



Ontario Place — home of IMAX

Graeme Ferguson

— by Shelby M. Gregory and Phyllis Wilson.

Graeme Ferguson is the Director-Cameraman-Producer of "North of Superior". He is also president of Multi-Screen Corporation Limited, located in Galt-Cambridge, Ontario (developers of IMAX).

Ques: What have you been doing since North of Superior?

Ferguson: We're just finishing a film for Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey. They are building a new theme park called "Circus World" near Orlando Florida, in the vicinity of Walt Disney World. One of the main attractions at Circus World is to be an IMAX theatre, like the one at Ontario Place, but with a bigger screen.

Ques: What is the film about, is it a circus film?

Ferguson: It's a film about what it's like to join the circus, to be a performer in the circus. The film is produced and directed by my partner Roman Kroitor, and will probably be called "This Way to the Big Show."

Ques: Did he use actors in the film?

Ferguson: No, he used only circus personnel. Roman took the camera right into the circus, and filmed during actual performances. It was very difficult because they could only get about two or three shots in any one performance.

Ques: Was this filmed with the standard IMAX camera?

Ferguson: Yes, John Spotton was the cameraman. Eldon Rathburn, who did the music for Labyrinth, is doing the score. It's to open around Christmas of this year.

Ques: Did you shoot any footage for the circus film?

Ferguson: Yes, I shot the African sequence on elephants in their natural habitat.

Ques: Will there be a chance to see this

film in Cinesphere?

Ferguson: Not for the public. We'll probably be doing our previews there. It's the only existing theatre where we can look at an IMAX film.

Ques: Will IMAX be part of all world Expos to come?

Ferguson: There is an Expo taking place in Spokane in 1974, and the United States Pavilion will feature an IMAX theatre.

Ques: Are they paying for the production of a film?

Ferguson: Yes, Paramount Pictures is producing, and Roman and I are involved.

Ques: Is it a feature film?

Ferguson: It's about a 20-minute film, rather like "North of Superior", but about the environment. The whole of Expo '74 is on the same theme, the environment. It's a small Expo, not anything like the one in Montreal; it's more like the one in San Antonio in 1968. There will be a Canadian Pavilion, a Japanese one, and also a Soviet Pavilion. Also, some industrial exhibits.

Ques: Is it credible to consider a film in IMAX more than 40 minutes in length, and what kind of format would it have?

Ferguson: Sure, we are hoping to do one called "Genesis", which is to be about the creation of the universe, but we have not been able to get the financing for it. We had planned it originally as a co-production with the Soviet Union.

Ques: Has Multiscreen approached the CFDC for money in the past?

Ferguson: No, we have talked with them a few times about projects in general but we've never gone to them with a specific request.

Ques: Are they sympathetic to the development of IMAX itself as a new concept in film, or are they staying away from investments of that kind?

Ferguson: I suppose we won't really know until we put a concrete proposal to them and see if they approve the funding. My impression is that they are sympathetic.

Ques: As a filmmaker, do you think that the IMAX system could enhance certain aspects of the story within a feature film? What considerations do you have to make?

Ferguson: If you look at a film like

"2001", there is no question that it was better for having been done in 70 mm than 35 mm. I think that that particular film would have been even better if it had been done in IMAX. But, IMAX was not available at that time. There are certain subjects that just because of their visual splendour are suitable for IMAX. Personally, I feel that quite a variety of subjects would be enhanced by the use of IMAX. It isn't just a bigger movie, IMAX is a new form of motion picture. This was our feeling when we conceived the idea of IMAX originally; that we were inventing a new film form which would have its own creative rules. Just as when sound came in the grammar of the silent film was replaced by a new type of filmmaking. All filmmaking: shooting, editing, everything changed at that point. When color came in, again the way the filmmaker went about making film changed.

When we did the Multi-Screen films for Expo '67, we shot the films differently, we edited them differently, the audience looked at them differently. With IMAX, it's not just a quantitative change in the size of the screen, it's a qualitative change in how a movie tells its story. Our feeling from the very beginning was that IMAX, like sound and colour, would change filmmaking. I think we are just now learning what the change

will be. Each film we do, we learn a little more about each IMAX film. As we go along, each film will look less and less like conventional films, and IMAX will develop its own particular style.

Ques: Are you getting away from things like the effect of depth perception in nature, and getting into other situations and effects with IMAX?

Ferguson: One of the things we felt we could get away from, by going to the larger screen, was the linear form of story telling which has dominated motion pictures through their history. In the Multi-Screen films at the Expos in 1967 and 1970, filmmakers began to make films that were a little less linear in their form. One of the most interesting was Michel Brault's film for the Canadian Pavilion at Expo '67. It was a two-screen film in which he told a story very creatively in two different, but parallel time frames. I think all the people working in Multi-Screen found new things like that possible. Now IMAX provides a screen that is larger and more flexible than any of the Pavilions at Expo '67. One can use it for multi-image as we did with "Tiger Child", or with a single image as in "North of Superior". The single image won't be the same kind, it has a lot more elements, it isn't composed the same way as the traditional single image. There are a lot more things

Inside the projection room



photo: Frederik Manter

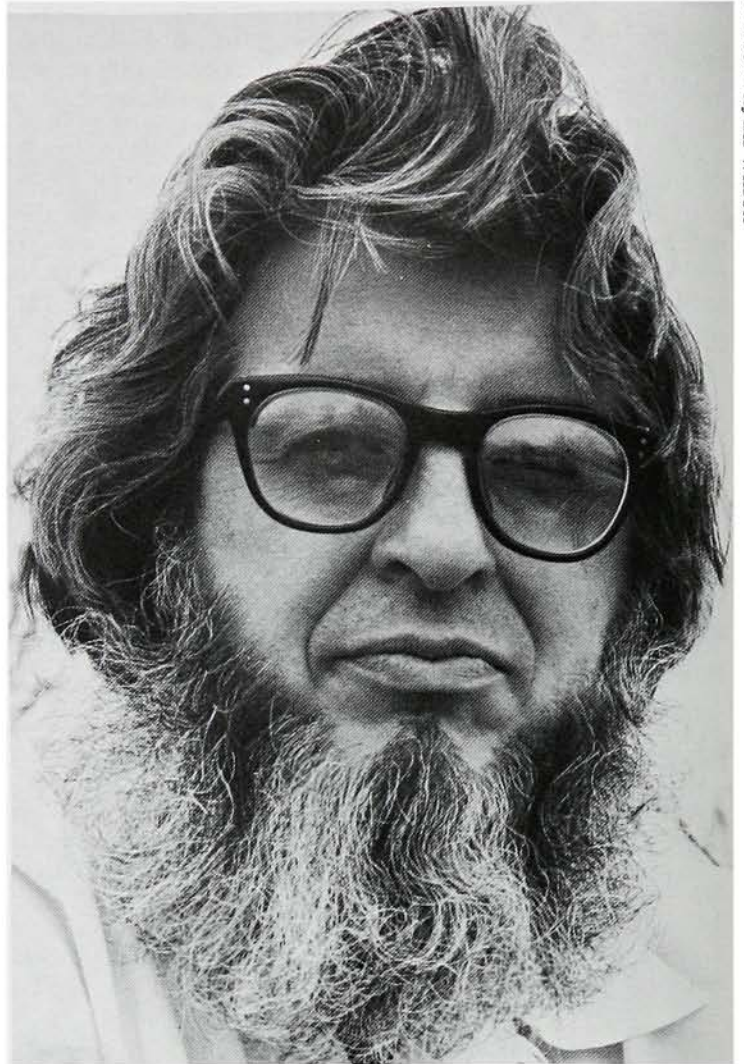


Photo: Phyllis Wilson

Graeme Ferguson

going on in the frame. One can choreograph elements within the picture instead of by editing them one after another. In conventional moviemaking this is not possible.

Ques: Who else is working with IMAX?

Ferguson: Dave MacKay has done a new film for Ontario Place. Also Chris Chapman has just finished filming the volcanic eruption in Iceland. This will make a short film of about seven or eight minutes long.

Ques: How did he film it?

Ferguson: He was right down in there with the IMAX camera. He even had the front leg of his tripod burned off by lava. There are also two films made in an associated medium which we've developed called "Omnimax". It is a dome show in which the picture is projected on the inside of a dome theatre.

Ques: Is it the same projection space as in Ontario Place, or is the whole dome the screen?

Ferguson: The whole dome is the screen except for the part right behind the audience's heads.

Ques: You mean you are standing inside a movie?

Ferguson: Yes. We opened the first of these in San Diego this spring. It's in a new type of planetarium called a "Space Theatre." Its seating is somewhat like Ontario Place, in that the seats are banked and all face one direction. Two films were made for the opening of the theatre.

One of the films is a space trip, "Voyage to the Outer Planets", and the second is a short documentary on Hawaii directed by Roger Tilton, and photographed by Barry Gordon. Roger and Barry have started to make another Omnimax film, and are shooting it in the South-Western United States. Omnimax is a different medium, it's not really the same thing as IMAX.

Ques: What was the progression in the development of these systems?

Ferguson: We conceived of IMAX first, but once we had the IMAX projector built it was fairly simple to figure out how to use it in a domed theatre with the addition of a fish-eye lens. The lens is designed and built by Ernst Leitz of Canada, Midland Ontario. They are really superb lens designers.

They designed the IMAX lens for Ontario Place too.

Ques: What's the essential difference between IMAX and Omnimax?

Ferguson: IMAX uses a very, very large screen; as large as one can make it. The picture around on it is geometrically correct. A straight line appears as a straight line. Omnimax uses a fish-eye system, and projects a picture on the inside of a dome so that all lines appear as curved lines.

Ques: What were the problems of creating Cinesphere within Ontario Place, and with Ontario Place itself?

Ferguson: I can't think of any really serious problems. The problem would have been if Ontario Place hadn't come along. We had at that point, after Expo '67, invented the idea of a theatre with a very large screen. We were able to put one into Osaka '70, but we had no way to build one in North America. We knew that in order to reach the North American Market with the system it had to be shown here, not just in Osaka. In the meantime, the Ontario government had decided to build Ontario Place but we had heard nothing about it.

Chris Chapman knew of their plans, he suggested that Ontario Place install an IMAX system. Without his efforts we might never have got the system going. Jim Ramsay, who was director of Ontario Place at that time, decided to take Chris' advice and use IMAX. At that time the system hadn't been premiered in Japan, and he had to make a decision about something he could not even see. He took quite a gamble in building the system into the theatre, and in commissioning "North of Superior".

Ques: Was the theatre built for IMAX, or did you build IMAX into the theatre?

Ferguson: The architect had the theatre designed before we came along. As it happened it was quite close to what we would have designed ourselves for IMAX.

Ques: Was that coincidental?

Ferguson: No, Eb Zeidler, the architect was responding to what he had seen at Expo 67, and so were we. He was trying to build a theatre that would be an amalgam of what was good at Montreal, but would be another step ahead. We were both going in the same direction, for the same reasons, but we were unaware of each other. The only thing that was a disappointment to the architects was that there was no way to project a picture over the whole dome. At that time, there was no projector capable of doing that — the IMAX projector certainly isn't powerful enough and to this day there is no projector powerful enough. The Omnimax is closer to what they wanted, but we can only do that in a 70 foot dome, whereas Ontario Place has a 110 foot dome.

Ques: What makes the IMAX projector special?

Ferguson: It uses a very large frame of film, the largest frame ever used in the history of the movies. It moves the film with a unique movement called the "Rolling Loop", which was invented in Australia. Without that movement one could not build a large format projector. The projector also incorporates the most powerful lamp-house ever built.

Ques: What are the particulars of that lamp-house?

Ferguson: The one at Ontario Place uses 25,000 watts. We actually re-designed it completely since then. The new projector lamp-house uses 10,000 watts, but puts out more light than the one in Ontario Place. Because, the total illumination system is more efficiently designed. The lamp-house at Ontario Place was not designed for a motion picture projector; it was designed as a solar simulator for the Aero-Space industry, and was adapted by Bill Shaw for IMAX.

Ques: Were there any problems in Cinesphere in terms of crowd control and audience capacity?

Ferguson: The theatre has done what it was meant to do, to handle 1600 people an hour in two half-hour periods. There are certain improvements that could be made; it was the first experimental theatre ever built along those lines. Our new theatres in Orlando and Spokane are designed to get the audience in and out quicker with fewer ushers. The only serious problem with Cinesphere is the location. If you get a lot of people coming in through the West entrance to Ontario Place you get a bottleneck where they have to pass by the waiting line for Cinesphere.

Ques: What steps beyond IMAX and Omnimax would you like to go in film?

Ferguson: Certainly what we must do next is a good test of 3-D IMAX. That will probably be done in the course of the next two or three years.

Ques: Does this mean an alteration of the projection system and the surface on which the image is projected?

Ferguson: Probably both. There are two three-dimensional systems existing. The American one uses polaroid glasses, and the Soviet system uses a lenticular screen.

Ques: What is a lenticular screen?

Ferguson: Lenticular just means it has little lenses in strips vertically embossed on the screen surface. What those lenses do is provide separate images for your left and right eye. At Expo '70 in the Soviet Pavilion there was a movie theatre with a screen like that. That was their first step in that direction. There is a fair amount of experimentation going on right now, with both these systems. The Russians are carrying theirs forward, and some work is also going on at the National Film Board. I think that out of this will probably come a three-dimensional IMAX theatre. That will produce a really stunning effect on the audience.

Ques: How should we in Canada approach film production in terms of becoming successful filmmakers?

Ferguson: I think the general pattern of thinking the past few years in English-speaking Canada has been to try and make films that compete in the American market, but do them cheaply. It hasn't been particularly successful. The great success of French language films obviously has been in the creation of a Québec market. If you are talking about films more generally than just feature films, we've had a remarkable success at Ontario Place with films made in Ontario. Cinesphere has drawn 2½ million people in two years. That is a lot

more successful than the feature industry in English Canada. It's obvious that the thing that has worked there is Ontario Place itself. It serves as a location for people to go and see Canadian films. On the English language feature situation, the problem revolved around getting English-speaking people into the theatre, and also in giving them a chance to see the films on television. I think perhaps the biggest defect in our distribution system has been the limited play that our Canadian films get on Canadian television. I would like to see every Canadian film, in both languages, played on television. If a feature is suitable for family audiences it should be played during prime time, if it isn't it should be played during the late hours. It should be on every television station in the country. I think that if there was a way of getting that to happen we would begin to develop an audience that was aware of our films. Then the people would be more inclined to go to the movie houses when a new film came out by the same filmmaker, whom they've come to know.

Ques: What about the future of Canada's reputation as a filmmaking country?

Ferguson: I think the change is taking place very rapidly. In our own field, that of making films for Expos, we are the leaders in the world right now. As a result of Expo '67, we have the best filmmakers here, the best equipment, and the most advanced system, the IMAX system. We have had tremendous support from the Federal government. We developed IMAX with the help of the Department of Industry. IMAX has already become well known in the field of Expos, amusement parks, theme parks, as the motion picture system of the future. It's fairly likely it will move into feature theatres in the course of the next few years. We are ahead of everybody, in this case, and we are recognized as being ahead, so I don't feel particularly on the defensive about the Canadian position. The only weak point I see on the whole Canadian film scene is feature filmmaking in English Canada. Except for that, our film scene is very strong and very successful.

Ques: Will the first IMAX feature be an American production or a Canadian production?

Ferguson: I don't know. As I mentioned our first conversations were with the Soviet Union about a co-production. There has also been some interest from Ontario Place in doing a fairly long film for Cinesphere in IMAX, but it is uneconomical for one theatre alone to pay the cost for the production of one feature film. The movie business doesn't work that way anywhere in the world. Perhaps a long film will be made in IMAX for the United States bicentennial in 1976. That is quite possible.

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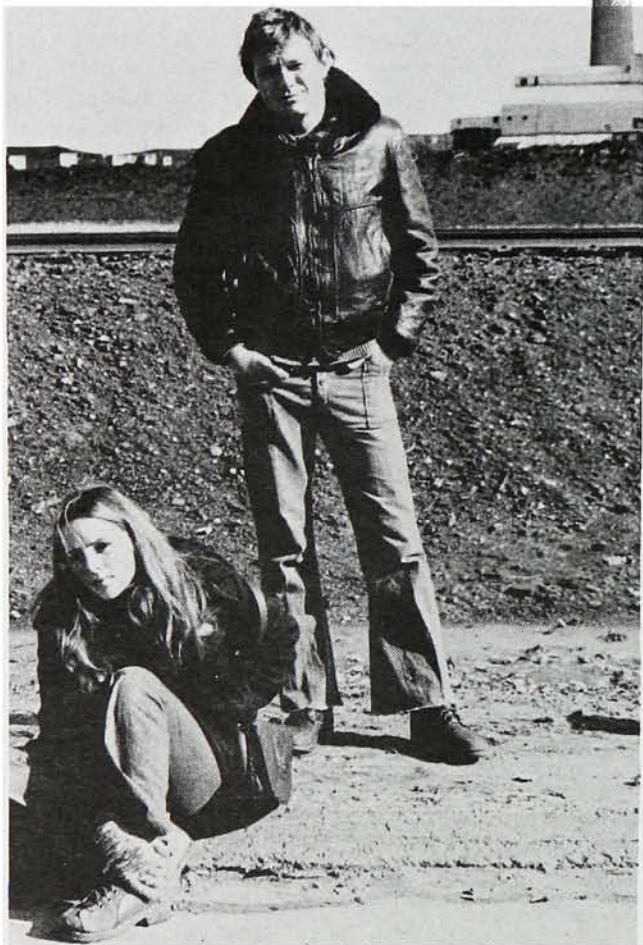
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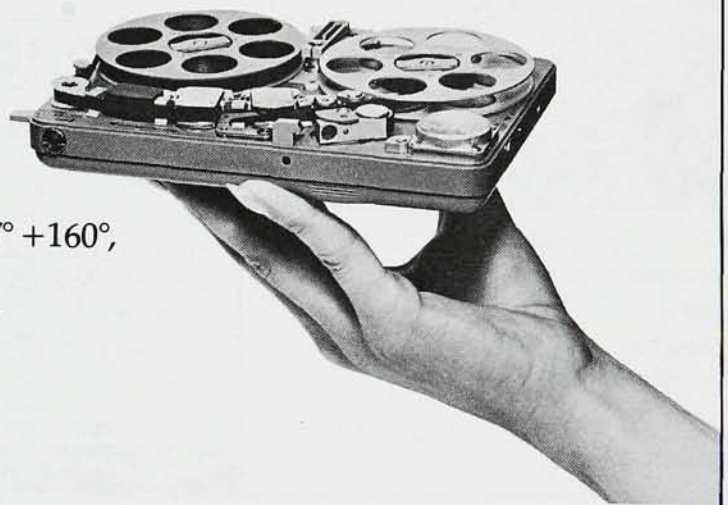
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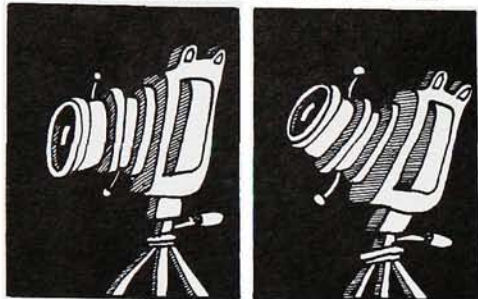
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