



ANDRÉ LAMY

George Csaba Koller

ASSISTANT FILM COMMISSIONER

Assistant Government Film Commissioner, André Lamy, a no-nonsense businessman and film producer came to the Film Board four years ago. André Lamy has an impressive track record in Québec's private industry, before joining the Board in 1970. His brother, Pierre Lamy, is still one of the best feature producers in Québec, having shepherded all recent productions by Gilles Carle, Claude Jutra and Denys Arcand. As Sydney Newman's right hand man, he is in effect the general manager of the Board, and as such has to deal with an infinite number of variables, including budget figures, internal staff relations, long term planning and Ottawa civil servants. While being interviewed at his office at NFB headquarters, he emitted an air of confidence and efficiency.

On a recent visit to Toronto, Sydney Newman characterized himself as a "juggler." He's juggling a tea cup on his knee for the news camera, he's juggling the budget of the Film Board, he's juggling English, French co-existence, that kind of thing. Do you see yourself in that role?

No, I'm not a juggler. I'm a very well organized, very systematic type of man. I try to prepare decisions according to the information and my own feeling on the question. I don't play with the elements too much. I'm not a juggler. I'm not.

I think he meant it in the sense that you're caught on a certain level between Ottawa and your own staff, and you have to get enough money from here to be able to afford to pay enough money there. As acting manager of the Film Board, your job would fall somewhere in between that seesaw, or am I wrong to presume that?

Well, if your understanding of juggling is that, okay. For me it's a very well organized process. We have some very specific relationships with the Treasury Board and I understand the system more and more. We have a very specific relationship with the Secretary of State. As for any resources or our mandate, more and more I understand how they fit into the system. The Parliamentary Committee is another dimension. They can and do challenge us and our mandate. It's a very well organized platform. This outside the Film Board. Inside the Film Board, for me it's quite clear. I'm not mixed up at all about the role of French Production, English Production, Distribution, Technical Operations and so on.

When Mr. Newman and yourself assumed your positions to head the Board nearly four years ago, you had plans to change a few things. Could you talk about that?

The basic change was regional production. Now we are in the process of implementing that plan. We are operating a Vancouver office at the level of three quarters of a million dollars, the Winnipeg office has been officially announced at the Board meeting there, Halifax is already in operation and our B budget asked for money for Toronto, as soon as possible. This was part of the five year plan. (The B budget is when you ask the government for new funds for new programs.)



We completely reorganized the French Production department, management-wise, by creating a new structure. Same thing happened with English Production. The studio heads are now part of management. Other than that, the producers and filmmakers are part of the staff. So there is a clear cut equation between management and production and directorship.

Another part of the change was to get a better share of the production to be produced specifically for television. This was implemented in both French and English Production, in different ways, because the problems and the solutions were not the same. For example, there were no problems when we established closer links between the Film Board's French Production and Radio-Canada. They are the same group of people, they know each other pretty well. But on the English side, because of the distance (Montreal to Toronto), because of the milieu, we were confronted with a problem.

This was the interpretation of the role of the National Film Board vis à vis the English network (CBC). We settled this one too. We started with the series on Québec, the series on the West, next year it's going to be the Coastal Region's. This was all part of the plan.

Distribution-wise: we say that the future of distribution is not to increase the staff or the number of offices across Canada, but that we should find more new ways of getting in touch with people. We decided as a policy to offer a discount to anybody in this country who could be a further extension of the role of the National Film Board, helping us to reach people. We say that to anybody who could give a public service — particularly free — in distribution we will give a 50 per cent discount. Thus we create 85 to 90 new 'office staff' to distribute the films of the National Film Board for practically nothing! We create a lower discount for education people, because they don't give a public service as elaborate as a library for example.

We decided to organize a protocol between provincial governments and the National Film Board, a kind of umbrella. They would like to get access to our films, and copy our films on video tape. They will pay a royalty. We said to them "Okay, if you want to help us distribute our material and reach the people, and do a good job, we'll even sign an umbrella contract." So far, the results were just fantastic. We've tripled the number of films available to the Canadian public in a period of about six months, and the process continues. It's just a matter of time. We may discover 200 'associate distributors' for the National Film Board staff. This was part of the plan.

What major scale plans did you have in terms of features for TV, aside from the series that you have. . . .

Well, there's no plan whatsoever with Michael Spencer and the CFDC, for example. I don't think that it would be proper for the National Film Board to get access to this bag of money because of the CFDC's role and responsibility. Secondly, I don't think it would be feasible because 30 per cent of every

dollar for the National Film Board is a fixed expense for the lab, and if I go on a kind of co-production deal with Michael Spencer, the National Film Board and a private company, I will force them to use our lab. Then the private labs would try to kill me. We tried to analyse this kind of set up and it was just impossible.

With CBC, yes. There's some kind of discussion going on that maybe we could prepare a set of four feature films. Two will be produced by the CBC, two by the National Film Board. Both co-producers will get access according to their own mandate. This is part of the relationship that we have with the CBC and Radio-Canada, for a series of films. This is not exactly co-production because of the mandate of the CBC, it's really a co-financing of production. CBC could refuse to show a film coming from the National Film Board. The National Film Board could say to the CBC "we will NOT produce such a film for you." We are pretty autonomous about the content of the film and we will not accept any specific guidelines coming from a distributor, including the CBC. Of course, this gives the right to the CBC to say "we don't want this specific film."

Sydney Newman two years ago in the Montreal Star was quoted as saying: "Some people think that André Lamy and myself are pretty ruthless." He was referring to the way you undertook the implementation of your plan. Would you care to comment?

Well, first, I do not agree with him. I'm not a ruthless guy. I try as much as possible to make the directors and the people around the directors appreciate the decision-making process. Of course, I'm responsible for \$30 million of public money and have to make sure that those dollars will be spent adequately. Sometimes dealing with filmmakers or artists, it's



very difficult to speak the same language. Not because I disagree or they disagree with me. It's just trying to bridge our perimeters, sometimes they're not exactly the same. I'm not a ruthless man. Honestly, I believe that the majority of people in French Production and English Production, even when they do not agree with me – they accept the decision-making process and the majority of decisions that we prepare so far.

How would you describe the Film Board's structure? It's a hierarchical structure, no doubt, but would you describe the way it functions as a democracy or are the critics who say that it's an autocratic kind of leadership correct?

Oh, well, this is NOT democracy or if it's democracy, I'm in charge and responsible. And, you know, I've got a boss called Sydney Newman and he could fire me. And the Minister could fire Sydney if he feels that Sydney's not doing a good job. This is not democracy BUT coming from the private sector I could tell you that I never saw in the past so much participation from the base, in the decision-making process.

Example: there are two programming committees – French and English – they spend a day or two every week to recommend to me what will be the NFB program, week after week. I'm in a position to refuse or to accept their recommendations. This is a very powerful tool for me but this is a very powerful tool for them also. When I have the information of what they would like to recommend to me, I'm in a position to refuse or to accept. And in fact we do reject some of the programs. But not as much as the program committees themselves. They reject maybe 50 per cent of the material coming from the base. I'm in a position to reject or accept the remainder that they recommend to me. It's a full process of participation, but I don't think that I'm in a position according to my mandate and responsibility to share the authority, whatsoever.

That brings up another question, I just saw the film Grierson this morning and was tremendously moved by it. His vision certainly included using film as a vital tool for social change in the process of democratising society. The narrator even says at one point: "Grierson's democratic ideal. . ."

André Lamy and David Novek, who was also present at the interview, nearly fell off their chairs at this point. Their laughter subsided and Lamy explained: "I'm a kid! I'm a kid, in comparison with Grierson." "Grierson was the boss", added Novek. "I read the file of Grierson's *séjour* at the Film Board. He liked democracy all right, with a drink in his hand! But he wanted to be in charge! And the size of the Film Board when Grierson was there and the social context when Grierson was in charge in Ottawa of an operation of 150 people was very different from today. Now we're dealing with an organisation of 1,000 people, with Francophones and English. Frankly, I think that the philosophy of Grierson and the way we should pursue this philosophy today, is quite limited."

Yet your films do reflect that philosophy in a larger context.

Oh, I agree. The philosophic approach of the content of some films is that Grierson was a genius. The spirit of Grierson dealing with the content of production was a very good one, and I think we protect such a philosophy inside the Film Board. It is important in every frame of film that we produce. But the way Grierson managed the Board at the time and the way we should manage the Board today is quite different.

"Grierson said that films should be made for a democratic purpose," interjected Novek, "But when you produce those films, somebody's got to be on top. You have to differentiate between democracy outside and within the filmmaking process."

There's a dichotomy there. . .

"Absolutely!" affirmed Lamy. "But that was managed perfectly day after day by Grierson. Democracy was for anybody outside the Film Board. The spirit of Grierson was a good one. We spent a lot of time together, he was very close to me for a

year. For me it was a process of understanding more adequately the role and the responsibility of the National Film Board to produce day after day the tools that could change society. That could ameliorate the quality of life of the people. It's still the same, and the structure is stronger than any man in charge of the Film Board.

The Board just recently produced a group of films called Corporation, a beautiful series. It actually goes inside another large organisation and exposes the inner workings of that supermarket chain. Could Arthur Hammond turn his cameras around and make such a film about the Film Board itself?

Truffaut did that with *Day for Night*. I will not hesitate to give a contract for somebody else to do so, if it's a good idea. But I don't think so, since there's a big difference between analysing Steinberg's and the NFB. Do you really think that the public would be interested in such a film?

Well, I would, but then perhaps I'm not a representative of the public. But perhaps after 35 years there should be a conclusive statement on film as to what the Board is about. . .

You should read three theses that have been written about the Film Board structure. They are damned good. One of them is from the University of Montréal. There's somebody from Harvard who has analysed for the past 12 months the structure, the production staff, the agreements, everything. Research like that goes on year after year. I'm not sure that the production of a film on the Film Board will be seen as a good document. If your sense of the question is that, I must say that I'm not afraid at all. I think it's a damned good structure.

Getting back to how much that structure costs: when you were all in Toronto in April, the papers quoted the Commissioner as saying that his annual budget of \$17 million is too little and that's why he has to juggle. Yet the Board spends more than that, doesn't it?

The global expenditure of the National Film Board for 74/75 will be \$30,300,000. We got a vote from Parliament last year of \$16 million and this year of \$17 million. Then we earn revenue. This comes from sponsored films (*other government bodies commissioning the Board to make films for them – ed.*), distribution, contracts, name it. One third of our global expenditures are from revenue. The difference is made up of services provided by government, like free rent, heat, electricity. With the voted money come guide lines. It's established

Frederique Collin in "Question de vie"



that we're going to split the production money one third for French (\$4 million per annum) and two-thirds for English (\$8 million per annum) production, based on the population of Canada. We know how to spread the money between production, distribution and technical operations. We would like all sections to progress at the same rhythm, according to their need. We could focus one year, for example, more on certain aspects of distribution, but this always rotates. There is a delegation of authority at a division chief level, that is quite autonomous. Tony and David and other people in Distribution would be told: "Okay, you got \$5 million, tell me more." The way they're going to manage their branch and they come up with a set of priorities. We say: "Okay, we accept this, we refuse that, because we don't agree with you on those specifics, etc."

Is the Board interested in making money with features?

"No!" responded Lamy vehemently. "I don't think that the Film Board is interested in making money. But the minute that you decide to make a feature film, you have to consider box office. That's just a fact of life. I'm not sure we would be more successful if we decided to rent the theatres ourselves and show the films for free. What we try to do is to launch feature films through the box office because that's the way that Canadians react to such forms of expression. Of course, there's always the question, should we produce feature films at all? But we cut back pretty quickly on the box office and we make sure we have copies in 16mm to go on television as fast as possible, before the project or the film become obsolete. This is not done by the private sector. We do that systematically: that after a year or the minute we feel the box office does not operate enough, we cut the contract and move to a parallel network of distribution, be it television or an independent feature distributor, to get access to people with other skills of distribution very quickly.

Novek: "The important thing for the Film Board is exposure in distribution, to reach the people, not to make money. Of course we want to earn revenue so that we can reinvest it."

Let's say one of your features is a run-away success, a real blockbuster. Cry of the Wild is heading in that direction. How will this affect your very systematic policy of allocating monies, having to revert monies you can't spend back to Treasury, etc.?

It won't change the policy. The policy is to produce maybe two feature films in French and two or three in English if money is available. I think it's proper for the NFB with a permanent staff to develop that kind of activity. First, for the filmmaker. Why? Because the filmmaker who decides to work here on a permanent basis should not be denied this form of expression. This is staff-wise: morale. Second, I think that feature film is more than only a form of expression: it's a medium by itself. There are people for whom television is just a piece of crap. You find them at the Outremont, they would never go to the Loew's, for example, to see a big, flat, American feature film, either. If you want to have access to a very specific group of people, the fifteen to twenty five year-olds, to say things that are important – Canadian content – feature films have proven to be one of the best forms of expression.

I would like an *Easy Rider* or a *Joe* to be produced by the National Film Board. I feel honestly that *Easy Rider*, or *Joe*, or *Serpico* could change a society. They were reflections of American society and created an impact which I don't think that a book, television, or a big, expensive feature film could have done. If you could control properly the ingredients of a feature film, you could do many things in society, provided you succeed. *Mon Oncle Antoine* changed drastically the Quebec production of films. Before then we had a type of skin-flic operation – Denis Héroux. Then we demonstrated that with a film Like *Mon Oncle Antoine* box-office could

work! As good as *Deux Femmes En Or*, and I'm afraid I was the producer of *Deux Femmes En Or*."

As long as you're putting the Film Board in the context of Québec society, I would like to ask a question relating to that: how does the political future of Québec determine the Board being in Montreal?

If our role is to interpret Canada to Canadians, of course in some of our films it will show what's going on in Québec. For example, *Action/Reaction* by Robin Spry, based on the October events. The stock shot was done by three crews, two from the French section, one from the English. This is a reflection on Québec, and I think it is a part of our role. To be more specific, in the French production," said Lamy slowing down, "it's a matter of concern for me to make sure that the filmmakers will not go too far or will not try to be partisan or party line or make films that could easily be interpreted as a propaganda tool for a party or for things which are very well linked in the public mind to a party. That's my concern, dealing with some of the films produced by French Production. As for the rest of what's going on in Québec, I don't think anybody will stop that. It would be going against the role of the Film Board if it wouldn't show up in some of our films.

You touched on the question of censorship. Two years ago there was a big flare-up with the Gilles Groulx affair. Is that still a great concern?

Of course, but I don't call it censorship. Never. I think that it is part of my responsibility and Sydney's responsibility to manage such a problem. Gilles Groulx' concern was a film with a title, for us it was to manage a situation. Yves Leduc was there to manage the thing, Gilles Groulx didn't want to be managed. Or didn't accept the guide lines prepared by Yves Leduc to finish the film. It was a matter of budget and it was a matter of content.

There was a more recent film with similar content, both being about union unrest in Québec. I think it was a film called Syndicat, produced by Société Nouvelle?

Rapport de Force was the title of a project that I refused to accept. First, I didn't feel it was clearly the responsibility of Société Nouvelle to produce such a film. Secondly, the film was too ephemeral as a content, because it was linked pretty much to two important strikes in Québec. And I didn't refuse the film, I refused the script. Then asked, in collaboration with the Société Nouvelle committee, to prepare a better script, to prepare a sort of guideline, but the filmmaker decided to drop the project.

So the project has been dropped?

By the filmmaker! Because he didn't want to accept my guidelines and he didn't want to come back with another film, on the same subject. I would agree with Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle that there is a film to be done about union activity in Québec.

Wasn't there supposed to be an episode of the Adieu Alouette series that was supposed to deal with that problem, as well?

Yes, oh, this one. . . . It was a very bad film, very dull, and I didn't have any problems cancelling it. I think the filmmaker was pretty happy to get rid of it. It was just a bad film.

Do you expect any more projects like this to pop up during the next few years, or have things calmed down somewhat?

Well, because I'm not a ruthless man, there is a better understanding of my responsibility, the responsibility of the Director of French Production, Yves Leduc and that of the programming committee, than previously●