

by Paul Vitols

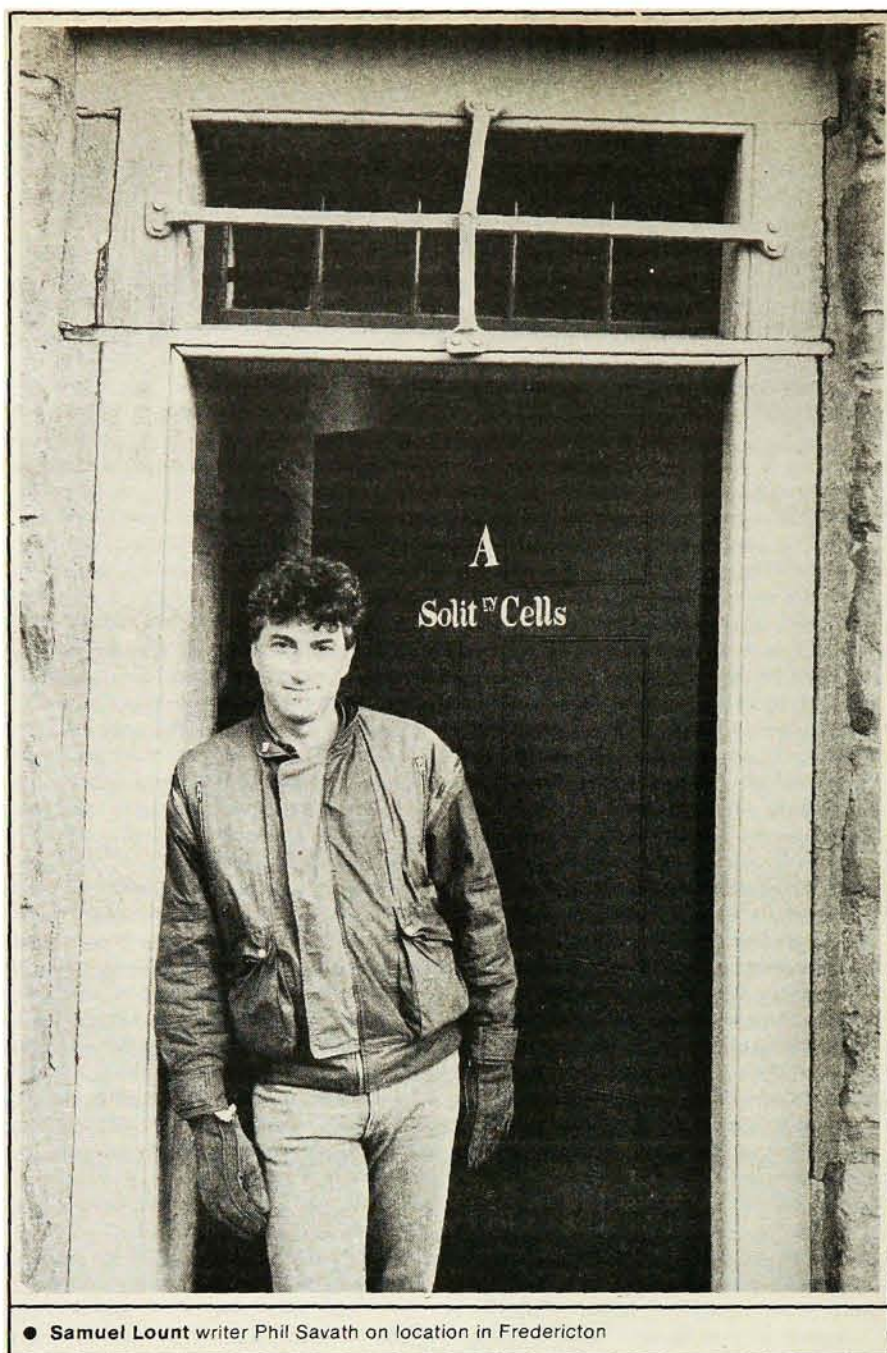
"It seems as if everyone is going around saying, 'Oh my God, the industry's in its dying stages, we've got to make a *great* movie!' And the only thing they have to attach that [hope] to is the script, so everyone goes nuts meddling in the script, when the way, as far as I'm concerned, to make great movies is to make *movies*, and then have some of them turn out to be great..."

Thus speaks Vancouver's Phil Savath, main writer of the recently-wrapped Moonshine Productions feature *Samuel Lount*. The "everyone" he refers to is none other than those mighty powers, the CBC and Telefilm, which since the effective demise of the Capital Cost Allowance have been the financial bottle-neck through which most productions of Canadian pedigree must pass. Of course, the projects reviewed by these institutions are not yet "productions," but are rather "packages" and scripts - the tender DNA of the finished production, existing only in the all-too-vulnerable form of sheafs of typed paper. Paper is cheap, and uniquely susceptible to the action of black felt markers, correction fluid, and cigarette lighters. The funding agencies, with only a script and tentative cast and crew list to go on, and often hundreds of thousands of investment dollars hanging in the balance, have a strong incentive to scrutinize the script and suggest, or demand, rewrites.

"The problem is," says Savath, "that everyone who can spell thinks he can rewrite scripts. (The CBC couldn't understand why I wanted to be on the set. I said, 'Well, movies always get changed on the set, and I thought it would be kind of neat to have the writer change it, instead of the costume lady.')

The \$1.6 million *Samuel Lount* production, with \$500,000 each from CBC and Telefilm promised upon closure of the deal, did not escape revision fever, and Savath found himself jumping through a wide assortment of hoops in order, impossibly, to conform the script to the disparate wishes of the two corporations while at the same time not altogether betraying the original intentions of himself, the producer Elvira Lount, and co-writer/director Laurence Keane. Savath exhausted the number of rewrites and polishes allowed by his contract and still the deal was not closed. Eventually, as with the two features he wrote previously, *Fast Company* and *Big Meat Eater*, the deal was consummated and Savath wrote the shooting script in three days a couple of weeks before shooting.

To capitulate briefly the history of the *Samuel Lount* script: After Lount had secured the interest of the CBC in the

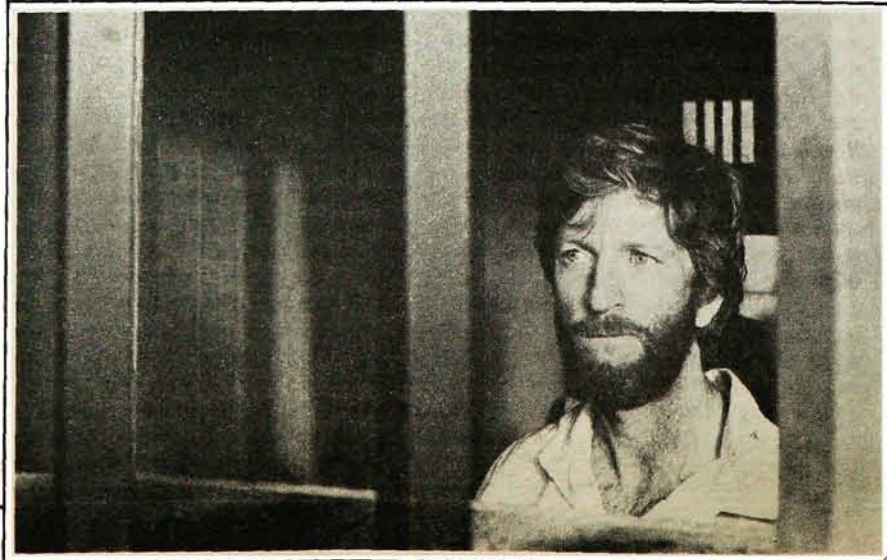


● Samuel Lount writer Phil Savath on location in Fredericton

## Caught between Telefilm and the CBC...

### The writer as rewriter

● R.H. Thomson as the unsung Canadian hero Samuel Lount



project, Savath and Keane completed a first draft in July, 1983, and Telefilm, according to Savath, "was very very high on the script. Their readers' reports said things like, 'This is one to shoot.' The CBC was less happy with the first draft; their readers' reports were not as glowing." Upshot: Telefilm was "up" on the script, CBC "down."

The second draft appeared October, 1983, and the CBC decided that the project was now feasible, provided certain changes were made. Recalls Savath: "Their concerns were all fairly minor - is the swearing 'period?' - but they were basically quite happy with the thing." He was just a few days from sending the CBC a third draft when Telefilm requested extra copies of the second draft, and then abruptly came out with new readers' reports that the script was in Savath's words "terrible." Telefilm down, CBC up.

The CBC now went to bat for the producers, and tried to coax Telefilm back in. Meanwhile, Savath struggled with the CBC demand that more and more "historical" detail be included, and the script, originally to be a strictly personal drama about an obscure historical hero, swelled by 40 pages into something a little more epic. Telefilm, under pressure from both the filmmakers and the CBC, relinquished its critical interest in the script to the CBC: if the CBC liked it, Telefilm would finance it. The CBC, still not completely satisfied, was not committed. Location start date drew nigh. Telefilm and CBC: both on the fence.

With the shoot looming a couple of weeks away, Lount finally demanded a decision from the CBC, and at last a deal memo was signed. In a climatic rush of activity the shooting script was prepared and the cast and crew deals closed. Shooting commenced in Kings Landing, N.B., in September and proceeding on time, on budget, and Savath was there, rewriting day by day, even doing a cameo in the film, perhaps to make sure that at least one line came out the way he wanted it.

Savath, while he would prefer not to have had the runaround with the funding agencies, and is especially critical of the use of different readers for different script drafts ("very unethical"), is pretty well resigned to the pre-production hysteria of financiers, and would go through Telefilm and the CBC again, or whatever other mill promised the eventual completion of a project. It all contributes to that elusive "track record."

"When I wrote *Fast Company* there were three producers. I wrote the script for those guys; they all loved it. They shot the movie; they all loved it. But it wasn't until the day the movie actually came out and turned dollars at the box office that within the following week - this was a year later - all three of those producers called me for a job. You have to prove that you can sell tickets. After that, if they like your script, they'll give you money to change it."

Photos: Chris Reardon