The fifth Summer Institute of Film

Writing Canadian means having the guts to be different

by Leslie Goodson and Warren Neill

For an author, a blank piece of paper can be a harrowing sight. For a screenwriter, there is the additional fear of what his script will look like on the big screen.

If novelists, poets and songwriters have some luxury in meandering through a story, breaking down conventional structures and creating new ones, screenwriters must adhere to structure and avoid "literary" showing off.

"I write novels, poems and songs," says Bill Gough, CBC producer, director and writer, "and I find writing screen plays the most difficult. Structure is vital. While writing a screenplay, you have to hold the structure in your mind all the time: an overview of the story combined with an attention to detail."

Doug Bowie, an experienced screenwriter who has done a lot of work for the CBC, finds screenwriting hard and demanding. "It must be very spare and lean," he says. "Everything has to be to the point, therefore, you have to be very tough with yourself and it's really hard."

These insights into the craft of screenwriting were at the heart of Ottawa's Fifth Annual Summer Institute of Film held by Algonquin College and the Canadian Film Institute during June.

Professionally-led workshops devoted to directing, producing and writing drama for television and film are the *raison d'être* of the Summer Institute of Film (SIF).

One hundred and twenty aspiring producers, directors and screenwriters from across Canada this summer converged on Ottawa to attend workshops led by Australia's Eleanor Witcomb *(My Brilliant Career),* England's June Roberts *(Experience Preferred, But Not Essential),* and Dan Petrie Jr. of the United States *(Beverly Hills Cop),* as well as Canadians Gough, Bowie and others.

The basic goal of this year's Institute was to explore how Canadians can create quality films that reflect Canadian themes, and thus raise the profile of feature films within and without this country. SIF founder and executive director Tom Shoebridge chose to focus on the notion of a good, structurally strong story this year because he believes it is essential.

Leslie Goodson, a graduate of Carleton's Journalism School, is a freelance writer in Toronto. Warren Neill helped organize the Institute.

Shoebridge acknowledges that English Canadians do not write as well for film as they do for other media. "We're technically competent (in film)," he says, "but we're lacking a spark which captures the (audience's) imagination."

During the past two decades there has been some success in bringing English Canadian stories to the screen. If not highly commercially successful,[1] most have been critically acclaimed, yet few come from the riches of Canadian history and literature.

For the most part, however, many Canadian dramatic productions have failed to capture a large audience. In the transition to dramatic film production in the mid-'60s, the documentary tradition dominated at the expense of the imaginative and the fantastic. Thus, a succession of Canadian films which can be generically described as "stark realism" – films in which stories are submerged to observation and analysis.

Veteran film producer Harry Gulkin, whose credits include *Lies My Father Told Me* and the recently released *Bayo,* was at the Institute to talk both about his new film and reflect on Canadian film production in general. "My films are not action pictures," he says, "they deal with the development of character and of situations between people. They deal with relationships and human values, set in our own context." When asked to define his audience, Gulkin says it is typically somewhat older and one which knows itself. "It's a minority audience, but a large one," he says.

Allan Kroeker *(God Is Not A Fish Inspector)* works out of Winnipeg and, as a result, his films have a particularly strong sense of place. As a producer, director and writer, Kroeker has adapted many stories from Canadian literature.

Kroeker was at the Institute to show his new film, *The Tramp At The Door,* based on a story by Gabrielle Roy. Kroeker says this film is a "bold risk in that the central character is telling stories to us and to the characters in the film, so there are lots of words in that film. It's not the kind of dialogue to which people used to watching television are accustomed." He says that because a film has a literary base, it doesn't mean it's not cinematic.

"Audiences are invited to invest in and to learn to read these films," he says. "I don't want to be patronizing, but the audience has to be cultivated, or trained, to appreciate them." If he says the style of his and many other Canadian films is one which may not be immediately attractive to some people, he, like all filmmakers, admits, "I would like to reach the largest possible audience."

Kroeker is not alone in this desire to reach the largest possible audience. However, long before the production is ready for distribution, a quality well-structured story is the crucial first step in the often difficult march towards financing, production, distribution and exhibition.

Twenty years after the dawn of Canadian drama on film, the question of how to create commercially successful, quality films still plagues the film industry. And so the Summer Institute raised the issue once again with its 1985 participants.

In the workshops and in a series of videotaped interviews with the producers and scriptwriters, there was a variety of impressions about the craft of writing drama for film and television.

"I believe the key to the American popular film is capturing the audience's imagination, and giving the audience what it wants," says Dan Petrie Jr. "It's a somewhat shameless and, indeed, completely unashamed pandering to the popular taste."

However, Petrie says that this doesn't mean he follows a formula when he writes because, as far as he is concerned, there is no formula that's worth anything.

Doug Bowie, who has written many historical pieces, including the highly successful *Empire, Inc.,* series, and this fall's CBC drama *Love And Larceny,* believes that "rather than running around trying to copy American contemporary movies, I think we have an interesting past (that we should) explore dynamically and with a certain verve, as opposed to in a textbook, boring way. That would give the Canadian industry a real shot in the arm."

Coming to terms with the concept of identity is an important prelude to any story being developed for the screen and for a potentially large audience.

Eleanor Witcomb points out that Australian films are not nostalgia, but well-known Australian stories and so open to many adaptations.

Witcomb moved from the theatre into screenwriting because she says she wanted freedom and space and movement. "However, it was a difficult transition," she says, "(because film involves) thinking in a different language. Film offers less dialogue because of the space and provides an opening of your mind too.

"The visual impact of the environment, the countryside and the landscape is fantastic," she says, "because it has meaning to people as much as words do. We can only write from our own identity. If we have no sense of our identity, then we are only writing superficial films.

"I think there are fantastic stories in Canada that have never been exploited," Witcomb adds.

Bowie agrees."There isn't *a* Canadian story; there are dozens of them, whether fictional or based on real characters or a mixture of the two."

The consensus of advice to the writers is to deal with the idea of identity on a personal level: "Look into yourselves and find out what you want to say, not what Hollywood wants you to say. You can't write from the true gut until you know enough about yourself to know what you want to do," says Witcomb.

"You need energy and a vision," says Bowie.

"Write about things that matter to you. Try to find out as much about yourselves, what you really believe and think," says Gough.

The Canadian identity is a subject of continuing debate. However, the screenwriters' intentions were more to infuse the notion of self-assurance as an approach to writing, and less to argue the case of Canadian identity *per se.*

Yet if we compare – and we do constantly – our fiction-creating ability with the Hollywood dream factory, it is difficult not to emerge significantly weaker in imagination and extravagance. As Robert Fothergill put it:

> *... It must seem that our filmmaking fraternity has dreamed for us a recurring and demoralizing dream of* la condition canadienne*...because that dream inflicts itself upon them inescapably. And if, aside from the question of art and entertainment, the films don't attract a public, it may be because the dream is not an alien one, but only too familiar. Canadian films are seldom escapist or invigorating.*[2]

If Canadian films are to achieve a distinction and uniqueness that attracts an audience, they need to be less self-consciously and less artificially Canadian, yet still remain true to ourselves.

But, as the workshop participants agreed, they needn't be parochial either.

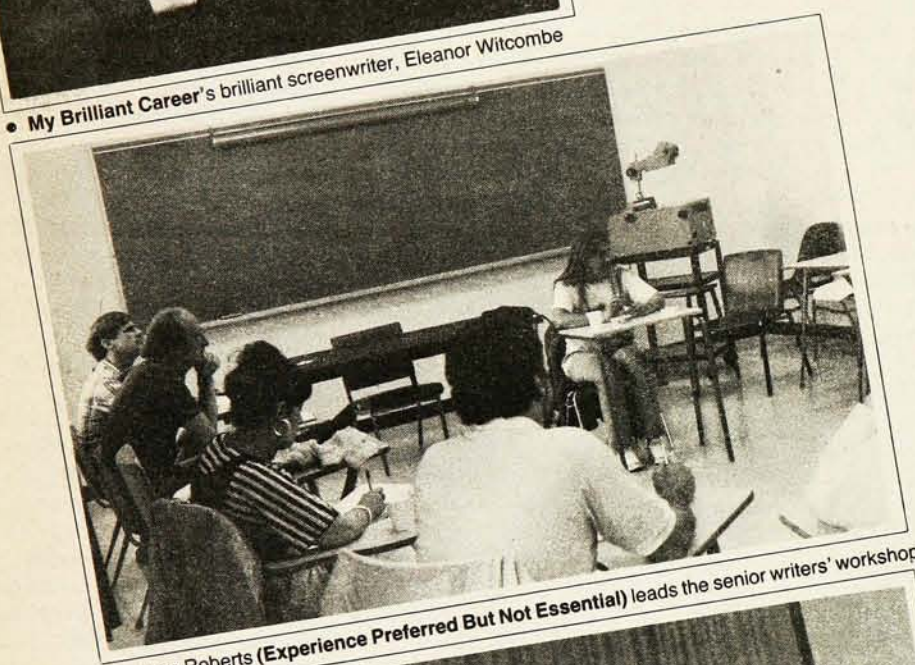
June Roberts, a British television producer recently turned feature-film writer, achieved success with her first feature film-script *Experience Preferred, But Not Essential.* It became popular in her native England as well as in America.

"It is not feasible to make a British film with only a British audience in mind," Roberts says, "but this doesn't mean compromising the content and making it American. It just means it has to be universal enough to touch people outside of Britain."

Allan Kroeker has similar feelings. "If you're true to the place you write about and have really human characters, it's a universal story," he says.

photos: Warren Neill

• **My Brilliant Career**'s brilliant screenwriter, Eleanor Witcombe



• June Roberts **(Experience Preferred But Not Essential)** leads the senior writers' workshop

• Manitoba's Allan Kroeker answers question after a sneak preview of **A Tramp At the Door**

• SIF panelists: Institute director Tom Shoebridge, left; Australia's Eleanor Witcombe; Britain's June Roberts, and the U.S.'s Dan Petrie Jr.

From a producer's point of view, says Gough, "the big problem with a lot of scripts that are shown to me is that they are reflections primarily of shows the writer has seen on television. It's second- and hence third-hand experience because you have the vision so far removed.

"As a producer reading a script," continues Gough, "I'm looking for something that is the simplest and the most complex. I'm looking for a story. A (good) story is almost always a simple one that can be described in one sentence. *King Lear* is a simple story, so is *Macbeth,* so is *Hamlet.*

"And without structure, the story isn't revealed. You can only build the structure when you know what the story is," Gough adds. "While writing a screenplay, you have to hold in your mind simultaneously the sound of the dialogue; the sound of the atmosphere surrounding the dialogue; the knowledge of where the different pieces of the story are; how it's being looked at; what kind of day it is, etc. It's a craft which can grow into an art."

To Petrie, "The most important contribution a screenwriter can make is to design a dramatic structure in which characters, dialogue and all the other aspects exist and flourish to the best of their abilities.

"This dramatic structure is straightforward, easily understandable, but still the biggest trick to pull off," he adds.

As Bowie says, "It takes a long time to learn what works and what doesn't. It's a very specialized occupation."

It is no coincidence, then, that common themes appear in the traditions of good screenwriting – the notion of sense of self and place, coupled with dedication to, and enjoyment of the chosen subject.

For it becomes clear that it is the responsibility of the producer and the director, as well as the writer, to insure that there is, indeed, a story in the script. But, above all, as workshop participants reiterated, *story and structure* are the essential elements of a good script.

Unfortunately, as Bowie puts it, Canadians haven't had the guts to say we're different.

"I don't think, really deep down, Canadian films have become an essential part of the country," he says, "They're not (considered) important to our image of ourselves, to our daily life."

Bowie's parting words to Canadian screenwriters are ominous: "Good luck! We don't need you like we need teachers and bus drivers. Too bad we don't, I wish we did."

1/ *Nobody Waved Goodbye* (1964), *Goin' Down The Road* (1970), *The Rowdy Man* (1972), *Between Friends* (1973), *The Apprenticeship Of Duddy Kravitz* (1974), *Lies My Father Told Me* (1975), *Why Shoot The Teacher?* (1976), *Who Has Seen The Wind?* (1977), *The Hounds Of Notre-Dame* (1980), *Ticket To Heaven* (1981), *The Grey Fox* (1982), *Empire, Inc.* (1983), *Charlie Grant's War* (1984).

2/ Fothergill, Robert, "Being Canadian Always Means Having To Say You're Sorry" in *Take One,* Vol. 4, No. 3, 1974, p. 25.