The godmother of Canadian independents

by Martin Harbury

Rena Krawagna was born in Yugoslavia and educated there and in Austria. Upon her arrival in Canada in 1952, she completed a degree at the University of Toronto.

Fluent in seven languages, her first job was a translator, but, fortunately for all of us, she abandoned that career in 1958 when she joined the CBC. She began as a script assistant on Front Page Challenge and a number of variety programs. She then worked in the research department before moving to children’s TV. In 1965 she made what was to be her last move, into Program Purchasing. There, one of her early duties was the assembly of four-hour ‘standby’ packages for the Corporation’s Northern Television Services. This was prophetic; she has been purchasing and assembling the work of independent Canadian filmmakers ever since.

Her current title is Program Purchasing Representative, but that in no way describes what she actually does. Typically, she has used the vagueness of title to her advantage. Since it really describes nothing, she has been able to get on with doing what she wants without the burden of a specific job description.

What Rena Krawagna wants is to buy and program the work of talented young filmmakers and to help them achieve the recognition that can benefit their careers. Her intelligence, humour, sensitivity and genuine concern are evident to all who meet her, but her self-imposed low profile obscures one evident to all who meet her, but her self-imposed low profile obscures one particularly important fact: from her tiny office she has helped more young Canadian filmmakers than anyone else in the country. To quote Pen Densham, “Without Rena and the CBC, there would have been no industry.”

Rena Krawagna spoke with Cinema Canada recently. This is the first interview she has ever given.

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Cinema Canada: Why did you move into program purchasing?
Rena Krawagna: Because I love film and I felt that I’d still be involved with some kind of production activity. I’ve always liked film and felt that this was something I really wanted to do.

Cinema Canada: So in the early days, say prior to 1970 or thereabouts, what was your job?
Rena Krawagna: In those days we had a lot of foreign films and a lot of people from Europe coming through.

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Martin Harbury is an independent producer living in Toronto. His most recent television production, with co-producer Paul Shapiro, was Clown White (1981).

We would go to screenings. I attended the Nordic screenings for a number of years. I also went to other film festivals. We would evaluate these films and purchase them for standby programming. Then NTS came along and I was quite involved with that.

Cinema Canada: NTS?
Rena Krawagna: Northern Television Service. Really it was basically research, keeping up to date with what was happening internationally on the film scene.

Cinema Canada: At what point did you become really interested in Canadian film?
Rena Krawagna: Actually, I became interested almost immediately through short films, which was one of my man-

dates and it was exciting because it was new. Also, there was an opportunity to work with Canadian filmmakers. In those days we were dealing with the real old timers like Jack Chisholm and then later a few young filmmakers like David Cronenberg made a few shorts...

DAVID CROWNEBNE

“...It was a three-year wait before I was starring. The only money I made in those three years was from Rena’s office at the CBC and the Canada Council. I did make eight or nine films and I kept on going back. I expected Rena’s office to be empty. It was so hard to find someone who would say yes.”

Rena Krawagna: We found it necessary to make short films rather than anything more elaborate. Oh God, there were any number of people, Paul and Deepa Saltzman, Insight Productions...

PEN DENSHAM:

“...I was on vacation from Moreland, Latchford and John (Walton) was working somewhere else; we were both extremely fed up. Rena said, ‘If you were to make a film on season or sailing, I could probably buy it’. A week later, we brought her two films and she bought them both. That’s where Insight started.”

Cinema Canada: Let me go back for a second. Merv Stone was the head of program purchasing at the time that you...
Rena Krawagna: He asked me to apply for the job.

Cinema Canada: And so how old would the Program Purchasing department have been by then?
Rena Krawagna: It was always there as far as I remember. Maybe 25-30 years. But it changed from one manager to the next. Merv Stone has been there about 19 years. In the early days it was very difficult to complete films. We were not...
Don terms the "urban guerilla warfare" experiment a success. We didn't know them, whether or not they could complete the project, or whether or not they were capable of the post-production. So we sort of got together with Don Haig who was very helpful. He supervised the post-production and this was how it all started.

**DON HAIG:**

"I think my connection would start around the early '70s. Rena was the program producer and she had some overseas footage. The problem was that the filmmaker was a very good cameraman, but he could not package the thing together with music, etc., to put it on television, so she brought the footage over with the filmmaker. That's really how the connection started.

**Cinema Canada:** It seems to me that there were a lot of people, other than the ones you mentioned. There were John & Pen, Nelvana, George Mendeluk, Paul & Deepa, Mark Irwin, Cronenberg, and also Louise Breton.

**Rena Krawagna:** Many—Gary Nichol in Ottawa, Phil Borsos with some of his shorts. I was not involved with his work but certainly supported a couple of his projects before he went on to features.

**LARRY WOODS:**

"Had Rena not had that insight and the faith to take a risk on an unknown commodity such as me, three weeks out of film school, I would certainly have failed. This is how the connection started."

Rena Krawagna: Well, there are any number of them, for example, whom I couldn't support in the area I function. I couldn't support anything that is highly religious or commercial, or anything that would normally be handled by any of our programs. You can only support certain numbers of people. It's very hard for me to have people work on certain projects but we would have to have 24 hours of broadcast time. It's very hard to function now.

Rena Krawagna: Seven years ago. It's a sifting and self-selection process. You have to be an able producer and so on. I think that it is possible one of the characteristics that most people admire in you. Rena Krawagna: It's very easy to say yes. If you know what you're looking for, and if it falls within the criteria that you have set up, you don't have a problem. The problem only comes if you have too many yesses. You have to gauge yourself, you have to know how many programs are going to be presented. You have to say no to somebody, but we don't have a problem. We live up to our promise, or whatever.

Rena Krawagna: Every film that I buy is very easy to say yes. You know what you're looking for, and if it falls within the criteria that you have set up, you don't have a problem. The problem only comes if you have too many yesses. You have to gauge yourself, you have to know how many programs are going to be presented. You have to say no to somebody, but we don't have a problem. We live up to our promise, or whatever.

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Cinema Canada: In your ongoing decision-making about the support you give or can give to filmmakers, how much of this is in consultation with Merv Stone or Roman Melnyk? How does this all work now?

Rena Krawagna: Merv Stone has been excellent in as much as he would say, 'I have my expertise and they know what they do.' He allowed us to go and for us it was just as much of a development stage as it was for the filmmakers not to know how far we could go, what kind of films we can support and so on. So he played a very important role. With Roman on the scene, it is much easier now because he has a mandate to support the Canadian film industry. Now we can turn to him and say, Roman, so many films are available, so many filmmakers would like to make some films and it is obvious by the sheer number, the increase of Canadian Reflections from half an hour a week, 8 hours a year on numerous occasions I have said to Roman, 'This is the direction in which I would like to go to start concentrating more on the production side of CBC getting a health fact that you seem to have always been, in one way or another, involved with people in the arts.'

Rena Krawagna: I don't know. Maybe you're reading something into it. I am married to an artist — have been married for 30 years, but my main interest is in my work, so I think if I see lovely footage or a good film, I will fight for it and this is what motivates me. The first Monday of every month there should be an excellent film on my desk and this should keep me going for another month. This is really the motivation and the need for creating and developing filmmakers' motivation... You're working with interesting people and it was easy, anybody could do it. It's a challenge.

Paul Saltzman: Speaking personally, our 26-part series (Spread Your Wings, now televised in Canada and having won 18 international awards) would never have gotten off the ground without Rena's support and Rockefeller's approval of the two which became pilots for the series.

Cinema Canada: Tell me about saying, 'No.'

Rena Krawagna: Saying no to a filmmaker. Well you say, 'You have some money left in the budget or you say no when the project is not good — if it can't be translated into your needs. It's not enough to say, 'I'll give it but it has to be this type of a film.' I would rather be honest and tell a filmmaker why a certain project wouldn't work than to say go out and do it and then we'll see if it works somehow.

Don Maid: It's not as if they said, 'Okay, you've got this space, call it Canadian Reflections,' they just said, 'Well, we want these half-hours filled for May, June, July and August.' After the last time, they said, 'We want 80 hours!' The joke has been... 'Well, sure, we'll just go into the supermax, and pull this stuff off the rack.'

Cinema Canada: How are you going to fill 80 hours?

Rena Krawagna: Well, it wasn't easy, but there are a number of films that we just picked up and we had a certain amount in the library and it worked out all right.

Cinema Canada: Is there a sufficient talent pool and a sufficient production industry now to keep Canadian Reflections going at a level of 80 hours a year?

Rena Krawagna: Certainly not 80 original hours. It depends on two things: money and, b) if you have a monumet of course, you could do it but you don't. So if you're talking about the same kind of level, not travelling but profile films, films about craftspeople, dramas, etc., it is difficult because the money is so important. If this were clearly defined policy. Naturally I would say no when the project is not good — if it can't be translated into your needs. It's not enough to say, 'I'll give it but it has to be this type of a film.' I would rather be honest and tell a filmmaker why a certain project wouldn't work than to say go out and do it and then we'll see if it works somehow.

Cinema Canada: Do you foresee a big budget being available to you for your department?

Rena Krawagna: Not right away, no. For the last few years we've operated on a budget. You say when you've got money, anything in today's economy that would make Roman say, 'Here, there's so many thousands of dollars for a film.' If the Canadian budget of course, you could do it. Romans and I would be able to complete a half-hour program. I mean there have been some mediocre films but unless you gamble on doing something creative, CBC produces the kind of a film he or she said they would... It doesn't always turn out that way. A lot of the films are too long or too dreary. They need to be re-cut and hope for the best, that the filmmaker will fight for it and this is what motivates me. The first Monday of every month there should be an excellent film on my desk and this should keep me going for another month. This is really the motivation and the need for creating and developing filmmakers' motivation... You're working with interesting people and it was easy, anybody could do it. It's a challenge.

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Cinema Canada: Do you have a one-on-one meeting with work from students?

Rena Krawagna: I try not to influence people. I would rather be honest and tell a filmmaker why a certain project wouldn't work than to say go out and do it and then we'll see if it works somehow.

Cinema Canada: What have been the most satisfying moments in your career so far? Where do you get your kicks? Roman can answer that.

Rena Krawagna: Oh Godmother! Of course, the greatest satisfaction — when you see the film it almost becomes your own film. That's the greatest satisfaction — when you see the film and see, 'I think this is what was meant.' I suppose we've been seeing a lot of films. If there is something moves me I don't think I have to apologize for that.

Roman Melnyk: As we worked closer and closer, we began to realize that Rena was sort of the Godmother of the filmmakers. She was the beekeeper and nurturing for good talent and I suppose we were just as tough on people who had potential but no talent.

Cinema Canada: Are you exclusively involved in network programming rather than regional programming? Rena Krawagna: I've spent 20 years in that if it's standby programming it can be anywhere, from Toronto to the East or West. As far as Canadian Reflections is concerned, it has become quite well known and has sold work and so on. This is very gratifying when you see this happening. Failures? I dare say there was one only... I was able to complete a half-hour program. I mean there have been some mediocre films but unless you gamble on doing something creative, CBC produces the kind of a film he or she said they would... It doesn't always turn out that way. A lot of the films are too long or too dreary. They need to be re-cut and hope for the best, that the filmmaker will fight for it and this is what motivates me. The first Monday of every month there should be an excellent film on my desk and this should keep me going for another month. This is really the motivation and the need for creating and developing filmmakers' motivation... You're working with interesting people and it was easy, anybody could do it. It's a challenge.

Cinema Canada: Is there any one film or production or moment that stands out as the most memorable successes or memorable failures?

Rena Krawagna: Well, it's deal with successes first. There are any number of films on artists, for example, that through broadcasting the film, thereby promote the filmmaker and the artists; the artist becomes known and has sold work and so on. This is very gratifying when you see this happening. Failures? I dare say there was one only... I was able to complete a half-hour program. I mean there have been some mediocre films but unless you gamble on doing something creative, CBC produces the kind of a film he or she said they would... It doesn't always turn out that way. A lot of the films are too long or too dreary. They need to be re-cut and hope for the best, that the filmmaker will fight for it and this is what motivates me. The first Monday of every month there should be an excellent film on my desk and this should keep me going for another month. This is really the motivation and the need for creating and developing filmmakers' motivation... You're working with interesting people and it was easy, anybody could do it. It's a challenge.

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Cinema Canada: Do you ever deal with work from students?

Rena Krawagna: Not too often. I see a lot of students but once they graduate they would come and we would not have to guide them. We would try to help them along, once they became so-called professionals. In Telefest I was on the jury and there were a number of very good films from York and Ryerson. Some bright stars.

Cinema Canada: You've been referred to more than once as the Godmother of young Canadian filmmakers. Rena Krawagna: Oh Godmother! Of course, the greatest satisfaction — when you see the film it almost becomes your own film. That's the greatest satisfaction — when you see the film and see, 'I think this is what was meant.' I suppose we've been seeing a lot of films. If there is something moves me I don't think I have to apologize for that.

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