The Odyssey of the Pacific

“...a film for adults, but mostly for children,” is how director Fernando Arrabal describes his latest project, Odyssey Of The Pacific, a $2 million Canada-France co-production filmed on location this fall in Montreal.

The story begins as nine-year-old Lis and seven-year-old Toby (Annick and Jonathan Starr, in their first screen roles), spend their summer vacation in the country, together with their aunt Elsa (Monique Mercure), and their uncle Alex (Jean-Louis Roux), wrapped in a comfortable world of television, daydreams, and electric model train sets.

Enter Hoang (Ky Huot Uk, also in his first film role), a seven-year-old Cambodian refugee placed temporarily in Elsa and Alex’s custody, who has lost his father and was separated from his mother on a Cambodian beach when the boat took him away. The children become fast friends. Toby is a passionate dreamer whose fantasies involve a major part of the film, he dreams of walking a circus wire, commanding a tank brigade, traveling in outer space, or conducting a symphony orchestra (shot with members of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra and 75 extras at Montreal’s Monland Theatre) alongside his pet duck Federico.

Toby’s dreams of grandeur are contrasted with Hoang’s more painful imagination, as he recalls memories of his father and the scene at the beach where he was taken from his mother.

One day while exploring in the woods, the children discover a hidden Pacific steam locomotive and later, the home of Old Thubal (Mickey Rooney), a feisty

Chewing the fat over a coke and a stogie are Mickey Rooney and Guy Hoffman
renegade who once piloted the engine. Now, though crippled, he still opposes the secret locomotive, he lets them fix it up.

But reality intrudes when Hoang must leave to live with his parents. Discovering some coal in an abandoned mine, the children start up the Pacific and plan a fantastic escape to Cambodia, where Hoang would be reunited with his mother and Thubal safe from the rest home. But at the last moment Thubal stays behind, allowing the children to elude the authorities and escape on their fantastic voyage.

Getting Mickey Rooney for the role of Old Thubal was not easy. During the six-week shooting schedule he was performing six nights, Monday through Saturday, on Broadway in the hit play Sugar Babies; so a six-passenger private jet was leased for $25,000 to fly Rooney, his wife Janice, and his travelling companion Dick Paxton into Montreal Sunday mornings. His scenes were done exclusively on Sundays and Mondays, and Rooney was flown back to New York in time for Monday night’s performance. Thubal stays behind, allowing the children to elude the authorities and escape on their fantastic voyage.

are the luckiest people in the world - grown-up children getting paid damn well to do something that's a lot of fun! Reflecting on his own status as the movies’ most famous grown-up child, he adds, “All grown-ups have a child within them but are afraid to show it. For the actor, the minute the child dies, he’s on the way out.”

Locating an authentic steam locomotive was necessary for the film, and it was found in Ottawa’s Museum of Science and Technology. A Pacific-type G5 class engine built by Canadian Pacific Railways in 1944, it is the last existing locomotive of its model in Canada. Insured for a quarter of a million dollars and rented for $15,000, the Pacific was driven by its own steam to a location in Hudson, Quebec. Since the museum’s curators cautiously forbade the engine to be operated after October 1st, for fear its steam might condense to ice in sudden cold weather, a two-week shooting schedule in Hudson was reduced to two days, where all scenes involving the moving locomotive were filmed with over 400 extras. The Pacific was then moved under its own power, and by crane, to a location at the Canadian Railway Museum in St. Constant, Quebec, for the sequences in the woods.

A further challenge to Arrabal is making the film in English, a language he does not speak. “Actually, it’s an advantage, because it gives me time to stop and think about the words and how they should be conveyed,” he said, through an interpreter. Arrabal communicates in French with the predominantly Québécois cast and 47-member crew, and even with Mickey Rooney, who surprised the set with his capable knowledge of the language.

Principal photography was completed in Montreal in the middle of October, and Odyssey is being edited in Paris. The producers anticipate a world-wide release by September 1981.

Bruce Malloch

Key to Credit Abbreviations
p.c. production company p. producer/production d. director d.o.p. director of photography sc. script/screenplay ed. editing/editor mus. music sd. sound recording/re-recording a.d. assistant director asst. assistant loc. man. location manager ward. wardrobe cost. des. costume design set. dec. set decoration cam. op. camera operator elec. electrician carp. carpenter special efx. special effects acct. accountant compt. comptroller sec. secretary i.p. leading players pub. publicity col. colour dist. distributor.
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With controversy now raging over Canadian film content, the role of the screenwriter has come under serious scrutiny. The writers themselves have been lost in the shuffle for too long; but finally, they are making themselves heard. This special section is devoted to their individual perspectives and opinions.

Canadian filmmakers – take note!