



Alberta Film & TV

'A' as in Alberta actor

by Linda Kupecek

"If you're an actor, what are you doing in Alberta?" laughed the Toronto talent agent.

Good question. The popular viewpoint in central Canada is that every Canadian actor eventually migrates to Toronto... to wait for calls from agents, to wait for news of films in the trades, to wait in the lounge of the CBC, or to wait tables between gigs. The waiting game, familiar to actors around the continent, is played in Alberta too, but with slightly different rules.

The third largest talent pool in the country is located in the Alberta ACTRA membership. In addition to the ACTRA Writers' Guild Alberta Branch, the Northern Alberta Performers Branch, and the Southern Alberta Branch (a small composite group) represent performers. About 200 actors in Edmonton and about 100 in Calgary combine to present an impressive array of speaking credits in major feature films - most of them American and British.

Happily, in recent years, more Canadian films have exploited the talent of Alberta with the open-mindedness of the Hollywood crowd. In the past, films originating in Toronto tended to arrive in Alberta, bringing with them everything but the coffee and the horses, and tossing but a few crumbs of extra work to Alberta actors. Now, times have changed, and a producer begins to weigh the cost of airfare of a Toronto actor flown in for one line against the skills of an Alberta actor with substantial credits.

Don Buchsbaum, production manager of *Running Brave*, which shot on location in Edmonton and Drumheller last fall, commented during that shoot, "I'm surprised at the depth of the talent resource here," referring to the active theatre scene, and the number of working actors.

Actors here are subject to the whims of the business, and, like actors elsewhere, must endure discouraging periods of 'creative unemployment', but at times, the scene here is surprisingly busy.

Generally, actors in Alberta survive on a combination of activities: theatre,

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radio drama (for the good old CBC); educational television (for wonderful ACCESS, a major engager in Alberta); very occasional commercials; industrial and sponsored films and narrations (on anything from creative pipelining to job opportunities in Tuktoyaktuk); and... the occasional feature film.

Alberta's spectacular terrain and cooperative film offices have lured an impressive number of film and television productions to shoot on location in the province... and Alberta actors have benefited. Resumes here may sport credits of principal and supporting roles in, for example, *Superman*, *Superman III*, *Death Hunt*, *Amber Waves*, *Harry Tracy*, *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, *The Boy Who Talked to Badgers*, *Pioneer Woman*, *Skilift to Death*, *High Country*. And those films produced by Alberta companies and producers, *Why Shoot the Teacher?*, *Ghostkeeper*, *Powderheads*, *Marie-Anne*, *Hounds of Notre-Dame*, have spotlighted even more Alberta actors.

Jack Ackroyd, Elan Ross Gibson, Stephen Walsh, Dennis Robinson, Georgie Collins, Murray Ord, Darlene Bradley, Jan Miller, Stu Carson, Joanne Wilson, Sharon Bakker, Graham McPherson, Jeremy Hart, Frank Pellegrino, Bill Berry, Jack Goth, Joan Hurley, Alan Stebbings, Judith Mabey, Bill Dowson, Claire Caplan, Bill Meilen, Stephen Hair, Judith LeBane, Jim Roberts and Tantoo Martin may not be household names, but they are names that have popped up in the credits of a number of films.

Superman III, a Dovemead production opening in theatres in June, features a number of Alberta actors in speaking roles. English casting director Debbie McWilliams interviewed exhausting numbers of actors, and cast 22 from Calgary, including Gordon Signer as the mayor of Smallville, and Margaret Bard as the hysteric at the gas station.

"We were a little hesitant because Calgary isn't known as an acting centre", smiled associate producer Bob Simmonds during the *Superman III* shoot, "but Richard (Lester) was very happy with the local players."

More recently, Silvio Narizzano directed a TV-movie version of the Lizzie Borden story for producer Bob Barclay and

CFCN Television. "We spent four days in Toronto, interviewing the best actors", says Narizzano. "Finally, I said to Bob - 'There's nothing here that we haven't seen out west. We're just being elitist in Toronto.'" In particular, Narizzano praises Maureen Thomas of Calgary, who played the leading role in the production.

Tom Peacocke, who played Pere Athol Murray in *The Hounds of Notre-Dame*, won the 1980 Genie Award for best actor, despite his Edmonton address, an indication that the members of the Academy of Canadian Cinema, do respect achievement over geography... an award which should have squelched rumours

isolation of the regions... and the very real disadvantage of the distance from those major casting calls in Toronto.

The reality of the business may dictate that talent, in order to advance and grow, must elevate itself to more sophisticated markets, and most actors in Alberta are aware of the potential in other centres. On the other hand, some artists may argue that if all talent migrates to a central point to homogenize the national dream, then who will be left to interpret the regions?

Also, there may be various reasons for maintaining an Alberta base: a spouse or family entrenched in western soil;



• A depth of talent resources: Jude Beny, Jeremy Hart and Elan Ross Gibson

of prejudice against the regional actor.

But an earlier Cinema Canada article quoted a Toronto producer on Peacocke: "He's an actor, for God's sake, and he's from Edmonton. What does he know?"... a statement which capsulizes the double strikes against the regional performer.

The performer in Canadian film is often the last consideration. ("What! We're shooting tomorrow?? We gotta cast this!" or "You the actor? What? You wanna know which scene we're doing????") Add to that the supposed

love of the mountains and the space; a partisan loyalty to the West; a commitment to the regional artist; or, more crassly, and more practically, a sense of increased opportunities in some areas.

For example, an actor in Alberta may have auditioned for Lynn Stalmaster, Jennifer Shull, Debbie McWilliams, or Peter Hunt, Robert Altman, Silvio Narizzano, Joseph Sargent, Harvey Hart, Allan King, William Graham, to the astonishment and envy of many an actor with corresponding (or more impressive)

credits in Los Angeles. In the biggest pond of all, it may be difficult or impossible to get an audience with the reigning biggies. But in the relatively small pond of Alberta talent, there is more opportunity to circulate. Perhaps, in Toronto, the maze of red tape woven by harassed casting directors would exclude from the call the same actors who were cast in Alberta.

In Alberta, the best known casting director is Bette Chadwick of The Other Agency Casting Limited in Edmonton. Chadwick has just expanded into Calgary with representative Diane Rogers, to cover the province. If she is not available, a producer or out-of-province casting director may simply call one of the ACTRA offices and hold an extensive open call of the ACTRA list. (ACTRA does not cast, only supplies a list of

You never know when you might spy an actor born, raised, trained, or still working in Alberta. Fay Wray was born in Cardson, then fell into the arms of the first King Kong. Rod Cameron roamed Alberta before he roamed B-westerns. Conrad Bain graced Calgary stages before starring in U.S. sitcoms. Stuart Gillard, raised in Alberta, trained at the University of Alberta, now is busy as an actor/writer/director in Los Angeles.

Doug Paulson, one of the most striking of homegrown stars, has zoomed from Edmonton to CTV as the host of *Thrill of a Lifetime*. Sherry Miller, the Spumante Bambino blonde, may land back in Edmonton occasionally for a Stage West gig.

Meanwhile, back on home turf, pay-TV projects perk up the careers of the local talent. *Bush Pilots*, a three-part



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recently co-starred in *In the Fall* for CKNB, Winnipeg, as well as playing featured roles in two CBC Catalyst Productions. "Here, the actors are starting to take charge of their own lives. And when there is no work, they are making work for themselves!"

Perhaps the pioneer spirit of Alberta inspires enterprise. Many actors, particularly women (could this be because of the limited roles available for women?)

highly successful actor/director workshop with several high profile imports.

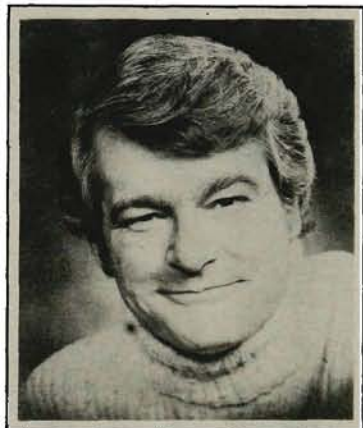
Margaret Bard has expanded her horizons beyond her major career as an actress, into directing (for theatre) and writing (an audition book with co-authors Miriam Newhouse and Peter Messaline; and a rather juicy novel published under a pseudonym). Elan Ross Gibson and Jude Beny (*Ticket to Heaven*) produced their own backers' audition of *Getting Out*.

And Greg Rogers, already a busy actor, has taken on the assignment of radio drama producer at CBC Calgary.

"I could sit and wait by the phone till the cows come home in Toronto", says one actor. "In Alberta, I have more control over my life. I can try to get my own projects rolling... even if I don't succeed... at least I will have tried."



● Maureen Thomas



● Tommy Banks



● Linda Kupecek



● Frank C. Turner

members and photos.) Both the Northern Alberta Performers Branch and the Southern Alberta Branch publish talent catalogues available to production companies. Also, Chadwick has her upbeat book, *The Face File*.

But, despite this, the meatier roles are more often cast in Toronto before the director even looks at Alberta talent. And many actors in Alberta must frequently weigh their reasons for being here against the frustration of being excluded from major calls. "I couldn't have got the Narizzano shoot if I had been in Toronto," believes Maureen Thomas. "Yet, on the other hand, too often, unless you are addressed in Toronto, they won't even look at you."

Ironically, some Alberta actors who have tested the waters in both L.A. and Toronto report that their resumés and origins are treated far more favorably and courteously on Sunset Boulevard than on Yonge Street.

But the Canadian aspect is brightening. Not only are more Toronto-based films auditioning (if not casting), in Alberta, but even the CBC (once notorious for shooting in Alberta with nary a line to local talent) moved into southern Alberta in 1982 with the splashy special *Chautauqua Girl*, casting a number of Calgary actors in major roles. Margaret Barton, trained in England and popular on Calgary stages, played the banker's wife, while Douglas Riske, the artistic director of Alberta Theatre Projects, played the minister.

Meanwhile, *Wild Pony*, which recently aired on First Choice, featured a number of Alberta actors in prominent roles, including Paul Jolicoeur, Jack Ackroyd and Murray Ord, all with extensive feature credits. Ackroyd's background includes a principal role in *Harry Tracy*, while Jolicoeur shone as *Squeaky in High Country*.

pilot for pay-TV, featured many Alberta performers, including Frank C. Turner (who registered stongly as Bruce Dern's farmer friend in *Harry Tracy*) Francis Damberger (winner of the Best Actor Award at the 1983 AMPIA Awards for his work in *Workers at Risk*) Jan Miller, Greg Rogers and Fred Keating.

The effervescent Keating also co-hosts *Movie Week* for Superchannel. *Lost Satellite*, another Superchannel offering, features Lorraine Behnan, Joan Hurley and Christopher Gaze (now in Vancouver).

Despite the range of work available, from a shot at a major feature like *Superman III* to CBC Catalyst Productions to narrations to sponsored safety films, at times an actor may have to diversify out of necessity. A number of actors have branched into other fields (i.e. writing, directing) in order to survive, both financially and creatively.

"I'm in Alberta because I find Toronto a trap," says Elan Ross Gibson, who

are becoming active, not passive, in their enforced role as struggling artist.

For example, Jan Miller of Edmonton has organized and produced a number of workshops and seminars aimed at the professional film actor, including a

So, why Alberta? Because acting is a tough race no matter which city you choose, but, at least in Alberta, it is possible to change horses, ride several at once... or even rent the racetrack and run the show.

Blue ribbon director

Anne Wheeler, producer-director with the National Film Board North West Production Studio in Edmonton, has once more imprinted herself on the international map. Her film, *A War Story*, has won the blue ribbon for Best Historical Documentary Feature at the American Film Festival in New York.

A War Story, shot in 1979-80 for \$250,000, is an emotionally powerful docudrama based on the diaries of Canadian doctor Ben Wheeler, who recorded his four years of caring for fellow P.O.W.s in a mining camp on Formosa. The doctor was also Wheeler's father, and *A War Story* is her tribute to his years of pain, shared through his secret diary.

The film also won the Best Overall Production Award at the 1982 AMPIA Awards, and has been picked up by PBS as a fund-raising film for Christmas.

"It would be philosophically wrong for me to be making films about people and regions that I don't care deeply about," says Wheeler, whose other films include *Teach Me to Dance*, *Great Grandmother*, and *Augusta*. "I'm in Alberta because I try to make the best films I can, and this is where I can make them. I came into films because I opposed people



coming here to make statements about Alberta when they didn't know anything about Alberta."

In Wheeler's future is a feature which will reflect her western sensibility. She is slated to direct *Horizon*, a feature based on the classic Canadian novel. *As For Me and My House* by Sinclair Ross, to be produced by Margret Kopala of Maggie's Movies, an Edmonton-based production company.



● From Catalyst Television's *Suicide*

Photo: Michael Woodlock