

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 *The National - The Journal* format estimated to cost between \$7 - \$10 million — gambles on the Now, the Montreal-based TV drama department is taking a risk on re-interpreting the 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 Anglophone 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 own 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 *équipe* 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 pinnacles of pre-Quiet Revolution high finance.

With Mark Blandford as executive producer and director of two hour-long episodes, screenwriters Douglas Bowie, 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 a city: Montreal from 1929, 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 robber baron George Stephen: 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 Room ("a penthouse suite for visiting Arab Sheiks" according to someone close to the project). Studio work will be done at the Film Board's Côte de Liesse headquarters.

"The series comes in the wake of a very slow production year," says *Empire* publicist Lana Iny. "The film industry is very slow. Most dramas in the past were out of Toronto. It was very rare from here. It's thanks to Blandford, head of TV drama here, that it got underway."

"The Montreal Anglophone community is dying," says Blandford, a True Brit, "and the English have less and less influence. Even if bastions like the Mount Royal Club and the Mount Stephen Club are still here, the great days of Anglo Montreal are things of the past.



● The Mount Stephen Club never looked so good.

"But the past illuminates the present. The advantage of a historical drama is that there have been 25-30 years to think about the subject, to really understand it." According to Blandford, "it's not been an easy production" to get underway, primarily because of budget restrictions.

The first episode has been shot. Throughout February, the second episode will be shot, mainly in the lavishly wood-paneled Mount Stephen Club in the heart of what was once called Montreal's 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'indifférence* 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' dramaturgy, 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 ac-

tors: the on-camera talent hails 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 have to live with that. Will I have the talent 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 ●

EMPIRE INC. for credits, please see Production Guide, On Location, p. 35.

● The National Assembly never looked so bad.



Scandale

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

employees of the Quebec government who were shooting porno movies in the basement of the National Assembly building in Quebec City.

That's the naked truth — the skeleton around which R.S.L. producer Robert Lantos has tailored *Scandale*, a film shot in less than a month for under a million dollars by George Mihalka (*Pinball Summer, My Bloody Valentine*).

The Pornobec scandal broke in the early autumn of 1981. George Mihalka agreed to do the film on December 4. There was a script ready, complete with step-outline, by December 11. There were 4 weeks of pre-production, hampered by the fact there were four-day holidays this year for both Christmas and New Year's, and the bulk of the shooting took place between January 12 and February 2. As Mihalka puts it, "It happened so fast, we began shooting without knowing some of the people we were going to be working with."

When I visited R.S.L., in early March, post-production had started even as pick-up shooting (establishing shots, the little things that help a film run smoothly) was still going on. Distribution deals had been made, and a release date of April 23 had been set.

Making a film that quickly poses problems, to say the least. In the words of George Mihalka, "When you're making a film so fast, on a shoestring budget, things are bound to foul up. And they did. Every day." He gave a 'for instance'. On the very first day, 2 1/2 hours before shooting was scheduled to begin at the Palais de Justice, the provincial government mysteriously cancelled R.S.L.'s permit to use the site. "All our lighting equipment," says Mihalka, "and our crew were there when we got thrown out."

That problem was solved, but it took some midnight shooting to do it. In fact, working at night seems to have been standard operating procedure. Rick Wallace, the editor of the film, (whose credits include *Meatballs* and *My Bloody Valentine*) recalls that "Occasionally, I'd have to go in at 3 a.m., when the crew was having lunch, to project the dailies."

But, clearly, not all the problems with *Scandale* could be solved. Mihalka was quite philosophical about the fact that the conditions under which the film was shot made even approaching perfection impossible. Speaking of the probability that there are going to be technical flaws in the film, he said "I'll know the difference and every photographer in the world will know the difference, but I doubt if anyone in the audience

will know the difference. If something's funny, then nobody cares about quality." He added, "If the script called for a sunny day, and it happened to be a rainy day, then that's what it turned out to be."

That attitude isn't exactly what they teach in film schools, but it's probably not as reprehensible as it sounds. In fact, Mihalka even sounded a bit poetic when he spoke of the crew's attitude as being out of the — unwritten — book "Zen and the Art of Filmmaking." "Bend like the willows in the wind," he said was their motto. And there was some genuine esprit de corps in the air when he talked about the contributions of François Protat, the director of photography (*Les Plouffe*), and Nanette Workman, who appears in one of the five cabaret numbers in the film.

But...

The Pedlar

Three cheers for the cook

Meleb, Manitoba, is the perfect setting for the bleak final scene in *The Pedlar*, a one-hour NFB drama set in the indeterminate past, in the hardscrabble Interlake district of central Manitoba. Even when it's hot here the place makes you shiver.

Meleb is a small general store, three houses, two churches, a parish hall, various out-buildings, and some stunted aspens clustered along a railroad crossing on a dusty road about 100 kilometers north of Winnipeg. One church and the hall are boarded. Nothing but the Ukrainian church, it seems, has seen paint in 40 years. The place is so flat and exposed that all you can think of is the cold prairie winter — 40° below and nothing between the drafty, still-functioning outhouses here and the North Pole except a marrow-freezing wind.

Between takes on *The Pedlar* Michael Scott, "executive producer, producer, best boy, and general all-around meanie," recounts a dream he had last night. The cast and crew are in a basement. It's an inferno. There are coals everywhere, and it's fiercely hot. Everybody is sweating madly and toiling like dogs. Suddenly, Stanley Knowles, the eminent NDP churchman and member of parliament, shows up. He condemns the NFB, a government agency, for mistreating the workers. Mike tries to explain that this is what they all like doing; this is their life's work! He says he'll be happy to assemble the crew to explain how much they love it. They are all singing testimonials to convince Stanley as Mike wakes up. You don't need to be Freud to see where that dream came from.

The previous day's shooting had gone into overtime, ending just before dark with a scene in an abandoned barn when a young girl (played by Marilyn Magnussen) brings a cup of coffee to a sweaty pedlar (Lubomir Mykytiuk) as he fashions a horseshoe over a roaring forge. Despite the heat, the long day, and the after-effects of a boozy farewell party for Tom Peacock the night before, the cast and crew are in surprisingly good spirits. It's the kind of atmosphere that is achieved only in a publicist's flak-happy imagination.

What caused it? It could be the dinner that will soon be served at the Fisher Branch Motel, the focal point of another small, remote Interlake town where the

Mihalka said to me at one point, "Criticism. After having done *Pinball Summer* and *My Bloody Valentine*, I'll laugh it off." Well, start laughing, George, because I really didn't like the cut of the suit I saw being made for the Pornobec scandal. (Not that I was actually allowed to see any cuts from the film. Lantos seemed a little, well, skittish about that idea.)

I admire Lantos and the others involved in *Scandale* for having the nerve to deal with such a touchy subject, especially since this is Mihalka's first film in French. Indeed, Mihalka said that "One of our biggest problems was to cast the film," given that so much of the artistic community in Montreal is so politically active, and so "Parti Québécois."

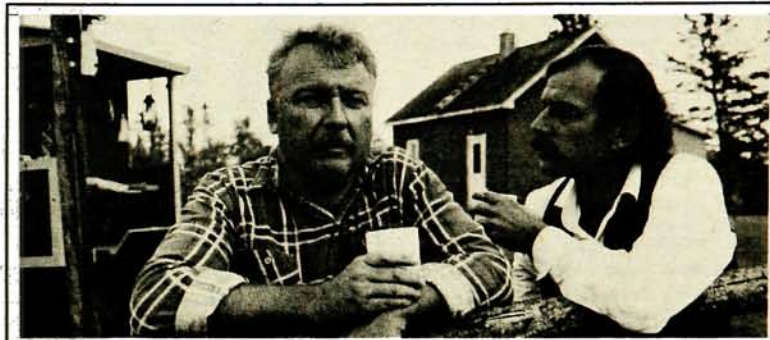
But summoning up the nerve to do the film seems to have exhausted their

supply. Rick Wallace said, "In my opinion, there's not a character that specifically represents anyone," and Mihalka said, "We could have satirized Quebec, or we could have satirized government. We decided to satirize government."

And what that means in concrete terms is that two scenes that Mihalka described as being satiric highlights are one in which a government minister being interviewed doesn't notice a bathtub being wheeled by his office, and another scene in which a minister enters his office, finds it empty, and says "Where are my employees? On coffee break or on strike?"

Well, some people might call that sensitivity to the feelings of the people of Quebec. But I call it pulling your punches.

David Clarke ●



● The pedlar stops for the cook's coffee (Tom Peacock and Lubomir Mykytiuk).

cast and crew have been staying and eating for the 16-day duration of the location shoot.

Dinners here have been like extended Ukrainian Christmas feasts. Homemade perogies, stuffed cabbages, meatballs, pies, fresh vegetables and fruit and sour cream, etc., etc. The cooks are as tunelessly busy and insistent as your favorite grandmother. This is not your usual catered fare; it's more like a child's dream of vacations on the farm. People have to loosen their belts and belch to watch the after-dinner rushes.

The Pedlar, one of only two dramas being shot this year by the National Film Board, is based on a short story by W.D. Valgardson entitled "A Place of One's Own." It's the story of a young girl who finds herself pregnant and abandoned, much to the chagrin of her mean-spirited father (Tom Peacock of *The Hounds of Notre Dame* fame). Against the wishes of the girl but with the consent of her mother (Doreen Brownstone), the girl is married off to a mysterious itinerant pedlar, a man distinguished by the fact that his entire upper torso is covered with tattoos. Alan Kroeker, the film's director and screenwriter, has taken to calling the film *Tess of the Interlake*.

The Pedlar is the third Valgardson story that Kroeker has translated to the screen. (A fourth, based on the story "On Lake Therese," is planned in the near future for local television.) The first two, *God Is Not a Fish Inspector* and *Capital*, though done quickly and with very limited resources, have both won awards (at the Seattle and Yorkton Film Festivals) and have gained considerable local favor.

Although he has made a handful of well-crafted films, *The Pedlar* is Kroeker's first opportunity to be a full-fledged director. With this film he has the budget and the time to rehearse and actually direct his actors, not just prompt and position them. He also has a crew to direct. Previously, he was both the director and the crew.

Lubomir Mykytiuk, who is perhaps familiar as the bread-juggler in *Paper Wheat*, likes the script of *The Pedlar* "because it is open to so many interpretations at different points. That's what's nice but also what's tricky about it." He and Kroeker discussed his character and the sparseness and subtlety of the drama for many hours before the shoot began. That has allowed the director more time with the other characters, especially Marilyn Magnussen. Understandably nervous and self-protective in her first shot at acting, she needs to be delicately coaxed into each emotion. The results so far have been promising.

I sat with the cast and crew as we tried to digest our bountiful dinner and watched the rushes that had been bussed up from Winnipeg. At the end there were three cheers for Alan Pakarnyk for the three marvelous dragons and eagles he had spent six hours tattooing onto Lubomir's body with marking pens. Three cheers for cameraman Charlie Konowal and all his sharp close-ups. Three cheers for the stand-in's steady walk with a dripping water bucket. And three cheers for gaffer Frank Raven who had created the blacksmith's forge that had broiled everybody, but had gotten a horseshoe to glow magnificently red right on cue.

By the time dinner was over I was beginning to wonder whether the secret to moviemaking, like the secret to so many things, was just a matter of good hearty home-cooking.

Gene Walz ●

SCANDALE p. RSL Films Limited d. George Mihalka scr. Robert Geoffrion music Tony Roman d.o.p. François Protat ed. Rit Wallace p. man. Wendy Grean p. acc. Manon Bougie-Boyer p. sec. Jacky Lavoie 1st a.d. Matthieu Vibert 2nd a.d. Arden Rysphan loc. man. François Leclerc scr. sup. Monique Champagne cast. Andrée Champagne dancer's cast. Kathleen Graham focus Michel Girard clapper/loader Patty Morein gaffer Don Saari best boy Charles Hughes key grip Serge Grenier ed. mix. Donald Cohen boom Gabor Vadney art. d. Csaba Kertesz asst. art. d. Michel Demuet set dec. Frances Calder set props Claude Charbonneau asst. set props Pierre Plante ward. des. Paul André Guerin ward. mistress Mary Jane Wallace make-up Marie Josee Lafontaine hair Andre Lafreniere asst. hair Denis Muller stills Alex Dukay, Atilla Dory unit man. Jacques Leflaugais asst. ed. Chantal Bowen sd. ed. Autone Productions Inc. superv. sd. ed. Richard Lightstone dialogue ed. Tony Reed, Patrick Dodd sd. ed. ed. Monika Dorfman Lightstone assts. ed. Susan Schneur. Ross Overbury l.p. Sophie Lorain, Gilbert Comtois, Alpha Boucher, François Troitier, Robert Des Roches, Sylvie Boucher, Douglas "Coco" Leopold, Les Freres Brosse (Jean Pierre Alonzo and Robert Morissette), Nanette Workman, Marcel Giguere, Jean Guy Moreau, Denis Laroque, Liliane Clune, J.C. Robillard, Marie-Alyne Joyal, Jean Chevalier, Sonny Forbes, Gayle Garfinkle, Celyne Verreault, Les Soeurs Ciseaux.

THE PEDLAR d. Alan Kroeker p. exec. p. Michael Scott sc. Kroeker based on story "A Place of One's Own" by W.D. Valgardson d.o.p. Andreas Poulsson ed. Lara Mazur p. man. Vonnice von Helms art. d. a.d. Kim Johnston cam. op. Charlie Konowal asst. cam. op. Elise Swerhone, Charles Levak tattoo des. Alan Pakarnyk make-up Rita Steinman gaffer Frank Raven, Ken Rodeck, Michael Scott sd. rec. Leon Johnson asst. sd. rec. Ed Ackerman l.p. Doreen Brownstone, Marilyn Magnussen, Lubomir Mykytiuk, Tom Peacock p.c. The National Film Board of Canada