's spirits, and ultimately it can destroy all hope and initiative.

During the fall and winter I produced a number of articles – a profile of Genevieve Bujold for *The Canadian* magazine, an article on Stanley Kubrick for *The New York Times* – in which my writing entered a new phase. There is plenty of work available for those who want to do superficial puff pieces on Canadian personalities – but, increasingly, I only publish stories that *mean* something, and which I can be reasonably proud of.

Perhaps the best example of what I call "adult journalism" is the story I did for *Weekend* magazine on racetrack steward

John Damien, fired by the Ontario Racing Commission in 1975 from his \$25,000-a-year job because he is a homosexual, who has waged a vigorous and expensive civil rights case ever since. The story was well received (Gordon Sinclair singled it out for commendation on CFRB radio; sportswriter Christie Blatchford for *The Globe and Mail* praised it in her column; Damien received over 150 letters of personal support and nearly \$2,000 from readers) but on March 30, lawyers representing the Racing Commission officials mentioned in the article served notice on myself, Damien, *Weekend* magazine and 21 newspapers across the country that distribute *Weekend*, of their intention to sue for libel.

I was, at that point, completing a new assignment for *Weekend*, a psychological profile of figure skater Toller Cranston, a humanly revealing portrait of him, quite unlike anything that has appeared in the sports pages. After six weeks' work on the article, it was accepted and scheduled for publication. However, during the course of copy editing, when it is customary for an editor to verify facts and quotes with the subject concerned, Cranston's manager, Elva Oglanby, served notice (in a screaming fit over the telephone) that she intended to sue *Weekend* if the article were published.

Associate editor John Aitken then informed me that the article (though paid for) would not be published, and none of the expenses (close to \$2,000) would be reimbursed. Moreover, two other assignments that I was supposed to begin (a profile of comedian David Steinberg and another article on Margaret Atwood) and had been given deposits on, making them formal assignments, were suddenly withdrawn. No explanation has yet been given, despite three written inquiries by me over the past three months.

It is a curious paradox that editor-in-chief Sheena Paterson should have her lawyers advise me that I, and they, must be prepared to defend the accuracy and integrity of my John Damien story, while at the same time she should consider my work "unpublishable" and my correspondence unanswerable – apparently beneath contempt. What a few whiffs of marijuana and some sensual descriptions of nude group-groping in the Bahamas, in the story of a famous figure, can do to ruin one's career as a writer! Each of my assignments with *Weekend* would have paid me \$1,000 – instead, once again I found the high price of Canadian timidity, puritanism, and hypocrisy. I had backup support for every aspect of my article, carefully, thoughtfully written; a genuine understanding of Cranston's lonely and neurotic life. What *Weekend* wanted from me, apparently, were the familiar stereotypes of sportswriting – myths, coverups, anything but the truth.

Why was this story suppressed? Why did John Damien lose his job? Why was **Tenderness** refused even the smallest assistance from the CFDC? Why was **Columbus of Sex** banned (despite persuasive defence testimony from Pierre Berton, Peter Morris, Joan Fox, and 12 other notable witnesses)? The answer is that there is an intransigent sexual prejudice and hypocrisy in

Canada that one does not find in the United States, England, or the rest of Europe, countries that have made a more sophisticated accommodation with human nature. Canada is the country that always says "No!"

In April, I began a new assignment for *The Globe and Mail* – a profile of British Columbia novelist Jane Rule, the author of three novels (*Desert of the Heart*, *This Is Not For You*, and *Against the Season*) since 1964, with a fourth, *The Young in One Another's Arms*, to be published in January, 1977. She is best known for her collection of biographical essays, *Lesbian Images*, published last year by Doubleday, and recently issued in mass paperback. If you haven't heard of her, it could be due to the fact that "major" Canadian magazines have never bothered to inform you. Despite the fact that her work is highly regarded by Joyce Carol Oates, Margaret Laurence, Marian Engel, Margaret Atwood, Faith Baldwin and others, no book of Jane Rule's has ever been reviewed in *Saturday Night* or *Maclean's*, and four magazines (*Chate-laine*, *Weekend*, *Canadian* and *Saturday Night*) turned down suggestions this year, by various writers, to profile her.

The story that I wrote for *The Globe* told of Jane Rule's dealings with the mass media in Canada over the past 12 years – mostly consisting of silence, broken occasionally by the odd stab in the back. Jane Rule is 45, one of the most refreshing and piercingly honest individuals I've ever met; a happy, creative, loving woman – and a lesbian.

I worked two weeks on the story, and when Margaret Laurence wrote me, on reading a copy, saying she liked it very much, and Marian Engel wrote me, saying she thought it was superb, I felt greatly cheered up, after a long winter of mounting debts and disappointments. It was, therefore, a special kind of shock when I was told by *Globe* editor Dave McKee, on behalf of editor-in-chief Richard Doyle, that my Jane Rule story would not be published. *The Globe* is quite willing to give extensive coverage to the John Damien case, because that is primarily a case of social injustice that disturbs its "liberal" conscience; but a story about a well-adjusted lesbian who has lived with her lover for 20 years, and who has many "horror stories" about how the mass media in Canada have affected her career, was not what the *The Globe* had in mind.

After a month of negotiations, *The Globe* agreed to pay for the piece, but still not publish it. Barry Zwicker, editor of *Content* magazine ("Canada's National News Media Magazine", published in Toronto) which specializes in behind-the-scenes stories of what goes on in Canadian journalism, agreed to publish the article, along with an investigative piece, interviewing all concerned, as to why the story was suppressed.

Whether *Globe* editors sensed potential embarrassment to themselves, if Zwicker went ahead with his plans, or underwent a less cynical change of heart, it was at this point that Cameron Smith, assistant to the editor-in-chief, invited me to conduct "a deeper investigation" into the sexual atti-

tudes of all major magazine editors and literary critics, and to find out, decisively, if Jane Rule had been a victim of prejudice. It would have to be "a first-class piece of investigative reporting" – but *The Globe* could only pay me \$100, no expenses. Why? They didn't say, and I didn't press. I knew it would be a lot of work (many hours of library research and correspondence; long-distance calls that would quickly consume the story fee) but I accepted. Publication in *The Globe* was my only chance of bringing Jane Rule's story before a mass audience. (At the time of writing this article, the *Globe* story is unfinished and its acceptance still a matter of suspense. *Books-in-Canada* bought the original story about Jane Rule and will publish it shortly).

If I were just starting out as a writer in Canada, I might accept the pressures and prevailing hypocrisies. But there comes a time in everyone's life when either they accept the loss of self-respect, the waning of moral courage, the draining of their energies, the warping of what they know to be true, or else they say – quietly or loudly, privately or publicly – "This shit has got to stop!" The cultural nationalists are right: this is a special country. But what do you take to kill the pain?

On June 10, after consulting two lawyers, I filed for voluntary bankruptcy. That means that for a minimum period of four months, up to a year or longer, I will be legally classified as an "undischarged bankrupt", all of whose assets and earnings, liabilities and debts are supervised by a private trustee, whose role in one's life is much like a parole officer. Virtually all of my furniture and household effects (all of it fully paid for) had to be placed in storage, for probable forfeiture to a finance company that had a lien against it.

I had borrowed money to help underwrite the costs on a couple of stories, expecting to get reimbursed when they were finished. It was one thing to have a \$5,000 debt over my screenplay, and another \$3,000 owing due to travel, etc., on the Toller Cranston and Jane Rule stories, but the last disheartening straw was in having *future* income wiped out, by having stories cancelled and future assignments withdrawn, so that I couldn't even meet payments on my personal debts. When a person files for bankruptcy, all debts have to be declared. There can be no exceptions. Even accounts paid in full – within 90 days before filing for bankruptcy – are recallable, on the grounds that it shows prejudicial treatment of one creditor over another. So even accounts that I had maintained, without missing a single payment for six years, now had to "go bad", and people who have helped and trusted me – such as my bank manager – had to be let down and disappointed. Bankruptcy is a state where one pays in anxiety, humiliation and stress what one cannot pay with money.

If in my writings of the past year I had been deliberately performing some provocative Lenny Bruce act, I could easily understand why family magazines and establishment publications would need to censor my material. Or if my work was mediocre and not *worth* publishing, I could better un-

derstand why markets are so few. If that were the case neither my screenplay nor my stories would win the support of some of Canada's top artists, as they have. What I have run into is the stony wall of Canadian gutlessness.

Some of the details of my story here are individual, and won't apply to anyone else. But the basic issue – why so much of Canadian culture, films in particular, is so lacking in energy and excitement, or just plain show-biz pizazz – is a social issue that applies to every filmmaker in the country.

In most other countries with an active film industry, there is what one might call a high and low culture. In Britain, for example, the "low culture" consists of **Carry On...** movies, and the equally bawdy and sophomoric **Confessions of a Window Washer** (and others, in the series). Most of these films are low-budget quickies, and they earn their keep, though they are not in any other respect a credit to anyone. They amuse some people and edify no one. The "high culture" items, being less predictable financially and more original artistically, consists of the works of Lindsay Anderson, Ken Loach, Tony Richardson, John Schlesinger, and many other topflight directors who have a commitment to personal and artistic growth. In Sweden, the gamut runs from hard-core porno to the sublime peaks of Ingmar Bergman. In Italy the range covers spaghetti westerns and beef-cake epics to the unique work of Fellini, Antonioni, Wertmuller and others. It frequently happens that the "low culture" is what makes the "high culture" financially possible. In Canada, however, the CFDC has repeatedly found "low culture" projects a political embarrassment. But since they are the chief film-funding agency in the country, this means that we have tried to have a film industry, while eliminating the kind of film that would most likely make a film industry possible.

In the United States, even if my filmmaking interests were supported more by libido than talent, I could at least have had the career of a Radley Metzger, Russ Meyer, or Gerald Damiano. In Canada, even with the presence of (what seems to be) serious purpose and talent, I am not allowed to be anything. I have gone from being a banned filmmaker to being a banned writer, and yet I still do not know the name or nature of my crime.

I guess by now I should be utterly broken in spirit. But I know that this impasse in my career and fortunes is more Canada's failure than mine, and that principally the reason why I cannot stay here, cannot grow here, is that I seem to offend a fastidious bourgeois establishment that fears the release of the kinds of energy I advocate. So when my bankruptcy has run its legal course, and the libel suit over the Damien story has gone to court or been withdrawn, I intend to pack up body and soul and move to England, and try to forget this fearful country where you can get royally screwed without ever getting laid, and – more to the point – develop as an artist in a more sophisticated environment. I'm tired of wasting my life – and seeing my life wasted – as a Canadian joke. □