

ATLANTIC ECHOES

by Mike Riggio

In 1973 the National Film Board opened the Atlantic Studio with Rex Tasker as its first executive producer. Tasker, who had been instrumental in decentralizing the Board's production facilities, guided the development of the Studio until 1981.

The location of the Atlantic Studio fell to Halifax. The city seemed to be the best possible base at the time, as there were several universities and Eastern Film Labs there.

In contrast to other regional studios across the country (Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto) the Atlantic Studio faced two immediate disadvantages: 1) The Studio covered four provinces instead of the usual one, and 2) The level of production within the region was, at the time, quite limited.

While the other regional studios work with a small core of administrative producers who then can draw on the resources available within the surrounding filmmaking communities, the Atlantic Studio had to import some staff from the Montreal office.

What the Studio tried to do was to somehow find a focus for the people coming out of the woodwork who wanted to get involved in making films but who had no previous training. Together with the Canada Council, the Film Board decided to help fund the various film co-ops. Since there were no film schools in the region, the co-ops seemed the next logical step.

The film co-ops provided an introduction to the film industry and taught the basic vocabulary of filmmaking. Through the co-ops individual filmmakers could bring themselves to a level of expertise where they could then present themselves to the Board as possible apprentices.

The first people who approached the Studio were people who wanted to be directors and who lacked a lot of the craft skills. Once they directed their film, found themselves once again pounding the sidewalks with nothing to offer.

In order to foster and strengthen the craft skills that were found lacking, the Film Board took on apprentices on most of its productions. By hiring individuals on a trainee basis, the Studio felt that these people could then go out to some of the local film production outfits and the commercial agencies where somebody could pay for these skills on a freelance basis.

In the meantime, the Studio has been involved in films about the people and the activities of the region. Though the majority of the films have been

primarily documentaries, there have also been a variety of animation and dramatic productions.

An examination of the list of over 50 films produced by the Atlantic Studio will easily show the spectrum of involvement of the various filmmakers from the four provinces. In Newfoundland there have been projects by Paul MacLeod and Bill Gough; in Prince Edward Island, Kent Martin and Brian Pollard; in New Brunswick Robert Awad, Jon Pederson and Art Makosinski.

Of the four provinces, however, Nova Scotia with its larger population and a seemingly much faster developing film co-op seems to have progressed the fastest and gained the most. Then too there is the added advantage of the Studio's Halifax location which inevitably would tend to give Nova Scotian filmmakers an added edge to accessibility over their contemporaries in the other three provinces.

Barry Cowling, a native of Dartmouth, was attracted to the Film Board and worked as a freelance writer and producer with the Atlantic Studio. Subsequently he worked out of Montreal on a variety of writing and producing assignments. In 1978, he returned to Halifax as a staff producer, took on the role of acting executive producer for the Atlantic Studio in 1981, and in April 1982 was appointed executive producer.

Presently he is in the process of implementing a new set of policies for the Studio which arise out of his experiences and observations over the past three years.

About the Atlantic Studio; he says, "We have been able to satisfy the requirements that we had set out for ourselves and have continued to make films, but with the definite understanding that there would be a growth of new filmmakers."

Today the Atlantic Studio relies far less on in-house filmmakers and places a heavier emphasis on the producers. These, Cowling feels, "can spread out and encourage the kind of filmmaking that is now possible because the community does seem to have grown up. The skills that weren't available in the early days are now much more abundant and visible. But overall, I think I can say this: the craft skills are still not as strong as they should be throughout the region."

Newfoundland, for example, needs particular attention "because there the filmmakers are disadvantaged over their contemporaries in the region by, if nothing else, the distance and the isolation. Filmmakers are

anxious for us to do productions in Newfoundland and to use local equipment and local people."

Cowling's special commitment to Newfoundland (special status, if you will) has been demonstrated in his renting space from the film co-op to house a visiting Film Board producer. The co-op used these funds to assist with the purchase of a flatbed editing machine.

The Atlantic Studio produces about five to six films a year, mostly traditional documentaries. "But that's not something that's cast in stone. Again, you have to think of developing skills—I don't know what would happen if you took all the money that we could muster to make one drama and gave five people work for one year. I don't know what kind of impact that would have on the community at large. We would be denying a lot of craft people access to training."

"However, if at some point the whole motion of filmmaking in the region seems to be towards drama then we can easily have the Studio go in that direction."

Very early on, for example, in its response to the Acadian filmmakers and their filmmaking needs, the Atlantic Studio produced *Une simple histoire d'amour*.

Barry Cowling sums up his appraisal of the Atlantic Studio and its present state of development: "I am pretty excited about the quality of work that

has been coming out, about the training of the various crafts people, about the ideas for animation and experimental film.

A lot of people are submitting things to us for comment and for reaction. But we're missing a million dollars. We could spend that million dollars very effectively and very quickly."

IATSE gives break

TORONTO—The new low budget contract for films budgetted under \$1.5 million recently announced by the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees Local 873 (Motion Picture Studio Production Technicians) will apply to all productions, not just certified Canadian films, according to IATSE 873 president Neil Grocutt.

Along with offering the new low budget rates, IATSE 873 has also frozen its feature film contracts at 1981 rates.

"Basically, there is a need for it," explained Grocutt of the union's move. "Potentially, there is an awful lot of work in the pay-TV area, and I don't

think you're going to get the big budgets for pay-TV."

No low budget-rate contracts have been signed yet by the union, though Grocutt said there were several producers interested in making deals. IATSE 873 is currently filming the \$2 million feature film comedy *Critical List* at Magder Studios in Scarborough.

TORONTO—Dynasty Productions Inc.'s *Mr. Sam*, a two-part television mini-series on the early years of Samuel Bronfman starring Saul Rubinek, August Schellenberg, and Al Waxman, which was to have begun shooting May 31 in Vancouver, has been postponed until October, 1982, according to producer John McGreevy.

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