

April 17, 1989 *interview with Robert John Guttke from the newszine, "Pipeline:"

Q: What's the story behind "When the Bluebird Sings?"

A: The long story of this episode was that it didn't stand a chance from the beginning. Without George R.R. Martin's backing the show never would have been on the air. You had two people writing it, toward the end, George and me.

Q: But Kristopher Gentian was based on your own experience?

A: A local television critic said to me that "this Kristopher character is so great they should give him a show of his own." It was rather difficult to take that as a compliment. I mean, everything that came out of Kristopher's mouth has come out of my mouth, it was all verbatim. Everything that you saw of Kristopher was me. I wrote in the script that I wanted him to have a baseball cap -I always wear a baseball cap. When Kristopher appeared around the corner of the shelf in the bookstore, he was wearing a scarf and a long coat and fingerless gloves, and that's how I dress all the time. But that wasn't in the script! Everybody watching it with me that night turned to look at me and said "Oh my God!"

Q: And that was Franc Luz playing Kristopher?

A: He's a marvelous actor. George asked me what I thought of this man that played the part, and I said I couldn't think of any better. The way he read the Oscar Wilde at the very end, I had tears in my eyes. It was beautiful. I was just thrilled. You never know what's going to happen with a television script —they only have a week to put it all together. But everybody who worked on "Bluebird" knew what Kristopher was about. They all leaned in the right direction — like they understood the struggle of the artist in society today - especially one whose work isn't accepted.

Q: I think that shows through, the fact that it's written from life.

A: Oh yeah, the way Kristopher looked at Catherine at the beginning in the bookstore, his eyes wide. When I see somebody on the streets or I'm out at the lake, I just ...study them. And then my heart starts to race, and I go up to them, and I'll see the way the muscles converge in the back or the way the eyes are placed. You suddenly start putting them up on pedestals, and it's really hard to remember that they're human beings just like everybody else.

Q: Meanwhile, they don't know what to make of being appreciated in that way.

A: No, but I've had more luck doing this kind of thing compared to any of my other photographer friends here. I just returned from a working trip to Chicago, where I have friends with a studio. They're also fans of "Beauty and the Beast."

They all watched the show and got the biggest kick out of this —they can't believe that I go up to complete strangers and ask them to come back to my place and ...model. But it's what I do!

Q: You obviously exude ...belief ...and need!

A: I would like to think that my artwork impresses them, that the stuff I've done moves these people. I've never had to pay any of them, other than giving them artwork or a photograph in exchange for their services.

Q: They're immortalized, it's enough.

A: They are immortalized, and it's something - but even when I was working with these professional fashion models in Chicago, they had the biggest kick working with me because it was so different from the type of catalog stuff they're used to doing. It was really something, when you get a rapport.

Q: Well, that's what I liked about "When the Blue Bird Sings." I think you obtained a certain rapport with the people working on the show. There was a resonance between everyone.

A: I wonder. I'd love to have been a fly on the wall down there when they discovered they were working with the real thing. When George called initially and just said, "We really like the creation of this artist," I just thought, "Thank you!" {laughter}.

Q: You were thinking, "Do I tell him now, or.....?"

A: I sent George a letter at Christmas-time that had certain criticisms of the show, because of course I wanted it to go in one direction and they were going in another. It was a very eloquent, well-couched, self-deprecating letter. It must have been at that point that they got to know that they were dealing with the real item.

Q: In truth!

A: Yes, in truth. But to see oneself portrayed on TV is still a sensation I've not gotten over. I mean, how many people just write themselves into a television show?

Q: I think it's fairly unique.

A: I would like to think so. From the very beginning George kept writing me saying, "No ghosts need apply." They broke all of their rules for the show. They didn't want a fantasy character to conflict with Vincent. And I kept telling them, "But nobody sees Vincent as a fantasy character, he's real!"

Q: That's true.

A: There are ghosts, and then, there are ghosts. The thing that George changed in the story was that he made it more ambiguous. I originally wrote it direct; you saw Kristopher re-die at the end of my story. George left it open to the imagination, and then added a few spooky things here and there. What George did with the story was marvelous.

Q: I was about to ask, what was retained from your first draft?

A: I would say the first two acts were pretty much what I wanted, and George changed the structure of the second two acts but used parts of my dialogue. Everything that came out of Kristopher's mouth I wrote. Some of the humor was mine - making fun of Joe in the bookstore, the owner calling him "Titwillow," and things like that. The sequence with Narcissa was all George's. I had originally written that sequence for Elizabeth, who painted the tunnel walls; but they felt that they couldn't get the actress back and the sets had been destroyed too.

Q: Oh, that's too bad; so many people loved her.

A: And I loved writing her dialogue, because she's so wonderfully dotty. I just thought it was appropriate that the artist of the tunnels be involved in the story somehow. You see, my only big regret about the episode was {because Elizabeth was unavailable} some passages of dialogue weren't used that explained the similarities between the two of them - two creatures that were isolated from true society, and suffering the same sort of exquisite pain.

Q: Your story gave the impression of having more time and reflection lavished on it. I don't suppose you're taking away from one art form {photography/sculpture} to work in another {TV writing} necessarily, but....

A: It took a long time though {9 re-writes}, to put together what I did send out. And it wasn't until the final draft that the Botticelli sequence was even created. I think that's what sold it. I was just sitting there, thinking about my Art History professor and the story he had told me about inspiration. I have always looked for people to be the inspiration to bring my work to life; it saddens me, because sometimes I can't do anything unless there's somebody out there who really makes my creative juices go. I keep thinking I should be able to do that by myself. I just remembered how Botticelli doted on Simonetta Vespucci. Even though she fell in love with somebody else he still maintained his appreciation for her. He very much took the young deMedici to his heart too. He was really crushed when they both died. I just thought, to an extent, Kristopher is looking at Catherine and Vincent the same way. They both would bring his work to life somehow. It just seemed to make sense to put it in there; and I think that's what George liked most of all; and that was the heart of the script.

Q: It was the turning point. It literally led 'round to the ending.

A: Very much so. In the ending, originally, there was supposed to be a sculpture.

Q: One of yours?

A: It didn't happen, I think first of all because they'd already had that painting...

Q: What did you think of the paintings?

A: Honestly? I don't think Botticelli would have approved. No one with a Renaissance masters background like Kristopher would do that kind of work. You know, these women in stockings and high heels. Originally the Botticelli sequence was to be done in Kristopher's studio, where Catherine would have been surrounded by various kinds of work of his. But the studio didn't make it to the final cut either. When George removed the studio, it made it more ambiguous. In a way, I felt it was much more successful.

Q: It even worked in the music, that ambiguity. Because in the beginning you didn't know whether Gentian was a threat or benevolent.

A: Well, I am a big film music fan; three-quarters of my music collection is scores from movies. And I kept thinking, well, here's your first chance to have anything to really do with Hollywood. I wonder what the music's going to be like. Lee Holdridge scored all his episodes like motion pictures; they were wonderful. Then Don Davis took over and did some great themes, I remember...

Q: Mouse's theme, and...

A: And Devin's theme, and, you know, I pay attention to that. Maybe nobody else in the world does...

Q: Oh, I think they do.

A: Then, I'm sitting here and I'm watching my story and hearing DeBussy! Strings and woodwinds and oboes...

Q: And horns...

A: My art professor called later that night, and said, "Did you hear the music?" And I said, "Yes!" The thing that amazed me was that my favorite film of all time is "Portrait of Jenny" - and that's all DeBussy's music rescored for the film. And here Kristopher sounded like "Afternoon of a Faun" in the nocturne, which was

beautiful.

Q: It reminded me a little bit of “The Ghost and Mrs. Muir.” A little Alfred Newman in there.

A: But that sequence where Catherine and Vincent are talking about “The Idylls of the King” was handled the way Korngold used to score things. He would have the music move with the lyrics, move with the voices and what the people were saying. When Catherine said something and all these little crescendos of delicate flutes ran up with her voice, I just thought, this is magic. Don Davis did an incredible job. I got the impression that everybody working on it really liked this episode.

Q: And the audience was aware of it; it came across to them the same way.

A: The “Idylls” discussion was George’s. I thought that was incredibly romantic without being sloppy. They can’t do that, because we have a romantic fantasy. All right, don’t overload the romantic side of it. Concentrate on the fantasy!

Q: The most romantic things in B&B have often gone unstated. The less said, the more the imagination can colour it in. Will we be seeing Kristopher again do you think?

A: I don’t know, maybe Kristopher may come back this season. I’ve got a lot of material to work with. I think if Kristopher was a great success, I don’t see why he shouldn’t come back to the show for a visit.

Q: Well, if people’s response to the production office was anything like my own mail on the subject, they might well be looking into it for a ...I almost said ‘Friday night.’ It’s too bad there’s such a stigma about Friday nights; we lose a lot of potential viewers because of that timeslot.

A: But you know, I don’t think I’d want it to be on any other night of the week.

Q: It was funny, when it moved to Monday, I suddenly realized that I not only missed it on Friday night, but Monday didn’t feel the same either.

A: It wasn’t right, it’s like I look forward to this on Friday night because I’m not one of those people that goes out dancing up their heels. I mean, I’m an artist, I’m by myself all the time, and I want something magical in my life on Friday night. Yet I don’t find going to a bar a magical experience.

Q: No. Solitude is beautiful.

A: Well, you see, that’s why I originally got involved with this show. I saw that pilot, and was so incredibly moved. And when Vincent told Catherine that “I

don't belong in your world, people look at me and I feel one thing that they fear, and that's their aloneness." And I thought I understood what he was saying. I spend so much time alone, and everybody thinks I'm so strange because of what I'm trying to pursue in my art. And here Vincent and I were just ...pals. I thought, this is incredible that this television series is about this sort of tragic, heroic figure who finds great comfort in books and music and candlelight. I thought, I understand this man, or whatever you want to call him, I really understand him. There's great merit in that. And I'll tell you another thing too: I received a phone call from a friend of mine. I've never been overly fond of her brother and he has never been overly fond of me. But he told her that he had all this respect for me after watching that show. That was marvelous to hear, because there is something that is going on within me, creatively, that is just as valid as somebody who is out there with a football team or whatever else they're trying to achieve. It's like I finally shined a little bit of light on being eccentric, I guess.

Q: It's not understood in the main, being eccentric may really mean that you're just trying to be more aware, more appreciative ...in quest of some different meaning or beauty. That rather than go out and make tons of money, you just want to satisfy yourself in that way.

A: Yes. I have this friend of mine who is an illustrator. He is one of the most talented people I went to college with, and he no longer does fun things unless it pays well. And I say, "Don't you ever like to feed your soul?" And he says, "Well, you know I have a wife and two children now and I own a house, so feeding the soul isn't important any more." I don't know - I'm just one of those people that would much rather be surrounded by candlelight than by a bank account. Although thanks to George, I now have a bank account, for the first time in my life. "Beauty and the Beast" has done so much magic for me with what has happened, I've become somewhat more credible in a lot of people's eyes, especially in the photography pursuits I've been involved with.

Q: Gee, and you didn't even have to die first!

A: {Laughter} And I was finally able to purchase for myself a state-of-the-art photo strobe system, which would have been impossible before. It just would never have happened without Kristopher Gentian. Or George Martin, for that matter. Well, I thanked George, I wrote him immediately and just said it would never have happened; and I even said, "George, you know, in the very beginning you people resisted a ghost story; you didn't want a ghost story. But we got a ghost story, George." He just chuckled; he said, "Well, some men ignore the boundaries, all the boundaries. And I said "That's right."

Q: There, you see - you've hit upon a truth!

A: I think it was the first time in my life being the strong individual I want! I'm

not known for being flexible.

Q: Perfectionist too, I think?

A: You betcha.

Q: Thought so.

A: It's rough sometimes, really rough.

Q: As was dealing with all those re-writes. What have you learned from working on "Bluebird?"

A: There are still certain things here and there that I guess I didn't have on the mark. George's scripts, by the way, are very literate scripts. I've read examples of his as opposed to the other people's work on the show. When I write it's sort of flat, just direction and stuff like that, George's are like little slender short stories. I kept thinking, why is he elaborating on this description, why is he putting so much feeling into a description that can't be filmed? There's a sequence in the script for Bluebird where Kristopher's work is being described in the warehouse. How did he put it? "Lush, romantic, erotic, sensual, Kristopher's glorious artwork is unsellable." That's on the mark, it's wonderful, but in a way.....

Q: How are they going to put that on film?

A: You can't put it on film. But I think it gives the actors and the director an idea of where they're going. And that's where the magic comes in. So that's why George is such an admirable talent; he really knows how to fill out these scripts.

Q: And elicit a wanted reaction.

A: Instead of just saying, "Turns left, cries, turns right, is incredibly moved." George knows how to do this.

Q: Do you see anything analogous between your photography, say, and writing? When you're taking a photograph are you doing the same kind of descriptive work?

A: My photography, when I'm dealing with people, sometimes it is an elaborate portraiture. My sculpture has a more surrealistic, fantastical quality to it, figures lying in space type of thing, dragons and griffins, and my drawings are very photo-realistic. I guess to an extent it can translate, they can inter-relate sometimes. So, the photography does pop into the.....

Q: Writing?

A: Oh, very much so. But I think in a way, keeping the art work ambiguous in

“Blue Bird” and off to the side worked real well for that story. Because to an extent, the art work wasn’t the story.

Q: That’s true. The artistic impulse was, really. Or perhaps the need, more than the impulse.

A: Yeah, very much so.

Q: It’s fascinating when there are crossovers between say a visual and an audial or written art. Kind of left/right brain going at it together.

A: Well, I’ve always admired people who can write, I admire people who can make music. These are things I’ve just sort of worshiped from afar for a long time, because my creative struggle was somewhere else.

Q: Meanwhile, your back burner was doing something for you.

A: Well, you know, it’s rather strange that the great success of my life really has not been my art work, if you measure success in a monetary vein. Creatively, I’ve been a great success. But monetarily, I’ve been a starving artist, because no one appreciates my work any more than they appreciated Kristopher’s. My greatest success has been in selling the story of my struggle ...and having it as a fantasy that people can appreciate.

Q: Is that as satisfying for you as your photography or sculpture?

A: I don’t know, I don’t know quite yet. When I was watching the show that night, I couldn’t judge it properly, because I was too close to it and my friends were too close to it. All I kept thinking was, this is different from anything that had been done before for the show. But I didn’t know if it was good.

Q: And yet it had every aspect that’s been in other episodes, just in different proportions.

A: A local television critic was saying that “It was an hour show that looked like it could have been 90 minutes long; it went by so fast. There was so much more that seemed to be hidden away somewhere that we didn’t see.” I got a couple of calls from people who said they thought it was as wonderful as the pilot, which was high praise indeed. The critic said that he didn’t think it was like the pilot, but that he thought that it left you with the same feeling that the pilot left you with. I said, “Yeah, that’s pretty good, I like that.” It made you feel sad, and it made you feel good. And that’s all that’s important.

At the time of this interview Robert was looking forward to his first issue of “Pipeline”; his comment was:

A: Well, I’ll have something to read in the park at night when I have my cloak on

and holding the candelabra, so.....

Q: {laughter} Oh, what an image! With the baseball cap.

A: And the roller skates. It's hard to keep those candles lit when you're movin' 240, though...

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