



Gladys Taylor and Mark Brudu in *Spirit Bay*

Adapting Native Scripts

by Drew Taylor

For years Canadian television has had a concealed fascination with this country's original inhabitants. Indians have been popping up as guest stars or as second bananas on the tube for decades. Witness the adventures of 'Joe Two Rivers' in *The Forest Rangers*, or 'Pete Gawa' in *Adventures in Rainbow Country*. Count the number of times Native people have appeared in the old *Matt and Jenny* series or the new *The Campbells*.

With all these Native-oriented shows floating on the airwaves, it's surprising how few, if any (and I'm inclined to believe the latter), were written by Native people.

The television series *Spirit Bay* has prided itself on its use of Native people in the cast, crew and as story writers. A family drama set on a fictional Indian reserve in northern Ontario, the series shows life through the eyes of the community's children.

Spirit Bay Productions may be the only film company in Canada or the United States to have made money from adapting story ideas by Native Indian writers into a high-quality, half-hour dramatic series. Ironically, the company maintains they're just harnessing a source of talent available to everybody, but which has been largely ignored by mainstream television.

As a Native writer, I worked on *Spirit Bay* for over a year as a story consultant, writer and production assistant. I wrote the series, 'bible' to be used by Native and non-Native writers. During my time there, it became apparent that the production company took a lot

more care and time soliciting story outlines from the Native community, and developing the stories as far as the Native writers could, than is customary with professional screenwriters.

FORMAT

First, the writer delivers a one or two-page story outline to the producer. If the producer likes the outline, a story meeting is held to help the writer further the story. Ideally the writer will return with an expanded version of the outline, maybe five to 10 pages. In this form, the structure of the story should be apparent and the characters well fleshed out. The producer may then, or may not, depending on the company, ask for a treatment, which is a longer outline in prose form, usually broken up into individual scenes. If all goes well, the next step is the first draft of the script, followed by several revisions.

Native writers at *Spirit Bay* were allowed to proceed as far as the treatment stage before their story was given to a professional screenwriter. The producers felt the Indian writers weren't experienced enough to handle a half-hour dramatic script, though many of the Native writers disagreed.

It is more difficult to develop a Native story into a shooting script than a non-Native one. It is at this stage that problems can arise.

CONTRASTING STYLES

It is important for the producer to consider the different style of Native writing — which has grown out of the tradition of storytelling. Our literature doesn't necessarily fit the standard,

western, three-act format of television writing.

David McLaren is a television writer. He was instrumental in planning and teaching a Native screenwriters workshop in November of 1985. He is familiar with the contrasting "style that Native writers write in. It seems to be completely foreign to North American white-bread kind of television," as he puts it.

The concept of western drama is based on conflict that propels the story along. Things are resolved by shouting matches or some other equally dramatic action. All writers in the field are familiar with the standard formula (setup, confrontation, resolution) that predominates in western cinema. On the whole, Native writing doesn't lend itself very well to this style.

As Keith Leckie, a non-Native writer for *Spirit Bay* and *Danger Bay*, puts it, "Arguments, conflicts and confrontations are not an authentic Native way of dealing with problems." To verbally admonish someone or create an incident that draws attention is not part of the culture. When developing a script from an Indian story, care must be taken, because one is "translating a fairly non-aggressive, non-verbal, non-confrontational approach to a medium that is very verbal, that is very confrontational, that is very aggressive," says Paul Stephens, producer and director for the *Spirit Bay* series, who has handled story outlines from approximately 15 Native writers since the show's inception.

STORY CONTENT

In developing the series and the scripts, Stephens has come to believe that the difficulty in accurately adapting Indian stories may not lie in the style but in the content. "Native sto-

ries are much heavier, with greater emphasis on spirituality, mythology and dance, and interweaving that into the stories. Film has trouble mixing magic and reality, myth and reality, dream and reality."

While Stephens' opinion of Native writing as being preoccupied with mysticism is purely subjective, he is correct in his explanation of a difference in content. Many of the conflicts in Native stories are personal and internalized. Native writers also tend to describe the world around them in detail, especially their relationship to the land and environment.

Keith Leckie has adapted six of the 13 episodes of *Spirit Bay*, most from outlines supplied by Native writers. He has become very familiar with Native stories. "Usually the issues are very real and very personal," he says. "The stories they write about have to do with their personal experiences which is very refreshing. They come from the heart. They're not contrived."

THE ADAPTATION PROCESS

The adaptation of Native stories into film scripts is risky. The average viewer with set expectations of what TV drama should be could find the soft, introspective, Native stories unacceptable. According to Peter Lower, story editor for *For the Record* and *Street Legal*, "That's the real problem. You can have a purely white audience."

Basically, a story adapter walks a tightrope between being faithful to the culture and being faithful to the medium. Though this is not impossible to do, it requires a special understanding and approach. Depending on the amount of authenticity wanted, a producer can hire a Native writer to write the script as well as the original story,

Drew Taylor is a screenwriter and freelance journalist living in Toronto.

or find a non-Native writer who is willing to keep in close contact with the original writer. Each option has its pros and cons.

NATIVE SCREENWRITERS

While the Writers Guild isn't exactly overcrowded with the names of Native screenwriters, there are many talented poets, short story writers and playwrights who claim they can do the job if given the chance.

Lenore Keeshig Tobias is one of them. She has worked as an editor on two Native magazines and is currently freelancing as a writer and storyteller. Viewed as an extension of the oral tradition of storytelling, script writing, she says, is fast becoming another form of Native literature. "It's a new frontier and our oral tradition is just branching into a literary tradition. We are learning to use this tool of writing. Screen writing is just another format. It's not that we can't do it, it's just something new that has come our way."

The benefits of using a Native writer are numerous. Authenticity and accuracy are important to any project that expects to be taken seriously. No matter how hard a non-Native writer researches and does his homework, there are certain subtleties and nuances that will be missed. Lenore Keeshig Tobias agrees. "It would be better because they [Indian writers] would have a more intimate contact, with and perspective of, the culture. And I believe it's Native people themselves who know best what is going on in the hearts and minds of Native people."

This in itself can be a problem. When I submitted a story outline, and eventually a treatment, to the *Spirit Bay* producers, the company discussed the story with Children's Programming at CBC. The story focussed on a group of *Spirit Bay* kids who visit another reserve in Southern Ontario. The idea was to show that there can be significant differences even amongst peoples of the same culture. The CBC said the differences were too subtle, that they weren't obvious enough to cause a confrontation.

The story was never produced. But it did show that, in some cases, Native stories can be written just for Native audiences. If a story is absolutely, uniquely Indian, so Indian that no one else is going to relate to it, what's the point? It's like preaching to the converted.

NON-NATIVE SCREENWRITERS

Using a non-Native to write a Native story is also problematic. The chief risk is a lack of understanding. True, a good writer can make anything believable, but it's important that the writer know exactly *what* he or



• The Beachcombers

OVERVIEW

In the past, Native life has been included in many Canadian television programs, specifically adventure shows. Programs like *Adventures In Rainbow Country*, *Matt And Jenny*, *The Beachcombers*, and to a much lesser extent *Danger Bay* have all included Native themes.

The Beachcombers is currently in its 16th season. It's the only show on the air in Canada to my knowledge (since *Spirit Bay* was cancelled) with a weekly Native cast. Jesse, Laurel, and Tommy are all regular characters. With such a large Native ensemble, Native Indian elements can't help but creep into most of the shows according to Karen Petersen, story editor for the series. "As far as I can remember, we've used virtually no Native writers on the show though we average at least one Native-flavoured show a season. We rely on a lot of input from the actors as well as accuracy from the writer."

In its fourth season, *Danger Bay* prides itself as an ecological and environmentally conscious show. The publicist for the show, Laura Goldstein, says *Danger Bay* has never used a Native writer, and "we've done only one show concerned with Native issues, and that was in the first year". Native people are well known for their closeness with the land and their concern over its exploitation. One would have expected them to play a more prominent role in the series. Both *The Beachcombers* and *Danger Bay* staff say they would more than welcome stories and scripts from Native writers. Again, like many other people in the field, they say they were just not aware of any Native screenwriters. Each company expressed a willingness and interest in using such new sources of ideas.

In 1969, *Adventures In Rainbow Country* premiered in its only season. It featured a young Native actor, Buckley Petawabano, as a strong series regular. The show took place in a fishing lodge on Manitoulin Island. Again no Native writ-

ers were used, though Ralph Ellis, executive producer of the show, maintains "we did go out of our way to make sure everything was correct. We'd go to pains to authenticate everything."

Of the 26 episodes produced, says Ralph Ellis, about 20 per cent had strong Native themes. "Indian legends made it intensely popular overseas. Because of Buckley's involvement, a part of every episode was Native. Good writers are scarce, and Native writers are even more scarce."

Ralph Ellis and his Manitou Productions also produced *Matt And Jenny*, an outdoor adventure series set in the 1850's. Because of the period in which the series was set, says Ralph Ellis, they couldn't help but include many Native stories. As in *Adventures In Rainbow Country*, all of the stories were supplied by non-Native writers. Researchers were occasionally used to maintain authenticity. "I remember one time," says Ellis, "we did a lot of research on a particular Iroquois ceremony in one episode. We talked to a lot of knowledgeable people on the subject." He too regrets not being aware of the Native talent available.

Taking this all into consideration, it becomes apparent that little has really changed over the years. Native people are used basically as performers. They have very little influence in production. *Spirit Bay* is the first show I'm aware of that used them as sources of information.

While there are very few Native people in mainstream production crews, they have started up quite a few Native film companies scattered across the country. In these companies, they are the producers, directors and writers of their own productions. They almost always produce culturally educational programs, usually for Native use only, or limited broadcast. But it is a place where Native people are getting experience.

— D.T. •

she wants the people to believe.

Many Canadians still believe that all Indians are trappers, that they still skin beavers and paddle around in canoes. Any writer who does his research knows this is only a small percentage. But, subconsciously, those images remain.

Native communications consultant, Michael Doxtater, is familiar with this stereotype. He says, "Non-Indian people think of Indians as some silent, brooding, stoic type who has got all the answers, and violence that's controlled by some kind of sensitivity or metaphorical understanding."

According to Lenore Keeshig Tobias, "Native people are still struggling to emerge from the stereotypes non-Native writers unconsciously cling to."

Non-Native writers also tend to overlook certain subtleties in order to make better stories. Unfortunately for many Native people, the shows then lose credibility. Many I've seen, involving Indian themes, could just as well have been made about Ukrainians or Estonians given the insensitivity of the scripts.

Writer David McLaren agrees that the translation of Native stories can be inadequate. "I don't think the white writers knew quite how to handle the subtleties I found [at the Native Screenwriters Workshop], and I'm not sure I can handle the subtleties I found in them. The white writers seem to tend to fall back on what they are used to seeing on television. They put in more actions, they set up more conflicts, things are resolved by the odd shouting match, or by some dramatic device other than sitting down and talking things out as often happens in Indian short stories and, as I understand, happens in life on the reserve as well."

Which is not to say that a non-Native writer has nothing to contribute to a story. Non-Native writers, in many cases, have a more clearly defined sense of how drama works within the context of the half-hour television story. Those who want to communicate to a largely white audience, must be aware of the needs of that audience.

Some non-Native writers do go out of their way to remain faithful to the culture. After working with *Spirit Bay* Productions for a number of years, as well as on other Native projects, Keith Leckie is beginning to get a feel for the people and the culture. "I'm only now coming to realize the subtle differences between the cultures. Some are not so subtle, but I want to use more of the many beautiful aspects of Native people and their philosophy. It takes a while to get into this."

Eventually it boils down to what the producer wants. If he or she wants authenticity and accuracy, and is willing to take a chance on an unknown screenwriter, anything is possible. But if the producer opts for a proven, non-Native screenwriter who relies on research, the result could be a well-written but culturally dubious program.