

Keeping the faith

by Jim Henshaw

Despite his talent as an actor, screenwriter Jim Henshaw refuses to be cast in the role of industry scapegoat. He's convinced that Canadian screenwriters, if given the chance, will prove themselves second to none.

I'm a screenwriter. To write this, I'm assuming the identities of a lot of screenwriters, under the likely assumption that if I stay in this business long enough, everything that has happened to them will eventually happen to me.

To protect both the innocent and the guilty — there is already too much gossip in this industry — I haven't bothered with names. Besides, the innocent and the guilty are sometimes interchangeable — they shift roles depending on your perspective.

"There aren't any good scripts in Canada!" You've all heard that before; from producers defending their latest trip to L.A. at taxpayers' expense, to lawyers lobbying for a little more leeway on their clients' CCA. From directors defending their choice of material, to the actor whose role in one film hasn't led to immediate casting in another, or made him a star.

In short, much of what's wrong with the Canadian film industry is *our fault*, right? Because anybody who's ever read a Hollywood paperback knows

that you can't make a good film out of a bad script. This presumption — that fine Canadian scripts are not available — raises the obvious question, how come? Well... maybe because I've got a few locked in a drawer, stuck in a safety deposit box, cached in my agent's vault, hidden in my lawyer's office; bound and copied, finished pieces of material that could go in front of the cameras tomorrow — as has every other screenwriter worth his salt. In most cases, it is material that has been read and rejected by every major producer in the country. A conservative estimate, based on the material I've read personally, would indicate that there are 50 film scripts out there that could turn this country from the "B" movie capital of the world into a producing nation we could all be proud of overnight.

So, you ask, why don't we keep releasing them to the marketplace until they find a buyer? Because, based on past experience, we can't bear to. It is difficult to have two years of work given a price tag of \$1.00 by a reputable producer for a 90-day option, or receive

three rejection slips from Canadian producers on the same day your script is purchased by a foreign major. A few years ago I submitted a script about discothèques and singles bars to a producer who didn't want to do it because Disco wouldn't last and, because it takes a year for a film to reach the public, he didn't want to be left with unsalable product. A year later, almost to the day, **Saturday Night Fever** went into release. A few months ago, with Disco finally gasping its last, that same producer approached me wondering what had happened to that script. A while ago you couldn't give a Western script away. Now, after a summer of Hollywood Westerns failing at the box office Canadian producers are beginning to shoot them. They must all be praying that **Heaven's Gate** turns into another **Star Wars**.

*Jim Henshaw is a free-lance actor/screenwriter who lives in Toronto. His feature film credits include: **The Supreme Kid** and **A Sweeter Song**. He is currently working on a one-hour T.V. drama.*

CANADIAN SCREENWRITERS

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself why I, as a screenwriter consciously choose to spend a good part of my life locked up with a coffee pot and a typewriter trying to squeeze some element of human experience into 120 pages of semi-intelligent prose?

For my health? Hardly...

For the glamour? A little hard to collect adulation from a humming Olivetti. Women? Give me a break! Who's interested in a caffeine addict who whispers the same sweet nothing over and over until he hits on the right structure! Money? According to ACTRA less than 1% of the 150 million dollars invested in Canadian films last year found its way to Canadian writers.

How about because I love it! And because I assume that I've got something to say or a story other people might want to share. So why would I go through all the pains of trying to create characters to tell that story, build a 90-minute plot structure for them, come up with exotic or at least interesting locations, some sex, action, excitement, a few laughs, a couple of one-liners you could put on a T-shirt, maybe cultivate an idea nobody's explored on film before... if I didn't know what I was doing?

I wouldn't I don't. So how come what I write doesn't turn up on the screen?

Why don't those six to eight people I meet at every party, with their great ideas for a movie, ever write them? Why don't all those producers crossing the 49th with a studio-rejected American opus in their hot little hands make the changes and rewrites they need themselves?

Quite simply because they can't. The art of screenplay writing is one of the most skilled and highly technical crafts in the film business. It's not simply a matter of having the discipline to spend five to ten hours a day doing what your first grade teacher taught you to do with a pencil. It is a medium that denies the open boundaries of the novel or the free flowing form of the theatre. It requires an intimate understanding of all the other cinematic crafts and still imposes the added strictures of time and occasionally budget.

Then, when the months of sweat and neural acrobatics have condensed themselves into a finished form, a producer faced with an over-budget production will solve his problem by tearing 10 to 20 pages out of his script. Or a director,



Illustration: George Ungar

who wouldn't risk a D.O.P.'s wrath by switching on a camera and shooting a scene, will pick up a pen and make alterations to the printed page. Or a production manager, who has scored a 100-year-old locomotive will arrange for a few new scenes to make full financial use of it. Or an actor, whose major claim to fame is a TV series based on his California persona, will be allowed to paraphrase dialogue that doesn't "feel right" to him.

Don't any of them realize what those things do to a well-written and carefully

constructed script? Hardly! And those who do, are as aware as the Canadian writer is, that given the current pre-packaged and pre-sold requirements of Canadian film, the script is secondary to the identifiable formula package.

I once had a conversation with a producer who was about to go ahead with a multi-million dollar film of a very good script. I asked who was directing and was told that he had made offers to three well-known directors: one whose forte was comedy; another's whose was action; and the third has a reputation

for getting you Wednesday's footage by Tuesday night. All three of these men were going to give the producer a different film, but that was of less importance to him than getting a name director with a track record to help his package.

What do you think the average Truffaut film would look like with Sam Peckinpah directing, Clint Eastwood starring and music by The Village People? How about **Jaws** in the hands of Ken Russell or **Star Wars** with Paul Mazursky at the helm?

No matter what shape your script is in, it won't work unless there is a strong point of view controlling the elements that grow out of it. We've all heard a bar band do a cover of a Beatles' tune. There's always something missing from the original. Yet give that same piece of music to another artist who understands what those lyrics and chord structures are meant to communicate, and he can turn it into a version that even enhances the original.



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No record producer goes into the studio with a song without knowing whether he is going Country and Western, Rhythm and Blues or Punk. To put a good script to its best use, it is necessary for a producer to know exactly what kind of film he wants and be willing to risk his "deal" to get the right elements for it. Every time he gives in, or compromises to move the production forward, he is one step closer to a bad film.

As for directors... How many of them alter a script to fit in a crane shot or use a Steadicam? How many destroy a perfect three-act structure to give a particularly tasty piece of talent an extra scene, or make utmost use of a location? Surely, the true test of a director's talent lies in his ability to exert his own, intelligent perspective of humanity, and apply his technical expertise *within the confines imposed by the written material*.

As an actor, I can recall being part of many first-production plays. A script was seldom changed until every other approach to a problem within a scene had been attempted. Only at the point that the actors were exhausted, the director was out of ideas, and opening night was too close for comfort, was the writer asked to write a line.

That doesn't happen in film; maybe because rehearsal time is so seldom available, costs are much higher and the directors have so much more on their minds. Still, there is no excuse for an actor not to have wrung every possibility out of himself before he gives up. No writer who is any good feels his work is carved in stone, nor does he write anything that he feels is unnecessary. However, should the crunch come, the changes should at least be up to the artist who has lived with the character longer.

A few days ago I had the opportunity to read a new script. It was nothing short of brilliant. Almost perfect. I told the writer so. He smiled weakly and handed me seven pages of changes ordered by the production company — a very long list of non-ideas designed to make the story bland, uninteresting and salable to TV. In other words, it may be true that you can't make a good film out of a bad script. But you *can* make a bad film out of a good script! **Rebel Without A Cause** could, without too much interference, have been **High School Confidential**. Only the work of strong and uncompromising artists saved it from that fate.

This is why so many writers withhold

their best work. They have yet to find anybody they can trust.

Which is *not* to say that there aren't any good producers, directors, or actors in Canada. The producers here can hold their own with those of any other country. Hollywood included. Many Canadian directors are capable of exceptional work, but some of the best just don't seem to get the opportunities they should, while some of the worst "succeed" in churning out failure after failure.

My own L.A. experience has convinced me that the only reason Canadian actors have trouble getting green cards is that most of them are so good there wouldn't be many Americans working after a while.

Ultimately, the question is, how do we get all these good Canadian scripts off the shelves and onto the screens of the world where they'll do us all some good? First, because film is a collaborative art, we must start talking intelligently to one another about what we are trying to say and do. If all that is expected of a producer is a finished film, we will never rise above the "B" movie level that only asks for distributable or exploitable product. Once the producer begins to make conscientious demands of the director, he, in turn, can begin to make focused and intelligent demands of his cast and crew that will raise their level of work as well.

It is crucial that the writer be allowed to exercise greater control of his material; not to the point of controlling the industry, but to the extent that he can assume his rightful place as the seminal artist on the production. After all, he knows his job better than anybody else and should be allowed to perform it. One telling anecdote concerns a writer meeting a producer in L.A. The producer smiled at the writer and said, "I just got your new script. It's very good. Who wrote it for you?" The writer smiled back, "I did. Who read it to you?"

This writer-vs-the-world debate has been going on in Hollywood since the first gag man walked onto a set at Hal Roach. Instead of just cloning an industry that imitates it, surely we can learn from others' mistakes. We can't afford to have 85% of our material fail at the box office as Hollywood can. If the rest of the industry begins to trust our own writers to provide what we need, then respects their contributions, our closet-creators will finally emerge with a little more faith and, most likely, a lot of fine fiction.