



illustration George Ungar

# The L.A. Magnet

by Bryon White

Like many young screenwriters in search of opportunity, Bryon White went to L.A. There, he talked to other Canadians like himself, who consider Canada a stepping-stone to bigger and better things.

Every serious screenwriter accepts that the key to success is the writer's ability to create a screenplay that will motivate certain individuals, who have access to large sums of money, to spend that money on turning that screenplay into a feature film. Once a screenwriter has developed a reputation for satisfying those money people, who are obviously satisfied when their investment is returned, the interest in his work and the latitude granted him in future will be

greater; for he has finally established himself as, what the moneymen paradoxically call, a "safe risk."

Los Angeles has long been the most productive centre for feature filmmaking in the world. Consequently, it has attracted many talented and creative minds. Many of those who have found employment and success as innovative "safe risks" are Canadians, like Tom Hedley, Lionel Chetwynd, Céline La Frenière, René Balcer and Larry Mollin.

What prompted these five Canadian writers to head south, despite the expan-

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*Bryon White has worked as an actor both on stage and in film, and has produced several plays in Toronto. He was assistant picture editor and music editor for **Circle of Two** and did sound revisions for **Wild Horse Hank** for NBC-T.V. and **Time/Life** broadcasts. He is currently co-writing a script with Mark Phillips, an L.A. producer.*

sion of the Canadian film industry?

**Cinema Canada** asked them about their experiences.

Tom Hedley, who is now adapting a novella into a screenplay for Barbra Streisand (and has sold two original scripts, one to Polygram and the other to Arthur Hiller), stresses that "Hollywood is no criteria for a good film. When Hollywood films are bad they're much worse than in Canada; but, because of the experience here (in L.A.), they know how to make crappy films work." Talking about the Canadian film industry, he remarks, "Canadian producers don't have depth unless they take a risk on doing original material; but the financial community doesn't allow for risk. Producers can't get creative because they're too busy raising money and swinging deals. They don't finance American films the same way. For every film a Canadian producer does he has to start a company. He's so stuck gathering monies together that he's almost forced not to be creative."

Screenwriter Lionel Chetwynd's credits include: the story idea (along with Patricia Resnick and Robert Altman) for Altman's **Quintet**, the screenplay for Harvey Hart's **Goldenrod**; the dialogue adaption of Mordecai Richler's screenplay for **The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz**; and many others. He is currently writing a TV movie about Mayer Rothchild to star Ed Asner.

Larry Mollin, who has written six plays for Toronto's **Homemade Theatre**; TV variety shows; **Easter Fever** and now **Drats**, both for Nelvana Animated Films, is currently writing a script for John Watson and Pen Densham's **Insight Productions**, and has sold a treatment to MGM. Both Mollin and Chetwynd seem to agree that Canada's problem is the producers. Says Mollin, "In Canada the producers are accountants and lawyers and they know very little about making films." Chetwynd elaborates that, "The problem with the Canadian film industry is that a lot of the producers are not sincere about making films but are in it for the lifestyle. They don't realize that making films is hard work, and they don't understand their craft, which is, knowing how it's done. And that can't be learned overnight." Of his Canadian experience, he comments that, "What you do in Canada is your entry payment to the U.S.," illustrating his motivation for moving south with the following analogy: "If you lived in the days of the Roman Empire, the people that were revered were the

generals. If one wanted to be a top general he went to Rome. Well, North America, being what it is, exalts and makes heroes of people in the entertainment business — and, quite frankly, Rome is here in L.A. Canada, at best, is Gaul."

Céline La Frenière found it difficult to leave Canada because she loves the country, but she claims that "Canada does not love its writers." La Frenière wrote the screenplay for the film **City On Fire**, and has recently completed a script with the working title **Lilian**, based on the life of Lilian Ailing, which is to star Julie Christie. Another of her screenplays, entitled **Breakaway**, concerns a poor French-Canadian girl who moves away from her revolutionary French-Canadian lover for the friendship of an upper class American girl. La Frenière is writing more Canadiana-type stories, like **Breakaway**, which are meeting with a much better reception in L.A. than in Canada. But, she qualifies, "If a good creative offer came to me from Canada, I'd do it, and not necessarily for financial gain."

Like René Balcer, many writers find that the producers and directors in L.A. are much more receptive than their counterparts in Canada. Balcer has been reading books and scripts, and batting ideas around with Monty Hellman, who is currently scheduled to direct a film for Coppola's Zoetrope Studio. Balcer says that his timing was right: "Monty needed someone at that time but no one offered to work for free with a strong commitment." This allowed him to be around when the people working with Hellman were developing a story for 20th Century-Fox. Balcer wrote the first twenty pages on his own, showed them to Hellman and the producer, who liked it enough to hire him to complete the script. Balcer doesn't feel that the Canadian film industry is all that bad. Echoing Chetwynd, he comments, "In fact, it's a great stepping stone for making it in L.A."

Many of the major producers in L.A. have a great deal of respect for Canadian talent. Whereas people in the States tend to specialize in one area of filmmaking, Canadians are diversified.

No doubt every serious Canadian screenwriter and aspiring screenwriter has considered the alternatives, of staying and trying to create a feature film industry indigenous to Canada, or going, to compete in the Hollywood system. But, as Chetwynd explains: "If you can make it within the system, you are given the greatest privilege of all mankind — the

opportunity to express yourself."

Canada is still one of the best places for any screenwriter or filmmaker to develop his craft. There are film schools, government grants, cheaper production costs, and two government-sponsored, internationally respected bureaucracies — the CBC and NFB — to aid Canadians in developing their craft: a craft that demands not only the ability to write, but also the knowledge of one's audience. If you are a screenwriter, it is wise to ask yourself if there are enough people in that audience who will pay money to see your film, which in turn will pay for the cost of manufacturing it. In the U.S. it is necessary to have an agent who will take your script to the producers, although that is not absolutely necessary in Canada. It is also a good idea to copyright your script with the Consumer and Corporate Affairs Canada Bureau of Intellectual Property, and familiarize yourself with the ACTRA Writers Guild.

In the case of a feature film, a writer who is not a member of ACTRA is required to join before the producer executes a contract with him. For other than features, where ACTRA has jurisdiction, a writer can join upon receiving a third engagement. As ACTRA has established close links with the writers' unions in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia through their affiliation agreement, an ACTRA member can work freely as a writer in these countries (provided he satisfies Immigration requirements) and join any of the guilds without having to pay the initiation fee. Concerning green cards in the U.S., if a producer is interested in your script he can get you a work permit if it is necessary for you to be there, or sponsor you to get a green card. However, none of this is necessary if the script is actually going to be purchased.

For those interested, one of the most valuable books on screenwriting is Dwight V. Swain's *Film Scriptwriting*, published by Hasting House Communication Arts Books, New York.

If none of the screenwriters profiled here have actually written an international *tour de force*, they still have good reason to be proud of their success to date. They have established themselves as professionals, and assured themselves the opportunity for creative expression in both the U.S. and Canada. This, in turn, will further the creative risks they are willing to take. If we are lucky, one of those risks may be their return to Canada to advance the cause of screenwriting here. Write on!