IN PROGRESS

The Wars

Fighting mud and mist

It seems ludicrous, getting lost in a sound stage, but that's exactly what happens during the shooting of Scene 05, Take 2 of The Wars, the $3.8 million screen adaptation of Timothy Findley's award-winning novel. The confounding element is a dense fog which has been so artfully contrived by the special effects crew (headed by Colin Chilvers, who won an Academy Award for Superman), that 15 actors and six horses on the other side of the Kleinburg studio have vanished into the thick of it.

What with the dry ice, the fog-sticks, the oil-based smoke and gallons of oozing mud on the floor, the stage has become an eerie no-man's land. When a horse somewhere lets out a snort, the sound is more than a touch unnerving. Suddenly, there's a muffled cry from Brent Carver, the Canadian star of the film, who has lost his bearings and can't find the camera.

Ironically, the scene itself is about being lost. Carver plays Robert Ross, a young Canadian officer in World War I, who, like the proverbial blind man, is unwittingly leading his men across a foggy, crumbling dike in Flanders, littered with the corpses of soldiers who took a wrong step and drowned in the mud.

Finally, the camera starts to roll, but Carver's horse won't budge. There is a long silence, followed by the wet sound of horses' hooves being sucked into the oozing ground. Then, out of obscurity come the pale figures of six officers on horseback. They ride wearily toward the camera, followed by nine foot soldiers weighed down by woolen greatcoats, guns and the fear of death.

After the scene has been shot, director Robin Phillips, former head of the Stratford Ontario Shakespearean Festival, talks about its lyricism, of all things. "There is something extraordinary about fog," he says. "That was probably the most horrific shot of the whole film, but with the fog even the gruesome becomes lyrical."

Though bloody spectacle is usually the foundation of war films, The Wars defies the standard devices of the genre. There are bodies in the film, but they don't blow up on camera. "Or on the camera," points out D.O.P. John Coquil-...
other," says Phillips. "It deals with personal choice, especially the kind within families.

Timothy Findley's story focuses on the war's effect on an upper-class Toronto family. Although the book is set in a historical time period, especially late-Victorian, it is seen as cool and repressed, the Roses seethe with rage. Most of the Roses' activities, blowing vials, is actually "driven by fury," according to Findley. "Her fury comes from the fact that we celebrate the children who participate in the war, and that's as they go to war for Robert. Ross, the son, is also driven by anger. He might have been a hero in the war, and perhaps he would have been bound for outstanding Canadian fiction. As one crew member puts it, "This is the first film I've been on that the actors aren't apologising for." The WARS may well be Canada's answer to Breaker Morant. Both screenplays share some common thematic ground with the Australian film. The WARS has integrity -- which is hardly surprising, considering that it's based on a novel that won the Governor General's Award for outstanding Canadian fiction. As one crew member puts it, "This is the first film I've been on that the actors aren't apologising for." The WARS was one of the only films being made in and around Toronto this past summer. It is also the first feature film filmed by a film that involves character -- their involvement marking the first time the English language has been as a partner in the project, while the National Film Board, as part of a new policy of investing in privately-produced films, is also contributing to the project. The WARS, perhaps the most consistent film's pre-sale to both the CBC and the BBC, and Nielsen is currently in the process of putting together theatre release here and abroad.

No doubt The WARS has attracted such hefty backing partially because of director Robin Phillips' involvement, and also because this is the first time Phillips has ever directed a film he is, at 38, Canada's pre-eminent stage director. Considered a rising star in his native England -- where he has worked with such luminaries as John Schlesinger, Peter Hall, John Gielgud, Edith Evans, Richard Chamberlain and Maggie Smith -- Phillips is already considered a success. Perhaps most significant is the film's pre-sale to both the CBC and the BBC, and Nielsen is currently in the process of putting together theatre release here and abroad.

The premise of Phil Jackson's sci-fi feature, The Music of the Spheres, is intriguing. The music of the spheres as it was formulated by the ancients, and later in the Medieval world-view, was the celestial music of an earth-centered system recording the perfect proportions of the gods. Jackson's aliens are, essentially, those supreme beings which exist for and in the music. A space project involving solar energy deflectors in orbit around the sun is the cause of friction between 'us' and 'them,' because it threatens to disturb the music.

Sometime in the 21st century a highly evolved technocracy has grown out of the ruins of our present military-industrial system, nurtured by the surviving scientific elite of the world. There hasn't been a nuclear catastrophe, but all cities have stopped dead, and social and economic change as we know it has disappeared. What is left is administered by the System, a network of computers housed in Centres throughout the world. A key logistical communications Centre is located in what was once Toronto.

Everything that happens on the planet is accounted for by an Equation. As long as it is balanced, the System works, and all things go to balancing the Equation. The alien beings are the one element the System cannot integrate.

Music is a highly ambitious, experimental gamble, limited by a budget of $140,000. Shooting in 16mm, Jackson sees no difficulty for later blowup. The production is an example of the imaginative use of minimal resources by a committed group of professionals.

The principle character, Melody, played by the remarkable actress from Quebec, Anne Dananews, is the other half of a 'human link' computer, called the Beast. Her brain is tied into the massive computer; she is highly sensitive, but only in relation to the Beast. Paul, one of the Beast's creators, was born under the old order and is one of the leaders of the new (played by Jacques Coutrel). Andrew, the psychiatrist who monitors the functional relationship between Melody and the Beast, is played by Peter Brickman. The drama is based on the contrast which arises among three characters and the Beast when the aliens start to affect his mind. Like Kubrick's Hal, the Beast has a will of its own, albeit tied to Melody during the telepathic collaboration known as "interloc." The Beast will be an extremely strong presence in the film, although we will never see it; video monitors will display information from its omniscient 'brain.'

The film's dialogue will be bilingual, with appropriate English and French subtitles. The concept of language is central to the logic of the story, implied in words and sentence structure. However, when Melody starts to have intuitive feelings about the aliens-- which are not accounted for within the System -- she lacks the words, and is driven by a tremendous need to express herself, to explode and get it out. Jackson hopes the film will challenge audiences to deal with complex ideas about the limits of rational thinking, bureaucracy, and words. Although the film will emphasize character and psychology over special effects, the effects are crucial. Jackson's aliens are, essentially, those supreme beings which exist for and in the music. A space project involving solar energy deflectors in orbit around the sun is the cause of friction between 'us' and 'them,' because it threatens to disturb the music.

The film's dialogue will be bilingual, with appropriate English and French subtitles. The concept of language is central to the logic of the story, implied in words and sentence structure. However, when Melody starts to have intuitive feelings about the aliens-- which are not accounted for within the System -- she lacks the words, and is driven by a tremendous need to express herself, to explode and get it out. Jackson hopes the film will challenge audiences to deal with complex ideas about the limits of rational thinking, bureaucracy, and words. Although the film will emphasize character and psychology over special effects, the effects are crucial. Jackson's aliens are, essentially, those supreme beings which exist for and in the music. A space project involving solar energy deflectors in orbit around the sun is the cause of friction between 'us' and 'them,' because it threatens to disturb the music.

Jackson hopes the film will challenge audiences to deal with complex ideas about the limits of rational thinking, bureaucracy, and words. Although the film will emphasize character and psychology over special effects, the effects are crucial. Jackson's aliens are, essentially, those supreme beings which exist for and in the music. A space project involving solar energy deflectors in orbit around the sun is the cause of friction between 'us' and 'them,' because it threatens to disturb the music.

The film's dialogue will be bilingual, with appropriate English and French subtitles. The concept of language is central to the logic of the story, implied in words and sentence structure. However, when Melody starts to have intuitive feelings about the aliens-- which are not accounted for within the System -- she lacks the words, and is driven by a tremendous need to express herself, to explode and get it out.

Christopher Lowry