

Douglas Bowie

Screenwriter at the crossroads

BY TOM SHOEBRIDGE

Hollywood's respect for screenwriters – "Did you hear the joke about the starlet who was so dumb that she slept with a screenwriter because she thought that he could help her career?"

Hollywood's definition of a screenwriter – "The first draft of a human being."

Douglas Bowie, one of Canada's most respected screenwriters, is not suffering from any such abuse. Rather, he is in a position that would be envied by screenwriters from any country. Last year, CBC aired his 14-hour mini-series, *Chasing Rainbows*, the most expensive in its history, and entrusted him to write the entire series. Afterwards, the head of CBC English Drama, John Kennedy, was quoted as saying that he is eagerly waiting for Bowie to bring in a new project. And this fall, Bowie's second feature in three years, *Hitting Home*, will be released. Meanwhile, he's regularly receiving numerous, well-paying offers while he contemplates developing a project of his own.

Yet, to talk to him is to catch whiffs of ennui, frustration, and restlessness.

After more than 20 years in the screenwriting business, with more than his share of awards, impressive audience reaction and widespread critical acclaim (more on the slings and arrows later), Bowie is reflective about being a screenwriter in the Canadian milieu.

To understand this questioning, it is useful to know how screenwriters in general are faring internationally.

From the first, flickering Edison Vitascope, screenwriters in America's dream factory were put in their place – at the bottom of the heap. The studio system, with its autocratic bosses and an assembly-line production model, barely tolerated the creatures. Writers were hired in huge numbers, herded into barren facilities, and then paid to produce a certain number of pages per week. Even respected literary giants, attracted by enormous amounts of money for those days, were given a simple desk and their output, too, was measured by the page. (William Faulkner later confessed to stretching his handwriting to meet his quota.) To see things haven't changed very much, one only has to read William Goldman's revealing *Adventures in the Screen Trade* or to follow the current bitter screenwriters' strike.



Doug Bowie on the set of *Chasing Rainbows*

And then there's the British tradition wherein the film and television industry affords its story-creating heroes almost sacrosanct reverence. Their stature is based on a literary and dramatic heritage where the writer takes precedence – where screenwriters' names are known, their work anticipated – people like Graham Greene, Robert Bolt, Harold Pinter, and recently, David Hare and Hanif Kureishi. In Britain, it is still common for the story to be the sparkplug of the deal, and remain the centre of interest and anticipation.

On the continent Down Under, often thought of as the ultimate model of the small, English-language film industry for Canadians to follow, the situation is a mixed one. National stalwarts such as Paul Cox (*Man Of Flowers*, *My First Wife*, *Vincent*) and David Williamson (*Travelling North*, *Year Of Living Dangerously*, *Don's Party*) stay at home and seem to get their stories to the screen with impressive regularity.

Other Aussies get seduced by Hollywood, with mixed results. For example: after nearly 30 years as a playwright and screenwriter, Eleanor Witcombe wrote the pioneering Australian hit, *My Brilliant Career*. Hollywood producers flew out to 'do lunch', and she was swept off to what she now disparagingly calls "cloud cuckoo land." After being paid huge amounts of money, her year's work was nonchalantly written off as a development deal. Now back home, she co-produces her own scripts, even though she hates the front office wheelings and

dealings. She claims that co-producing is necessary to protect the integrity of her work in the present Australian climate of tax-induced deals and arrogant directors.

Here at home, we have the oft-repeated story of our publicity-funded institutions of Canadian screen culture, the NFB and the CBC. In these vast corporations, with a few notable exceptions, the politically astute bureaucrat had most of the power and basked in what little glory there was. (Bill Mason, creator of some of the National Film Board's most popular and successful films, always boils when he hears that the NFB has won this award or that prize. "The NFB has never made a film. It's the filmmakers who win these awards.")

In Canada's almost nonexistent independent film industry, the screenwriter was ignored – partly because there was no market for his or her skills, until the last 10 or so years.

It was just at the beginning of yet another production cycle, that Douglas Bowie got hooked on screenwriting. In 1967, on a dare, he wrote his first screenplay and won a prize with it. He then toiled in relative obscurity until the universal acclaim for his six-hour mini-series, *Empire Inc.*, made him, as he puts it, "into an overnight success, after a 12-year night."

To visit him, you don't have to venture into Canada's bustling filmmaking centres where deals are made around trendy cafe tables or in pricey hotel suites. Instead, you wander down one of Kingston's quiet tree-lined streets to a

modest but tastefully decorated red brick house. In his airy third floor office, Bowie methodically creates a page or so on his electric typewriter. Then he doodles on it, crosses things out and rewrites it with a pencil, finally typing up the final copy on his state-of-the-art computer. Slow, but very steady.

Bowie strikes one as the consummate professional: dedicated to his craft, well-versed on an impressive number of aspects of the screen industry, and passionate about the future of film and television in Canada. He has a reputation of being open about his script ideas, discussing points with producers and directors right down to the final filming. The give-and-take of collaboration during the development of a script is something he seems to enjoy.

On this day, he is still pondering the reaction to *Chasing Rainbows*, in which he invested nearly four years of his life. The audience, not overly large at 1.4 million, held steady over the 14 hours, ending at 1.1 million. Impressive, especially when one considers the irresponsible scheduling of the series. (Doesn't the CBC brass realize that only hockey nuts or couch potatoes will commit themselves to viewing the equivalent of seven feature films in 10 days?)

The scheduling was only part of the problem. As the first drama in the world shot in High Definition Television (HDTV), *Chasing Rainbows* was viewed and touted around the world. But not for the story or the acting or the drama. Even CBC's own promotional material focused on the technology, which in the end could hardly be noticed on the average home television screen. It was drama versus hi-tech, and the new toy on the block won.

Bowie, however, is delighted with the enjoyment index for the ambitious production, which showed that the audience enjoyment ranged from a high 78 the first night to a towering 85 in the final episode. A check with Mother Corporation's audience research department revealed that a record number of phone calls and letters to the CBC – far outstripping the number elicited by the legendary *Anne Of Green Gables* and its sequel – testified to the depth of the audience's involvement in the series.

Yet the reviews were, to be genteel, 'mixed'. *The Globe And Mail's* John Haslett Cuff savaged it in a Saturday Entertainment front page (in a irrational tirade that had his peers privately questioning both his motives and his professionalism). Among the numerous positive reviews, the *Calgary Sun*, no lover of the CBC

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and easternism is general, urged its readers to "Chase this Rainbow as long as you can."

With these thoughts swirling in his head, and pad and pencil in hand – "I can't think without a pencil" – Bowie talked freely about the screen industry, from his side of the story.

Cinema Canada: How close was *Chasing Rainbows* to the history of Montreal after World War I?

Doug Bowie: There was a great effort made to make the background as accurate as possible – things like the uniforms, the dates, the visit of the Prince of Wales – I did reams of research and found lots of very interesting events, people and so on, 95 per cent of which I had to discard as it didn't fit the dramatic framework that I was after.

Cinema Canada: Was there an overall theme or approach that you hoped to capture in *Chasing Rainbows*, other than the entertainment elements?

Doug Bowie: It isn't about one specific thing but I hope that it captured the era that follows most wars: the disillusionment, the frustration of returning home and the difficulty of fitting in.

For me, job number one for a mainstream television writer is to make the piece entertaining. That said, you try to give the thing a certain substance with things large and small that have a historical resonance, like the small sub-plot of the way that the blacks were treated at the front – not allowed to carry guns, the racist treatment of Jews in Montreal, or the racist films that were popular.

One of the larger historical elements that I hope worked was the Reg Fessenden story about the beginnings of radio. This was the man who really did first transmit voice over radio waves. The way that he ended up in the show is exactly what happened in real life – even though he is obviously smarter than the Americans, he ends up selling out because he has no other choice. He's totally forgotten. Everyone thinks that it was Marconi. If he (Fessenden) had been an American, he would have been a household name. That whole theme of the control of our airwaves obviously echoes right down to our present day.

But really, if most viewers get caught up and enjoy the thing as a story, if they keep asking what happens next, that's good. On the other hand, if there's the odd viewer who is prompted to find out who this Fessenden guy was anyway, or was there a Fascist Party in Quebec in the '30s as we showed in *Empire*. That's great too. The stories aren't just surface, there's an underpinning to them too.

Cinema Canada: Are there themes which you as a dramatist are particularly interested in?

Doug Bowie: No, not specific themes so much as an approach. I've always been fascinated by a weaving of fictional and historical characters, in things like *Ragtime*, *Little Big Man* or *Tom*



Love and Larceny stars Douglas Rain and Jennifer Dale

Stoppard's play *Travesties*. This has something to do with being a Canadian writer. What we haven't done here, without getting too high and artsy or meaningful about it, is created a kind of country of the imagination. Canada's past exists – with real people and real events who exist in our history books but they don't exist in our imaginations like Jesse James or George Washington do for the Americans.

I often feel that Australian films are so successful in their Great New Wave because they had gone unashamedly into their past, which makes them different from the Americans and the British, and from us.

I guess I've been in the business of helping create this mythology with real and historical characters, real and fictional situations. The Prince of Wales, who did historically come to Canada after the War and meets the fictional character of Jake Kincaid. It could help say to people, "Look, this is us, this is where we come from." Someone said that the art of fiction is separating the truth from the facts, and I guess that is some of what I am trying to do.

If someone, after seeing my dramas, sees that our country is exciting, or has interesting, even sexy characters, then I've done part of what I've set out to accomplish.

If I were working in Hollywood or somewhere else, I think it would be completely different for me.

Cinema Canada: Why do you try to achieve this through scriptwriting rather than through novels, or radio and stage plays, which you've had some success at?

Doug Bowie: Well, I have been thinking a little bit about my future and these points have crossed my mind. Novel writing strikes me as three years of incredible loneliness and hard work. It partly depends on the idea – it must lend itself to the novel form. If you read the 800 and some pages of *Chasing Rainbows*, that's my novel.

Cinema Canada: Is there something specific about screenwriting that attracts you?

Doug Bowie: Yes, there's the great bugbear of collaboration. It can drive you nuts when all those people want their two cents' worth. On the other hand, it is exciting with the interchange of story ideas with people whose ideas you respect.

Cinema Canada: Is there something that you feel the screen – theatre and television – can deliver about your stories that the other means can't?

Doug Bowie: There is, of course, the notion that television and film are the art forms of today. There is something very satisfying that these media allow a lot of people to respond to your work. And that you can get immediate feedback – good and bad so that you can continue to learn and improve.

With a screenplay you can delude yourself into thinking that 'this is great' while it's just on paper. But when it is produced, that's when the little cracks appear, and the guywires start showing, and that your 'wonderful' scene could have been 25 per cent shorter and so on.

But the feedback is proof that what you do matters and there are people who do pay attention. It's the immediacy and relevance of the media that is exciting.

Cinema Canada: Do you have an overall guiding approach to screenwriting?

Doug Bowie: I try to focus on the emotions of the characters. Film is primarily an emotional medium rather than an intellectual one. The viewer has a gut reaction to it, and that reaction is to the characters and emotions and feelings. It might not be fashionable but I think that there is some basic truth to the old Hollywood cliché of "Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em come back next week."

When I write, sometimes I literally tack little code words up in front of me: emotion, suspense, pace, surprise. These are the kind of things I want to build in. Easy to say, difficult to do.

Cinema Canada: Is there something special that you try to achieve in the first draft of a script?

Doug Bowie: Yes, readability. You can't shop a treatment around so the first draft is what decisions are made of, and it's often read by someone whose primary job may not be reading scripts. Therefore, I tend to over-write, explain more things, give more stage direction, make it perfectly clear what is going on and why. Because a lot of people are going to make suggestions – everyone thinks he or she has a better idea. You know that you can prune it down in the rewrite. Someone once said that screenwriting is rewriting. Your primary job is to improve it while maintaining the integrity of the initial story that people were excited about in the first place.

Cinema Canada: What are the downsides of screenwriting?

Doug Bowie: One of the minor but constant irritants is the sloppiness of the critical reaction to your work. Partly, it comes from being blamed or even praised for something that is not the result of your screenplay. And you can't run around straightening out things for the record, though you would like to take the script to them and say "See, it was in the script or that was not what I wrote," and so on.

Some examples: a character in *Boy In Blue* says "They'll wait. They'll wait." but in the film it sounded like "No way. No way" due to low sound recording and the actor acting drunk. In *Empire Inc.*, the director had an actor say "nice house" during a dead spot. In *Love And Larceny* a scene explaining what happened to the main character's child was cut in the editing room. The reviewers lambasted me for, in turn, using modern slang in a period piece, resorting to a bland cliché and leaving a gaping hole in the story.

A finished production is like a chemistry experiment where all the elements have dissolved into something new and it is impossible to take it apart.

Cinema Canada: How can the screenwriter collaborate and yet preserve the integrity of the story as he or she sees it?

Doug Bowie: There is a fine line between being a pain in the ass and having to fight for what you know is important to the story. You can't get upset because they are changing your precious little words. Yet, are you letting them change an essential part? Knowing what to fight for and how to fight for it is an essential aspect of being a screenwriter. Ernest Lehman said that, "to make it as a screenwriter, you have to know what battles to lose." Sometimes I think that it's a miracle that a decent film ever gets made.

Cinema Canada: The major problem is...?

Doug Bowie: Certainly a number of my things have been a whole lot different on the screen than they were on the page. It's not the best way to get your stories delivered in a pristine manner. It is a constant hassle. There are two

ways to respond: become a poet or novelist or even a tennis player. Or, do you try to get more control of your work yourself by becoming a director or producer, cutting out some of these middlemen?

Cinema Canada: Are you moving in that direction?
Doug Bowie: Yes, I would like to direct or produce one or two things myself. It might be a total fiasco and then I would go back to doing what I did before, or something totally new and different.

Cinema Canada: How do you see the future and approach of drama on Canadian television?
Doug Bowie: I'm a little bit in despair over Canadian drama ever being a big mainstream phenomenon in the face of the American reality. The number of people watching Canadian drama is actually going down, due to the fragmenting of the audience. At one time two million viewers was a hit, now it's down to 1.5, even 1.2. It seems ridiculous to declare a nice drama like *Skate*, for example, a flop because only 1.3 million people watched it. But that's a lot of people. There will always be more of an audience for programs like *Alf*, but so what? We should be concentrating on quality, recognizedly Canadian productions, and not worry so much about garnering huge audiences. I'm not talking about marginal, esoteric stuff. It's a mistake to emulate run-of-the-mill American broadcasting just to catch another 100,000 viewers. Surely the message of the bad old tax-shelter days in films is that that approach didn't work and I doubt that it will work in television either.

Cinema Canada: Is there a form that seems to be the best bet for television's future?
Doug Bowie: It's a mug's game to worry about form. It's difficult enough just to write a good script. And shows that do well like *All In The Family*, *Seeing Things*, *Hill Street Blues* often redefine and expand the boundaries of accepted forms. This year's hot new form, "dramady" or whatever, is apt to be out of fashion next year anyway.

Cinema Canada: Do you have any advice for Flora MacDonald about Canada's broadcast and film policy and what models she should establish for the screen industry?
Doug Bowie: We have to be careful not to model ourselves too closely after someone like the Australians as we have a unique situation, being located next door to the Americans. We can't legislate what people are going to watch now that they have almost total access to the American product.

I like some of the elements and the approach of Britain's Channel 4, which would not require us to change too significantly. We need to break down the artificial distinction between made-for-television movies and regular



Lisa Bunting, Michael Riley and Paul Gross *Chasing Rainbows*

Douglas Bowie – A Scriptography

(includes only scripts which have gone into production)

Who Was the Lone Ranger? (1967) Television play. CBC production. Winner, CBC Centennial Playwriting Competition.

Prop Man (1968) Radio play, CBC production.

Amnesty (1968) Television play, CBC production.

Gunfighter (1969) Television play, CBC production.

The Krokonol Hustlers (1970) Television mini-series, CBC production.

The Contest Eaters (1970) Television play, CBC production.

Moving Day (1971) Television play, CBC production.

Amnesty (1971) Adaptation of 1968 TV play. Winner, One Act Play Festival.

Gunplay (1971) Television play, CBC production.

You and Me (1971) Television play, CBC production.

U-Turn (1972-73) Feature film screenplay. Produced by George Kaczender. Official Canadian Entry, Berlin Film Festival, 1973.

Bargain Basement (1974) Short film screenplay, NFB production. Winner 1st prize, Fiction Films, American Film Festival, New York, 1977.

Dream House (1974) Stage play, radio play. Prize winner, Smile Company Playwriting Competition, 1976.

A Gun, A Grand, A Girl (1975) Television play, CBC production.

The Man Who Wanted To Be Happy (1975) Television play, CBC production.

Breakdown (1975) Dramatic film script, NFB production.

Scoop (1976) Television film, CBC production.

No Way Of Telling (1976) Television play – adaptation, CBC production.

The War Is Over (1977) Short film script (co-author), NFB production. Nominated for four Canadian Film Awards including Best Screenplay.

Shantymen Of Cache Lake (1977) Television play, adaptation. An NFB production.

The Newcomers – The Present (1978) Television film, Nielsen-Ferns productions. Winner of CFTA Award for Best Television Drama.

That Summer In Paris (1978) Radio play, adaptation of Morley Callaghan book. A CBC Festival Theatre production.

Empire, Inc. (1980-81) Television mini-series. A CBC-Radio Canada co-production. Winner of four ACTRA awards including Best Writer, TV drama.

The Boy In Blue (1982-84) Feature film script. Produced by John Kemeny for Twentieth Century Fox.

Love and Larceny (1982-84) Television drama special, CBC production. Gemini Award winner in 1986 for Best TV Movie.

Hitting Home (1985-87) Feature film, a Telescene Films production.

Chasing Rainbows (1985-87) Television mini-series, 14 hours. A CBC production.

theatrical films. We should allow made-for-television movies to try and find a theatrical market. One of the frustrating things about working for television movies is that the finished product seems so disposable, now you see them, now you don't, after all that work and money.

Telefilm has made a big difference, but we have to be careful not to plan our entire industry around it indefinitely, priming the pump on a permanent basis. I'd like to believe that the Canadian film industry can stand on its own.

Cinema Canada: What about feature films?

Doug Bowie: I'm a little worried about the feature film situation where there seem to be only television films and one-off very low budget films done mainly with public funds, and no place for a mainstream, medium-budget film like *The Grey Fox*. I don't think that is how you create an ongoing feature film industry.

Cinema Canada: What effect do you feel the pool of well-trained crews is having on the industry?

Doug Bowie: I think that the value to our industry of all these wonderfully experienced people is overrated. Sure they are here, and we need them. They are a necessary condition but they are not a sufficient condition for a national screen industry. It is a little like a housing development which has all of these well-built foundations but no house designers.

What is needed is more faith in the few creative individuals whose courage and determination can utilize these crews for more and better Canadian productions, rather than runaway American productions. It is true that we have a very efficient industry, but servicing films is not the same as making films.

I see a lot of talent and time being used to feed another industry while Canada's lags along because of the shortage of people able to do their own productions due to a lack of production money, etc.

Cinema Canada: Are there any advantages or disadvantages in living in Kingston?

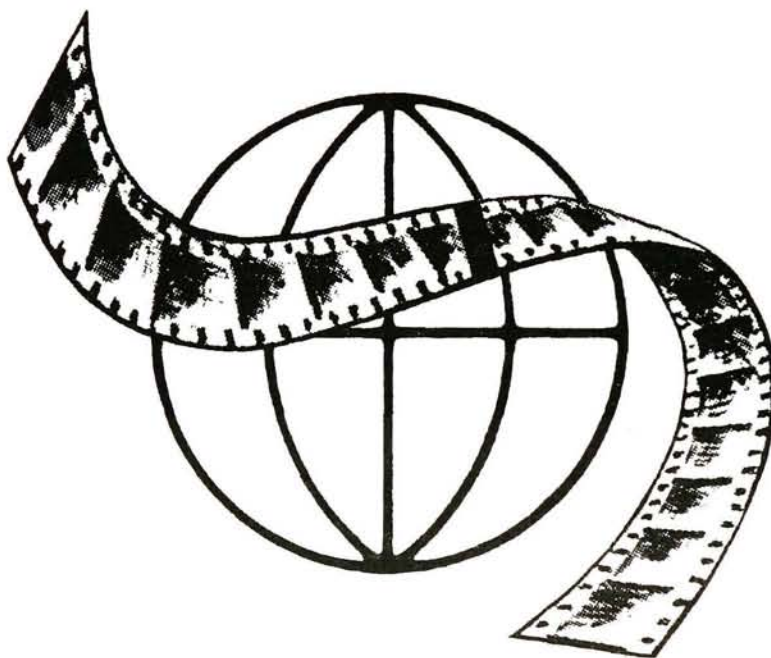
Doug Bowie: It's a very pleasant place to live and is fine as long as I want to continue just being a writer. I can get to Montreal or Toronto in a couple of hours. However, if I want to move into producing or directing, it will be a problem. I would have to base myself where the productions are.

Cinema Canada: After over 20 years in the business, are you optimistic?

Doug Bowie: I guess I am, as there seem to be some very good and talented people within the industry who have the will to create something permanent. But I doubt it will happen with a single, big dramatic breakthrough. It is more like three steps forward and two steps back. It will require a lot of little successes, and those will require a lot of perseverance, dedication and patience... and good scripts. ●

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