

The Canadian screenplay : A modest proposal

Once upon a time there was a bright Canadian Film Student who studied at a Canadian Film School. There, he wrote a Great Canadian Screenplay, which he submitted to a Mighty Canadian Film Producer. The producer was thrilled and made the story into a Great Canadian Film. The film made lots of money, and everyone lived happily ever after.

The moral of this story could be that life rarely turns out that way. But, in this case, why shouldn't it? Why shouldn't some film school graduates be expected to write competent and saleable film scripts? What's wrong with Canadian film producers availing themselves of quality Canadian material on a regular basis? And, why is it so inconceivable that Canadian films make money, for a change?

Producers are the first to complain that Canadian film scripts leave much to be desired both in terms of quality and quantity. They sit in their offices ostensibly guilt-ridden at having to produce yet another American screenplay, with American stars, and, God forbid, an American director. Yet neither the producer, nor the industry as a whole, is willing to put money where its mouth is. While complaints about having to settle for Canadian mediocrity, there have been no serious steps taken towards upgrading the quality of education in film schools. Why is it that the industry doesn't feel responsible for educating and producing quality filmmakers and scriptwriters? More importantly, does the industry honestly think that skilled screenwriters can be bred in those bad jokes called scriptwriting courses?

When we think of all the money that is poured into amateur and professional hockey in this country, it's no wonder Canada produces some of the best hockey players in the world. The money buys equipment, facilities, coaches, instructors, and trainers of all sorts to help develop the athlete to his full potential. It's unfortunate that we can't say the same about Canadian screenwriters. I suppose that's one reason why Canada has yet to produce the Wayne Gretzky of Screenwriting.

There are other reasons too, the most serious being the method of instruction used in some scriptwriting classes. In the last few years I have attended five screenwriting classes and three workshops in the Montreal area. Although each course was taught by a different instructor, the method of instruction was the same. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, that same procedure seems to be the most popular throughout Canada.

Screenwriting courses usually follow a "method" whereby a script is presented to the classroom for criticism. Usually, the author reads his own script out loud, and then waits for feedback from the other members of the workshop. The feedback takes the form of statements like, "It doesn't work for me," "I don't like the part where...", or, "Why isn't that, this way?" etc.

Since the criticism is based on subjective impressions rather than on any defined analytical model, it fails to deal concretely with any problems the text may have. The advocates of this "method" contend that writing cannot be taught, and that the best one can do to help a writer is to provide subjective feed-

back. The best the writer can do is to write on and on and on. But without proper models of analysis, the writer only repeats the same mistakes, without ever being aware of them, since an art cannot be learned by trial and error.

Perhaps students cannot be taught how to write screenplays, but, they can certainly be taught to analyse what they've written. And, methods can be designed for that purpose.

It seems that in our culture there exists a notion of the ideal, conventional film story. It exists in the abstract, much like a Platonic ideal, and is probably a result of having consumed thousands of film stories since early childhood. The more a film story resembles that ideal, the more effective it will be in terms of popular appeal. Although the comments made in the workshops are a result of an instinctive comparison between that ideal structure and the text in question, the criticism is invalid because it fails to explain why a text is unlike the ideal structure. In other words, the workshops fail to define that ideal, that criteria of comparison. They fail to create models through which a text can be matched to a defined standard.

Similarly, there is a multitude of books written on screenwriting, dramatic construction, and storytelling in general, that all attempt to outline a paragon. But I have yet to find one that systematically defines and applies that ideal structure to a given text. Or one that suggests clear and concise models with which to approach a film story. Instead, they seem to address script analysis in a random, unorganized manner, never bothering to work a single narrative thoroughly.

The work that needs to be done is obvious. It is necessary to design and instigate a method of instruction that clarifies the structure and qualities of effective drama, and helps the writer to attain them. The method, therefore, must incorporate the definition/application of a model, or better, several models, with which to approach a text, and writing exercises, the purpose of which is to spark the writer's creativity and bring him closer to imitating that ideal structure.

Right now it is necessary to thoroughly assess the state of scriptwriting instruction in Canada. To this end, I ask those interested to submit their comments, outlines and approaches used in courses, models by which to address film drama, or theories as to how scriptwriting should be taught.

If the response is favorable, it will be possible to produce an anthology of Canadian screenwriting criticism. Perhaps more projects will follow from this.

The onus for funding is on both the film industry and the different governments. If we are to build a strong and viable industry, we must begin at the beginning - with the script and the screenwriter. Just imagine what would happen if every year the industry was to develop two quality screenwriters through a specially designed instructional program. Neil Simon, look out.

Frank Barillaro ●

Frank Barillaro is a Montreal screenwriter.

Copyright confusion

I am not surprised that your correspondent, David Balcon, concludes that he is confused by the story of Sharon Pollock's attempt to reclaim the copyright she should to CFCN Television in Calgary to her play "Blood Relations". ("A Question of Copyright - The Sharon Pollock Case", Cinema Canada, December 1983). Unfortunately for your readers he has made the case even more confusing than it actually was by adding a great deal of misinformation and misunderstanding of his own.

As a simple example, the cast was not made up entirely of performers from Calgary as he states. Only Maureen Thomas and Robert Koons were from Calgary. I would think that he would be able to find that sort of information without too much difficulty.

More importantly, he claims that "part of the controversy surrounds the speed at which things moved." He claims that the production crew was hired "at the year's end." The fact is that many of the key production people were engaged as early as August of 1982, which is quite a long lead time for a made-for-TV-movie which didn't begin shooting until February of 1983. It is this type of glib statement that suggests that he hasn't bothered to research his facts very carefully and that he isn't familiar with the production of movies for television.

Where his slipshod enthusiasm rangles most is his inability to assess the meaning of the whole proceedings. He appears to have missed the point entirely that the injunction was requested on a matter of principle. Ms. Pollock claimed that, under the Copyright Act, as her work had been disfigured by the CFCN production and as her reputation would be irrevocably damaged by the disfigurement, she had the right to reclaim her copyright.

However, it was settled out of court and the movie is now being distributed and no changes have been made in the movie from the material which was originally filmed.

If Mr. Balcon had understood the main thrust of Ms. Pollock's action he would have been curious about the terms of the settlement. What did Ms. Pollock receive to compensate her for the immense damage she claimed the production would cause to her reputation? She asked for \$400,000.00 Did she receive anything close to that amount? Did she even receive enough to pay her lawyer's fees?

Of course Mr. Balcon is confused. He hasn't discovered the answers to any of the questions raised by Ms. Pollock's attempt to stop the production. He has merely raised a number of questions about the events and many of his questions arise out of the further complications he has created by his confused reporting.

Robert Barclay
Producer,
CFCN Production of "Blood Relations"

POST-SCRIPTUM

The good news about our new half-hour drama *Thanks For The Ride* (reviewed Dec./83 issue of CINEMA CANADA) is that we think so highly of it that we have

submitted it for a possible Oscar nomination in the "Live-Action Short" category.

The bad news is that we are guilty of the sin of omission. By giving you in error an early list of the film's cast and crew, we omitted mention of several important post-production contributors.

If I may acknowledge them now, they are: Roger Mattiussi, the editor, Marc Chiasson, the sound editor, and Lawrence Shragge, who wrote the original music for the film. Our sincere apologies for the error.

Jeremy Katz
Publicity, N.F.B.
Toronto

Look out!

Upcoming in 1984 issues of Cinema Canada:

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André Carrière

PRODUCTIONS

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