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 Biju 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 mark 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 worlds. 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 of it every time. We're the people who come out of banking and law firms to 'produce' feature films, who knew nothing of the filmmaking process, but just had the money. We've ended up getting bottleneck 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 coexist side-by-side. Specifically with the six dramas, we've been able to function both as filmmakers and as producers 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've 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. He and his partner John Walker, shape the film; our facilities were used; 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 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.

Cinema Canada: Do you reject ideas?
INTERVIEW

Michael MacMillan: The first time we went to a brokerage firm, we were able to do a lot of things because of the economy. It was highly presold or had conditional acceptance. Those people knew us and they were hoping for our success as much as we were. We were able to make films that would not have to comply with their marketing schemes. We thought that everything was going to be a lot easier. But then we got to the second round of investment, and we were not able to make a deal. We were not able to make a film that would not have to comply with their marketing schemes.

Janice Platt: That's true. We went to a lot of distributors and they were not interested in making films that were not going to be profitable. They wanted to make films that would make a profit. We were not able to find a distributor who was interested in making films that were not going to be profitable.

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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 docudrama 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 story, that was there, then it was worth it. 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 some 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 German, as they are British. In that sense dramas are so much easier to make than documentary films. So when you've got a body of work, a library of stories, people are used to watching films, everybody's used to that sort of the human drama or whatever and that's what these six stories, they appeal to the instinct in people. They're essentially universal stories.

Michael MacMillan: To look at it in dollars and cents, what we did was added up the markets we thought we could sell to and those markets fortunately tallied up a little more than the production costs. Half-hour family dramas with teenage protagonists on purpose. Because they were half-hours and the producers and the directors had a natural non-theatrical market – school and libraries – out of which we were going to recoup one-third of our costs. And then, the television market alone wasn't enough to guarantee breaking even, so we managed to marry the TV and film market. And then, part of the reason was that being children's programming, it was very important.

Cinema Canada: You pre-sold the series?

Michael MacMillan: Yes. To TV and the nontheatrical 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. What happened was we looked at the stories and we wanted to make them as Canadian as they are American as well. And the body's used to what's called the human drama or whatever and that's what these six stories appeal to. They're essentially universal stories.

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: Given that you created the project, how much control did you have over 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 quite different. Mine 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 us 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 finding the cast?

Janice Platt: The process of casting was obvious because it was over such a long period of time, we went 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 adamanate 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.

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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.

Seaton McLean: The point with this series was obviously because it was over such a long period of time, we went 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 adamanate 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: 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 we 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 clear about it. The ACFC said fine, you can use our people – you've been told up front what aspects 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 cooperative. And that's one of the reasons we keep using ACFC people, rather than the fact that they're the best.

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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.

Seaston 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 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 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 in 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.

Seaston 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 industr is 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 the sales that we put together. And in Canada, that’s possible in television because the mechanisms for distribution and exhibition are Canadian, they are controlled by the national film industry, we have free access to television with little knowledge and experience in that area. It’s almost impossible to get significant pre-sales to Canadian film distributors, who we don’t have control anyway. If you can’t get pre-sales, which you can do in television, it’s a lot cheaper 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.

Seaston McLean: If there’s one thing we’re aiming at, it’s really contributing to television in Canada. It’s not a reason to stop going along the route that we’re going given the fact that there are many opportunities of exciting documentaries that can be adapted into great Canadian films, dramas, documentaries, series, variety, whatever.

Janice Platt: I always had heard about me that 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 large 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 protect your borders. Because it’s so tough now, I think it’s imperative for people to get together and share as much as they can, realistically.

Seaston 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 classic mistake that the company of people are running commercials on television and cuts back during times of economic constraint only to find out they’ve lost half their market when they start up again.

In the last 3 months we’ve just gone out in a very frontal manner and literally forced people to listen to us. We have made in-roads that we could never have made if the situation was fine, the economy good, and the potential for 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 CFTC, 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.