



• Anna Sandor

photo: Zarov

## Anna Sandor and Constance Beresford-Howe:

# Yours, Mine and Ours

by Edgar Matthews

**Cinema Canada:** *Constance, as a novelist, do you like the idea of translating books to the screen...?*

**Beresford-Howe:** It's very often poorly done, but I am not against the idea. I get a great deal of pleasure out of seeing favourite books well translated onto the television, because the essential entertainment value stays if – always if – it's handled properly, not vulgarized. There are terrible things that can happen – and they often do, but on the whole people can get pleasure from an adaptation on a wholly different level from the book reader. The real pitfalls present themselves, however, when the author of the book and the author of the treatment don't see eye to eye, but in the case of Anna and I there hasn't been any interesting case of violence or anything. (She laughs) Now I've had enough experience with adaptation to know the difference, believe me. Without getting into personalities, it can be terribly frustrating if the adaptor isn't on the same wavelength as you are. They start inventing dialogue out of their own little clever heads, and it can be horrendously awful.

**Cinema Canada:** *I've heard some people say that making films out of books is fostering the establishment of an illiterate society...*

**Beresford-Howe:** No. Librarians will tell you that the opposite is true, that kids come into the library because they've seen something on T.V.

**Cinema Canada:** *Is the author often consulted on the adaptation?*

**Sandor:** Constance and I first met just after a screening of *The Marriage Bed*, and I never consulted with her on either *A Population of One* or on *The*

*Marriage Bed* though I guess you could say that we were indeed on the same wavelength. And maybe that's because of my philosophy on the adaptation of books – I don't believe that you're just buying a title. I think you have to remain faithful to the book in cinematic terms. However, I think that if you remain so faithful to the book that you just end up putting the printed page onto the screen then you're not making a movie. As a book, I loved *The French Lieutenant's Woman*... but, as a film, it just didn't work for me. It was a literate film, too literate – too faithful to the original material. When I was making my screen adaptations of Constance's books I really didn't want to meet her...

**Beresford-Howe:** Nobody wants the author around!

**Sandor:** No, that's not why. I felt that, in a way, she bore a child and I adopted that child. I was going to raise that child in my own way, tampering with it to translate it into being my own. I was afraid that I'd feel a certain amount of guilt if I had met her during my work on those films... especially if I had met her and didn't like her...

**Beresford-Howe:** How awful! (she laughs)

**Sandor:** But that's not the case... I just felt that meeting her would hinder me in my adaptation. I want to forget that it's a book – just so that I can concentrate on it as a film.

**Cinema Canada:** *Constance, were you very concerned that you were not consulted on either *A Population of One* or on *The Marriage Bed*?*

**Beresford-Howe:** No. You'd be surprised – once your book is between covers and out of your hands, it's no longer yours. Not really. I had enough confidence in Anna – just by reputation – that I presumed they were both probably going to be alright. I wouldn't have wanted much to be consulted unless I could have prevented some disaster – like a changed ending. By contract, however, I really do not have the right

but I can make waves and be pretty unpleasant. I do have a certain amount of privilege there... but I would be very reluctant to use it.

**Cinema Canada:** *Have you ever used that privilege?*

**Beresford-Howe:** Once. I had to. When a script of mine at CBC, which I had written for television – somebody mucked around with it. I had to get quite nasty. It was an original script, *The Cuckoo Bird*. The film aired in the fall of 1985 with Elizabeth Shepherd in the leading role. The problem was that it was my first experience working, so to speak, in committee. They asked me to write an original play for television. After much reluctance and hesitation because I had never done it before, they finally talked me into it. I went through the whole business of repeated drafts. We had long consultations and I accepted all kinds of suggestions... and, after much discussion, we had put together a script that we all – apparently – thought was okay. I went off for my summer holiday, but when I got back I saw that there were scenes in the script that I never wrote. I started to boil over. One of my characters was missing – gone! No, they changed his name and his whole background of personality. I phoned one of the producers and we had a serious talk. I wrote letters to everyone concerned, saying that if this script is used my name will not appear because it's not my work. I'll never understand why something we all thought was okay in May turned out to be absolutely no good at all in September – somebody had spent the whole summer fiddling around with it. The end result was that they went back to my script – with one concession.

**Cinema Canada:** *What did you learn about writing for television?*

**Beresford-Howe:** I learned a lot. Work done 'in committee' hardly ever works. When in a group people will settle for things that, individually, they would never go for. That means the in-

tense privacy of someone who is creating gets mucked around with and bad, bad things happen. It's incredibly silly...

**Sandor:** I was a new kid on the block too when it came down to *A Population of One* – it was my first time working with film rather than tape. I was very young and inexperienced and I let them muck around with the script, even on the set. There are scenes in that film that whenever I see them I still cringe. It certainly could not happen like that to me today. When you talk about working with a team, I think it's a stupid expression when you're talking about art – it sounds more like surgery. But it does depend on the so-called team. There are certain people whose input I trust, but when you talk about these endless meetings there comes a point where changes are being made just for change's sake. It's different so it must be better! I think you must learn to say 'no'. 'No' is a very important word to learn in this business. You have to take suggestions with a grain of salt. When people talk for four hours they tend to forget what they've said. And you have to learn to judge what ideas people are really married to... then, on the other hand, there are some very good writers who say 'no' every time a suggestion is made.

**Cinema Canada:** *What are the more difficult things for you, Anna, as a screenwriter, when you're adapting a novel? What's negative about adaptation... and how can those negatives be turned into positives?*

**Sandor:** If the novel is too good it's a problem, and if it's not good enough it's a problem. If you find something very good you find yourself wanting to leave it exactly as it is. And then there's dialogue – dialogue in a novel can be really wonderful but once translated to the screen it doesn't always work. If you lift the dialogue directly from the page it usually doesn't work. I think the major problem when you're adapting a novel is making the internal external. Film, obviously, is a visual medium. In

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Most people would agree that *Under the Volcano* was a superb novel... but what about the film version? John Irving's *The World According to Garp* was a bit as a film, but the screen version of his *Hotel New Hampshire* was a major disappointment. Most people seemed relatively pleased with how **Joshua Then and Now** ended up on the screen. And then there's Canada's perennial favourite *Anne of Green Gables* – now that it has been so successfully translated to the screen will the book suffer? Some might think so.

The transformation of a book to the screen is not always successful, and sometimes we wish that the screenwriter would have remained more faithful to our favourite paperback. Toronto's Anna Sandor, the 1985 ACTRA Award and Prix Anik-winning screenwriter of *Charlie Grant's War* and of over 50 produced television scripts, has translated two novels by Constance Beresford-Howe to the screen: *A Population of One* and *The Marriage Bed*.

*The Marriage Bed*, produced by Bill Gough and starring Linda Griffiths, Layne Coleman and Jan Rubes, was broadcast on the CBC on December 21.

Anna Sandor's screen adaptations have been met with favourable reviews, both from critics and from the author herself. But what makes a good adaptation? Does satisfying the author satisfy the movie viewer? What are the pitfalls of adapting a book to the screen? When does a novelist's control of the work end and the screenwriter's own vision take over? Anna Sandor and Constance Beresford-Howe share their views and advice in conversation with Cinema Canada.



• Constance Beresford-Howe

**The Marriage Bed** there are pages and pages about how this woman feels, with a child growing inside of her, all alone in a big house, and so on... in the movie you're left with a vision of a very pregnant woman, but how do you visualize her loneliness? A bad adaptation would have a voice-over or wretched dialogue describing what's going on inside the character – saying rather than showing. It's a difficult transition to bring about. There were some people at CBC who felt that *The Marriage Bed* could not be translated – they felt that it was too internal. They had kind of given up on it. I actually started working on *The Marriage Bed* before *Charlie Grant's War* but it took *Charlie Grant's War* to give us the clout to go in there and convince them to do it. It's a real challenge to translate such an internal novel to the screen. The right kind of shot can convey the right feeling – a shot of a very pregnant woman sitting alone on Christmas Eve in front of a half-decorated Christmas tree certainly conveys that feeling. That image speaks volumes on the screen. You don't have to say anything at all.

**Beresford-Howe:** With film you have to use a different way to say the same thing...

**Cinema Canada:** Now that you've seen *The Marriage Bed*, Constance, are there any scenes in your book that you felt should've have been replicated for the screen? Would you have done it differently?

**Beresford-Howe:** Yes, in a way. I think, ideally, it would have been a little bit better if we could've had more detail about Anne's (the central character's) childhood because that accounts so much for what she is as an adult, how intensely difficult she is to live with. She's been warped by an unstable background. To that extent, I think it would've given the film a richer dimension of character.

**Cinema Canada:** And are there things added in Anna's film version that were

never in your original work?

**Beresford-Howe:** Not to speak of, no. That's why I am pleased with the outcome. It's when people start to mess around and put stuff in there that may or may not be faithful to your concept – that really does bug you. With adaptations the possibilities for awfulness are endless. I would have had much more misgiving if someone in Hollywood had bought the rights to *The Marriage Bed*. We did have some nibbles from Hollywood after CBC had bought the rights.

**Sandor:** Yet there are a number of things in the film script that come from me rather than from the book, but I think that they become so much a part of the movie that they probably don't even jump out at Constance. You need to make changes in order to externalize certain aspects when you're adapting a novel.

**Cinema Canada:** Anna, what do you look for when translating a book to the screen?

**Sandor:** Both of Constance's novels are first-person novels, and I tend to write most of my films very much in the first person. That's how I prefer to write. So, on a subconscious level, I think that's what attracted me to her books. And she creates some very strong interesting female characters which, unfortunately, you don't find too often these days, particularly in films. The message of *The Marriage Bed* also appealed to me – the message that it's okay to want to stay at home, to want to be a mother, even though you may have a college degree. It's a choice that seems to have been overlooked in this era of choices. There's nothing wrong with raising a family, you know. It's a legitimate choice for women to make.

**Cinema Canada:** If you were to make yet another film based on one of Constance's books – now that you've met her, would you go to her for consultation and input into the screenplay?

**Sandor:** Consultations? I don't think

so. Besides, Constance has said herself that she wouldn't like to be consulted, really. And I don't blame her. I think that if something were unclear, or if I were going to make some drastic change in the concept, then I might consult her. I didn't consult her with regard to making *The Marriage Bed* a 'Christmas film'. It's not that way in the book – but I think it works so well for the film.

**Cinema Canada:** Constance, can you offer any advice to those who might one day be adapting a book to the screen?

**Beresford-Howe:** First, you have to saturate yourself in the book. Make it your own, in a sense, appreciate its value. That already commits you to a sort of faithfulness to the book. It has nothing to do with little tinkering or matters of technique. Because it is a different medium, one will have to make changes – that's completely understandable. But every step of the way one should be asking oneself if this is really right – does it grossly contradict what the book is trying to say? One has to be very honest and very self-effacing, in a way, and that's what's so hard about adaptations. I have seen a screen treatment of *The Book of Eve*, which I thank God has never been filmed! I hate the script. It's awful. It messes around with one fundamental ingredient in a way that I find just unacceptable – in order to make Eve more sympathetic to the viewer the scriptwriter has made the daughter-in-law into a kind of Dracula with fangs... a really impossible bitch! That was so dreadful. I have no control, but I guess if it ever came down to the finish line changes could be made. Many other versions have appeared. It's been kicking around for awhile. The book was published in 1973. Larry Fineberg's stage version of the book – entitled *Eve* – has had a fairly long life in the United States and in Britain. That play was often quite effective and brave in its attempt to do something different, but it doesn't work awfully well in that

whole first act. It doesn't get anywhere. I think he'd agree with this – the first act never quite comes off. The second act is great!

**Sandor:** I think that *The Book of Eve* could be turned into a successful film. It wouldn't be easy, but it'd be nice because it's part of a trilogy with *A Population of One* and *The Marriage Bed*, showing the different ages and phases in a woman's life. I'd like to have a crack at it!

**Beresford-Howe:** The rights to that book were sold with no limit of time. It's sad, because every year three or four people come panting up to my agent...

**Cinema Canada:** I'd like to ask each of you this same question: why do you write?

**Beresford-Howe:** 'Cause I love it, I guess. It's a combination of compulsion and just sheer self-indulgence. To me, it's just one of the most amusing and fun things to do in the world. It's not that I have any great message for the world. I'm just an observer of character and I like to see how well I can get it onto the page. I'm not wildly prolific – it takes me up to three years to get a book ready to show a publisher. I've written only eight books over the past 40 years.

**Sandor:** I envy people who say "I love to write" I find sitting down to write very painful. I kind of fell into writing. I used to act. Now that I look back at it I guess I was kind of a mediocre actress. I'm a much better writer. But my acting background has really been useful to me as a screenwriter. I guess I write screenplays as opposed to novels because I really do need applause – literally and metaphysically. With writing I get to say all the things that I was trying to say as an actress – and I get paid much better! I get a really good feeling after I've written something... I guess I write because it's the thing I know how to do best. And it gives me wonderful rewards on many different levels, but it's hard work, hard psychic work – but someone's gotta do it!