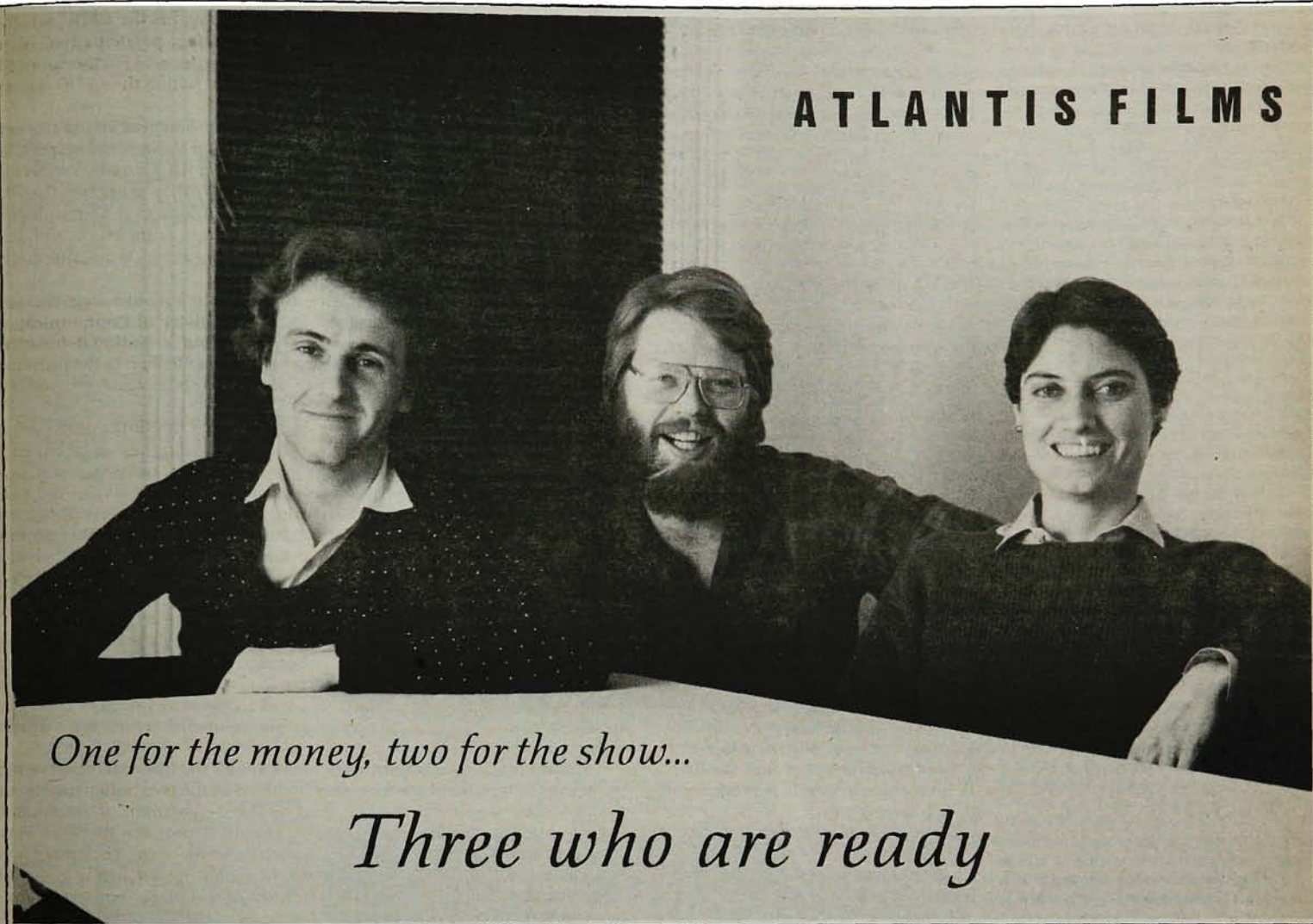


INTERVIEW

ATLANTIS FILMS



One for the money, two for the show...

Three who are ready

by Bruce Malloch

A few years ago a trio of young filmmakers put everything they owned into a U-Haul and headed for Toronto. Five years later Janice Platt, Seaton McLean and Michael MacMillan won the Bijou Award for best independent drama for producing Bruce Pittman's *Olden Days Coat* (1981).

Platt, McLean and MacMillan first began making films at Queen's University some six years ago, forming a production company, Atlantis Films, in their third year there.

After a half-dozen films, they made the move to Toronto to successfully make their impact as producer-directors at a time when the Canadian film industry grapples with an unknown future.

Balancing between documentaries and drama - Atlantis has produced the John Walker/Chris Lowry documentary *Chambers: Tracks and Gestures* about Canadian artist Jack Chambers - the trio is currently producing a series of six half-hour dramas based on stories from Canadian literature.

Chambers and David, a TV drama under 30 minutes, both recently won awards at the Canadian Film and Television Awards in Toronto on Nov. 12.

Bruce Malloch is Toronto staff reporter for Cinema Canada.

Cinema Canada: Do you see yourselves primarily as filmmakers or producers?

Janice Platt: We see ourselves as filmmakers. We don't want ever to be in a position where we're dealing only with money or with financing. If we wanted to be in that position we would be in a job that's a little more secure. We see ourselves very much as filmmakers who have creative input every step of the way.

Michael MacMillan: We also see ourselves as producers, though I think those are difficult and loaded words. We see ourselves as producers who are filmmakers and as filmmakers who are producers. We see ourselves in both roles. At least I certainly do: I don't consider myself as a filmmaker, I consider myself as a producer. They go hand in hand, as well they should. A good filmmaker should know how to put a project together, just as a good producer should know something about the filmmaking process, or else he'll make a botch every time. Witness the people who came out of banking and law firms to "produce" feature films, who knew nothing of the filmmaking process, but just had the money: we ended up getting botched-up films and films that nobody wanted to see because there was nobody with filmmaking abilities at the reins. So in the ideal situation the two should co-exist side-by-side. Specifically with the

six dramas, we have been able to function both as filmmaker and as producer all the way down the line.

Cinema Canada: As filmmakers, in what particular areas do your talents lie?

Seaton McLean: Well, we've all directed. We all produce, period. I have edited most of the films we have done with the exception of this new series where I will edit one of the six. Mike used to do all the shooting and sound recording but now we hire people to do that for us.

Michael MacMillan: I tend, if anything, to do much more of the financing, the selling of the finished programs. I do the legal work and what you might call the executive producing.

Janice Platt: I do a great deal of the writing; sifting through ideas and information that comes in here; reading scripts and proposals, and working with material that we print up.

Seaton McLean: I think we should be careful to point out that even though Mike does primarily do financing more than Jan and myself, we still all take part in much of the decision-making process that happens after Mike discovers that there are these openings for marketing. By the same token, Jan and myself don't go off doing something without telling Mike. That goes for whether a film is going to be sold to a certain person or whether we buy stamps.

Janice Platt: Equally, with the editing

or anything like that, it's a shared creativity.

Cinema Canada: What can a filmmaker who approaches Atlantis with an idea or a script expect from you?

Michael MacMillan: Well, Chris Lowry is an excellent example of that, with the *Chambers* film. Chris met us at the Peterborough Canadian Images Festival in 1981 and said he had a great project on Jack Chambers and we agreed to produce it with him. He has worked with us every step of the way; there was still that gleam in his eye right to the final release print. We were able to organize the way the film was going to be financed. We were able to give him a guiding hand and more: We helped him and his partner John Walker, shape the film; our facilities were used; we helped shape the script, and now we're selling the film.

Seaton McLean: We also helped shape the way it finally looked in terms of the editing process and music composition, writing the voice-overs, actually sitting down to edit with Chris and John.

Cinema Canada: What are some of the reasons why you turn down a project?

Janice Platt: If we don't think there's a market for it. If the budget requirements to make a success of that film exceed the potential money that we can recoup from sales, we turn it down. If

INTERVIEW

it's a topic that we find offensive. A couple of times that has happened.

Michael MacMillan: If it's a film like that, we just wouldn't want to be associated with it. We've enjoyed doing drama, and we want to do more. In terms of documentary, it has to be either a very special subject like *Chambers* was, or a documentary which is extremely marketable. Very few documentaries are. You probably have to do a series of documentaries or something like *Vincent Price's Dracula*. Most proposals that we get aren't for those types of things.

The big factor is also the way we like to work with people. Chris Lowry was again a perfect example because he worked at every stage with us. We don't want somebody just to come to us with an idea, start the film and then find out they're just interested in stepping in and doing the directing. We want somebody that's going to be involved from step A to step Z. And also a large part of who we decide we want to work with is based upon how we react to them, on a personal level. We're very interested in working with people that we can work well with. When people approach us, even if they do have a great idea, if we just feel that their personality is going to be in conflict with our own, then we'll probably say goodbye to them because we'd much rather make a film in a better working environment and working relationship. Like everybody else, the biggest trick for us is finding the financing. There's lots of good ideas and lots of talented people; unfortunately there isn't the money in this country or we don't have access to the money in this country to finance these things.

Cinema Canada: Would you care to elaborate on that?

Michael MacMillan: It's difficult to make a film and recoup your production costs in Canada and we would all like to recoup our production costs in Canada because if we could, we would be able to do a film that would not have to consider foreign marketing aspects. Which would be very nice because then you could begin to make films which were, in fact, entirely Canadian; well, truly Canadian in every sense. Now, there's a compromise to be made: it's not just because a film is marketable that it will appeal outside the country if it's not Canadian; it's also not to say that all our films have to be Canadian through and through. But it certainly is a frustration of ours and, I imagine, of every other producer in the country, that by and large, if you add up the potential sales—whether it's to CBC, CTV or Global, the educational TV outfits, apparently the new pay-TV outfits, the school and library markets and the other ancillary markets that exist—when you add up all those figures it's very tough to see how you'll break even.

Cinema Canada: So, as young filmmakers, how did you first approach investors and convince them that they should back your projects?

Michael MacMillan: The first time we approached friends, relatives, and a few business acquaintances. The second time we approached those people again as well as a wider range of business acquaintances and as we went back to our supply investors it broadened every time. Now for certain things we'd go to a brokerage firm. We've still got, for instance, a private offering out now for units in two films that will be tax-motivated investments. We're going back to

people who invested in one or two of our films before and new people as well.

Cinema Canada: But getting investors the first time, was it luck?

Janice Platt: It was, very much, because those people were personal acquaintances. Those people knew us and they were hoping for our success as much as we were.

Seaton McLean: But, on the other hand, by that time we had made 25 films as *Atlantis* and we had been in business for 2 1/2—3 years and we hadn't made a botch of anything yet, and I think doing 25 films was a very great recommendation for us.

Janice Platt: Though *Olden Days Coat* was our first drama we still had a solid track record of technical competence among other things.

Seaton McLean: It was also luck with some of the subject matter. *Olden Days Coat* was a Margaret Laurence story and it had Megan Follows, who is probably one of the best children actresses in Canada, and it had a theme that appealed to people universally. So we were asking people to invest in something that they could feel good about. We weren't asking them to invest in an exploitation film or something like that.

Michael MacMillan: The investment offers we make are just darn good investments above and beyond tax shelter aspects. Any offering we put out now is highly pre-sold or has conditional sales. So if a person invests a dollar they know from the beginning that there are contracts guaranteeing 55 cents or 85 cents on the dollar return. That plus the tax shelter aspect makes for a darn good investment.

Seaton McLean: So that's why we've been able to enlarge a large pool of investors because now it's being looked at not just as a tax write-off but also a very good investment.

Michael MacMillan: Of course that's a catch-22 for filmmakers because the reason we can do that now is because of our track record producing films. We couldn't do that at first. For somebody who's trying to do that for the very first time, it's very tough.

Cinema Canada: What would you recommend for somebody doing it the first time?

Michael MacMillan: Do it on a relatively small scale and make it work the first time, and the second time it will be easier. Approach basically the type of people that we approached, who believe in what you're trying to do. Don't take producers' fees. Don't try and get rich fast.

Janice Platt: And acquaint yourself with the legalities and the accounting.

Michael MacMillan: The trouble is there is no basic route to become a film director or film producer in this country. I used to ask that question all the time and I never got a satisfactory answer. I thought I was being misled perhaps. I found there are no easy answers. There are no basic mechanisms for anybody to follow. If you took a poll of producers and directors in the business, people that are well established, you'll find that every story is completely different and they've gone through some bizarre maze of connections and experience to get where they are.

Seaton McLean: Really, the route we went when we started is probably still the best route to go but it's gotten more

difficult because of the economy, and that is approaching foundations or corporations to sponsor a film: something that ties in with their marketing scheme or something that their foundation puts money into which would allow you to make a few films. We still make films for clients. We don't think they're beneath us at all.

Cinema Canada: But, aren't they the films you have to make in order to make the films you want to make?

Michael MacMillan: Well, we enjoy making the corporate films. We don't do that many, like we're cranking them out in factory form.

Seaton McLean: And they can be very interesting and instructive. For example, *Canada Today* allowed two trips across Canada to parts of the country that we would never have had a chance to see. It's a very high-profile film, it's in every Canadian embassy and consulate in the world. Chances like that don't come along too often. So, it's sponsored film, but we certainly wouldn't have turned that down just because it was a sponsored film. Some of the films we've made for clients were our ideas. We thought that this would make a great film, we wanted to make it, so we went to see the client.

Cinema Canada: So you approached people rather than waiting for them to approach you?

Michael MacMillan: We approached various corporations who said yes. It was our idea from square one.

Cinema Canada: Let's talk about the non-theatrical market. What sort of things do you look for in your dealings with a non-theatrical distributor?

Michael MacMillan: Well, we have this deal exclusively with Bob Vale of Magic Lantern Films because it seemed to us that Magic Lantern is simply a fantastic distributor who not only knows their market but they will give us what we need, which is feedback and advice; help us get access to different markets; help set up contact with other distributors, other exhibitors.

Janice Platt: We look for a distributor who, once the project is going and is in production, we can approach and ask questions. Because they know the market much better than we do. And if we're not ready to work co-operatively with that person, then chances are that film will not make it in the marketplace and if it doesn't then the project's a waste of time.

Michael MacMillan: Also, for TV in Canada and outside of Canada we look for a distributor who's going to care as much about our film or television program as we do. We think that our television programs or our films are the most important films around because we made them. Lots of blood, guts, money and energy went into those films and they are our top priority and we'd like our distributor to share that feeling. There are a lot of big distributors who are like a department store.

Seaton McLean: It's been said that so many filmmakers are just pleased as punch when a distributor says he'll take his film, they just say great and are flattered by it. That's a common mistake. It's a mistake that we have made in the past and it's a mistake that we will never make again. And if there is one thing people should know is not to jump at the first opportunity, because if the film is good enough for somebody to be interested in it's probably good enough

● Janice Platt



for two people to be interested in it. If there are two people interested in it, then you can start getting some money from it. They're not just going to take it and say thank you very much, and seven years down the road you haven't seen any money. That's really one of the key things.

Cinema Canada: *What went into the decision to do the six-part series based on stories from Canadian Literature, given that films on purely Canadian subjects are often difficult to sell to foreign markets?*

Seaton McLean: Just before answering that, I think it would be important to say that if we felt strongly enough about a project and it looked like the market was there but it was going to be sort of a break-even situation and we really wanted to make the film, I think we'd probably still make the film. In the case of these six dramas, the subject matter and the stories themselves are universal themes. They are Canadian, but they're as Canadian as they are American as they are German as they are British. In that sense dramas are so much easier to make than documentary because everybody is used to watching films, everybody's used to what's called the human dilemma or whatever and that's what these stories do, they appeal to a general instinct in people. They're essentially universal stories.

Michael MacMillan: To look at it in dollars and cents, what we did was we added up the markets we thought we could sell to and those markets fortunately tallied up a little more than the production costs. We chose six half-hour family dramas with teenage protagonists on purpose. Because they were half-hour and featured teenage protagonists they had a natural non-theatrical market - school and libraries - out of which we're going to recoup one-third of our production costs. Without that market, the television market alone wasn't enough to guarantee breaking even, so we managed to marry the TV and the non-theatrical market by virtue of its being children's programming. It's very important.

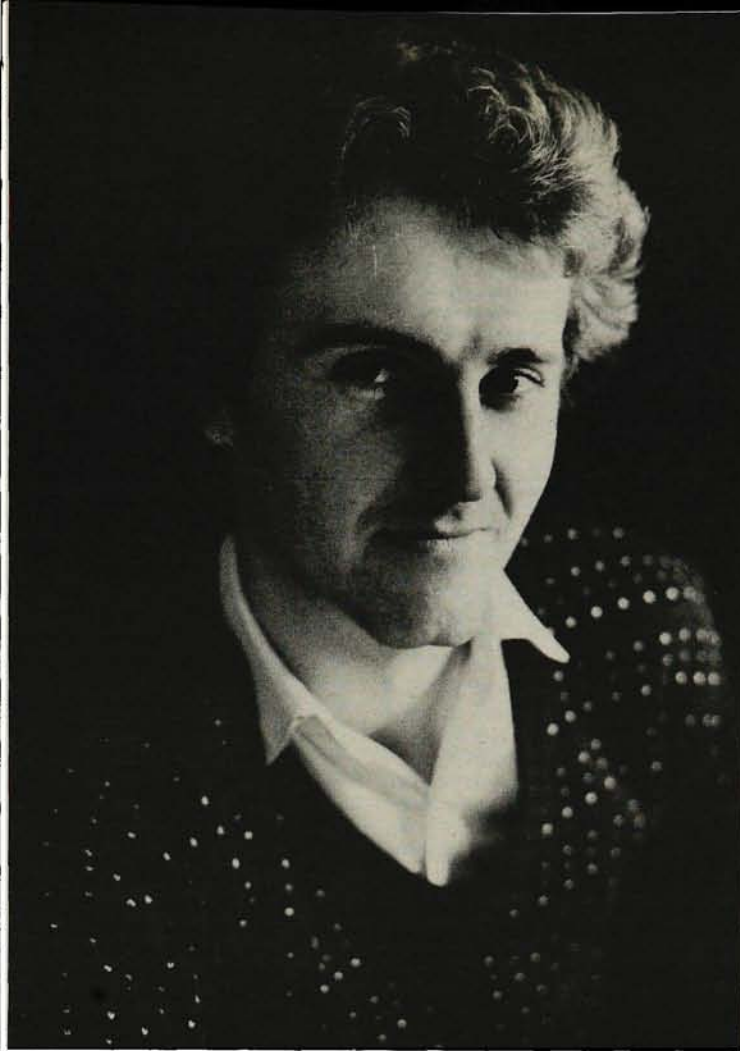
Cinema Canada: *You pre-sold the series?*

Michael MacMillan: Yes. To TV and the non-theatrical market.

Cinema Canada: *So how much was at risk when you began production?*

Michael MacMillan: We still didn't have the last 15% in, for which we were able to raise, interim financing; Atlantis contributed its producers' fees, its overhead, its equipment charges and some other costs. The CFDC were able to provide and still are providing interim financing to cover some of the pre-sales we have made, including some of the pre-sales outside of the country. So, yeah, it was pre-sold for most of the cost.

Janice Platt: Coming up with the short stories was very difficult because we had our own mandate: short stories that were appropriate for family audiences, that had young people as protagonists faced with some moral or physical dilemma. There are surprisingly enough, considering the huge body of Canadian short stories. What happened was, Mike, Seaton and I, for weeks and weeks and weeks, read anthology after anthology of Canadian short stories, and we had a fairly clear idea in our minds of the type of things we are after. Finally, after much searching, we came up with the six.



● Seaton McLean

Cinema Canada: *Given that you created the project, how much control did you allow the directors of each different episode?*

Janice Platt: All three of us were involved all along the line but, when the director had to talk to someone or when there had to be someone on location, that director talked to one person, either Mike, Seaton or myself. In that way it's sort of narrowed down a bit. The director has a fair amount of power. When that director is on set he is the director. We step in only if we think a mistake has been made in terms of the eventual marketing of the film, if something is being done that is going to hamper the marketing or if something is being done that is going to cost an extra \$3,000 that we just don't have. That's on location, that's when we step in as producer. Other than that the director is the director and we try not to violate that.

Cinema Canada: *How did you go about signing the crew? Wasn't it a non-union shoot?*

Seaton McLean: Well most of our people are ACFC.

Cinema Canada: *Did you have a union contract?*

Janice Platt: No.

Cinema Canada: *How did you work that out?*

Janice Platt: The limitations of the budget very much dictated that we could not sign a union contract with the ACFC. We went to them and were totally open about that; we could simply not afford to go through all of the steps necessary to sign that contract. We wrote the ACFC a letter of agreement, and in that letter we said please let us pay this much; we set standards, we set rules in terms of overtime and travel, and all of this was put in the letter and we were

very very clear about it. The ACFC said fine, you can use our people - you've been totally up front with how much you can afford to pay and how the shoots to be conducted, so we would be more than happy to agree with that. We said to them also that, as soon as we could afford to sign a contract, in all likelihood we would, but, for this series it's simply not within the budget, we just can't do it. They were totally flexible and totally co-operative. And that's one of the reasons we keep using ACFC people, other than the fact that they're the best.

Michael MacMillan: In our past experience we never signed a contract with ACFC, never felt the need, but we always paid the going rate, or a couple of dollars under; more or less the going rate. There's no difference.

Janice Platt: The point with this series was obviously because it was over such a long period of time, we were using much more crew than we had before.

Michael MacMillan: Certainly the experience of making these six and the *Olden Days Coat and Chambers*, I think, makes us able to develop an adamant attitude that there can be very good films made in Canada based on Canadian stories. The excuse that Canada doesn't have the material or that you can't make those things in Canada is crap.

Cinema Canada: *Many members of the independent production community have been critical of the CBC and its policies toward the independent sector. Yet you have been quite successful in dealing with them. Any secrets to your success?*

Michael MacMillan: I don't now that there is any particular secret. We've never had a problem in dealing with them so it's difficult to say what aspects of our relationship are different from somebody else's. This sounds like an ad for CBC.

Seaton McLean: I think it goes back again to what project you're taking to them. If you take what you think is a great idea to them and they tell you there is no market for it, or they can't use it or it doesn't fill their mandate or whatever, then you should say, "O.K., am I going to go ahead with it anyway, or am I going to put it aside and pick something else that they are going to want to do?" Don't hold a grudge against them because they know better than 90% of the population what people are going to want to watch or what fills their mandate. I think a lot of the bad feelings come from people who took the wrong projects to them and got turned down and feel slighted because of that. We've been very lucky because we've taken projects to them that would fill their mandate, or that they very much wanted to do and we've had no problems. We just got along.

Michael MacMillan: We've always had other sources of financing in place so we're only asking for a price we know they can afford.

Janice Platt: There are obvious problems when dealing with the CBC, or with anyone else who is outside your own little nucleus; you don't retain total control. In anything that you do co-operatively there is a give-and-take, co-operative situation, everyone experiences certain frustrations, and we to some degree experienced that. You know, it's not to say that everything we take to them, they're really happy with it: there is a lot of back-and-forth, and there are all the inherent discussions, frustrations, joys, everything that goes with it.

Cinema Canada: *Would you like to see them buy more product from independent filmmakers?*

Janice Platt: Sure.

Michael MacMillan: I don't think the CBC should be involved in production the way they are. I think it's completely appropriate for them to be producing in the areas of news, current affairs and sports, and some other areas, but, absolutely, their mandate should offer much more to the private sector. But remember, they have a huge bureaucratic production system set up and it's very difficult for them, overnight, to tear that apart, to say let's just buy our stuff from independent producers. They have people who have families working for them, depending on them, and I don't think that they should be completely wiped out. But they should be spending more money in the independent sector. Not only because the private sector has proven time and time again they can make excellent programming, number one, but, number two, they can make it for a price that is far more cost-efficient. It makes economic sense and creative, cultural sense to put that power in the hands of the private sector.

Seaton McLean: Also in terms of point of view. You're getting many more people's point of view from the private sector, a much more diverse look at your culture, society or whatever than when you have the same group of people producing television programming for the population.

Cinema Canada: *What are your attitudes about pay-TV? Do you think that it's going to be the saviour that many people in the production community at one time hoped it would be?*

Michael MacMillan: No, I don't think we ever hoped it would be either - we as Atlantis of course. The industry did, unfortunately. I tend to think that it's

INTERVIEW

going to be another market, another reasonably important market, 10%, 15% additional on the existing market. It's an important 15%. It's a very welcome 15%. That's all it is.

Cinema Canada: How have your dealings been so far with the Canadian pay-TV licensees?

Michael MacMillan: We approached First Choice with at least one project, a month or so after they were licensed. They didn't show any interest in talking to us.

Cinema Canada: Were you disappointed?

Michael MacMillan: Certainly. But, they didn't seem to want to talk to us about anything and showed no interest, so we haven't talked to them since.

Seaton McLean: It's not to say that we won't. Right now they are trying to set things up. The mistake that I think we made was that the day after they were licensed there was a line-up outside their office of people with ideas and they weren't in a position to consider them or start giving out money that day. A lot of people got put off and I think that pay-TV probably will help production along, but it won't be to the extent that everybody thought.

Michael MacMillan: C-Channel has been an interesting experience. Perhaps because they were aiming at a very clearly defined market, had specific purposes in mind, and therefore were anticipating a much smaller penetration of the market, they simply have had to create effective relationships. C-Channel has very actively been talking to us and number of other independent producers and as a result we're in

serious discussions with them.

Cinema Canada: Do you want to make theatrical feature films some day?

Janice Platt: Not necessarily. As we've said before, for Atlantis, feature films are not and have never been the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. We don't think that documentaries and television programming are lesser things to be producing than feature films. Feature films are another area. A different area, but not a more important area. And certainly these days the trend is very much the wide audience. Many, many people are influenced by television programming and there is a lot of improvement to be done on television programming and television programming in Canada, especially drama. There's a whole wide area out there just waiting for exciting programming.

Seaton McLean: Until they sort out the distribution set-up for feature films in Canada I can't really see it as being anything but a frustrating exercise because of the number of good Canadian features that were made that have never received distribution, or received one week's distribution as token gesture. That to me seems like the ultimate frustration. Whereas here we are, making 1/2-hour TV, dramas that literally millions of people will see. How many people have seen 90% of the features that were made in the last three years in Canada? So, until that gets sorted out there really isn't much sense in it. And even after it does get sorted out, unless it seems to be a natural necessary step for us to take and a step that we want to take, we're very happy doing what we're doing now.

Michael MacMillan: A production company and producer and the industry in general has to justify its continued production of films based on the sales that it makes and we and everybody else will have to finance our films based on pre-sales. And, in Canada, that's possible in television because the mechanisms for distribution and exhibition are Canadian, they are controlled by Canadians. In feature films, it seems to us, with little knowledge and experience in that area, it's almost impossible to get significant pre-sale commitments from exhibitors and distributors, who we don't have control anyway. If you can't get pre-sales, which you can do in television, it's a catch-22, and you'll never finance a production. But, in television you can finance it that way. And when the tax shelter dries up - well, that's dead and gone - there still will be ways to finance TV productions.

Seaton McLean: If there's one thing we're aiming at, it's really contributing to television in Canada and I can't see any reason to stop going along the route that we're going given the fact that there are thousands of excellent Canadian stories that can be adapted into great Canadian films, dramas, documentaries, series, variety, whatever.

What has always bothered me about Canada is that way that Canadians tend to refer to television producers as the black sheep of the family or poor cousins. In the States there are very legitimate corporations that do nothing but produce television programming and do it in a very excellent way and never have made a feature film. In Canada it seems to be that everybody sees feature film as the be-all and end-all or end-all and be-all and it has always bothered me that this sort of thing exists. When people start realizing that you can be a very reputable television producer and co-exist with reputable feature film producers, then I'll be a much happier person.

Cinema Canada: Faced with an economic slump, how do independent filmmakers survive?

Janice Platt: Because times are so bad now, you can't survive on your own and the tendency has been very very much in the past to stay in your own backyard - not to share ideas, not to share experiences, not to share anything, but to just protect your border. Because it is so tough now, I think it's imperative for people to get together and share as much as they can, realistically.

Seaton McLean: There are two points of view right now: one side feels that the thing to do is protect your borders, to solidify, to dig in and wait till the worst is over. I liken that to the case of a corporation which runs commercials on television and cuts back during times of economic restraint only to find out they've lost half their market when they start up again.

In the last 18 months we've just gone out in a very forceful manner and basically forced people to listen to us. We have made in-roads that we could never have made if the situation was fine, the economy great, and everybody was producing films: they were forced to listen to us. Now we can talk to the NFB, we have made in-roads there; we have talked to the CBC and we've made in-roads there; we are dealing with the CFDC, dealing with C-Channel, T.V.O., people that would have been difficult to get hold of before are now calling us. It's a mistake just to get in the trenches and hide.

Letters

(cont. from p. 18)

to call themselves documentarians. Our organization has been founded as an international umbrella group to represent the interests of film and documentary makers, and we hope to convince people within and outside of the "industry" that documentary is not a second-class form of filmmaking, but an art unto itself. So I hope that Donald Brittain and Robert Rouveroy hang in there!

Some of your readers may be interested in our organization. We started in February and are now a non-profit trade association, with nearly 50 paid members. Most of our members are from L.A., naturally, but we are committed to starting chapters in other cities and countries. Interestingly, our first non-U.S. chapter is starting in Wellington, New Zealand! I would love to correspond with any Canadian documentarians interested in the IDA or in starting some Canadian chapters.

Our official goals are: "to promote nonfiction film and video, to encourage and celebrate the documentary arts and sciences, and to support the efforts of nonfiction and video makers all over the world."

Current members include a number of noted Hollywood documentarians, including David L. Wolper (*The National Geographic Series, Roots, The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*) and Jack Haley, Jr. (*That's Entertainment, Hollywood: The Gift of Laughter*).

One of our first projects is to create a computerized list of documentarians all over the world, with selected credits and specialties. This list will then be made available to interested parties worldwide and will become the basis of international co-ventures, distribution and employment for our members.

We also have a Marketing Committee that is studying the problem of marketability of documentaries, especially to the new media.

If any of your readers have questions, they can write to me at The International Documentary Association, The Production Center, 8489 West Third Street, Los Angeles, CA 90048 or telephone our office at (213) 396-3920 or (213) 655-7089.

Linda Buzzell
Founder
International Documentary Association

Credit to the distributor

We wish to correct an error in the article on distributors ("Planning to Stay Alive") in the October issue. The article incorrectly states that Asterisk negotiated a sale of *The World's Children* series to CBC Northern Services. It was one of the distributors of the series who negotiated that sale - not Asterisk.

David Springbett & Heather MacAndrew
Asterisk Film & Video Productions

● Michael MacMillan

