

PAUL DONOVAN

by John Harkness



Paul Donovan returned to Halifax from London, England, after completing film school there in 1978. Like others, he felt the promise of the new climate in the industry, and started to work. With his brother Michael, a lawyer by trade, he founded Surfacing Films, and made a first feature *South Pacific 1942*, a surreal comedy set in a Canadian submarine during World War II. Canada had no subs in World War II. Recently, the Donovans have completed their second feature *Siege*, which is in post-production in Toronto. At present, they are the only feature film producers in Nova Scotia.

Cinema Canada: How did *Surfacing Films* come into existence?

Paul Donovan: There are a lot of unemployed people in Nova Scotia, and we were amongst them. We wanted to utilize our skills, and my background was in filmmaking. We started to work at raising money. It evolved slowly, and as I needed more and more legal advice, Michael provided it and became more familiar with the mechanics of what we were doing; and after a while we were a film company. John Walsh had just come back from Singapore or Taiwan, where he was working as a diver in shark infested waters. He likes Nova Scotia because there's nothing big there, he says. Because people sit around and drink beer, they're skeptical. He liked the challenge of building a submarine.

John Harkness, Toronto film critic, is a former Cinema Canada staff reporter.

Maura O'Connell was not in on the first film, she just started recently (as co-director on *Siege*).

Cinema Canada: Why are you based in Halifax?

Paul Donovan: We like Nova Scotia.

Cinema Canada: What sort of advantages or disadvantages do you find there?

Paul Donovan: The disadvantage is that we're off on our own, and that's probably an advantage also.

Cinema Canada: What about the final end: is it harder to raise money in the East or perhaps easier because you're the only people there?

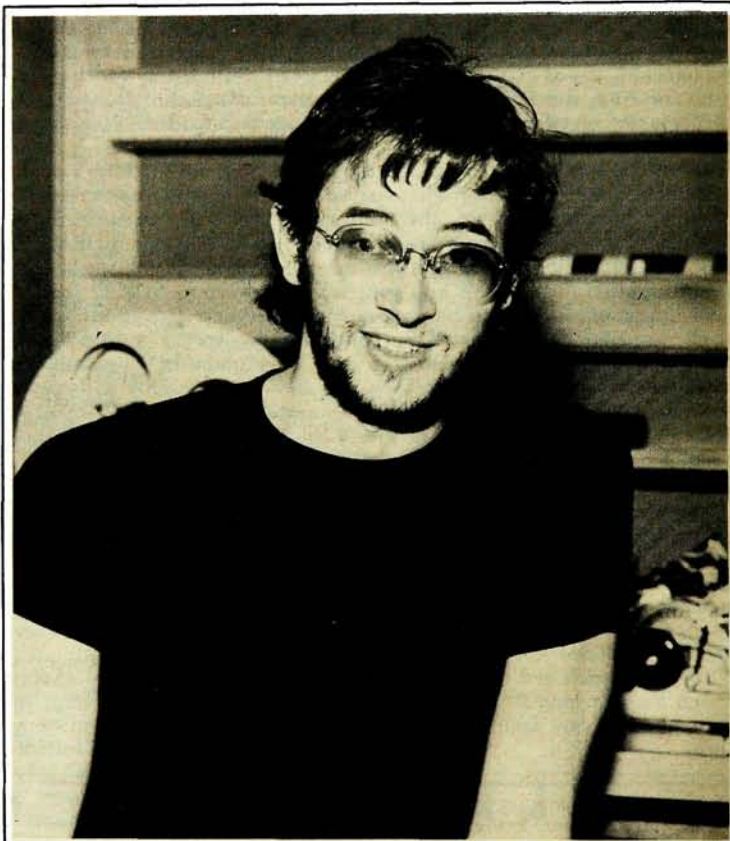
Paul Donovan: I don't know, because we haven't tried to raise money ourselves. Sometimes we console ourselves, saying it's harder because people are extremely conservative with what money they have. It's not huge amounts in Nova Scotia. They're not cowboys. On the other hand, we sometimes think the other way; that we're in untested waters.

Cinema Canada: The money for both your films has been raised through the Capital Cost Allowance. Has that been primarily in Nova Scotia?

Paul Donovan: Primarily in Nova Scotia, but a lot of tax shelter investment has been raised there for other films. The people who know, know, and people inside the financial world will tell you what films sold there. It's a very cozy, well-organized, small back-room market. We're in a position, if we deliver, that we will at least find money for future films. We have a structure in place that's very good for us at present.

Cinema Canada: This structure for financing films, does it have to do with the fact that you have the creative and legal elements combined in a single company?

Paul Donovan: It's been a good balance for us. But my brother won some writing prizes while studying law, so I think he's a reasonably creative person, and I'm reasonably business-minded. I'm intimately familiar with distribution contracts, etc., so that we can deal with it all ourselves. That helps us cut costs and it helps us take a realistic approach.



Regarding the structure, what we have is an agreement with a broker, whereby the broker would like to keep us going and we have to deliver a certain amount of product. The tax shelter is an added bonus, but it's not a fundamental part of the agreement. All we have to do is make low-budget films that make money.

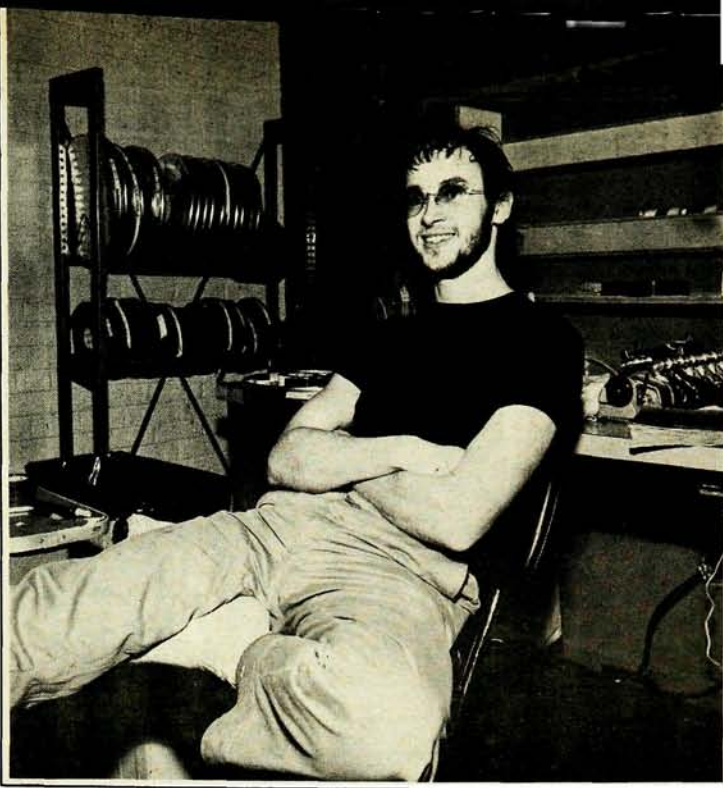
Cinema Canada: So the removal of the tax shelter wouldn't have much effect on you?

Paul Donovan: Maybe it will and maybe it won't. It certainly makes the deal very sweet for an investor. It's like a net hanging underneath you. The tax shelter made the film industry. Films started being made when people realized how the shelter could be sold to the general public, and I don't believe for one second that films could have hap-

pened without it. I don't know if it will die without it; it may, but people are much more experienced and level headed than in '77.

Cinema Canada: What about the logistics of working in Nova Scotia? How much do you have to import?

Paul Donovan: Everything. There is no 35mm equipment for anything, that's all there is to it. But what's the difference? It doesn't matter. It's as much trouble to get a camera for outside Toronto to downtown Toronto as it is to ship to Halifax. Airplanes take one out in two hours. You do have to edit far away, and go without certain things, like you have to wait two days for rushes, which is not a rush. There's no double system projection at all, so you can't see synced rushes.



But there's a certain ambience you like to have, which tends to happen because actors are not local. The acting community is not of sufficient size in Halifax to supply a complete cast for any film. We sort of have an affirmative action toward local actors, but we want to cast everywhere.

Cinema Canada: How loyal are you to Nova Scotia?

Paul Donovan: Oh, there's no loyalty. We don't have any loyalties. Especially me. It's a matter of pure like or dislike. I like living in Nova Scotia. I like to think that in two months I could have a completely different opinion. I could have a bad experience, it could rain 75 days in a row, I don't know. Los Angeles has never had any particular attraction for me. It's a hard question to answer. I think it would be bullshit if I said I hate Hollywood.

We have a lot of freedom: producing our own films, choosing our own scripts. We have our own nice little close-knit family. I don't think that there's a lot of pretension or a lot of self-delusion that we're Hollywood Northeast. We just want to make better films and films that we sort of believe in and that, at the same time, keep us going. That doesn't seem possible in Hollywood. If you want to be a big boy, order 2,000 people around, work on a huge set and read about yourself in the National Enquirer, this may be an advantage, but those aren't our ambitions. Being free and being lost in a system are two different things.

Cinema Canada: You submitted a brief to the Canadian Cultural Policy Review Committee that said, in part, that in order for a film to qualify for the Capital Cost Allowance, it should be budgetted at under \$2 million. What was the rationale for this?

Paul Donovan: My rationale on that is very, very simple. You can sell a low-budget film to limited markets, so it doesn't have to be *Star Wars* to make its money back. Or, you can make a big-budget film that has a Major involved from the beginning. And I don't mean 'involved' because of a little piece of paper or a 100-page contract that says, 'we're interested in this film, blah, blah, blah,' with one little escape clause. The Majors *have* to sink money into it. If they've sunk money into it, they're going

to have to carry it all the way. But if they're just agreeing to use the film with an eye toward distribution, that's nonsense — only the CFDC and a broker in 1979 would swallow that.

Cinema Canada: So in a sense it's an argument for revenue guarantees.

Paul Donovan: If you're going to make a big-budget film, you better have revenue guarantees, or else anyone investing in it is nuts. If you make a small film, you can go by the script, by the enthusiasm and dedication of the people. Even if they err, the limited markets — pay-TV, foreign sales — will bring the money back. What we argue is that \$2 million is supposed to be the amount of money needed to make a fairly professional film. At a \$2 million price most of the money has to be spent on what you see. But when it gets up to five, well, John Guillermin is suddenly getting \$785,000... that sort of thing.

The CCA is supposed to help the film industry. I see that as money going into the pockets of actors and technical people and art directors, not huge salaries. Two million just doesn't leave room for those huge salaries, so if there's \$100 million available in tax shelter money, it might go into 50 films instead of 20, and out of those 50, 15 might be good. More people working is what it's all about, but now we've seen a new vision.

Cinema Canada: Ah! A new vision.

Paul Donovan: A new vision of what should have been done. The new rules from the securities commissions make

me vomit. Personally, I think it's driving staple guns into the heads of the film industry. It's all well intended; but basically, as the tax shelter evolved from real estate, film was treated as a piece of real estate. But it's not, it's film, it's a creative medium, it's an illusion, so you have to deal with it on that basis. In the end, by all these little rules of checks and balances, you're supposed to come up with a good film. The securities rules prevent gigantic exploitation by the producers, but that was never the problem. If the securities commission, from the beginning, required that every person investing in a film had to be provided with a copy of the script, I think some of the films would never have been made. The average orthodontist has gone to university. He can pinpoint a turkey.

I've read big-budget scripts that were completely incompetent. The format is even incorrect. That sort of thing is pathetic.

We can never make a film with a public issue because of the security commission rules. No way. We will never buy a completion bond. These are parts of the budget that don't go on screen. We stand behind our films. If it's us or the broker who put in the money, we'd better finish it and sell it. It's our money. We take virtually no production fees up front, so we have to do it through private placements all the time. I think that the securities commissions have catered to the tiniest proportion of filmmakers who make a certain type of film to a certain budget, and dealt death to the others because the cost of doing a public issue is still prohibitive.

Cinema Canada: So your position is less one of nationalism than realism?

Paul Donovan: I'm extremely anti-nationalist. I hate nationalism. This cultural thing you read about, it just makes my knees give out, it makes me go into dead faints. It's like this committee with a K on culture. What's culture? You take two steps back and this is the funniest thing you've ever seen. I don't know what culture is, but when I was walking in the streets of London years ago and saw the punks come out with Mohican haircuts, I suddenly realized that probably in 100 years scholars will consider this part of the culture of the '80s. But it didn't come from a committee. A

British committee defining culture is talking about something completely different which will be forgotten in a few years.

I think that good films can come out of a completely free-wheeling system provided people with ideas and creative spark can get in.

Also, and this is an emotional part for us, they have to change the policies of the Canadian Film Development Corporation.

Cinema Canada: What's wrong with the CFDC?

Paul Donovan: The CFDC should only be giving money to new people. It would be nice if they could never give money to the same person or organization twice.

If the CFDC put up half the money for a \$500,000-\$800,000 film, and the only requirement was that the person had to put up the other half (and it couldn't come from themselves or their cousin, or uncle), that means they'd have to go out to the private market and somehow raise that money, ideally from an organization like a distributor or a television company. Then you would have somebody who has had to face the realities of the market. Each time, it will be a new person who will make a new film and four out of five times it's going to be bad, or two out of five. But some of the time it's going to be good and everytime it's good, they have a new person.

If the film industry's larger, well-established organizations, which the CFDC is oriented to support, can't survive, they shouldn't survive. If a film company's going to drop, let it drop. It's got to be survival of the fittest.

Cinema Canada: You're talking about the weak dropping away. Has South Pacific 1942 made its money back?

Paul Donovan: No.

Cinema Canada: Is it close?

Paul Donovan: No.

Cinema Canada: Ah hah!

Paul Donovan: We're talking philosophical arguments. We could be one of the weak that drop away. Well, that's too bad. It's painful to think this way, but that's our opinion on the film industry. What would make us most happy, for instance, would be if the CFDC policies were written to give huge amounts of money to someone in exactly our position.

Cinema Canada: People who are essentially regional, small budget?

Paul Donovan: Yes. The regional thing is great! Sometimes that can be used: you're in an underprivileged area and that area has been raped for 100 years. We want something back. Me personally, especially. It's almost a fair argument.

We don't want it that way. We don't want the regional arts committees to have anything to do with what we do. We want us to make our money back. Maybe that's in our heritage, the Scottish fear of debt. We want to be independents who make films people want to see.

Cinema Canada: You and your brother also made an application for a pay-TV license. Was that an expression of raging regionalism?

Paul Donovan: Well, there's nothing to talk about, because by the time this article comes out, the CRTC will proba-

ably have given the license out, and we can't presume what they will say.

The problem is, we were inspired by the "All Night Show" (a late-night, Toronto program which featured comedian Chas Lawther as 'Chuck the Security Guard,' who ran weird old video until six in the morning. It is no longer on the air).

Everybody is talking about Canadian culture - that program was it, right there. Prior to Bob and Doug. This was what TV could be. Now, it's too formal and rigid. We could have fun, do something really cheap, and most of all, work with all those people out there, all those nuts who aren't now in the Canadian film industry and are lurking around bars. You want them on TV doing something - there's lots of material out there. You need a minor league.

The CRTC might have felt threatened by our application. The danger was that they described in their call for applications that they wanted something new and experimental - things that hadn't been on TV before. And we're standing there, saying, "Hey, that's what we're trying to do, we don't want to be HBO." But, you can philosophically say that's what you want, but when you actually see it staring you in the face, the old Canadian government, seeing something that could be disorderly... That's our main liability. I think we suffer from being too non-mainstream. If they did give us the license, we'd really enjoy ourselves. We would make it the channel for things that would never normally be on TV.

Cinema Canada: For instance?

Paul Donovan: There have been Canadian movies that were very bad. We think it might be reasonable to show half that movie, possibly the worst parts, and then get the people involved in the making of it, and they would fill in the rest of the story and tell you what went wrong.

The primary motivating factor is that it dispenses with the formalities of television, it becomes a sort of FM-TV. The high production value associated with TV is slickness; throw it away. Good technical quality, but make it very personal, a little bit loose around the edges. The camera might fall over once in a while, but still have a good image.

It would be a national license. No regional rage. We're sort of raging regionalists. Canada's a funny place. The best thing about Canada is that it's not unified.

People say Quebec wants to separate, Alberta hates Ontario, B.C. looks down its nose at the Prairies, it goes on and on. I think it's healthy. That's people. When you look at a country like the United States, you see everybody's waving the flag, marching in bands, and building B-1 bombers. That's unity.

It's better to have a little hysteria and people not knowing and not being so sure of the country's values, and disagreeing. I like the Italian government, the fact that they change every few months. They say uncomfortable things and maybe it affects their international credit rating, but these are not particularly woeful problems.



● Getting the most for his money, Les Krizsan films the action. Photo: Ian McGeagh

Siege

The battle of Bay Street

A man appears in a window of a Halifax waterfront tenement with a homemade bazooka on his shoulder. There is a brief flame from the rocket in the tube before it flares off into the night air. An inferno of flames explodes on the roof of a nearby office building where a sniper is perched.

The Halifax police are on strike. Citizens are forced to defend themselves by their own methods. But wait - two dark figures emerge on the rooftop trying to douse the flames. Fire trucks and police cars encircle the building.

The strike is over, but the filming of *Siege* is on.

In Edge City, filmmaking is a precarious occupation, exception made of the dubious comfort provided by the fat budgets of training films for the department of National Defense. Feature films are as rare here as Atlantic salmon, and if the acid memos from Toronto banks have the appropriate impact, they will destroy the species in the Maritimes as well as elsewhere.

The existence of a film called *Siege*, now in the final editing stage, is definitely a minor financial miracle.

After walking in and out of cynical distribution offices around the world with its first feature *South Pacific* - 1942, Surfacing Film Productions decided it better fit its next film to the meat market of cinema distribution.

South Pacific - '42, a black comedy about a wacky Canadian-crewed submarine in the W.W. II Pacific Theatre, is now running opposite a feature about the W.W. II Wolf Pack subs in German

theatres. But distribution was a hard battle for lawyer Michael and director-brother Paul Donovan, the pair who run the show at Surfacing. This time they decided a solid action movie had a better chance at the low-budget market. After auditioning several scripts with distribution people, they finally got a favourable reaction to *Siege*.

The film is a tale of gang murders in Halifax during the longest police strike in history. The key event occurs when a potential victim takes refuge in a run-down apartment building on the Halifax waterfront. The tenants have to defend themselves, *Straw Dogs*-style, against a gang of thugs.

The Donovans felt they had a viable product on their hands, and even though the movie financing market looked worse than bleak, they hit the broadloomed streets once again.

They managed to garner 25% of the funds they needed, but the deadline came and went for the final monies to be deposited. After some paper shuffling, they extended the deadline and ran into a broker who felt he could capitalize on a faltering industry. He raised another 35% and guaranteed the rest. More importantly, he put up 10% interim financing, which paid a lot of overdue bills.

All looked rosy, but another Maritimer in Ottawa, the Hon. Allan MacEachen put a damper on the scene with his budget. Suddenly the broker was not enthused over a high-risk movie investment. Michael and Paul had contracted all of the actors and 98% of the crew; it was a week before shooting when the broker called.

The game was over. Paul called up all the cast and crew - cancel, cancel, get drunk.

The next morning Michael shook Paul into consciousness and said, "This is what we're going to do..." They went directly to the broker's largest investor and dined him on tea and cookies for three hours while they tried to convince him of the viability of the project. They even produced a letter of guaranteed distribution from an L.A. distributor on short notice. This particular investor

has been described as "solid, conservative," but at the end of the discussion he was convinced. This was Friday morning. He said he would try to get the banks to put up the cash on his signature.

The banks, however, were another stumbling block. Recent memos from head office had vetoed any film investment financing. The investor had to muscle them to get the money. After the phone conversation with the bank, the investor turned to Michael and said the bank manager had asked him why he was doing it, and he really couldn't come up with an answer. Three days later the cheque arrived at Surfacing Film Productions' office. The *Siege* was on.

After their hairy experiences with the financing of the film, they were ready for the worst during production. Strange as it seems, the shoot went off without any major problems. It was 17 straight shooting days averaging 14 hours per day, but the cast and the crew were extremely dedicated and averaged 45 set-ups per day.

Shooting mostly at night with high speed lenses and the state-of-the-art Moviemax camera, the main problem for D.O.P. Les Krizsan was how to shoot an action movie with eight inches of depth-of-field. When I arrived on set the lighting was such that I had difficulty seeing what was happening. It reminded me of the gaffers comment on Richard Leiterman's lighting of *Goin' Down the Road*; - "They should make light meters with illuminated dials for cinematographers like Richard." Les could probably use one of those at times. However, despite the lack of depth-of-field, the minimal lighting approach cuts crew size, lowers equipment rentals, speeds up production, and adds a touch of realism.

And realism was the underlying concept during the filming of *Siege*. The special effects had to be good and with no money to hire an expensive L.A. effects company, the props man, John Walsh had to do some improvisation to pull it off. He started by finding a somewhat paranoid gun collector in rural Nova Scotia with one of the biggest private arsenals in the country. With a barn full of automatic weapons to choose from, the props department had a field day. But at night the machine guns went home with an R.C.M.P. gendarme.

Fortunately, the cast was made up of experienced professionals who could handle the weaponry. Doug Lennox, a veteran of television action shows like *The New Avengers*, played the role of the villain "Cabe." Tom Nardini, a child actor in Hollywood who moved to the N.Y. stage, plays the lead male role. Brenda Bazinet, a Saskatchewan native who moved to the Toronto stage plays the female lead. The film also features Keith Knight and Jack Blum, both of *Meatballs* fame.

Chuck Lapp ●

SIEGE exec. p. Michael Donovan p. John Walsh p man W. James Bruce p asst Douglas Meggison d Paul Donovan, Maura O'Connell dop Les Krizsan 1st a d Cordell Wynn asst cam Roberto Elizabetsky unit man Cordell Wynn scr Paul Donovan sd Pierre Dostie boom Alan Scarf elec Ian Henderson gaffer Michael Ruggles clapper N.O. Goose chef Jim Sharpe sp efx make-up Carolyn van Gorp sp efx J. William Walsh, T.J. Cove ed Keith Brewer ed ed Martella Tower cast Iris Essex i p Doug Lennox, Keith Knight, Jack Bloom, Jeff Pustil, Branda Bazinet, Daryl Haeny, Tom Nardini, Dug Rotstein, Alan MacGillivray, Barbara Jones, Gary Dempster, Dennis O'Connor, Fred Wadden, Rick Collins, Terry-David Despres lab Quinn Sound, p. c. Salter Productions

LOOKING GOOD

INDEPENDENT TV PRODUCERS

MOVING AHEAD

by Bruce Malloch

When the 100 percent Capital Cost Allowance was introduced as an incentive toward establishing a viable Canadian production industry, everyone assumed its greatest beneficiary would be the feature film industry; almost as an afterthought, the write-off was applied to television and non-theatrical production. Yet the feature film industry on a whole has not lived up to expectations, struggling with a one-step-forward-two-steps-backward approach to creating both an indigenous, recognizably Canadian product and to returning money to its investors, while the independent production community has used the CCA to produce some exciting, quality films that are selling abroad. One of 1981's most successful productions was not a feature film, but a half-hour children's drama produced by Atlantis Films' youthful triumvirate of Michael MacMillan, Seaton McLean, and Janice Platt, *The Olden Days Coat*, which won the Bijou Award as best Canadian independent production and sold to virtually every available market.

Perhaps it's time some people in the industry stopped considering films produced for television as somehow second-class citizens to films produced for theatrical release. While industry sources estimate that one in 25 features has returned money to its investors in the past two years, nearly all the independently produced television and non-theatrical films have generated returns.

While features disguising Canada as California, New York, or Boston have failed at the box office, a Canadian produced children's series, *The Kids of Degrassi Street*, which makes no excuse its kids are from Toronto, received a distribution guarantee from an American non-theatrical distributor simply because it was good. In terms of steady, ongoing production, the companies outside the «mainstream» of feature film – the makers of television films, documentaries, shorts, children's, educational, and industrial films – are this country's film industry. Janice Platt speaks for many small independents when she says, "Feature film is not the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the be-all and end-all of filmmaking."

Broadcast structures around the world are generally not made to accommodate independents, and most Canadian independents quickly learn their own country is no different. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which buys less than 5 percent of its programming from independents, is virtually the only domestic television market at the moment (Canadian pay-TV will be licensed later this year). Non-theatrical producers must compete with government-funded film groups like the National Film Board and the Ontario Educational Communications Authority, whose total budgets exceed any amount an independent can reasonably hope to

Bruce Malloch is the Toronto staff reporter for Cinema Canada.

raise. This forces the independents to sell to foreign markets, which means they must compete with international production standards. The successful independents survive by recognizing how their product must be adapted to the needs of the marketplace, in either television, non-theatrical film, or a combination of both.

Whatever their market, one fact of life all independents realize is they have to be export-oriented to survive. "For the Canadian independent, it's life and death to sell abroad. The independents will never get 100 percent of their costs from licensing to the domestic markets," says Bill Macadam, president of Norfolk Communications, one of Canada's largest independent television production houses. In 1979, Norfolk burst upon the Canadian television scene with *Connec-*

the television production industry.

Another high profile television house is Primedia Productions, owned and operated by Pat Ferns and Richard Nielsen. They formed Primedia in 1981 after their corporate backer, Torstar, pulled out of their previous company, Nielsen-Ferns International. Primedia's record shows a commitment to innovative, quality Canadian programming: *The Wars*, which technically remains a Nielsen-Ferns property, is an adaptation of Timothy Findlay's acclaimed novel featuring an all-Canadian cast; the company has an exclusive contract to adapt National Ballet of Canada productions to the screen; in pre-production for 1982 are *Billy Bishop Goes To War*, starring Eric Peterson, and a mini-series of Gabrielle Roy's novel *The Tin Flute*.

a project unless it has pre-sale possibilities. The reason pre-sales are essential, Nielsen explains, is that while independents abroad recover between 75-90 percent of their costs from their domestic markets, pre-sale revenues in Canada almost never reach 50 percent, forcing the Canadian independent to rely on foreign sales. Their strategy is to pre-sell a project to two or more markets, usually Canada and at least one foreign market, then sell to the rest of the world after the film is completed.

But the whole world is not an unlimited market for pre-sales. Except for pay-television, the American market is virtually inaccessible - they don't pre-buy from foreign suppliers as a rule. There aren't many commercially viable projects Canadians can co-produce with Asian, African, and South American television. Australia has its own production industry competing in the international market. The Canadian independent's best foreign pre-sale market is Europe, where programming demand is high, and where Canada has co-production treaties with Great Britain, France, Italy, and West Germany. Pre-sale funds from Europe can be substantial, often amounting to 50 percent of production costs. But even in getting 50 percent out of Europe, the battle isn't over. "The problem is, to the extent productions are tailor-made for Canadian and pre-sold European markets, it becomes harder to design the program for the American markets also," says Nielsen (an after-the-fact sale to one of the U.S. networks often puts a production in the black). "Unless Canada starts

we do is seen by 100 million people around the world; 30 years ago, to think of reaching that number of people would have seemed impossible. As a nation, we cannot afford not to be a part of this." Presently, Canada exports less television product than Great Britain, France, or West Germany, despite its market advantage. Macadam believes increasing Canada's television exports will not only bring high amounts of foreign currency into the country, but also will give Canadians a perceived image abroad. "Until other people see us as different from the United States, we will have no perceived identity at home," he says.

Aware of Canada's role in the development of high technology, particularly the area of satellites, cable television, and the Telidon system, Macadam criticizes Canada's neglect of the high technology explosion's other factor, the production of software. "There is no sense in us being leaders in satellite technology if they are going to be filled with American television programs," he says, advocating incentives which would encourage Canadian producers to export their product and compete with the rest of the world as the only way to repatriate Canadian audiences, 80 percent of whom, he maintains, presently watch American programming.

"This country launched a great effort to establish a feature film industry with the expectation that the films would take only 10 percent out of the home market. Nowhere in the world does the home market only equal 10 percent," observes Nielsen, citing this as the primary reason Torstar withdrew its backing from Nielsen-Ferns. He feels the advantages of television production over feature film are its more controllable costs, more predictable returns, and larger audiences. "TV is the only sensible way to produce. There is a market: the demand for popular entertainment is insatiable. The world market is an 'honest' one, with only 2-3 buyers in each country, allowing a producer to reasonably predict his return."

Primedia concentrates its production on made-for-TV features and dramatic mini-series because they are what Ferns and Nielsen believe sell best in the marketplace. Nielsen analyses the market this way: "Single documentaries are almost impossible to do. Distributors hate them, unless it's a very hot topic. A documentary series must be tied to a successful genre, for example, wildlife. For some reason, variety just doesn't seem to travel in this country. Drama works well in the international market, but continuing dramatic series are unlikely to be sold abroad." He criticizes the Canadian industry's weak efforts to find and develop Canadian talent; one of the objectives of *The Wars*, he says, is to give worthy Canadian talent some international recognition. "We do have the stars in this country, but we haven't provided them with the vehicles to give them an international profile."

The independents have three basic means of financing projects with their investors: tax shelter, pre-sale, and co-production. All three systems have their difficulties. Co-productions and pre-sales require producers to raise only some part of the total production costs themselves, but such guarantees demand a proven track record and substantial industry contacts at home and abroad - things a young independent can't acquire overnight. Since tax shelter money must be at risk, a task shelter deal often precludes a pre-sale arrange-



● *The World's Children - With Oscar in Peru: Asterisk*

tions: *An Investigation into Organized Crime*, an exposé of the Canadian underworld produced for the CBC, which aired to high ratings and rave reviews for its high quality investigative journalism. Since then, Norfolk has pre-sold a segment of another series, *The KGB Connections*, for prime-time use to ABC, the first Canadian independent to make a pre-sale contract with an American network (and one of the few to date); done co-productions with the British Broadcasting Corporation; and consistently turned out quality entertainment programming using Canadian and international talent.

Macadam sees Norfolk's role as a catalyst, acting to bring together the finest available talent for each project. He does not believe in putting a lot of people on staff. Like all the independents, Macadam emphasizes the importance of teamwork: as president and producer-in-chief, he assumes creative control, but chairman Kitson Vincent is responsible for financial planning and development, chartered accountant Mark Moore handles cost control through a daily system of computer readouts, Paul Kent co-ordinates projects and distribution, and Duane Howard serves as production manager, on a team which has quickly achieved a high profile in



● *Sophie Minds the Store: Playing with Time*

As influential members of the Canadian independent production community, Macadam and Nielsen daily confront the problems which limit the independent producers, such as the need to sell abroad because of the small Canadian market, the difficulty in raising financing, and the government regulations which, whatever their original intention, hamper viable independent production. One essential deal for the producer of prime-time television material is the pre-sale contract. Macadam flatly states Norfolk won't handle

"You cannot sell lowest common denominator product around the world. That's proven."

-William Macadam

to pay a larger percentage of the production costs, there will be no more independent production industry in Canada. We can't make the industry go unless conventional and pay-television cover 50 percent of the cost."

Nielsen and Macadam both cite the advantages Canadian producers have in the international market: English acceptable to the American audience's ear, co-production treaties providing money, expertise, and creative input, and a not-yet-fully-tapped wealth of Canadian talent. "People forget that Canadians have had a huge impact on world television," emphasizes Macadam. "The perception in Britain five years ago was that Canadians couldn't do drama, yet Sidney Newman, a Canadian, was in charge of the BBC drama department. One-fifth of the American television production community in Los Angeles is Canadian, and Canadians are behind those American shows 'imported' into Canada. Let's get them back by making top quality programming and selling it around the world."

Macadam sees no reason why Canada can't crack the world television export market dominated by the Americans. "The USA exports 87 percent of the TV seen around the world. They're exploiting a form of culture absolutely astonishing in its power. Every production

ment, and vice-versa. The tax shelter's biggest drawback is that most units are sold from September to December, requiring the producer to take out some form of interim financing to pay the actual costs of production during the year. If a production has been shot with interim money, and the units in a tax-shelter offering don't sell, the interim financier may be left holding equity in a film he doesn't really want. This far-too-frequent occurrence two years ago in the feature film business left many investors sour; but Macadam feels investors should not group television producers in with the feature film people. "In film, you have to keep re-investing in several films to make money, but in television you can turn a profit first time out," he says, citing television's

ducers - developing projects, raising money, and overseeing production. But the people in charge of the smaller independent houses, MacMillan, McLean, and Platt at Atlantis, John Brunton at Insight Productions, and John Muller at M & M Films, see themselves not just as producers, but as filmmakers. It's the very nature of the independent production community not only to make the deals, but to make the films as well. "That's the fun, going out on a shoot. Missing out on that is like missing out on the dessert after a meal," says McLean, who thinks of himself as an editor before a producer. To produce films independently, a filmmaker must be versatile, flexible, and not above the most menial task; what David Springbett calls "hyphenates" - writer-directors,

involved, and know the mistakes which can quickly ruin an independent - growing too fast, over-estimating one's capabilities, and the biggest mistake, spending too much money. "We don't want to turn into a film factory," says Brunton. "I don't ever want to get too far from the project. It takes so long to make a film that I want to make sure the subject matter I deal with is something I have a strong feeling for. Right now, I'm comfortable with our size. We're small, but still capable of doing a big project."

As one of the few Canadian independents to have worked on a contract basis for an American network program, Brunton knows both the advantages and difficulties of doing big-time work on someone else's schedule. In 1979, George Schlatter, producer for NBC's

Gold, a three-part series of one hour episodes on the history of Canadian performers in rock and roll, is being financed by the CBC and a corporate sponsor, Labatt's Brewery. Brunton is critical of his fellow independents' dealing with the networks. "It's a misconception for independents to think the Canadian networks have an obligation to buy their shows simply because they're Canadian," says Brunton. "The independents have not been creative enough in bringing other people into the deal. The networks are open to deals being structured in a more inventive way, but the onus shouldn't completely be on the networks."

Right now, the focal point for Canada's independent production community is the CBC, which no doubt will continue

Contributors to this article:

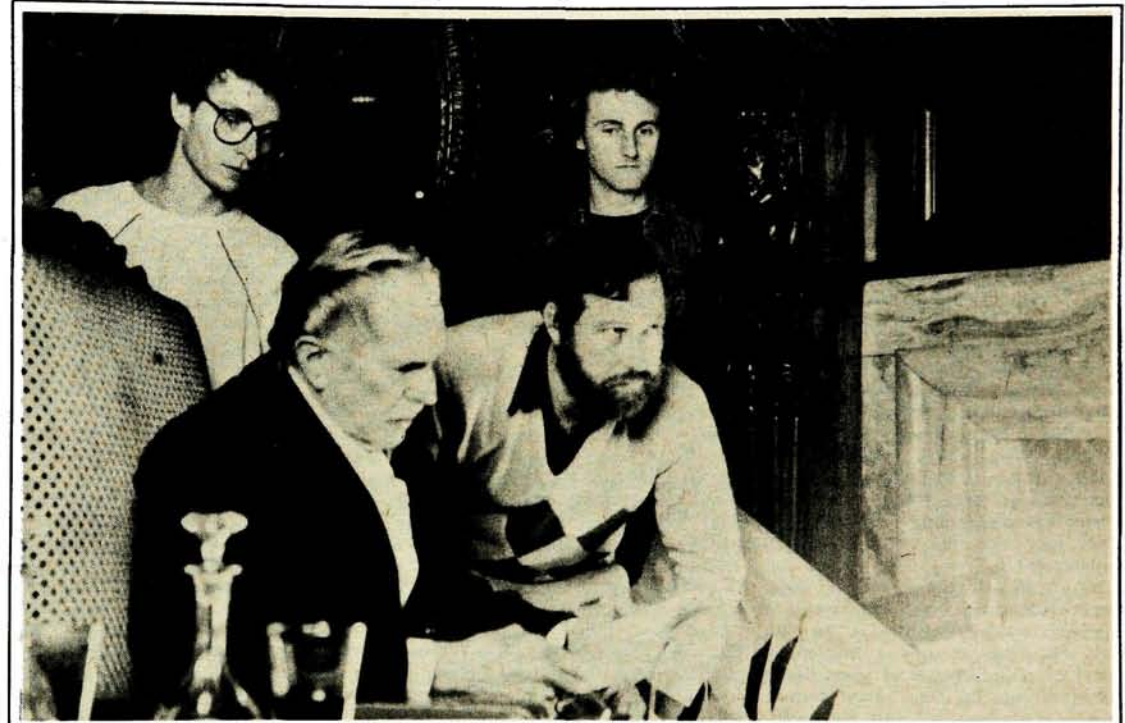
- Playing With Time Inc.
Kit Hood, Linda Schuyler
- M & M Productions Ltd.
John Muller, Henia Muller
- Asterisk Film & Videotape Productions Ltd.
David Springbett, Heather MacAndrew
- Atlantis Films Ltd.
Michael MacMillan, Janice L. Platt, Seaton S. McLean
- Insight Production Company Ltd.
John M. Brunton
- The Film Works
Paul Stephens, Eric Jordan
- Norfolk Communications Ltd.
William Macadam
- Primedia Productions Ltd.
Richard Nielsen, Pat Ferns
- Magic Lantern
Jerry McNabb

smaller budgets and cheaper distribution costs - about 25 percent. The return on television, while not as high as on a successful feature, is steady and assured enough to keep investors happy.

Both Macadam and Nielsen feel their companies have outgrown the tax shelter as their primary means of financing production, and now rely more heavily on pre-sale agreements. Says Nielsen: "The rule is: if you can pre-sell, you don't need private investment; if you can't pre-sell, you shouldn't go looking for it." But if a project's shortfall is between 15-20 percent, both will use the tax shelter as a necessary means of raising additional money. Macadam also recognizes the tax shelter's worth to young production companies, stressing how it was instrumental in Norfolk's early years, until the company had built up its track record and co-production contacts.

With a change in the CCA scheduled for the end of 1982 (from 100 percent to 50 percent the first year, 50 percent the second), both Macadam and Nielsen urge that new incentives be established for the independent production industry. Macadam feels investment should be encouraged in production companies, as opposed to individual films, and proposes the establishment of a revolving pool of interim financing funds, cross-collateralized against a number of films, with equity in the production company offered as an incentive to investors. Nielsen would like to see government policy require the CBC to buy 25 percent of its programming from independents, give tax breaks to sponsors of Canadian programming, and alter the present Canadian content regulations, which now encourage low budget production, to encourage more drama, entertainment, and variety programming.

At relatively large scale companies like Norfolk and Primedia, Macadam and Nielsen essentially serve as pro-



● Director John Muller works with Vincent Price's *Dracula*: Atlantis/M & M Productions

ducer-editors, even producer-drivers - their function not limited to a fixed and limited role.

In Toronto, where many successful independents are based, there is a spirit of co-operation among the independent production community. Everybody seems to either be working or have worked with everybody else. Last year, Atlantis did a co-production with M & M, *Vincent Price's Dracula*, on which all five of the companies' principals (MacMillan, McLean, Platt, John and Henia Muller) produced; Muller directed and McLean edited as well. David Springbett did the sound on another Atlantis project, *Chambers: Tracks and Gestures*. Kit Hood, who produces children's drama, edited Springbett's children's documentary series, *The World's Children*. "The general philosophy of the small producers is that when one works, we all work," says Heather MacAndrew, Springbett's wife and partner at Asterisk Films. "There's a good feeling among us, that we're all in this together."

Companies like Atlantis, Insight, and M & M have worked hard to earn themselves some financial and creative security within a volatile industry, and they work equally hard at keeping it. They want to continue exploring different areas of production without being overwhelmed by the mechanisms in-

Real People and *Speak Up, America*, was impressed with a film Brunton had made with Peter Shatalow, *Beaver River Rat Race*. Calling Brunton in Toronto, Schlatter suggested they "talk sometime"; Brunton flew to Los Angeles the next day, appearing in Schlatter's office that afternoon. "We made the deal right there," Brunton recalls, "a handshake, I had a cheque in my hand that afternoon, and we began shooting the next week." Brunton and his Insight team of Ian Patterson, Cathy Gulkin, Ann Mayall, Susan Hutt, and John Brooke hit the road for Schlatter, criss-crossing North America to shoot short "documentary-entertainment" pieces for his two shows. "Flying by the seat of your pants production," is how Brunton describes the experience, which saw them handling such diverse topics as heavy-weight skiing and the Love Canal issue often in the same week. "As exciting as it was, it was frustrating not to be able to pre-plan," says Brunton. After producing between 30-40 short films for Schlatter, Brunton ended the deal because he felt Insight had learned enough. It's an issue all successful independents inevitably face. "Do you dig deeper into one area in which you have gained a lot of expertise, or do you go on to something else?" asks Brunton. "We decided to look for a new direction."

Brunton's latest project, *Heart Of*



● McLean, MacMillan, and Platt of Atlantis

to be an important buyer even after Canadian pay-TV is introduced. Often, an independent's success is directly proportional to how well he or she gets along with the CBC. John Brunton feels the keys to dealing with the CBC are both communication and patience. "Often seven or eight people are involved in a deal, and each of them has to know what's going on. The people who get upset with a deal's progress at the various stages of the negotiations don't understand the CBC's internal system, its checks and balances. Even the most powerful person in the organization must go through a process that requires a lot of other people's input." Brunton stresses the importance of carefully planning a project. "A proposal isn't even close enough. You must approach

them with a project well thought out in all respects, financial, technical, and legal. The CBC is an extra-careful organization; filmmakers, as a rule, are almost diametrically opposed. They lean to the spirit of the film, rather than all the other details necessary to make a deal with the CBC."

In April 1980, the CBC created an office for independent production, headed by lawyer Roman Melnyk, to establish an access point for independents. Melnyk's job is to co-ordinate CBC programming with independent production; last year his office bought 20 series and several individual programs for mainstream television use. "I see myself as the independent's advocate," says Melnyk. "I'm not here to make a deal off the independent, but to help him with his product."

From experienced producers with proven track records, to aspirant filmmakers with an idea but little expertise, many people approach Melnyk's office proposing everything from a short documentary to a network series. Developing an idea that Melnyk's office likes generally entails first working it into a proposal or script, then examining the viability of the production itself - who would star, what the market would be, where it would fit into the schedule, etc. Once this is satisfactory, the producer and the CBC negotiate the financial package. But Melnyk emphasizes his office is not the only place independents can make deals with the CBC. "My office does not pre-empt or preclude any other department head within the CBC in their relationship with an independent," he says. *Playing With Time's* Kit Hood and Linda Schuyler negotiated their sale of three *Kids of Degraffi Street* episodes mainly with Nana Harcourt, head of the CBC's children's department.

"The critical problem for the independents has been that the marketplace has been basically confined to the CBC. This obviously creates a bottleneck effect of a wide range of ideas being funnelled into the CBC," says Melnyk. The most obvious difficulty for the independents is the CBC's primary obligation to its own creative departments. "If a department is planning a series on a certain topic, then the independents shouldn't expect us to be a market in that area," says Melnyk. The best advice Melnyk has for an independent is to know the marketplace. "A lot of producers have told me they don't even watch TV," he says incredulously. "You've got to know what is being produced, what is on the air, what the broadcasters can use, what they can pay for the product, where the alternative markets are. You've got to know the environment you are working in very, very well."

An example of a production getting the most out of its marketplace is Atlantis' *The Olden Days Cost*. Budgeted under \$150,000, it has sold to virtually every available market: CBC, Radio-Canada, U.S. network, pay, and educational TV, TVOntario, Access Alberta, and 15 countries around the world. Simpson's of Canada has sponsored its non-theatrical release; Air Canada has bought in-flight rights for both English and French versions; and the federal government purchased several videotapes which they gave as 1981 Christmas presents to Canadian embassy personnel around the world. Michael MacMillan of Atlantis says that sales presently have returned 60 percent of the production costs from Canada, 20 percent from foreign markets, and with the contracts

Atlantis has made, the production should be well into profit by 1983. "The lesson we learned is to really do it well, give it strong production values, use the best talent available - best director, best writers, best actors, best crew," says MacMillan. "It really pays off. It gives you a production which is marketable around the world. You spend more money initially, but you're better off in the final run."

Like MacMillan, John Muller of M & M feels that only by producing quality product will the production industry maintain investor confidence. He feels the deal-makers who have characterized some feature film production in the past three years "have left town" and now those producers whose concerns with filmmaking are both creative

"It's ludicrous that the government spends so much money trying to force feed the feature film industry, when a small boost to the independent market would get it so much more in the long run."

—Jerry McNabb

and financial should be encouraged. "We must turn around the negative attitude toward film investment. We should not be so feature film oriented, not so egotistical as to pressure a film into an investor's hands without a market," he says. Creatively, he would like to see a return "to the great Canadian tradition of drama, documentary, docudrama" before 1978, embodied in such films as *Goin' Down The Road* and *Why Shoot The Teacher*; to achieve this, he believes producers should lower their sights financially and produce films whose budgets are tailored to their



● The Film Works at the Casa Loma

anticipated financial return. "We must control content, be able to overlook the distribution area, make a marketing plan before the film is made, realistically check off a film's potential in the marketplace," says Muller. "Producers must assure themselves that the property can recoup, so as to create new trust in the investor market. We as producers should find a home market that is realistic, then build it from there."

Impressed by the solid industry effort to convince the federal government to roll back the proposed CCA changes until 1983, Muller urges the production industry to take advantage of the mo-

mentum. "This effort gives evidence that a solid industry is in place," he says, pointing to the \$148,445,000 in planned production and \$56.6 million worth of interim financing said to have been at risk by the original budget changes. He would like to "quickly educate the producers who want to produce this year and match them with the investors." His producer's education would include lessons in tailoring budgets, keeping overhead low to compete with the market, and sharing the financial risk with the investors. He feels strongly that producers and investors should work as teams. "If I can't control a property from A to Z, I shouldn't risk only my investor's money."

It bothers independents when investors consider their projects as risky as feature film ventures, because the producers feel most of their projects can assure investors a steady return over a long period of time. Small films may not make their investors rich quickly, but they do offer them a sound investment, according to *Playing With Time's* Linda Schuyler; she says many of the 12 to 14 investors in the *Kids of Degraffi Street* series were offered feature film investments, but declined in favour of her project, which has already made its money back on paper. Michael MacMillan says Atlantis has had a total of 65-70 different investors, including repeaters, in the company's history. He claims the success of *The Olden Days Cost* raised investor confidence enough to allow Atlantis to make *Chambers: Tracks and Gestures* without a big risk.

But despite the success of Atlantis and *Playing With Time*, not every independent has confident investors knocking at their door looking for a sound deal: a lot of projects still get shot on deferred salaries and hope. Eric Jordan and Paul Stephens of The Filmworks have been making film together since 1975; they have a good track record producing documentaries for TVOntario and The Agency For Instructional Television in the United States. Their 1979 documentary, *Running*, was sold as a 30-minute prime-time special to the CBC, while a 10 minute theatrical version was financed by Famous Players and distributed by Paramount Pictures in 1980. When they decided to branch into dramatic production in the spring of 1981 with *A Time To Be Brave*, a 30-minute project they developed themselves about an Indian family living in contemporary Northern Ontario, they found the investment market had gone cold.

"We met some very nice people who were interested by the film, but said they were so badly burned in feature film that they weren't going to invest anymore," said Stephens of his long, frustrating, and fruitless quest on Bay Street. Now in 1982, still committed to making the film, Stephens and Jordan will finance the picture themselves. The only outside money in the \$100,000 budget is "a little bit of financing" from the federal bureau for multi-culturalism. "It's a tense feeling to risk the capital of the company, but I feel you've got to take those risks," says Stephens. "We think it'll pay off. It'll pay off artistically - it will make us grow. It will also pay off financially. We think we can make money off of it." Their plan is to shoot the footage this spring, then attract a distributor or a television buyer; Stephens says they already have strong interest from the CBC and an American non-theatrical distributor. "The main thing now is to do the best we can do

and then show people," says Jordan.

To the filmmakers sustaining themselves primarily through the non-theatrical market, such as Kit Hood and Linda Schuyler of *Playing With Time* or Asterisk's David Springbett and Heather MacAndrew, filmmaking is often more a lifestyle than a business. "We chose to be small," says MacAndrew. "We have a certain kind of filmmaking we want to explore." Springbett and MacAndrew, as the films they made last year reflect, are deeply interested in international development issues and social concerns. But financing these projects wasn't easy: while *The World's Children* was financed by private investors, Springbett and MacAndrew had to sacrifice to make the other two films. *A Moveable Feast*, funded through a grant by the Canadian Pediatric Society, had such a low budget that both producer's salaries were deferred, and Asterisk assumed Canadian distribution of the film to help recover costs further. *Old House, New House* was partially shot on spec (filmed without a guaranteed buyer at the producer's risk) in a co-production with another small independent, Fichman-Sweete; it wasn't until Springbett had put together a demo film that the government departments came through with some financing. "After a year of writing them letters, memos, and telexes and getting nowhere..." says MacAndrew.

Springbett endures the hardships of being a small independent because it lets him do what he's always been interested in, documentary. "When I was at the CBC they assigned me to the drama department," he recalls. "I think I was the only one in the company who wanted to get off the drama unit." Both he and MacAndrew are genuinely disinterested in becoming cogs in the feature filmmaking machine; they are happy working for themselves, doing one big, and maybe two or three small, projects a year. If their projects can't get off the ground, they meet ends by doing colleague's films or other media-related jobs. "It's definitely not slumming, you're using skills you've acquired," says MacAndrew, who has worked as a researcher, interviewer, and book reviewer between films. "Besides, it's a treat to just work for someone else and not have the worries that go with being producer or director."

At *Playing With Time*, Kit Hood and Linda Schuyler have developed an entire production attitude towards children's drama. With writer Amy Jo Cooper, they have produced tight, and appealing stories with characters who are neither too good nor too slick but refreshingly realistic. Their reward has been the security of guarantee from American non-theatrical distributor Learning Corp., which means they can complete 13 *Kids of Degraffi St.* episodes (six are already in the can or completed). But they are determined to do them on their own terms: four episodes in 1982, three in 1983. "If we had gone the pre-sale route, and had to do 13 episodes by the end of the year, I have every confidence we could do it," says Schuyler. "But we would have had no choice but to be more administrative, hire more crew, work faster, and we don't want to do it that way."

Careful financing, as much as good filmmaking, have kept Hood and Schuyler in production. "We've paid cash for every major asset we own," says Hood. The *Degraffi St.* budgets, now about \$65,000 per episode, can't go much higher or else the investors won't see a

return; Schuyler says the market simply will not pay more. "We don't have an office with carpeting halfway up the wall and 15 people on staff," says Hood. "We know work comes and goes. We've spent summers waiting for money to fall into place." Still, when they applied for their yearly bank loan in December, with a distribution guarantee and a CBC sale interest in place, they felt they were dealing from a position of strength. Yet the banks, overextended in feature film financing, wanted the company put up as security. Hood and Schuyler walked out. "It was scary," says Schuyler. "We had bills to pay, and people back at the office waiting for pay cheques, but we had to say no." Hood couldn't understand the bank's attitude. "For us to go under, it would mean Learning Corp. would have to go under, which would

the international market, to help them reach a point where they don't need it anymore," he says. Ironically, the small independents have had greater success than the feature film industry in cracking the features' most-sought-after market, the United States.

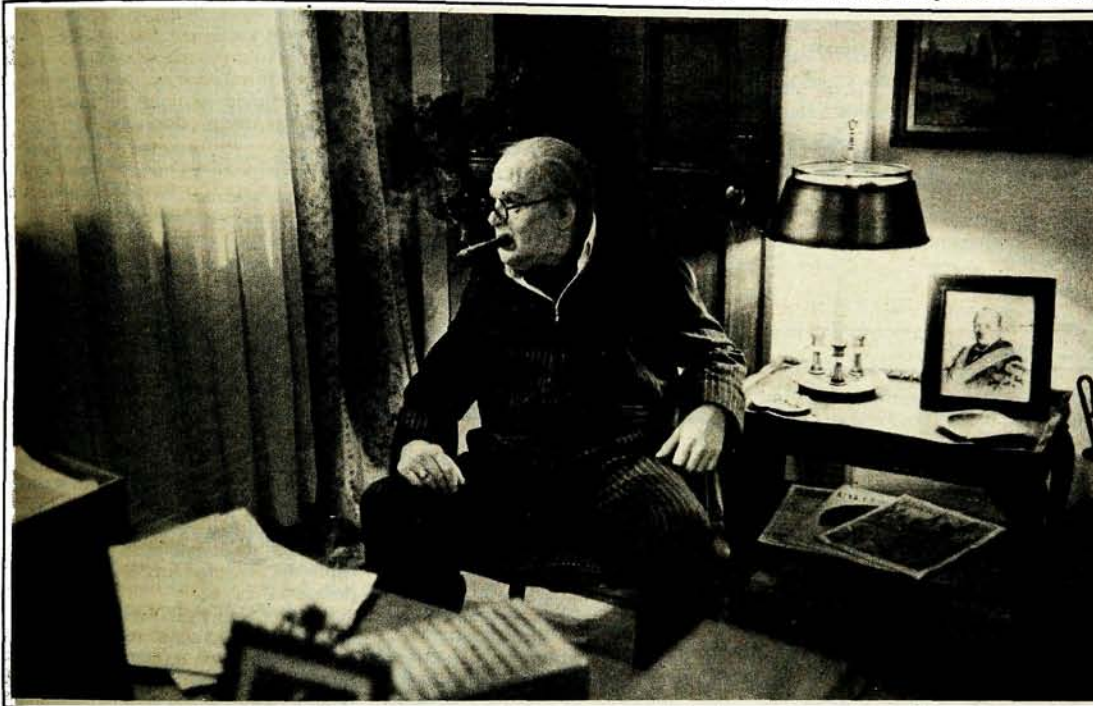
"I tell people if you're going to produce independent films, have the U.S. market in mind," says Jerry McNabb of Magic Lantern Films, a Canadian non-theatrical distributor. He points out the American market for non-theatrical productions is \$75 million annually, compared to \$9 million in Canada. But close to \$8 million of the Canadian market goes to buying American product and government subsidized material by the NFB or the OECA, leaving barely \$1 million for the Canadian independents. "Obviously, we can make a lot more money off

them (the Americans) than they can make off us," says McNabb, noting that since the Reagan administration has cut back on educational funding, there is less American production being done, subsequently opening up the markets for Canadian independent productions.

At home, a Canadian independent's product must be among the very best in its genre to succeed in the market. Where a *Degrassi St.* episode would cost \$500 to purchase, says McNabb, an equivalent half-hour NFB children's drama would cost \$250, and an equivalent OECA production \$30-40. To get buyers to pay more, the independent must offer them high quality. In McNabb's opinion, government film groups generally produce average material, rarely exceptional product, "which means independents who pro-

duce really superior stuff fit the buyer's need. But for people who want to produce learning materials on film, forget it, there is no discretionary money any more."

McNabb says some independents expect to make more money on a film than is possible. He says the return to the producer is as low as 18 percent and as high as 25 percent in the U.S., while the Canadian market ranges from 20 to 40 percent. "A Canadian producer can only do a \$80-100,000 film if there is a sale to television as well," says McNabb, "only the top 2-3 percent can get a return in the educational market alone on that kind of budget." He would like to see the 100 percent CCA retained for non-theatrical productions, and also feels the independents themselves, not just the NFB-based independents, should

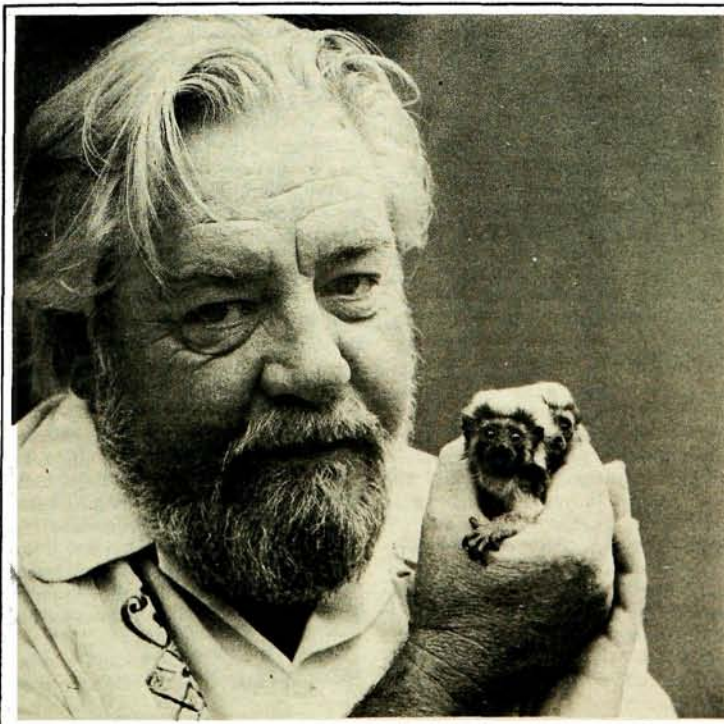


● Churchill reincarnated by George Merner for Norfolk Communications' *Winnie*

mean Mobil Oil would have to fold." The bank relented and gave them their loan without the company as security, but Hood and Schuyler both admit they were lucky to have been in a strong enough position to wait the bank out.

At the peak of the CCA film investment boom two years ago, many small independents were putting together feature film deals to try to cash in on the investor demand. Hood and Schuyler admit they consciously avoided that. Feeling they weren't ready to make a feature film, they saw it not as a good business proposition, but a bad creative move. They have no regrets. "We're aware that we've built something up here, and we don't want to make that bad decision that will ruin it. We're at the point now where we're in control—we can grow and still do the things we want to do," says Schuyler. They plan to start a children's feature in the middle of 1983.

Many of the smaller independents would like to see the 100 percent CCA retained after 1982 for non-theatrical productions. David Springbett credits the CCA with allowing Asterisk to break into the American schoolboard market and become a major educational producer in the United States. "The small companies are really the ones who use the CCA in its original intention—to give Canadian producers a stepping stone to



● Two by two: Gerald Durrell gathers tamarins for *Ark on the Move* by Nielsen Ferns



● William Macadam, head of Norfolk

have more effect on government policy. "I'd like to see the government talk to private independent producers and see how it can help in exporting film."

With the 100 percent CCA scheduled for change after December 31, 1982, companies like Atlantis and Playing With Time are preparing for next year this year by learning the basics of financing by pre-sale now. According to Michael MacMillan, Atlantis will try to pre-sell two half hour dramas in 1982, "so that next year, when we have to, we'll know how to do it." Playing With Time's goal is to cover 50% of their 1982 production costs through pre-sale generated revenue. Says Linda Schuyler: "That's the good thing about this year of grace. We can try to do without it (the CCA), and if we can't, we know it's still there, and we can ease ourselves into '83."

But Schuyler adds "I don't know what some of the other small producers are doing (about the future). They just can't walk into the CBC and expect a pre-sale." The 100 percent CCA gave most of the successful small independents their start, and allowed them to reach a point where they could support themselves not through government regulations but by the industry itself. If after the elimination of the 100 percent CCA, another investment-incentive mechanism is not put in its place to stimulate production in areas outside of feature film, it will be very hard for existing small independents to grow and new ones to start up, since most financial packaging would be dependent on a producer's track record. Let's hope during this year and re-assessment for the Canadian film industry, the small independent production houses are not forgotten. It seems unfair that those who stand to be hurt most by the reduction of the 100 percent capital cost allowance are those who have abused it least.

Schlock but slick

by Minko Sotiron

On Dec. 4, RSL producer Robert Lantos called George Mihalka, offering him a chance to direct an as-yet-unwritten film - a sex comedy, to be made in French and based on "Pornobec," Quebec's own little political scandal. Some video technicians had been accused of using the equipment at the National Assembly to make porno films, and although the scandal soon petered out, it made good reading while it lasted. ("Quebec is the only place in the whole world where you can have this kind of scandal and have the population laugh it off as a great joke instead of bringing the government down," comments Mihalka.)

Having nothing better to do, he went down to talk about the movie, got a synopsis from Marc Carrière in three days, and a script from Robert Geofrion in four. The film was on.

Scandale was shot in 16 days this January, and RSL hopes to have it ready for release on April 23. In many ways, the film is a throwback to the early québécois films of Denis Héroux, Pierre David and Cinépix - films which featured acknowledged québécois talent, mixed sex with humour, and were made for a song.

"They've realized that you can always replace money with cleverness, that you can add production value to your film without having to spend great deals of money," says Mihalka, referring to his producers whose more recent films were big-budget ventures. "We learned those things in school, but most people in the Canadian film business never went to film school."

Mihalka, having made three features in as many years, and still working on Funny Movie, is having a good time. Whether he is making the films his professors would like to see him make, and whether his B-movie apprenticeship will eventually lead elsewhere, remain to be seen.

Before the recent Scandale project was even a glint in anyone's eye, Minko

Sotiron spoke to Mihalka about his filmmaking experience.

Film director George Mihalka doesn't apologize for making what can be frankly termed exploitation films. His first feature film, a teen surf'n'sun farce called *Pinball Summer*, he describes as "Walt Disney with tits and ass." Clearly aimed at the drive-in market, he admits the movie was silly; in fact, in "endearing bad taste." But he says the movie doesn't need defending: "It's meant to do nothing more than please your eyes like a 90-minute Coca-Cola commercial."

His second feature film, the horror flick *My Bloody Valentine* was clearly more ambitious. Released by Paramount one year ago *My Bloody Valentine* is about a mad killer miner who terrorizes a mining town by murdering its people in a number of novel ways. Although a fairly typical example of the blood 'n' gore genre - a *Newsweek* critic called it "schlock shock" - Paramount Pictures gave it a big push.

"Paramount must have thought we had done something right, because they made 1180 prints which is close to the most copies of a Canadian film they've ever printed," Mihalka notes, adding that Paramount backed it with a massive advertising campaign. This included full-page ads in *The New York Times* and extensive television coverage. Indeed it was so pervasive that when Mihalka was down in Los Angeles, he was startled to hear the film's commercial on a taxi radio.

"There it was on Mecca's airwaves, and for a brief moment, I thought, My God we've really made it!" And Mihalka and his collaborator, cinematographer Rodney Gibbons, could be forgiven for thinking they had indeed made it. Unfortunately for them however, although *Valentine* opened strongly in the U.S. and Canada, it didn't appear to develop "legs" at the box office.

Part of the reason for its lack of box office staying power, according to Mi-

Minko Sotiron is a free-lance writer and information officer at Concordia University in Montreal.



● George Mihalka Photo: Piroska Mihalka

halka, lay in the advertising campaign. It emphasized the bloody nature of the film, yet the producers were forced by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) to cut out the most sensational gory parts in order to maintain an "R" rating. This resulted in the anomalous situation of many potential filmgoers being turned off by the threat of excessive blood, while the violence aficionados were left disappointed because the expected gory mayhem wasn't delivered.

It didn't help, Mihalka notes, that the cuts also weakened the story line. Moreover, strict deadlines exercised by the producers, who in turn were pressured by the distributors, also stifled the film's creative potential. He gave an example of how tight this control was:

"In one scene - basically consisting of an action shot which took place in the miners' shower room - the showers are all on, and the killer has already murdered the girlfriend of a miner who has temporarily left to get some beer. When the miner returns and he sees the girl, we cut away from the corpse to shoot him dropping the beer. We stay on the sixpack as it hits his feet. He doesn't react. We keep the camera at his feet long enough to show the water that's swirling at his feet slowly turn red with blood.

"That shot wasn't on the shooting schedule. Once the producers saw the rushes, I was questioned about spending time shooting a six-pack. Yet when we were forced to do the cuts it was the only shot left.

"Although we made the film the distributors asked us to, they, however, completely misread the MPAA, which was stricter than they had expected. To satisfy its standards and avoid an 'X' rating, we were forced to make over 30 picture cuts in a week. Anyone who has ever made a film knows what that means. The result was a completely different picture."

Yet, Mihalka doesn't want to appear full of sour grapes. No regrets, he says. "We all knew what we were getting into. We agreed to make a formula film in

● Alpha Boucher lets it all hang out in Scandale

● MAKING IT

impossible conditions and under an impossible schedule."

'Impossible' meant having only six months to complete the film, from story idea through scriptwriting, shooting, editing to finished product. "And this included having to direct 60 people in a mine 800 feet underground." Moreover, he wasn't helped much by the fact that the abandoned Cape Breton mine they had chosen as their location had been prettied up by the townspeople in a misguided attempt to help to filmmakers.

"They had cleaned the mine and painted it with bright red and white colours. We had to go back and make the mine grungy so it looked like a real mine," he recalls.

My Bloody Valentine turned out to be a polished, professional-looking movie, which even *Montreal Gazette* critic Bruce Bailey admitted when he wrote: "...at last Mihalka has shown us that he can make a movie."

Mihalka doesn't want to make another horror movie, even though he would have no trouble finding another such project. "I don't want to be cast as a horror movie director," he says, adding that something in the future he wouldn't mind making another horror movie, but only on his terms.

In spite of some of his negative experiences working on the two feature films, he admits he is grateful for being able to work on them so shortly after leaving film school. In 1979, he was only a couple of years out of Concordia University's film production program when Jack Murphy of Criterion Films offered Mihalka the chance to direct the \$750,000 *Pinball Summer*. Apparently, Murphy decided to pick Mihalka and Gibbons on the strength of their prize-winning short film *Pizza to Go*, a spoof of genre films.

The plot of *Pinball* - two high school buddies pursue two sisters in competition with a motorcycle gang - was lightweight, generally a vehicle to get as many sight gags as possible. (The film was re-released last summer under the title *Pick-up Summer*.) The essential thing for Mihalka was that he gained valuable experience in learning how to work on a tight schedule and within a strict budget.

"There's no way you can learn in a university all the things you'll need to know for a large-budget film. Also, you have to experience an attitude change. I don't think there's anyone who can walk out of university and carry on where he left off. For instance, if you're making a film as a student there's no way you can rent a crane for a certain camera angle. They cost at least \$500 a day. You might figure out a way to tie a camera to a rope and hoist it up but you can't do that on a feature film. You have to do things quickly and get them right because every mistake is very, very costly."

For Mihalka, the jump to the \$2 million *Valentine* was even greater than the one from school to *Pinball*. The scale and the stakes were much higher he explains: "Before, Rodney and I were like Triple A league baseball players. Now we had been called up and were in the big leagues. And we knew we had to produce because this would probably be the only chance we'd get."

Luckily for him the experienced hands of Cinépix producers John Dunning and André Link steadied him, for as he admitted, "I literally had to learn on the job. We were forced to make those films because they represented the only chance I had to make a film. Rodney and I weren't interested in being starving

artists. You have a choice: either you make films for the National Film Board which no one sees, or you make films for someone else. And in Canada, Link and Dunning are the only ones willing to give people a chance to make films."

Mihalka also points out that if Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas could make exploitation films (for Roger Corman's American International Pictures), then so could he. "We don't have rich backers like Jean-Luc Godard did. Make no mistake about it, he's a prostitute like the rest of us."

"As long as you're going to get used, you might as well know who's doing it, and get paid for it." If this sounds like prostitution, Mihalka doesn't deny it.

"I'm going to learn the craft by making films for other people. After a while, Rodney and I will be able to make films we can really be proud of - commercially viable films that are entertaining yet have a serious message."

Making visually-exciting, slick films is the goal Mihalka is aiming at. "We probably make the most American-looking films in Canada," he says, explaining that it's important that Canadian films look good since they're going to be measured by American technical standards.

"Canadians are bombarded by American films which are the world's slickest. That's the look they're used to seeing. Until a few years ago, most Canadian films were visually incompetent. And whenever a Canadian filmmaker did become professionally competent, more likely than not, he'd be on a plane to Hollywood. Rodney and I are the only ones to have achieved a degree of visual excellence without leaving the country. Our aim is to make our films as slick as American ones. There's nothing wrong with making films that are easy on the eyes and professional-looking."

Paradoxically, though, Mihalka is quite the Canadian nationalist, pointing to the fact that his movies have had 100% Cana-



● Laying it on thick, Sylvie Boucher and Gilbert Comtois in *Scandale*

dian content from cast to crew - although both films had to pretend to have American locales. They were also completely shot in Canada. And he didn't use "used" ex-Canadian actors. "Our biggest name was Don Francks in *Valentine*; for the rest of the casts, I used unknown actors," he says.

He wishes that the narrow, provincial Canadian attitude towards film would change. "It's alright to make documentaries in Canada," he says, "but otherwise, entertainment is a dirty word here. Canadians just don't respect it, nor do our institutions. Why aren't the CBC and CTV showing more Canadian films?

Nothing succeeds like excess

Hollywood loves nothing more than success. If *Star Wars* makes it big, then churn out imitations in the hope of tapping into the box-office gusher. This was the impetus behind the making of *My Bloody Valentine*.

Stephen Miller, an ex-owner of a repertory cinema in Montreal and the producer of *Hog Wild*, conceived the idea of a horror film about a small mining town on St. Valentine's Day. He approached Cinépix producers John Dunning and André Link who in turn approached Paramount Pictures with the idea.

Since Paramount had a smash financial hit with its film *Friday the 13th*, it thought it had a second

chance to duplicate the millions it had earned. The distributor was also mindful of the success of *Halloween* - another horror film which used a significant day as a theme - and thought a film on St. Valentine's Day was extremely exploitable.

Says Mihalka, Paramount wanted the film to be so gory that "it would make *Friday the 13th* look like a Sunday School picnic," and they were insistent that the bloodshed consist of "creative kills." The deal was consummated in July, 1980, and Paramount stipulated that the film be ready for release on St. Valentine's Day, February 14, 1981.

"Take the film *Metamorphosis* which won a prize at Cannes. It was a student film and had it been American, Barry Greenwald would have been given a break. Yet here why hasn't anyone seen it, and why hasn't it been on TV?"

Mihalka recalls what he learned at the 1981 Wim Wenders film workshop he attended in Montreal. "I was sick with envy at how the German government supports their filmmakers. I wish I could go to a TV network with an idea and then be guaranteed 50% of a budget and guaranteed screening on TV in three years as they do in Germany. No wonder their film industry developed so quickly."

"I could easily find hours and hours of good film work in the last five years

a new film project, very different from *My Bloody Valentine*. He's developing a script for a Canadian comedy tentatively titled *Funny Movie Eh?* It's being written by Tony Hendra, Sean Kelly and Ted Mann of *National Lampoon* fame. Backed by Jack Murphy of Criterion Film and Andrew Alexander of Second City, the film is to have a budget of \$2 million. According to Mihalka, *Funny Movie, Eh?* is going to be a spoof on genre films based on his earlier *Pizza to Go*.

Mihalka came to his interest in film gradually. His family emigrated to Canada from Hungary in 1956 and he followed them in 1961. After high school in Montreal, he enrolled at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University), earning a degree in English literature in 1973. While teaching at his high school during the day, he was studying for a Master's degree in educational technology at night at Sir George.

Increasingly, he became interested in film work and eventually enrolled in the university's film production program, graduating in 1977. While at university Mihalka and partner Gibbons made many short films, several of which won awards at various international festivals. Their *November 3*, a 30-minute dramatic film, won the "Mention de Qualité" at the Tours International Film Festival and their documentary *Thin Film Technology* won awards in science film festivals in Hong Kong and Toulouse. In Canada, their short experimental film *Claustro* won the Kodak film award.

Upon graduation, Mihalka and Gibbons formed the Sloth Film Corporation. They continued to produce films, while working as free-lancers in the Montreal film industry in positions ranging from production assistant to cameraman. During this period, they made several commercials, industrial films and documentaries, most notably *The Agony of Jimmy Quinlan* for the National Film Board.

Now making it as a director, does Mihalka have any advice for young filmmakers?

"The best way to get started in this business is to learn to make good coffee. I started in features serving coffee on a certain producer's film and year-and-a-half later I was his director.

"After that, learn to sweep floors. Use your own initiative - you have to make your own breaks."

At the moment, Mihalka is engaged in

THE
NEW CHINA
 DOCUMENTARIES

by Kevin Tierney

On a recent visit to New York we found ourselves in a 52nd Street Chinese restaurant. Two members of our group spoke fluent Chinese with Taiwanese accents, and before the soup had arrived they and the waiter were discussing the relative merits of unifying the island with the People's Republic. Further into the conversation our friends pointed to us and told the waiter we were going to China. His face started to beam. When he heard we were Canadians, the smile broadened even further: "The doctor, the doctor," he said. "Bethune?" I replied. "Yes, yes, Canada is the number one friend of China in the world."

Well, there may be some truth to that, and if anybody is trying to validate our waiter's assessment of Canadian/Chinese relations, it's the National Film Board, where the People's Republic appears to have become the new fron-



ship. It took almost two more years for a second official visit (1975) but by then culture and friendship had taken second place to commerce and distribution. On this particular visit the Board was represented by Janis Stoddart and Paul Courtice who handled distribution in Asia. They met with China Film Corp. employees to follow up on NFB films which had already been purchased through the Canadian embassy in London. The problems encountered then continue to frustrate even today. "Because we're a government agency, we get to see the people who work for the government department - which accepts free films from embassies, etc. - and they won't introduce us to the people who do the buying," Courtice explains.

"We feel that some small progress was made, but only time will tell whether our productions will ever be widely seen by what is potentially the world's largest audience."

- André Lamy, National Film Board

tier. For example, what other topic could have spawned seven documentaries in the last two years alone, and led to official visits to China by the last three film commissioners, plus exchanges of all sorts?

Relations between the NFB and China go back even further than the existence of the People's Republic. Norman McLaren spent time there during the 'tran-

Professor of English and cinema, Kevin Tierney has just left Montreal to teach English at Lanzhou University, Gansu Province, in the People's Republic of China.

sition' period between the departure of Chiang Kai-shek and the coming to power of Mao Tse-tung. Grant McLean shot a film in 1946 about war-torn China (a copy of which was presented to the China Film Development Corporation during an official visit in 1977 - and they were most impressed).

The more recent history of the NFB and China, however, begins in 1973 with Sidney Newman's visit. Newman, who was then the commissioner of the NFB, was the first person to introduce the idea of a film exchange between the two countries in order to promote friend-



● Masters on their own land, the people work together on a North China Commune



DOCUMENTARIES

The next visit to China was led by André Lamy in 1977, the second commissioner to make the trek. "The purpose of the visit was threefold: 1) to gain public exposure for NFB films in China; 2) to obtain permission for an NFB crew to make two or three documentaries in China, and 3) to make a contribution to the continuation of good relations between Canada and China. We feel we were successful in this latter objective, and we were definitely successful in the matter of getting permission to film. As for the first objective, distribution of NFB films in China, we feel that some small progress was made, but only time will tell whether our productions will ever be widely seen by what is potentially the world's largest audience." (*Report on a Visit to the People's Republic of China by a Delegation from the National Film Board* by André Lamy).

The key phrase is, of course, "the world's largest audience," and it was certainly this point that the present commissioner, James Domville, had uppermost in his mind in 1980 when he went to China.

Reflecting both the changes in China's own sense of itself, as well as our domestic situation within the film industry, Domville invited along Claude Godbout, then president of l'Association des producteurs de films du Québec, and Pat Ferns, the president of the Canadian Film and Television Association. This was the first time official representation from the private sector had been present, and according to Fern's report, it was at least a step in the right direction: "While the tangible benefits in the short term may not be all that great, I felt it was an important initiative for the film commissioner to include private sector representatives on what in the past have been exclusively NFB delegations."

The "tangible benefits" relate to the sale of Canadian-made feature films and television shows. The current Chinese policy towards foreign film purchases is to buy selected and pre-screened films for anywhere from \$15,000 to \$35,000, claiming both theatrical and TV rights. (There is one TV for every 800 Chinese. Not exactly big box office.) Domville, however, keeps trying to convince Canadian producers of the importance of just getting the Canadian product into the country, as an investment in the future when it may be possible to receive royalties. Consider the possibilities of widespread distribution at even a penny a head! The NFB might look forward to selling its own films for cost recovery purposes, while the private sector could collect an awful lot of pennies.

But in a private sector that can hardly cope with a short term that seems to be getting shorter all the time, now is not the most auspicious moment to be trying to interest Canadian producers in the long term - to say nothing of the long distance. Still, Domville's enthusiasm for the idea remains strong. Clearly, he's been bitten: after two visits, he's already hoping for a third and he speaks of China in terms usually reserved for very special places. Under his stewardship Canadians have shot films in China and Chinese crew shot four documentaries here. There will soon be a four-city tour of Chinese-made features that will be screened for the public, and to reciprocate, China will host a Canadian film week probably in the spring of 1983. Future plans call for an exchange of animation artists as well as other exchanges for purposes of exploring com-

mon ground in everything from film archives to distribution.

Domville admits that the process is a long and often tedious one - even by NFB standards the Chinese bureaucracy appears overwhelming - "... but the potential benefits of such efforts make it all worthwhile." The immediate repercussions of official delegation visits, and other signals coming from China, if never completely clear, do point to an even brighter future - at least in terms of 'cultural exchanges' if not sales. (In fact, according to Paul Courtice, NFB film sales are down from those of 1979, but he attributes that to the 'hard currency' problems the over-extended Chinese are presently facing.)

The most obvious benefit of all these diplomatic and official overtures are the films about China that have been produced in the last few years. In each case, the films came as a direct result of the NFB commissioners' visits. Newman's visit in 1973 paved the way for *Glimpses of China*, directed by Marcel Carrière. As its title suggests, the film reflects the excitement felt by one of the first crews given access to China's big cities and model institutions. Les Rose followed the University of British Columbia

hockey team, the Thunderbirds, on their visit and produced *Thunderbirds in China*.

Subsequent to André Lamy's visit and part of the China-Canada exchange program of film crews, Tony Ianzelo and Boyce Richardson obtained permission to go and live in China for an extended period of time and they produced three films: *China - A Land Transformed*, a half-hour documentary, remains an interesting document about an exemplary commune. Although full of the Maoist myth, it offers an interesting comparison between pre-1949 China and what has come to be called the 'middle Mao period'.

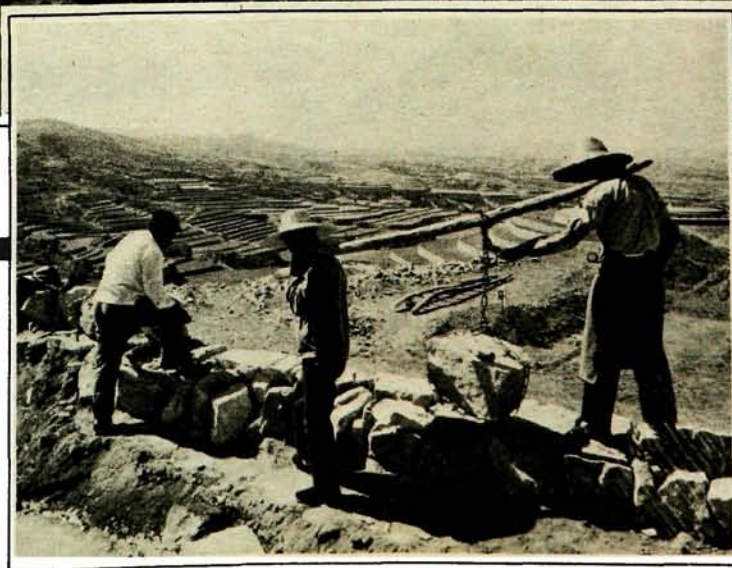
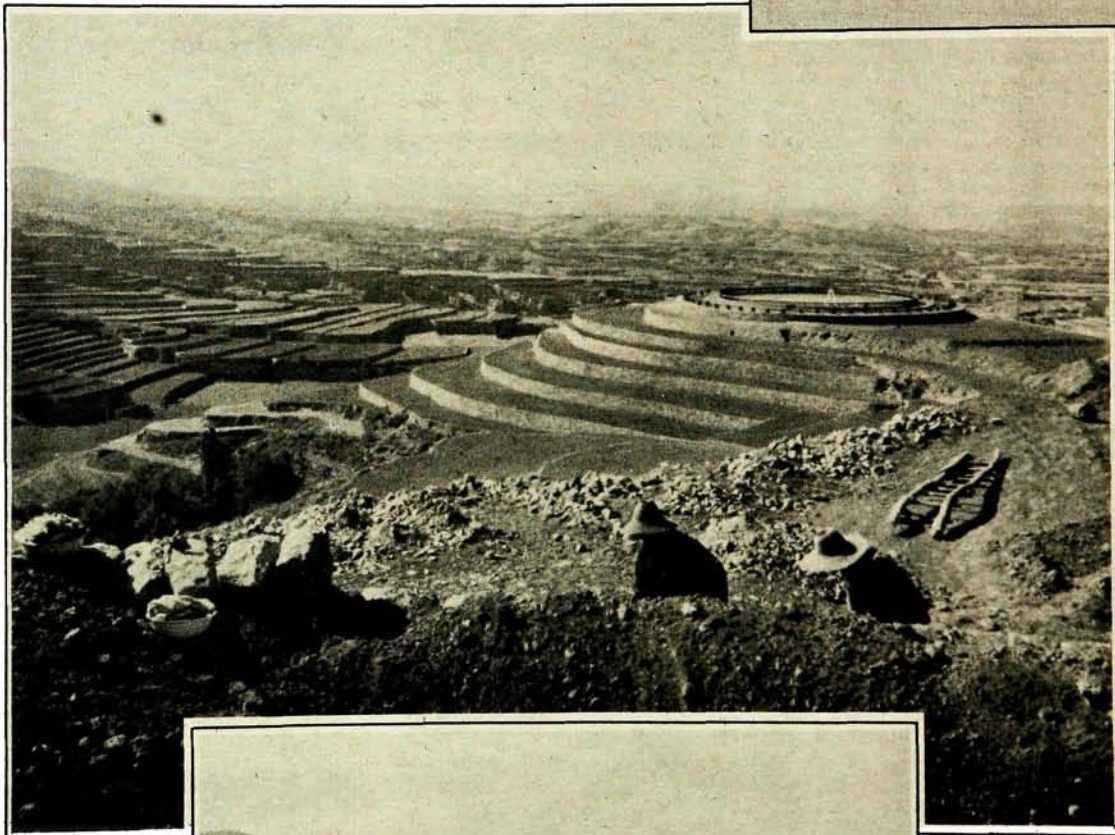
North China Commune (an edited version of this film was done for television and re-titled *Wuxing People's Commune*) and *North China Factory* were the other products of that stay in China but are of more interest today as historical documents. Long-time China visitor and observer, Paul Courtice remarks, "If you see a film about China more than a month after it's shot, it's out of date." Ironically, one of the world's oldest civilizations is for today's filmmakers elusive and everchanging. Add to this the cliché of inscrutability, and

The times they are a-changin'

About a month before Christmas we received a RUSH telex from the Central Broadcasting Administration saying essentially, "We've got money and we want to buy films." The request came to us through Cultural Affairs in Ottawa. They, in turn, asked the CBC, the private sector (through the CFDC), and us. We sent *Mon Oncle Antoine*; *First Winter*; *One Man*; *J.A. Martin, photographe*; and *Drylanders*.

But what's interesting is the reason for the Chinese request. They have just started advertising on TV to encourage consumerism among the peasantry. The peasantry, however, weren't buying in response: they didn't like the programming so they didn't watch the ads. As a result we get to sell them *Mon Oncle Antoine*, not because the Chinese are dying to see a Québécois film, but because the state wants people to watch the five minutes of commercials during each broadcasting hour. I still don't know if they actually bought anything."

Paul Courtice, NFB Representative - Pacific and Northeast Asia.



● The terraced hills, the timeless labour in China, *A Land Transformed*

DOCUMENTARIES

you really have to hope for beautiful images, because the content is at best an approximation of a given moment in the history of a country that continues to reel from the implications of the phrase, 'change for the sake of change'.

The most recent NFB films on China were shot in late 1979 and premiered as a trilogy at the 1981 Festival du nouveau cinéma in Montreal. Collectively, they are called *Guy Dao - On The Way*, but each film has been designed to be viewed on its own. Part I, *Station On The Yangtze*, introduces us to the train station in Wuchang, a city of four million people in central China. But instead of a traditional approach, that of the studied and tightly structured documentary narrated from the reflected past-tense (e.g. We were then taken to.... etc.), there is a strong sense of the present tense. The camera serves as a visual narrator, looking relentlessly at everything it can, while simultaneously trying to maintain a low profile. Interviews abound: anyone willing to speak is spoken to and every single word of the exchange, including repetitions, is recorded and translated. (Prints of the original versions of these films can be obtained from NFB libraries.)

Dufaux works hard at humanizing his subject matter by focusing on individuals and following the drama, or lack of it, in their everyday lives; thus avoiding that traditional pitfall of Westerners looking at China and treating people as masses. We come to understand a great deal more about Chinese life by watching a railway employee's retirement party, and then seeing his daughter's initiation into the job as her father's replacement, than we would learn from some kind of pseudo-sociological reading of relations between the generations in China. The pace of the film is closely aligned to the pace of the daily life it's trying to capture, and one senses - in all of these films - a conscious attempt to dispel romantic and exciting notions about China in

favour of looking at things that are extremely ordinary.

Part II is called *Round Trip to Beijing* and is exactly that: a three-day return trip from Wuchang to Beijing (1200 km each way). Here, too, we watch people - Team no. 6, a group of women employed to serve the passengers' needs as sort of conductor/stewardesses (they punch tickets, pass out playing cards and comic books at the beginning of each trip, and lead the passengers in the mandatory daily exercise routine). Ultimately, this is the least successful of the three films for we're never quite sure where the director's interest lies: is it with the train itself, the notion of mobility within China, or the young train employee we follow home once back in Wuchang, where she's asked about her savings account and her TV set?

The most ambitious film is the last, *Some Chinese Women Told Us*. Watching the first two films, one is struck by the number of women employees involved in all aspects of running the station and the trains. This prepares us for the third film. The style remains consistent. There is a feeling that the crew hung around until they heard of something interesting about to happen - in this case a wedding, and a working wife's visit to her soldier husband, whom she sees two or three times a year - and then went off to film it.

Basically, it is the story of seven women

"Anyone willing to speak is spoken to and every single word of exchange... recorded..."

● Workers at the end of their day in a North China Factory

who work together loading and unloading trains. We see them at work during the night shift, at home in their dormitory, and marching to work single file. Although they all appear to be speaking freely, nobody ever says anything that goes against current policies. For example, everyone talks about their roles in precisely the same way - "Our duty is to serve the people and the state"; and in response to questions about children, absolutely everyone says that one is enough.

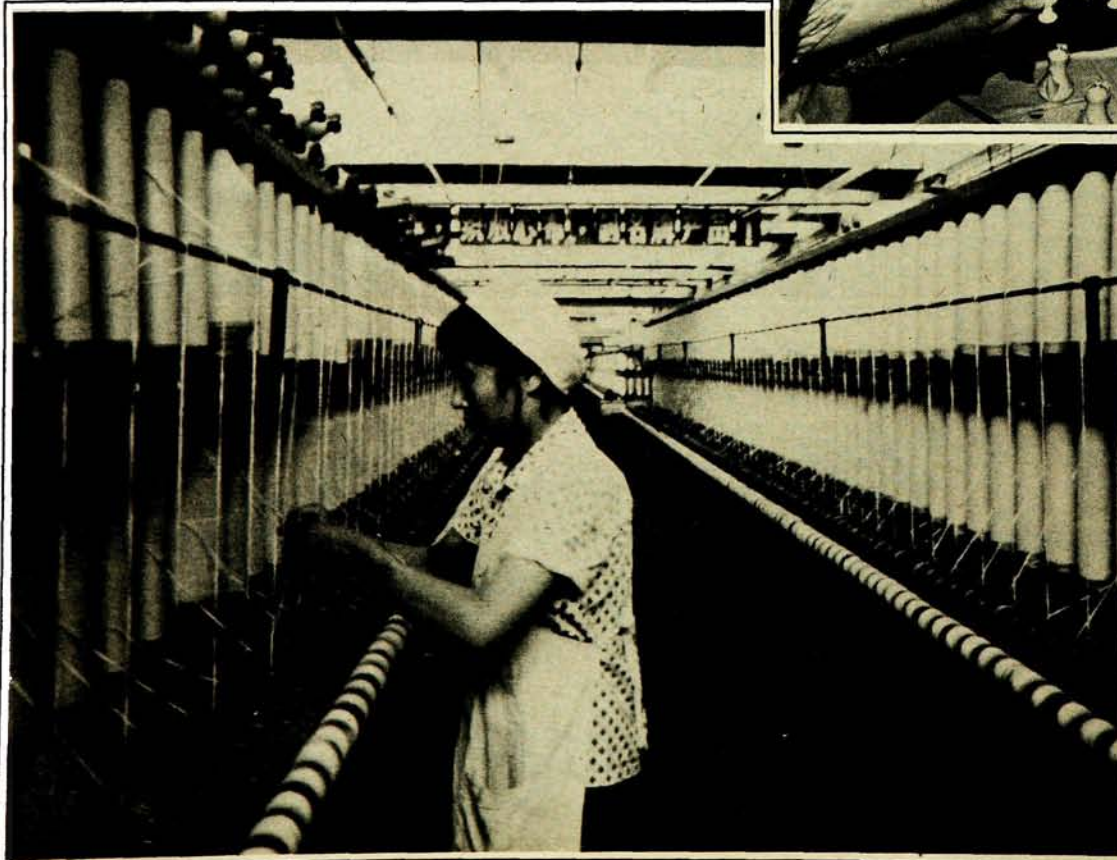
The tone of all three films is that of the intelligent and inquisitive tourist, who is interested in everything and unafraid to ask questions. Those hoping for investigative reporting, however, should look elsewhere. Only in the last few moments of the final part of the trilogy are we exposed to anything like 'hard questions' - Where did you learn your ideology? Where did you learn to put serving others ahead of your own ambitions? A young woman is asked in a quiet one-to-one interview. She has a great deal of difficulty understanding the question, and her obvious discomfort is affecting. But instead of being grateful for the kind of question I thought I'd been waiting to hear for more than

three hours, I was offended by the almost aggressive nature of it. That was when I realized how well Georges Dufaux had succeeded in taking me 'on the way' to understanding a little more about China and the subtleties of a wonderful style of documentary filmmaking which reaffirms that it is still possible to show and not to tell.

Finally, it would be unfair to conclude a discussion of the NFB and China without mentioning Tom Radford's excellent film, *China Mission - The Chester Ronning Story*, produced by the NFB's Prairie Region in co-operation with the Alberta Department of Education. It would be equally unfair to treat this film as yet another NFB film on China.

For anyone interested in any or all of the following, this film is a must-see: Canada, heroes, 20th-century politics, the-stuff-that-makes-the-west-the-west, missionaries, diplomacy, education, How-to-age-with-grace-and-dignity, history, socialism, even the history of photography and filmmaking. And believe it or not, the context for all of this is a mission in China.

China Mission is simultaneously a biography and the autobiography of



Chester Ronning. Born the son of a Norwegian father and an American mother in his parents' mission in China, Ronning's life was full of the stuff of which heroes are made: horse-breaker, homesteader, diplomat, politician and teacher. Using archive material, documentary footage and Ronning's personal mementos, Radford has woven a portrait of the man and his time. In that sense *China Mission* is a beautifully filmed history course, full of humanity but never sentimental or nostalgic.

In its quieter moments, as we move through the sepia-toned stills, to black-and-white shots, to film, and finally to color, we discover that we are watching a love story. The love story of a gentle man who will never outgrow his boyhood memories and dreams, who feels committed to leaving the world a better place in which to live, and who keeps a large part of himself reserved for the first world he knew, China. Thus, it is touching and amusing to see him visiting his old friend Chou En-Lai in 1971 and inviting him to Alberta for some "good old-fashioned Chinese food."

When Ronning quotes an old Chinese proverb we are reminded of why Radford's film, and those of Dufaux are important: "Live until you're old. Learn until you're old."

REVIEW

Tom Radford's

**China Mission :
The Chester
Ronning Story**

In a small white house, in a small white town in Alberta, lives a great man. Here, Chester Ronning—statesman, missionary, schoolteacher, cowboy—is at home.

Ronning lives famously in the agricultural community of Camrose, in the shadow of China. His life's work done, he languishes quietly, like an old chesterfield in a hotel lobby, offering inspiration and comfort to anyone who happens by.

In 1980, the National Film Board's production studio in Edmonton released an hour-long documentary entitled *China Mission: The Chester Ronning Story*. The film introduced this outstanding Canadian to most ordinary Canadians.

China Mission was directed by Tom Radford who also acted as co-writer with the late, legendary Stanley Jackson. Radford's task was unenviable, considering the enormity and variety of Ronning's life experiences. *China Mission*, in order to succeed, had to take a century of tumultuous history and put it on two reels.

Chester Ronning was born in 1894, in the ancient walled city of Fancheng. He was the first non-Chinese to be born there. His parents, Lutheran missionaries, were quick to adopt the local culture. Young Chester grew up speaking Chinese as a first language, Norwegian as a second and English a poor third. He was fed from the breast of a Chinese milk-mother and in every way, except appearance, was your average kid on the block.

This was the boy who would be Canada's first Ambassador in Peking, High Commissioner to India and special U.S. negotiator in North Vietnam. He would also become a founder of the CCF (Commonwealth Cooperative Federation) and a prophetic voice on the side of Chou En Lai and Mao Tse Tung.

Ronning and his family were forced to flee China, in 1899, with the advent of the Boxer Rebellion. They returned in 1901 and stayed for six more years until Ronning's mother Hannah died of exhaustion.

Ronning returned to Canada where he became a homesteader in the Peace River country of northern Alberta. There he worked as a cowboy enroute to becoming a teacher.

In 1922, the lure of China proved too strong and the young teacher made his way back to his birthplace in Fancheng to continue his parents' work.

China Mission deals mostly with this period of Ronning's life. It tells the story of Ronning the teacher, the man of the people, the simple endearing spirit. His later political positions are almost totally ignored, and for good reason.

Ronning was never the most diplomatic of diplomats. He was against the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and because of his "Chinese sympathies," he



was never completely trusted by the old guard in Ottawa.

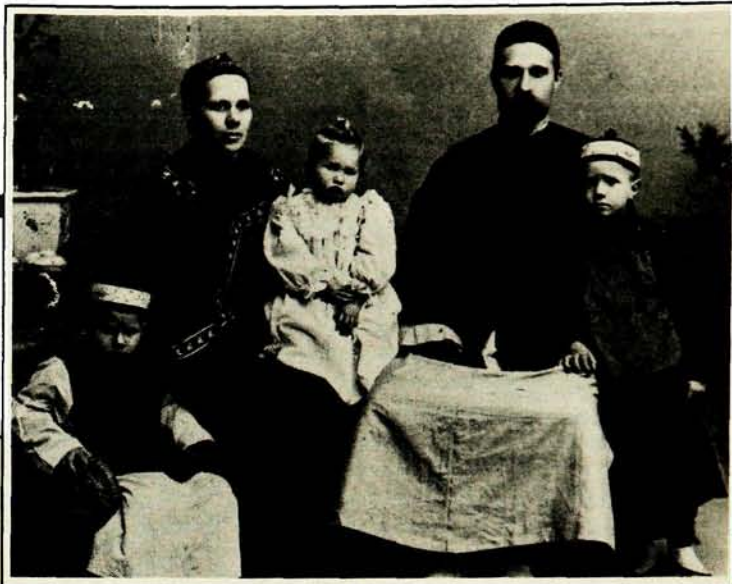
China Mission's greatest achievement is the way it exposes Ronning's grass roots. In scene after scene, we see a man who was loved by children and animals and suspected by politicians. What would you prefer? The fact that Ronning was a western teacher and not an eastern historian did nothing for his diplomatic career. It's also the reason why he remains mostly unknown in sophisticated video-wise areas like southern Atario.

The film, in style, is a fairly straightforward documentary. It combines contemporary footage with archival footage and stills, intercut with interviews. These elements are welded together by Cedric Smith's narration and Roger Deegan's music.

There's nothing flashy here, nothing gimmicky, just the story of a great man told in an excellent film.

China Mission is not so much about China as it is about one man's vision of it. Radford uses Ronning as a key to unlock some of the myriad mysteries which cocoon that awesome country. He never tries to tell the history of modern China in 58 minutes which is just as well. For this reason, Chester Ronning has never been totally happy with the film. He feels it focuses too much on him and not enough on the evolution of today's China. This is a criticism which I'm sure Radford can live with.

This project first surfaced six years ago when Radford was hot to make "The Chester Ronning Story." He soon found out that Ronning's daughter, Audrey Topping, a photo-journalist with the *New York Times*, had the same idea. Given the pecking order, Radford decided to take a back seat. Two years



● Chester stands next to his father. Years later Ronning remains a towering, inspirational man

population.

I have long maintained that Canadian features are like wayward orphans in search of an identity. In contrast, Canadian documentaries are as tough as pucks and this film is an appropriate example.

And so to politics. *China Mission* has never been shown on national television in this country! There are probably many reasons for this, but a few deserve some scrutiny.

Could it be that the traditional rivalry between the NFB and the CBC is depriving Canadians of experiencing this inspired piece of work? Or perhaps the CTV is too interested in American simulcasts to find the time to air a decent documentary. In any case, it's a national disgrace that this film has yet to be shown on television.

Chester Ronning is an old man. His story may not be slick, sexy or sensational, but it is truly educational. What a wonderful day it would be when our networks could differentiate between the truths of the teacher and the temptations of the titillator.

Tom Crighton ●

In what must go down as one of the more infamous remarks made by buyers at the CBC to a producer, Tom Radford was told that, although the network was not at present interested in the film, it would be prepared to buy it for screening after Ronning's death.

CHINA MISSION: THE CHESTER

RONNING STORY d. Tom Radford ed./sd. ed. Christopher Tate, c.f.e. p. Michael Scott exec. p. Lydia Semotuk, Michael Scott cam. Robert Reece, Ron Orleux, Harry Nuttall, Richard Westlien sd. Garrell Clark, Ann McGaw, Ed Smith, Lesley Topping mus. Roger Deegan narration Cedric Smith commentary Stanley Jackson, Tom Radford original story Audrey Topping story consult. Stanley Jackson, Vladimir Valenta, Tom Daly recc. Clive Perry, Wayne Finucan Productions still animation Svend Erik Eriksen, Tom Brydon asst. ed. Joseph Vizsmeg, Ray Harper, Colin Ross, Jonathan Leaning, Selwyn Jacob asst. cam. Chris Aikenhead, Gary Armstrong, Meme Westlien research Inger Smith stills consult. Doug Clark stills research Avrel Fisher post-p. superv. Christopher Tate, c.f.e. education consult. Mary Lyseng historical consult. Brian Evans titles Val Teodori unit admin. Charles Lough, Pat Hart col. 16mm running time 57 min. p.c. The National Film Board in co-operation with the Alberta Department of Education.