Empire Inc.
Telling an Anglo tale

With the down-turn of the Canadian film industry, the CBC is once again the only game in town. While the news department in Toronto — with its expanded \textit{The National - The Journal} format estimated to cost between $7 - $10 million — gambles on the New, the Montreal-based TV drama is taking a risk on re-interpreting the \textit{Then}. Hailed as “one of the biggest” dramatic series ever made in this land, the $3 million, six-part Empire Inc. slated for viewing early in 1983, hopes to do for the memory of Angelphone Montreal what the hugely successful Duplessis series did for Quebec’s pre-1960 politics: consecrate its official demise.

Fittingly, this six-hour requiem to past glories is being brought to you in a never-before-seen spirit of amicable collaboration between TV’s two solitudes, CBC and Radio-Canada, with slightly less prominent (though credited) help from the National Film Board. Verily, the Canadian TV producer’s dream come true!

And it is largely, at least in key respects, the same equipe that created Duplessis (the tandem Mark Blandford producer - Denys Arcand scriptwriter) who are behind this chronicle of the boom-to-bust saga of fictional Montreal financier James Monroe’s rise from Scottish immigrant’s rags to the pinnacle of pre-Quiet Revolution high finance.

With Mark Blandford as executive producer and director of a two-hour-long episodes, screenwriters Douglas Bowie and Denys Arcand who will also direct two episodes and Jacques Benoit, with Douglas Jackson directing the other two segments, Empire Inc. is the triple story of a man and his family, that of the times the Great Depression, the rise of Nazism and the Second World War, as well as that of an entire city from 1928, when it was the financial capital of the country, to 1960.

Location shoots include such former bastions of the Anglo establishment as the Mount Royal Club and the Mount Stephen Club — once the home of CPR magnate and rubber baron George Ste-phen: the House of Commons in Ottawa (thrown back to the days of Mackenzie King dullness); and, sure sign of these times, the Chateau Laurier’s new Golden Mile. Because Empire is a period piece, and historical periods change times in the course of one day’s shooting, the schedules are gruelling.

One of Empire’s stories within the story — which the publicity department goes so far as to call a “career change” — concerns Quebecois political documentarist Denys Arcand’s (on est au coton: Québec: Duplessis et après; and the forthcoming Le confort et l’inégalité) on the 1980 Quebec referendum presence as hired director not working on his own script for the first time in his professional life.

“Me, I’m the project’s token French-Canadian,” says Arcand with a laugh, who admits his collaboration is something of a holiday for him after a decade of political films. “Blandford likes to have a gang working around him. He asked me along.”

Arcand has scripted the fourth Empire episode (about the Quebec labor question in the aftermath of the war); but the two segments he will direct are not political and deliberately so: “more of a love story,” he says, though the setting is a brothel.

Arcand’s interest in the series (passion as opposed to work) was predominantly on the level of the historical research involved.

“It’s a subject that has never been touched, either in film, in theatre or in books. No one’s really looked at Anglo financial power here. In terms of little facts and things, I learned a lot about these colossal fortunes. It was truly a savage capitalism.”

“The French and English universes were completely separate. We didn’t see each other, we didn’t talk to each other. On the level of the series’ dramaticity, there’s no French-English confrontation: it’s the history of Anglophones re-interpreted for Anglophones. The Francophone is here solely as a spectator.”

Arcand says he’s greatly looking forward to working with Anglophone actors: the on-camera talent halls mostly from Toronto often via Los Angeles or off-Broadway. “It’s been eight years since I’ve worked directly with actors,” since Gina (1974), his last dramatic film. Arcand has nothing but praise for the work of his Anglo colleagues, especially for the high quality of scripts.

“Those scripts that come out of English Canada are really first-rate. I’ve gotten a lot of pleasure reading them. They’re really very good. High calibre, well-put together, good punch-lines. It’s very pleasant.”

Arcand does have one worry, though: the $3 million budget which he says is “very small.”

“To do a period piece like this costs a fortune. Everything — from a car to a desk to a watch — has to be gotten hold of. We’ve got 15 days’ shooting for each episode. This is really the limit. But we’ll have to pull it off! I hope so. I’m keeping my fingers crossed.”

Empire hopes to set a precedent for future co-productions. Arcand is not the only one who’s got his fingers crossed.

Michael Dorland

\textbf{Scandale}

\textbf{Porno for fun and profit}

They were doing alterations on one of Quebec’s more noisome skeletons the other day, down at R.S.L. Films. Lately, you see, a number of Quebec’s skeletons have jumped out of the family closet and come clanking into the parlour. The folks down at R.S.L. have seized the opportunity to take one of them — the Pornobec scandal — and parade it around the countryside, with the hope that the yokels will fill R.S.L.’s coffers in order to see it.

The Pornobec scandal involved some...