

# REVIEWS

## Denys Arcand's and Douglas Jackson's **Empire Inc.**

Perhaps the most depressing aspect to being culturally colonized is that even one's victories are smothered by the endless continuity of one's defeats. *Empire Inc.* had everything going against it. The six-hour CBC/Radio-Canada/NFB miniseries premiered at the height of post-Applebert reaction. *Empire Inc.* was the slender thread on which the already tattered reputation of Canada's public production sector was going to hang itself in the eyes of public opinion. Much was made of the sheer expensiveness (\$3.5 million) of this first big drama to be produced outside of L.A.-North.

Secondly, *Empire Inc.* was touted, by TV Guide and other fellow travellers in the media circus of Big Brother mind-control, as Canada's answer to *Dallas*, creating the expectation that the Canadian placebo would produce the same effect for the TV addict as the mainline stuff.

Thirdly, while *Empire Inc.* still had two episodes to run, ABC's \$40 million *Winds of War* (the biggest TV show ever) thundered across the screens of North America sucking into its after-burners some 85 million pairs of eyeballs.

Against such an onslaught, it took more than patriotism to make it through the six hours of *Empire Inc.* Above all, it called for the ability to keep an open mind – a difficult task for colonized minds, crushed by the domination of the occupier's standards. But if you could, you were in for a rare experience indeed: the slow-burning satisfaction of witnessing a moment of cultural triumph. Not the kind that brings you leaping to your feet in fleeting ecstasy, but the far deeper and more gratifying sense of vengeance that comes from seeing exactly what makes Us different from Them.

Except in the most superficial sense of being about rich people in big houses, *Empire Inc.* bears no comparison with *Dallas*. If J.R. Ewing is in some sense a study of the Evil Self propelled by the power of money, Sir James Robertson Munroe (Kenneth Welsh) is a study of the Empty Self: "Munroe Enterprises is me, it's everything I've done, it's everything I am" (episode four). In *Dallas* the women are commodities, cleavages on wheels. Anatomically, *Empire Inc.*'s women are more leg than breast, more the stuff of varicose veins than inflations of imagined neuroses. James Munroe's



● Kenneth Welsh's Sir James Robertson Munroe, true *habitant* of the Canadian imagination

sons grapple with ideals; Jock Ewing's boys grapple with the onus of their money. *Dallas*, finally, like all things American, is about the mismatch of the individual and his clichés. *Empire Inc.*, like all things Canadian, is about sociology in search of a *Gestalt*.

Despite the conscious attempt to keep each episode within the sexual rhythms of the dramatic patterns of the American TV-hour, *Empire Inc.*'s rambling grandiosity kept exploding those confines. One-hour segments simply did not provide enough room – because what was afoot in *Empire* was the use of television as entertainment for the purposes of empire/nation-building. Even in dramatic garb, the didactic self-consciousness of the public sector's mission inevitably shone through against the sheer blankness of Canadian ignorance about itself. *Empire Inc.* touched upon so many themes (Montreal Anglo wealth, Quebec wartime fascism, the rise of central State power) that the six hours were just a glimmer – but a very real glimmer – of the tremendous possibilities of true Canadian content. Thank God for the glimmer, though it does also tend to light up the depths of the surrounding darkness.

For it is very much the depths of that darkness that cloud the sheer marvelousness of *Empire Inc.*'s identification of the essence of Canadianity. In a vast and uncertain land, this story of a robber baron becomes less the climb of one individual to a position of power than it is a symbolic repetition in a mercantile economy of the fundamental pioneering experience of *défrichage*: the defini-

tion of a territory for the imagination.

In order to establish its Canadianness, *Empire Inc.* becomes a constant *subversion* of the clichés that dominate U.S. television. So the preoccupation of *Empire*'s first three episodes with Munroe's wheeling-and-dealing does not so much establish the Ewing-like amorality of the capitalist villain as it does James Munroe's vision and essential progressiveness. Munroe is the kind of capitalist that Canadian Marxists admire, and it is the fundamental admiration

one feels for Munroe that subverts any sense of his evilness. In our barren landscape, Munroe instantly becomes an authentic Canadian hero: he doesn't care a fig for the Brits (his knighthood in episode three means nothing to him) and he knows the Yanks are out to screw us (episode five). For this legendary pioneer and pioneer of legends is a real *habitant* of the true North Strong and Free.

It is this Canadian heroism, Munroe's consciousness of the under-developed nature of his environment, that drives him on and becomes his torment as he searches for a successor to his vision, his *Empire*. It is a comment on the forms of our own cultural 'over'-refinement that his sons James Jr. (played with consummate wimpishness by Peter Dvorsky) and Larry (Joseph Ziegler) are just too civilized – the first is musical and the second sublimates his youthful socialism into neighborhood medicine – to carry on the job of empire-(read nation) building. That Munroe is in the end forced to sell his brilliantly diversified portfolio of companies to a Texan "bull-shooter in a big hat" becomes an ironic slice at the very spirit of *Dallas*. James Munroe is a Beaverbrook who never found his England and *Empire Inc.* is a hymn to the entrepreneurs of the Canadian imagination, the public-sector heroes who against all odds in their search for the Canadian public have brought *Empire Inc.* to the screen. From the wood-paneled walls of George Stephen's former home to the marble halls of Sun Life's former Montreal head-office, *Empire Inc.* is an act of cultural reproach on the epic scale. Canada, says Munroe in the last episode, "hasn't given me a damn thing – I stole everything." *Empire Inc.* is six hours stolen back from our looted past. But James Munroe did not find Canadian successors to his vision. It would be tragic indeed if *Empire Inc.* were not to find the numerous progeny it deserves.

So one stands as always peering into the beggar's bowl of Canadian culture while awaiting the results from the decision desk. The audience response to *Empire Inc.*'s first episode, "Hello Suckers," was an overwhelming 2.3 million souls. Certainly the curiosity was there. Unfortunately the first episode



● The Munroe family of *Empire Inc.*, a glimmer in the heart of darkness



● Amy, Sir James, and Cleo

was also the one in which the differences between real Canadian television and the foreign stuff would have been the most unsettling. Jennifer Dale, despite her loveliness and vitality, does not have Kenneth Welsh's depth of characterization, and in this episode too early had to carry more than her share. Even Welsh's brilliance - *Empire Inc.* is largely a one-man show - takes getting used to: like the best of brandies, it requires a couple of shots before the glow gets to you.

For the second and third episodes, the statistical decline has set in: going down to 2.1 million and 1.55 respectively, then rallying for the fourth episode, with a slight rise to 1.8 million. Still hefty numbers, but one begins to shudder at the looming threat of the *Winds of War* opener which coincide with "Titans Don't Cry", episode five, the dramatic height of *Empire Inc.*, an episode of stunning lyricism which should, if there is any justice in life, keep the beautiful Linda Griffiths in work for the rest of hers.

While waiting to see if the Canadian Godots will massively support the finest dramatic television this country has ever produced, it is worth reflecting that the CBC and the NFB have with *Empire Inc.* lived up to the expectations laid upon them. Given enough heat, the public production sector can and does deliver. Somewhere in those endless corridors, there is room for hopeful undertakings. And at the very least Mark Blandford merits an Order of Canada for having wrought this miracle.

The collaboration between the CBC and the NFB would appear to have translated smoothly onto the screen. The joint direction of the six episodes (Douglas Jackson doing one, three and four, and Denys Arcand doing two, five and six) was so even-handed as to be unnoticeable.

More jarring was Douglas Bowie's occasionally appalling dialogue. Episode three for some reason was pregnant with dumb lines. For instance, C.D. Howe (with David Gardner excellently playing this colorless minister of the church of State) says to Munroe about the latter's Senneville estate: "Nice home." To which Munroe replies, with equal imaginativeness: "We like it." Or when the curiously vapid Mitch Martin, playing Amy, the least developed of the Munroe children, gasps at her paramour: "I'm afraid of what's in my head. Won't you hold me, like a woman, not a little girl."

Luckily this sort of thing is only intermittent. The acting throughout *Empire Inc.* is systematically first-rate, though imprisoned in the one-hour format and the vastness of a 30-year canvas, many of the characters simply never get enough room to develop fully. Gabriel Arcand is wonderful as the French-Canadian fixer who can never quite get over his astonishment at having become very rich. As Munroe's wife Catherine, Martha Henry is a marvel of taut restraint, an actress who shows only the slip of her abilities. And Donald Pilon as the Munroe chauffeur finally gets to utter a couple of lines in episode five.

Many of *Empire's* finest performances take the form of brief cameos. Robert Clothier (of the *Beachcombers*) undergoes a fortunate metamorphosis as the randy Lord Percy. George Merner, in a few brief minutes, does a matchless Mackenzie King. And Alexander Knox, in his equally brief portrayal of Lord Atholstan, proprietor of The Montreal Star, is a gem of incipient senility. In episode four, Jacques Thisdale has all

the meanness of Clint Eastwood as a snakelike Communist labor organizer.

Fanatics of verisimilitude may have been slightly puzzled by the numbers of cars whizzing across the Jacques Cartier Bridge in a scene in episode two - rush-hour in the midst of the Depression? And the towers of Westmount Square obtrude in episode five (set in 1954) about 15 years before their time.

The CBC gets plenty of nudge-nudge-wink-wink in its view of itself as the common carrier of Canadian culture. The Happy Gang radio show is momentarily resurrected in clips from the bowels of CBC Toronto's Studio Three, now the set for The Journal. In episode

**EMPIRE INC.** d. Denys Arcand, Douglas Jackson sc. Douglas Bowie story ed. Joan Irving-Herman exec. p. Mark Blandford p. Paul Risacher assoc. p. Stefan Wodoslawsky, Dorothy Courtois d.o.p. Alain Dostie art. d. Pierre Garneau cost. d. Fernand Rainville p. man. Connie Ballam 1st a.d. Louise Turcotte-Gerlache 2nd a.d. Hans Vander-sluis asst. loc. man. Yves Mathieu, Diane Thomas, Henri Boucher p. sec. Lise Gagné drama unit sec. Andrée Chamberland cast. d. Barbara Cartwright, Emma Hodgson cast. asst. Sophie Sénécal unit admin. Maurice Gingras, Jackie Van Echten, Yvon Payette admin. (NFB) Tamara Lynch cont. Johanne Pregent cam. op. Michel Caron 1st cam. asst. Daniel Jobin 2nd cam. asst. Nathalie Moliavko-Visotski stills Andre Lecoz, Attila Dory sd. Richard Besse boom Esther Auger gaffer Roger Martin elect. Claude Derasp, Normand Viau, Pierre Charpentier key grip Johnny Daoust, Emmanuel Lépine set. des. Hubert Poirier, Nicolas Sologoubov asst. dec. Robert Chabot, Serge Chapu, Jean Leroux set dec. Charles Boulay prop man Maurice Dumas des. coord. Raymond Decaire store keeper Prosper

Barry Lank's

## Kelekis : 50 Years in the Chips

**Kelekis : 50 Years in the Chips** d. Barry Lank p. Jancarlo Markiw sd. Jonathon Kacki lights Frank Raven asst. Stewart Young/Terry Ludwig cam. Barry Lank asst. cam. Cindy Warner ed. Ken Rodek running time : 12 min.

John Bluethner's

## The Historical Dramatic Comedy of Punch and Judy

**The Historical Dramatic Comedy of Punch and Judy** d. John Bluethner cam. Ian Elkin sd. Leon Johnson sd. ed. Michael Mirus ed. John Bluethner running time : 9 min. 30 sec.

Victor Dobchuk's

## So Far From Home

**So Far From Home** p./d. Victor Dobchuk cam. Elise Swerhone sd. Ed Ackerman sd. ed. Lara Mazur lights Frank Raven ed. Elise Swerhone p. man. Deborah Barron-McNabb running time : 22 min.

*So Far From Home*, *Kelekis : 50 Years In The Chips*, and *The Historical Dramatic Comedy of Punch and Judy* are the latest films produced by the Winnipeg Film Group, the Manitoba version of similar active co-operatives of independent filmmakers across the country.

Started in 1974 with Canada Council support, which desired at the time to encourage film production outside cen-

tral Canada, the Group has not only produced a growing and impressive array of low-budget short films on its own initiative but has often taken on a project which the regional NFB office started and for some reason dropped (the *Kelekis* film is a good example in this regard).

The emphasis, says Group co-ordinator Merit Jensen, is on the independence a filmmaker must have in relation to his chosen subject. Experimental, documentary, and animated films are the main products from the coterie of filmmakers Winnipeg is fortunate to have working with the Group though a few dramatic films have produced as well. In fact, a 90-minute feature, a comedy, by Paizs is currently nearing completion. It signals the Group's first attempt at a film of such length.

The Group's activities, coupled with the steady stream of films produced by the regional NFB office in Winnipeg, bode well for filmmaking in the province for the present. One hopes the NFB continues and strengthens its presence. Winnipeg filmmakers are at a crossroads after nearly a decade of slowly building activity and confidence. Experienced filmmakers are more sophisticated and bolder in their efforts; new filmmakers are being given a chance.

In diverse ways, they are trying resolutely to explain their community to themselves and the rest of the world. It is worth an examination. These three films, in their clear, self-effacing way, are part of the attempt.

Take *Kelekis*, and *Punch and Judy*. At twelve and nine minutes respectively, both films are, though completely unlike in subject, elaborate vignettes in that each details a single, small event which implies a greater, multiple one.

In *Kelekis*, director Barry Lank, while using the 50th anniversary celebration of Winnipeg's most famous restaurant and noted North End landmarks, really summons the sense of community the customers, past and present, feel when they considered their living near and sometimes virtually in the restaurant.

Lank uses dry humorous details, deft intercutting of old photos and film with the present, and ad lib comments from people at the anniversary party to invoke a nostalgia which even someone who knows nothing about the subject will feel keenly. Every community, Lank implies, has its Kelekis, a centre of a community's energy.

This film, essentially about a Winnipeg phenomenon, like his earlier (and better) film, *It's a Hobby For Harvey*, a smooth, jocular document on Winnipeg lawyer and world-champion whistler, Harvey Pollock (another local phenomenon), is sympathetic and joyous in execution. Though Lank, finally, fails to detail the life of the restaurant or the fabled North End, let alone the history of the family, he is able to make us care at a distance about this place and its importance to people.

And who couldn't respond to actress Helene Winston saying that a Kelekis' bag of chips "was the poetry of this place"? Not Lank who has offered, if not a poem, at least a valentine.

Michael Dorland ●

And who couldn't respond to actress Helene Winston saying that a Kelekis' bag of chips "was the poetry of this place"? Not Lank who has offered, if not a poem, at least a valentine.

In *Punch and Judy*, the first film of John Bluethner, something is implied beyond its subject, a performance on a hot summer afternoon in a city park of the famous puppet play by two members of the Manitoba Puppet Theatre. Simple and seemingly casual in his approach, which is emphasized by a steady rhythm in the cutting, Bluethner shows us he isn't so much interested in the play as in the nature of theatre itself. What is the interplay between an audience and performer? What is the technique the puppeteer must command? How do performers and audience interact after the show? Two shots stand out: the intense gaze of a woman watching the play, and the exhaustion shown by puppeteer Randy Woods at the end of the performance.

The film isn't profound or moving, not only because the situation doesn't allow for that, at least on the surface, but also because Bluethner's cool style keeps us at a distance. Even so, it is a film worth a thought or two.

*So Far From Home* takes us into other territory. This is the first film by Victor Dobchuk, and an excellent debut it is. The film tells with compassion and insight the story of Hugo Torres, a one-time activist in Chile before Allende's fall, and his fellow exiles in Winnipeg.

Those who seek a leftist polemic will be disappointed; those who find a social document of complex human beings will be satisfied. The film contrasts the increasing Canadianization most of the Chileans are undergoing with Torres' own struggle to keep up the fight for political freedom in Chile from his place of exile while he resists the same Canadianizing. No 'solution' is posited to this problem since there is none.

Straightforward, assured in its telling, and without fawning sentimentality or hard editorializing, *So Far From Home* is a splendid film which raises questions about the nature of political commitment itself and the problem of anyone in exile from a desperate situation. Dobchuk's concern for the people comes through and we care. Dobchuk is a talent one hopes will develop, and quickly.

His opportunity to do so, and no doubt that of the two other directors discussed here, may come with the Winnipeg Film Group. For the moment at least, in Winnipeg, opportunity has met talent to the benefit of filmmakers and viewers.

Rory Runnells ●