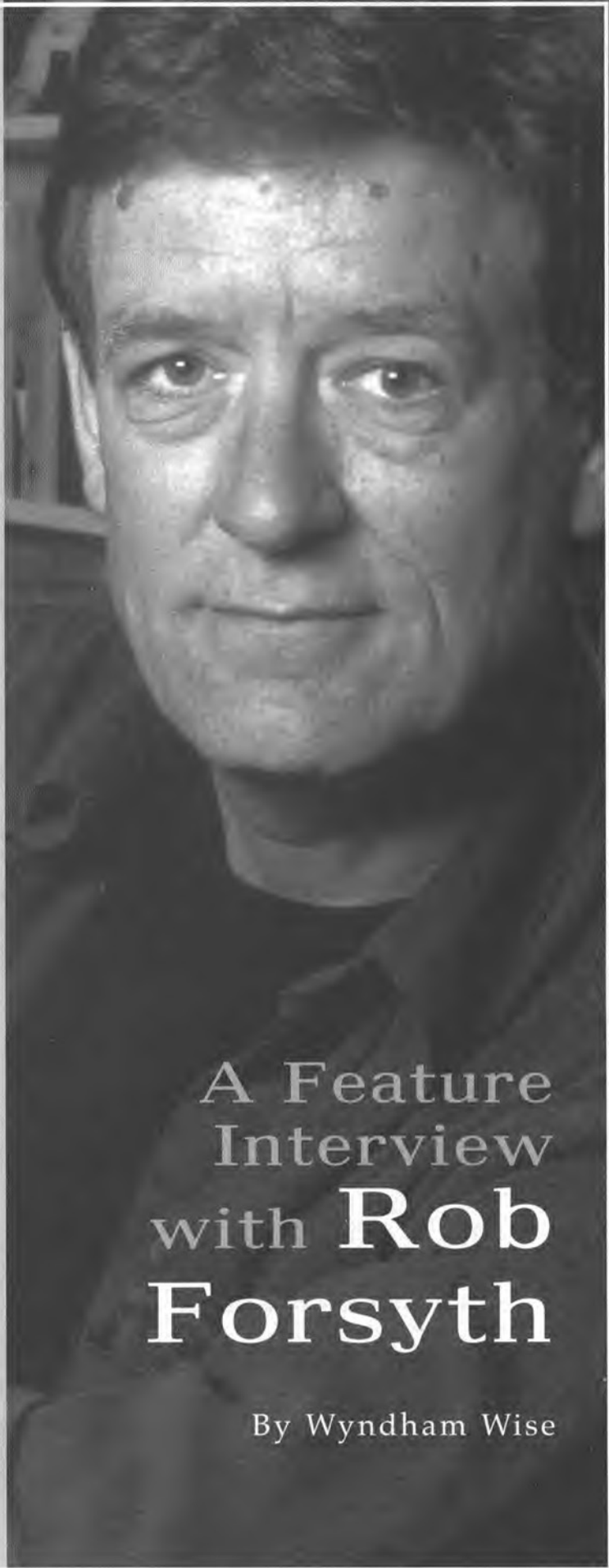


I recorded this interview with Rob Forsyth—who passed away last year from colon cancer—when I was hired to help launch the Writers Guild of Canada's quarterly, *Canadian Screenwriter*. The WGC's policy and communications director, Jim McKee, and I were bouncing around ideas for the first cover story. He mentioned that Rob was just back from Zimbabwe where he had been teaching and researching material for *Dr. Lucille*. The upcoming release of *Conquest*, Rob's work on *Due South* (and many other series) and his previous, brilliant screenplay for *Clearcut* made him an ideal candidate for the first cover.

For me, however, it was much more than that. It took me back almost 20 years to a time when I was just getting started in the film business. I had, what I thought was a great idea for an all-Canadian, man-on-the-run-from-the-law feature, set in the deep bush and small towns of Northern Ontario. I approached director Don Owen (*Nobody Waved Good-bye*), who saw the story's potential. To write the script he recommended a hot young writer fresh from great reviews for "The Winnings of Frankie Walls." I met Rob through his agent, Nancy Colbert. He liked the idea, we negotiated terms and I secured development money from the CFDC.

Rob took my idea for the film, which was based on the true story of the largest manhunt in Ontario's history, and made it his own. He produced a script of such beauty and authentic feel for small-town life that Sydney Newman—formerly head of CBC drama during the 1950s, head of BBC drama from 1963–68, film commissioner and head of the NFB from 1970–75—who was freelancing as a script reader at the CFDC, wrote that it was one of the best he had ever read. However, it being a low-budget film, during a time of million-dollar, tax-shelter bombs (and me, being a neophyte producer who had ambitions to direct), we had no chance of getting it made, although I didn't know it at the time. Rob dutifully went through three more drafts for the CFDC and polished what was there, but we were never able to find a reputable producer with a "track record," and the script remains, unproduced, in my filing cabinet. Eventually Rob and I lost contact, as people who come together for business sometimes do.

The chance to see Rob again and actually get paid to do an interview was an opportunity too rich to pass up. He drove in from Stratford, and we met in the WGC's boardroom. He was his usual warm, friendly self and kept trying to play catch up, but I was determined to do the interview and then play catch up, which we did two hours later downstairs in Druxy's. He had moved to small-town Ontario with his wife Martine Becu to raise a family and pursue a very successful writing career. *Christie* (the name of our screenplay) hadn't worked out, but *Clearcut* certainly did. It proved to be an intensely controversial film, which died at the box office, but which is now recognized by some influential critics as one of the best "unseen" Canadian films of all time. Rob also had a knack, a real talent for writing one-hour dramas. From *Sidestreets* and *For the Record* to *Due South* and *Outer Limits* (and everything in between), Rob had written for them all, although recently he had had enough of series work. He wanted to pursue longer forms, such as *Dr. Lucille*, and more films. His untimely death prevented him from ever realizing that goal, so his romantic and gentle *Conquest* remains his final film. As opposed to the graphically violent, angry *Clearcut*, it was much closer to the man I had come to know and respect; a decent human being in a business more known for its egomaniacal behaviour: smart, generous, funny and a damn good writer. The Canadian film industry has lost one of its best and brightest.



## A Feature Interview with Rob Forsyth

By Wyndham Wise

# A Feature Interview with Rob Forsyth

*How did you get your first break in the business?*

I was trying to write poetry and children's stories when I was 24 or 25.

*When was that?*

In 1976 or '77. The typist for my stories knew a television producer from Florida who was doing a children's series. When he—Stanley Colbert—came to town, we talked for almost two hours about American football and how Canadian football was better. Then, with about three minutes left in the conversation, he asked, "Do you want to write one of these things?" I asked him what they looked like, because I had never written a script before, and he said, "I'm not doing it all for you. Go find out." And I did.

*You also wrote for Sidestreets during that time. Was that your first series?*

Yes. I did five of those, plus a lot of rewrites.

*What was Sidestreets?*

It started out trying to be a purely Canadian police show; a gentler police show. The police weren't dealing with violent criminals all the time. They dealt with community issues, the sidestreets of Toronto, but within a year or two the series moved into harder crimes like rape and murder. It ended up doing quite well and is still seen. I was recently teaching in Zimbabwe, and it was on the local TV. It plays in Italy in loops and loops after 20 years because it's cheap programming. I'm not sure if they even pay for it.

*You then moved on to For the Record. How did that come about?*

I was asked to do a *For the Record* by producer Sam Levine. He wanted a show on unemployment. It was my first *For the Record*, "The Winnings of Frankie Walls," and it remains one of the best things I have ever been involved with. The script just worked.

*For the Record was one of the most interesting series produced by the CBC. Perhaps the best, and last, of its anthology series.*

It was the heyday of CBC drama. They were using writers for what writers could really do, and using interesting directors. They were creating mini-movies. There was no film industry to speak of in Canada at that time. The best writers and the best directors were doing *For the Record*. As a writer, it was what you wanted to do, because you could create from a standing start. You were given a blank slate and I was given two shows. One was on unemployment and I did another on nuclear power. We were given absolute free rein with big budgets and long shooting schedules. "Frankie Walls" was like writing a little movie. It didn't deal with political issues; it was the story of an unemployed man. The other one I did, "Harvest," was much more like a docudrama, where you took a real situation and told a story around that.

*Is the writing any different when it comes to traditional drama and docudramas?*

The second one, the one on nuclear power, took a lot longer because when it comes to docudramas you want to stick to the facts, and it takes a lot of drafts to get rid of the facts. Facts don't make drama. "Frankie Walls," or any straight drama is much easier to tell because you are not trying to stick to the facts. In the end, the only docudramas that work well deal with the spirit of the facts and not the facts themselves; otherwise make a documentary or a radio program. It's very hard to get the facts out of your head, and I tend to do much less research now. Just the bare bones as to what the issue is and then put the books aside.

*Do you think that this is a process writers should strive for?*

I think writers for film can really over-research. Film is not about teaching. Television is about teaching. Film has to entertain. So if you're stuck with the facts, you can't entertain.

*In the 1980s you did Vanderberg, a sort of pre-Traders mini-series, and you had become a senior writer at the CBC.*

There weren't an awful lot of us. There were about a dozen writers. We weren't on salary, but we worked all the time—John Hunter, Michael Mercer, Barry



**Graham Greene terrorizes Michael Hogan in *Clearcut***

Pearson and myself. It was a small, closed club. I think I wrote some good things for them. The *For the Records* were good. I don't think *Vanderberg* worked as well as it should have.

*You then moved into features. What was the attraction? Were you interested in the longer form?*

They're different. It's a whole different experience. Television, to me, is a bridge to the stage. It's a medium that can contain many ideas. Film is a very different medium. It's a medium of high entertainment and much less information. It tells the truth. I like doing both, but features are making an experience tell the truth.

*Clearcut was made in 1991 and is considered in some quarters as one of the great Canadian features, certainly underrated, but with great direction and a powerful script. How did you get involved with Clearcut?*

Cinexus/Famous Players had bought the book *A Dream Like Mine* by M.T. Kelly. I hadn't read it, but I knew it was controversial and people were shocked by it. I was called by Stan Colbert, who was by now my agent, and he thought I should read it and go and talk to the producers. I read it and loved it. I thought it



was amazing, so I went and talked to Stephen Roth. We got along well and I started within two days. However, with *Clearcut*, in the same way the facts can get in the way, the book got in the way at the beginning. I did three or four drafts, but it was not working out because we were trying to stay too close to the book. The book didn't have a central character, it had a narrator, so we created a character out of the man who was telling the story and then the film worked after that. Ultimately, it was this character, the liberal lawyer, who got the film so heavily criticized in certain quarters. It was no longer one man's experience. The lawyer became a metaphor for white liberal society. This was the film's strength.

*Even though his role was mostly heavily criticized?*

In terms of the film, the character of the lawyer, played by Ron Lea, was not fully developed as a performance.

*It certainly doesn't match up to Michael Hogan and Graham Greene, who give powerful performances. Especially Greene, who just burns up the screen.*

The film came out right after Oka and it was confusing. People didn't know what to think of native uprisings and

here was a film that was saying somebody has got to pay.

*Which leads to the violence in the film. The physical violence that Greene's character imposes on Michael Hogan is some of the most gut-wrenching ever seen in a Canadian movie. Do you think people were turned-off by that? Do you regret going that far?*

No. It's not a regret, but I wish the film had made it clearer in its opening act what the setup for the violence was. I think it demanded too much of the audience to make the leap. The violence in the film is created by the white liberal lawyer, not by the Graham Greene character. The Greene character is a figment of his [the lawyer's] imagination, his externalized anger, and he does what the lawyer thinks. He's sick of dealing with the courts. He wants someone to pay. He wants someone to hurt. And no, I don't feel badly about going that far. As Graham says after he skins Michael Hogan's foot and Ron Lea is outraged by this: "What are you so upset about? This is one man's foot. They used to cut off the tits of Apache women and play baseball with them, and you're upset about one guy's foot?" No, I wasn't upset by that, but a lot of people were. I still read about it, that it goes too far, but I don't think it did.

*How do you look back on it now?*

It may have had a negative impact on my career because it was so shocking. I think people thought that was what I was like. But I was doing a lot of television, so I didn't mind. In terms of features, people who saw *Clearcut* wouldn't necessarily think of me for a romantic comedy.

*In terms of television, you were doing a lot of series work dating back to the early 1990s: The Campbells, Night Heat, E.N.G., North of 60, Outer Limits, Due South, Cold Squad.*

I do one or two episodes a year, usually with friends, or with friends producing. I haven't had time in the past 18 months, but I'll still do them. I like writing for series television. I find it fun.

*What do you like about series work? What's the fun part?*

It's a knack, and you get to exercise this knacky part of your brain. Of course, the writer must have the talent, but there is a knack to be able to do this stuff in four equal 12-page acts and to sustain and

build the story over 53 minutes. It's not just craft. I don't know how to describe it. It's just a knack. It's something that really can't be taught. Either you can do it slightly and get better at it, or you can't do it at all. And there are a lot of writers who just can't do it, which is good, because maybe it saves them from burning themselves out on a television series. I've always found it fun, but never found it fun enough to work on an entire series. I've been offered at least half the Canadian television series in the past 20 years, but I don't want to live like that. I don't want to write 13 to 21 hours of the same thing.

*Surely with your knack you could be paid handsomely to do series work in the U.S. It's a great cash cow, isn't it?*

Yes, and extraordinarily hard work. It's 12-to-16-hour days, six or seven days a week. Some people love it. They see it as 20 or 30 mini-feature films. I don't see it like that. One or two hours is enough.

*Let's move on to Conquest, your most recent feature script, and the first since Clearcut, isn't it?*

Yes. *Conquest* has had a very long and interesting history. When I was first married, we went to the town of Conquest in Saskatchewan and there was a Vietnamese woman working in the café who was the unhappiest woman I have ever seen in my life. I came back, having met her, to the CBC and said I want to do a TV movie about this Vietnamese boat person who has ended-up stuck in this café. And the CBC brass said no, we're not interested in small prairie towns and Vietnamese boat people living unhappy lives. We're only interested if boat people are heroes. So nothing happened. Then I got a call from an actress who asked if I would develop a film for her at the CBC, and I said I would. I went in with a producer, and this time the CBC agreed to put *Conquest* into development. That was about four years ago. I wrote the first draft, but it became evident that the CBC was not going to produce it; however, I continued to be paid to write the next two drafts and eventually it was shown to Christina Jennings at Shaftesbury Films. She called up and asked if it was available, and I said, "no it belongs to the CBC." Christina is the most tenacious woman in Toronto. She started to make phone calls and said to the CBC, "if you're not making this let's strike a deal." The deal was that the CBC would give the project back to me

# A Feature Interview with Rob Forsyth



Tara Fitzgerald with Lothaire Bluteau in *Conquest*.

and I would sell it to Christina for whatever the option price was. The CBC would be paid out of Telefilm money and they [the CBC] would make it their first theatrical feature. Christina was very keen on having a British actress in the lead because it would allow us to do a coproduction. It felt better, anyway, to have either a Britisher or Australian come into town. The film originally focused on the old people of *Conquest* and the younger people were secondary. But that clearly was the wrong way to go. Nobody wants to watch a beautiful young couple as secondary, supporting players. So we shifted it. The young man believes his town can be saved, against all hope, against reality. He is the town banker. Bankers are very important in small towns, at least he believes they are. This branch, in reality, would be closed by now. If you drive into small prairie towns, they're almost ghost towns, but there'll probably still be a Royal Bank there, because farmers need banks. Everything in the town is closed up. The café is only open because the banker brought in a boat person to run it. Into this town comes a young, mysterious woman, very beautiful, in a red Alfa Romeo who is on the road to someplace else. She doesn't know where and finds herself stuck in this town someplace else. It's based on the idea of the main prize, in finding what the prize in life is. She has never found it. For her it has been a prize of money, position, or place, and she ends up saying the prize might be the man.

*The film has great performances by the two leads, Lothaire Bluteau and Tara Fitzgerald, and works as a romantic comedy, but it is also a "fish-out-of-water" story. The woman comes into town without signposts.*

Christina Jennings's instinct to make her British was exactly right. This is not a place you would choose to come to. This is not a place where you dream of living.

*Presumably if she was Canadian, she wouldn't be staying there.*

The character of Daisy doesn't want to stay there, but she has nowhere else to go. It was originally written for someone from Vancouver, but it never played very strongly because you kept wanting to say, "why don't you just pick up and go back to Vancouver." Whereas, a British girl who has travelled the world, has run a series of cheap stores all over the world, it's quite natural that she would want someone she can latch on to. *Conquest* is a very complex drama to try and make work. The director, Piers Haggard, and I had to go through about five drafts, struggling to make it work through the inner energies of the characters rather than the events surrounding them. There are virtually no events in *Conquest*. There aren't music and sex. *Conquest* is a straight-up, 1960s-style romantic comedy, so it's not relying on sex. It relies on the actors and without Tara Fitzgerald and Lothaire Bluteau there's no movie.

*Bluteau plays a French-Canadian in southern Saskatchewan, and to those who know their Canadian history, this rings true. But for a lot of people, his character plays like another fish out of water. Was this character originally written as French-Canadian?*

No. It's written that way because Christina wanted Lothaire for the role. It added to the piece. It makes the Prairies exotic, and for a European audience, it's a great sell. This French-Canadian in the middle of Saskatchewan is something very rare.

*There's a touch of magic realism running through *Conquest*, almost whimsy, a quality not often found in English-Canadian features.*

There was much more magic realism in the conception and it's one of those things that I wish we had more of. The caragana bushes would flower along the sidewalks; buildings would be painted the morning after a happy event. It changed a lot from the script partly because of the expense

and partly because it just got lost in the tight schedule.

*A lot of writers complain that with features they lose control of the script, which is taken over by the actors and the director. Do you find this to be the case, that perhaps you have more control over your TV scripts?*

It's actually the reverse. Most television that I do, I understand there's a writers' department that it has to do what it has to do. So on *Due South*, for example, when you write an episode you know that its writers' department is full of talented people and they are going to mess around with the script to make it work for their production needs, to make it work for Paul Gross, for the guest star, for the music they got that week that Paul has written, so on and so forth. Sometimes what goes on-air bears a fair similarity to what you have written, sometimes it does not. *Conquest* was shot word for word.

*Did you go on set?*

No, I think writers on set are a distraction and should not be there. We reworked the script slightly during rehearsals. These were very serious stage actors, both Lothaire and Monique [Mercure, who won a Genie for Best Supporting Actress]. They weren't up to changing lines. If a line wasn't working, they would try for 20 minutes to make it work, then they would turn to me helplessly, and I would say I would fix it because things don't always work. But everything that was fixed was fixed with their involvement, so when they got on set everything on that film was scripted. *Clearcut* was the same, shot to script. I think, on features, there is not the money or the time to change things once you get started. Once you start mucking around with the script there's a risk that it is going to cost money. On a 25-day shoot, and Piers was big on this, you just have to nail everything day by day. You can't play around. So if a good idea strikes you, it's too late.

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