Little Gloria... Happy at Last

Flags and license plates

Little Gloria... Happy at Last, a made-for NBC television special wrapped up production after two months of shooting on locations in Ottawa, Montreal, Brockville, Toronto, and Oshawa. The film was produced by Edgar J. Scherick and Associates from California with Justine Héroux's Montreal-based company Cine Gloria. Despite the fact that three of the four producers were American, Little Gloria was officially classified by Canada's Department of Communications as a British/Canadian co-production.

Little Gloria is about the billionaire American family, the Vanderbilts, and the controversy and sorrow that marked their private lives, particularly those of the women. Impression was that it would be best if they made the film as much as possible like an Archie comic book. That should be expected. Christopher Plummer said recently that his character, Reggie Vanderbilt, "was not a playboy, but a man with a sense of failure." This suggests that the Vanderbilts will be served straight up as serious emotional material with the flavour and charm of the times. NBC's recipe of the Republic, Eagle soup—an ideological delight. In any case the merits of the project can be judged (or perhaps just consumed) sometime in October when Little Gloria will be broadcast as two 120-minute specials on NBC and CTW.

By Canadian standards, Little Gloria was a big-time production. There were scenes involving as many as 200 extras all dressed in the style of the '20s. The film travelled with a permanent complement of about 100 people, an abundance of motor homes and a cavalcade of trucks. Shooting took place only in Grade A:* Nortel locations including the Chateau Laurier in Ottawa, the beautiful art deco restaurant at Eaton's in Montreal, the gracious Fulford Estate in Brockville, and the opulent McLaughlin mansion in Oshawa. And the lifestyle of the wealthiest class of people is expensive to portray. Little Gloria was made on a $7 million budget which, given the exchange difference, stretched to close to $10 million in Canadian funds. As far as the economy was concerned Little Gloria was a mini boom in the film industry and, for those only interested in economics, the film was a happy venture. But for those concerned with culture a project like Little Gloria has few redeeming qualities. Little Gloria was a "flags and license plates" picture, a type well known on the Canadian production scene in which a place like Toronto has to look like Philadelphia or Montreal like New York. But more than flags and license plates were imported: even the driver captain, the production secretary, and the first two assistant directors were brought in. In addition most of the top creative jobs that were not held by Americans were held by British. That did not leave much room for Canadians who worked as technicians or had to be satisfied with assistant or assistant-to-the-assistant plus the rack of support jobs needed on any film. Even the Canadian producer seemed to play a subservient role, acting chiefly as a publicist, public relations officer and labour arbitrator while her American colleagues ran the show.

While it pays the bills, as they say, such a situation can sour easily and there were tensions and grumblings in many different departments. There seemed to be a good deal of life feeling in the A.O.D. department but perhaps wardrobe was the worst afflicted. Within hours of the arrival of Little Gloria for the Canadian portion of the shoot, the California costume designer was demanding the firing of her Canadian costume mistress. The charge was that she had no taste. A sticky managerial decision was avoided, the Canadian's reputation reinstated, and her aggressor's attack ridiculed when the timely news arrived from New York that the Canadian's work on a previous picture had just been awarded an Emmy. The same costume designer also displayed a rather blunt insensitivity to French/English tensions when she shortly reprimanded a francophone costume mistress for speaking English in an

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The sheen of period costumes and customs makes a glossy production for American TV thanks to a United Kingdom-Canada co-production treaty photos: Piroska Mihalka

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accent that she found difficult to understand.

French/English relations took another dive when on location in Montreal it was announced that the McLaughlin mansion had been parceled out by the decision of the walk-the-talkies. The atmosphere soured yet further over a disparity in the allocation of per diems between visitors and Canadians working on the production. The union representing Quebec's technicians lodged a formal grievance over the issue and there was also 13-minute work stoppage in protest.

Perhaps then it is not surprising that a popular nickname for the film became Little Gloria... Finished at Last. Nevertheless, from a certain perspective, there was something fascinating about the making of this film: the eddies of discontent swirling in the depths, momentarily bellowing on the surface and the thundering ironies that threatened to crack the somnambulant present soaring through a repetitive history into an area of Cowley's medical unit yet further over a disparity in the allocation of per diems between visitors and Canadians working on the production.

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