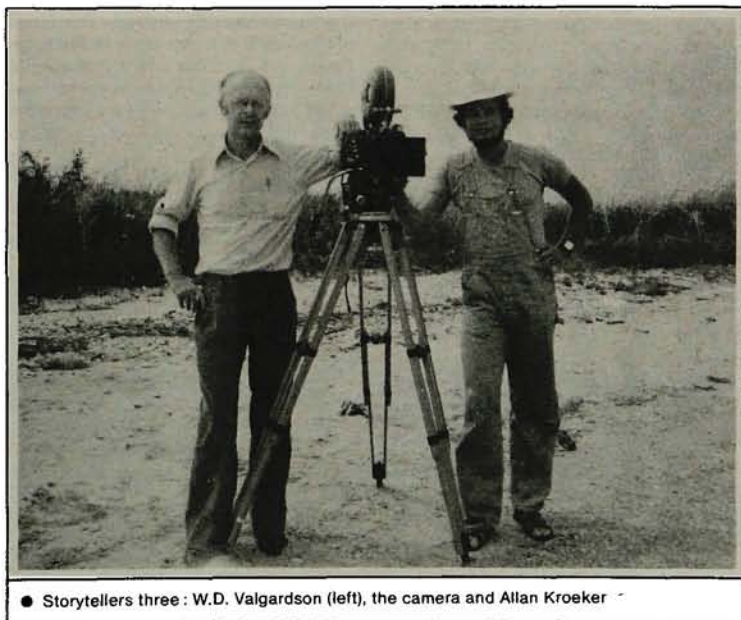


# Boundless horizons : the filmmaking of Allan Kroeker

by Gene Walz



● Storytellers three : W.D. Valgardson (left), the camera and Allan Kroeker

Photos : Allan Kroeker

On the industrial equivalent of the endangered species list Manitoba filmmakers must rank somewhere between the whooping crane and the passenger pigeon. While the small, hardy flock has grown since a film co-op was formed and the NFB established a prairie production unit during the 1970s, every season still seems like open season. And survival of the fittest is the reality of every day.

For filmmaker Allan Kroeker this means working at every facet of the business - everything from screenwriter to soundman, from producer to editor, cinematographer, and director. It also means making movies for a variety of employers. "I've worked everywhere but in the real world," he jokes.

Fresh from film production courses at York University, Kroeker took a job with the Manitoba Department of Agriculture. From 1974 to 1977 he made films with titles like *Food Chain*, *Lambing and the Care of Lambs* (his favorite), *The Wheat Kings*, and *The Trouble with Sprayers* (which he claims is "the *If You Love This Planet* of ag films"). Not the sort of inspiring topics that guarantee Genie

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nominations, but good work for an apprenticeship. For these were all "shoe-string films" (the most expensive cost less than \$10,000); they provided the kind of keep-your-eye-on-the-budget discipline that still characterizes his work. His boss at the time, Vern McNair, remembers being so impressed with Kroeker's first weeks on the job that he wondered how long he'd stay. What caught his eye were the two distinctive cinematic qualities that were evident even in this early work: evocative, pictorially-stunning images and intelligent, understated editing.

In his spare time Kroeker made a series of "parables for real life" for Mennonite Brethren Communications. Again, economizing was the keynote. In 1976 Kroeker did 40 minutes of filmed parables for less than \$5,000; in 1978 he made nine 16mm parables for \$15,000.

The biggest budget, \$3500, was set aside for a wry Bergmanesque work called *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* Based on a Leo Tolstoy story, it follows the escalating greed of a land speculator who has made a deal with a mysterious *Seventh Seal*-type monk to keep all the land he can stake out in one day provided he returns to the original stake by sunset. In effect, the filmmaker struck the same deal. Because of the small budget, he had to shoot the film in the same amount of time it took the speculator to complete his circle - but without suffering the same ironic fate as the speculator. He barely made it.

*How Much Land* was planned as a "showcase" film. And it worked. Kroeker's skill as a filmmaker and his way with a budget quickly brought him to the attention of Mike Scott, newly installed as executive producer of the NFB's prairie

regional production unit and anxious to establish Winnipeg as a place that made dramas (and animation) as well as documentaries. He gave the young filmmaker the go-ahead to adapt a Rudy Wiebe story into a short mood-piece titled *Tudor King*. The Manitoba Department of Education was also interested in making fiction films - to be used in the province's schools. They rejected proposed adaptations of Chekov and other public-domain writers and recommended that local authors be used. On one of his frequent trips to the Interlake District for farming footage, Kroeker had casually picked up a book of stories by W.D. Valgardson. He proposed three stories, adapted one into the award-winning *God is Not a Fish Inspector*, and threw in as a bonus a documentary portrait of Valgardson called *Waiting for Morning*, ingeniously put together from out-takes and interviews.

With the success of these two ventures Kroeker was launched into his "Valgardson period." He filmed two more adaptations of the Gimli writer's stories for the NFB - *Capital* and *The Pedlar*, and one for CKND-TV - *The Catch* (based on "On Lake Therese"). Since then he has moved on to work by other Canadian writers,





● The merchant as a social outcast: Lubomir Mykytiuk in *The Pedlar*

all for CKND; he has written and produced *The Reunion* by Saskatoon writer Guy Vanderhaeghe (which won this year's Governor-General's award for fiction) and written and directed *Hunting Season* by Helen J. Rosta and *In the Fall* by Nova Scotian Alistair MacLeod. In addition, he has freelanced as an editor and/or cinematographer on several other prairie productions, notably films on the Edmonton games and W.O. Mitchell and *The Strongest Man in the World and Laughter in My Soul*, both by Halya Kuchmij. Withal Kroeker has probably been the busiest filmmaker in the province over the last ten years, with more films to his credit and more awards than anyone else. This isn't surprising to Mike Scott, who observes: "Allan lives filmmaking. More than anybody I've ever known, he's totally committed to it."

One of the secrets to Kroeker's success is undoubtedly his ability to keep two or three projects going at the same time. When he first started out as a filmmaker, he says, "I couldn't sleep some nights because I had so many things that I wanted to do." He still doesn't seem to get much sleep. Right now he is putting the finishing touches on *Hunting Season* and *In the Fall*, arranging to shoot a one-hour drama based on Gabrielle Roy's "The Tramp at the Door," and doing research on a documentary on prairie painter William Kurelik. Not bad for a kid who grew up in a virtually movie-free environment.

Manitoba is a province notable for its distinctive ethnic groups, several of them celebrated on film: the Ukrainians of Winnipeg's north-end, (*Paul Tomkowicz*, *Ted Baryluk's Grocery*); the largest French-Canadian community outside of Quebec; the largest Icelandic community outside Iceland (*Iceland on the Prairies*); and one of the largest concentrations (60,000) of Mennonites anywhere. An agrarian people who first came to the province from the Ukraine in the

1870s, the Mennonites live mainly in the rich farmbelt south of Winnipeg. But their names stand out in the city's phonebook as they would nowhere else: five columns for Wiebe, four for Dyck and Penner, three for Loewen, and two for Rempel and Enns and Kroeker.

Unlike the Amish, Hutterites, and Pennsylvania Dutch with whom they are sometimes confused, Mennonites have no distinguishing physical or cultural peculiarities: no beards, no bonnets or horsedrawn buggies, no aversions to electricity and other trappings of Western civilization. What has chiefly defined these followers of Menno Simons are their belief in anabaptism (baptism only when a person is mature enough to fully

understand) and their refusal of civil oaths and military service. Hard-working and family-oriented, they have had little truck until recently with the "frivolities" of modern life. In his book *In Search of Utopia* E.K. Francis notes that even in 1950 "most modern amusements such as spectator sports, dances or even movies remained taboo for the majority of Manitoba Mennonites."

According to Kroeker, it wasn't the movies that were the problem but the people associated with them. The reasoning, he remembers, went like this: "You might think you were going to see *Old Yeller*, but they were also going to show you a dirty short." It was the Mennonites' fear of dirty shorts and bad companions

that would have almost completely deprived Kroeker of movies were it not for his grandfather, A.A. (Abe) Kroeker.

Abe Kroeker was the spectacularly successful agribusinessman featured in the Winkler chapter of Heather Robertson's *Grassroots*. Abe had a still camera when the church regarded photography as a sinful vanity. When his grandson was old enough to handle it, Abe gave Allan a 35mm still camera and a free charge-account for film, processing, and accessories. He introduced his grandson to the world of images.

Abe also loved movies. No gathering of family or friends was complete without a screening of rented movies in his basement. It was Abe who steeped young Allan in the movies of Abbott and Costello. And it was probably Abe who now prompts Allan to offer the opinion that *Capital* is his "most Mennonite movie." For in 1983 the Mennonites of Manitoba are better known for their shrewdness and business acumen than their religious fervor.

*Capital* is not what the church elders would like to consider a Mennonite movie. It's the story of an old man and his young son. They make their living by fancying up junk cars with paint and polish and pilfered car radios and then selling them to unsuspecting greenhorns. In the process the old man passes on all the lore he has amassed, emphasizing especially the need to keep your venture capital separate from your "livin' money." In the end the boy amusingly demonstrates that he has learned his lesson all too well.

Though the Mennonites have in many ways become just another variation on a homogenized twentieth-century protestantism, there is one way in which they remain fairly unique. That is their strong sense of family. From this angle each and every Kroeker film can be seen as a reflection of his Mennonite heritage. For each film is concerned with a small group of people, usually a family, in turning-point situation, often a business proposition. For Fusi Bergman in *Fish Inspector*, for instance, it involves giving up fishing and retiring to an old folks' home. For the family that is the focus of *In the Fall*, it involves the selling of an old and useless but beloved horse. In each of the films the situation threatens to disrupt the fragile cohesion of the group or destroy one of the members in it. The stories are rendered all the more poignant by the fact that the characters are so isolated, by geography and temperament, from everybody else.

What attracted Kroeker to the Valgardson stories, however, goes beyond their possibly autobiographical overtones. Initially it was the sense of place in the Gimli writer's works. Crisscrossing the Interlake district to get footage for his agricultural films and spending many a summer vacation there awakened Kroeker to the cinematic potential of the area.

"What makes the Interlake such a great set," he says, "is the purity and simplicity of detail there. It removes us just enough from our everyday lives." It can give a story a kind of timelessness. "I like the magic of a 'once-upon-a-time' story that can come from setting it in the Interlake."

In Valgardson's stories there is, says Kroeker, "a sense of universal experiences stripped right down to the bone." While they express certain regional qualities, they also transcend them. "I'm not saying that this is Manitoba or this is small-town Canadian life," Kroeker insists. "*The Pedlar* could be set any-



● God is Not A Fish Inspector: Ed McNamara as Fusi Bergman



# MANITOBA FILM

where. *Capital* is not just a story of small-time life on the Canadian prairies." Robert Altman, who saw and liked *Fish Inspector* on one of his frequent trips to Canada, expressed it this way: "National boundaries are a state of mind."

Universal as they may seem, adapting Valgardson's stories to film was not an easy undertaking. In the first place, Kroeker warns against reading stories in search of good film subjects. "It's too dangerous; you overlook the true potential and the problems of the story." He has never been attracted to a story on the basis of its being easy to film. In fact, at first he didn't see any filmic possibilities in the stories of Alistair MacLeod, whose *In the Fall* is the source of his most recent film.

A story starts to become a film when "some kind of ghost comes back to me, an after-image." It's an irrational, subconscious process. For *Capital* it was the image of two guys standing like hawks waiting for their prey. For *The Pedlar* it was the image of the road and the young girl the first time she sees the pedlar and his tattoos. Once this happens Kroeker goes back to the story to "absorb it fully." When he has done this to his satisfaction, he puts aside the story and doesn't reread it again. He explains the actual scriptwriting process in this way: "there is something mysterious happening and I'm just writing down the clues."

However it happens, Kroeker does not see the need for simply illustrating the story on screen. His films are not

faithful image-for-word translations. "I don't see the need for it," he explains. "The challenge in writing an adaptation is to expand on the story, to make it more cinematic. You actually do an injustice to the story by just trying to repeat it verbatim on film." The main difficulty comes from the fact that there are "many more credibility problems on film than there are in print." Reconstruction is essential. Dialogue, characters, even incidents have to be altered.

Take the case of *Fish Inspector*. The most affecting moments in the film occur during several exchanges between Fusi Bergman and Jimmy Henderson. At one point Fusi buttons Jimmy's sweater wrong and finally gets him to laugh. Without these moments the death of Jimmy at the end of the film would not be nearly as effective. Yet the Jimmy Henderson character is only fleetingly alluded to in the original story.

With *The Pedlar* Kroeker took a few more liberties. Searching for a reason to explain why the travelling merchant is such a social outcast, Kroeker recalled what he had learned while working as cinematographer and editor on *The Strongest Man in the World*. In that film, Mike Swystun is also shunned. So Kroeker transformed his pedlar into a magician and a juggler. The result is that he is a warmer and less mysterious character than he is in Valgardson's story. But the change has repercussions that alter the entire story.

Although Kroeker has adapted four Valgardson stories to film, they have

been different enough so that each film has meant newer and bigger challenges. *Fish Inspector* was essentially a one-character drama. *Capital* dealt mainly with the old man and his son. For *The Pedlar* there were three strong-story was more difficult to orchestrate. *In the Fall* deals with a family of five. In addition, *Capital* is a wry comedy and *The Pedlar* an almost mute psychological drama, while *The Catch* and *Hunting Season* are both suspense-thrillers in the style of Hitchcock's television work.

Although he likes the short-film format because it is more controllable, Kroeker has lately been attempting longer and more complicated films with better, more experienced actors. *In the Fall* stars Cedric Smith in approximately a 50-minute film, *The Tramp at the Door* (to star Monique Mercure, Ed McNamara, and August Shellenberg) is planned as a one-hour drama. And he would love to do a feature-length manhunt film like *Mad Trapper* by Rudy Wiebe or a film version of Frederick Philip Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh*. Sometimes he worries, however, about how long he can "get away with Prairie stories." For it's important to him that he keep expanding his horizons, keep advancing.

Not that making films in Manitoba isn't challenging enough. Former executive producer Mike Scott puts it succinctly: "Like most other prairie filmmakers, Allan has had to learn everything and do everything on his own. There are very few people here to teach him the tricks of the trade." This problem is compli-

cated by the fact that Kroeker is working on fiction films.

On this point Scott becomes both animated and heated. "Drama is the most important kind of film today," he states vigorously. "It will do more for our sense of self than any other form. We have to pursue drama in popular as well as cultural terms. Otherwise we'll be completely overwhelmed by other countries." For Kroeker it means "telling a story regardless of what Hollywood says it should be." To him it is essential to "write and make movies in your own language about things going on around you."

But because of this determination to make fiction films, Kroeker is, according to Scott, "underrated by others in the region and by the NFB in general. His achievements are already important enough to have gained him much more attention." The awards he has won are starting to change this. And everyone who has seen *In the Fall* believes it to be his best film so far - quite possibly the film that will give him the exposure and recognition he needs.

He is one of Canada's most prolific and proficient short-story adaptors. He is also the Prairie's most complete filmmaker. In the words of regional programmer Andreas Poulsson: "Other directors have only one or two strengths; Allan has a very strong hand in all aspects of filmmaking. His range of interests and talents is extraordinary: his sense of discipline and attention to detail is absolutely astounding."

● "National boundaries are a state of mind," said American filmmaker Robert Altman after seeing *God Is Not A Fish Inspector*

