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# but if you ever really win...

Drawing on their Canadian heritage, Fil Fraser and John Trent are two producers who are making our film industry happen. Their commitment to making a film that is both universal in its emotional appeal and yet firmly rooted in Canadian soil.

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by Anthony Hall

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## fil fraser

Fil Fraser is an urbane 45 year old black man who grew up in a bilingual home in Montreal. For several years he has been the popular host of an Edmonton hot-line show, giving him the enviable freedom of a well paying job that requires no work after noon. From this base Fraser put together the money and the talent for **Why Shoot the Teacher** which he co-produced with CTV. To date the film has earned more in English Canada (around \$2,000,000) than any other domestically-made film. His stunning success as a first-time producer resulted in an appointment to a task force charged to advise the Alberta government on future film policy. In this capacity Fraser travelled widely, and contributed to a report recently tabled in the Alberta legislature recommending that the province create "a self-destructing Crown Corporation" to stimulate development in film.

He and his task force colleagues patterned their proposals on what they found in Québec, and particularly in Australia. There, explains Fraser, state officials--equivalent to our provincial officials--set up lines of credit to stimulate movie production. At first, Australian filmmakers tried to play the same "game" that many Canadians have attempted, making their films appear culturally neutral in the hopes of gaining a foothold in the lucrative American market. This strategy was soon rejected, however, and they began to make films "within budget parameters that would allow them a chance of making their money back in Australia." With less pressure to appeal to international audiences, Australian filmmakers eased into a style of production reflecting better the local idiom. The result has been pictures such as **Picnic at Hanging Rock**, **Storm Boy** and **The**

can market. This strategy was soon rejected, however, and they began to make films "within budget parameters that would allow them a chance of making their money back in Australia." With less pressure to appeal to international audiences, Australian filmmakers eased into a style of production reflecting better the local idiom. The result has been pictures such as **Picnic at Hanging Rock**, **Storm Boy** and **The**



Producer Fil Fraser

**Last Wave** which do tremendously well at home, and have an honesty and integrity that is endearing them to a growing number of viewers outside the country.

Fraser sees no irony in this, for to him, "all great films are regional." "It is only by being specific to a time and place," he continues, "that truth and universality can be achieved." Thus, he cautions: "Before we go knocking a-

round with our eye on the Americans and the rest of the world, we need to mine our own territory. That's not to say that we ignore the rest and build a wall around us. It is to say that there's damn good money and good audiences and good stuff to do in film here, and if we do it well here, if it works here, it should work everywhere else, because we're not so different from everybody else." Fraser characterizes Canada's market for its own films as basically "underdeveloped." He maintains, however, that even in this disorganized state there is a proven potential here for a movie to earn \$5,000,000!

**Why Shoot the Teacher** demonstrated that \$2,000,000 can be reaped from English-Canadian theatre goers, and movies in French Canada have grossed \$3,000,000. Fraser's new film, **Marie-Anne**, represents an attempt to put together these markets by telling a story of real interest to both audiences. The vehicle that will accomplish this goal, Fraser hopes, is a romantic dramatization of the trials faced by the first white woman to enter the Canadian West. Andrée Pelletier, who plays the title role, and her male lead, John Juliani, will dub themselves into "Québécois" for the French release.

In spite of the unifying trend of Fraser's marketing strategy, he disclaims any political motives. "We're not trying to solve the Canadian dilemma or rewrite Canadian history," he asserts, continuing: "**Marie-Anne** is not a documentary. It's entertainment. There's an

audience for plain honest films like this one that just tell a good story and send you home feeling good." The success of **Teacher** suggests that Fraser has a fine sense of what Canadian audiences want, and there is no reason to believe he will be wrong with **Marie-Anne**. His next project is **Back to Beulah**, for which he has secured W.O. Mitchell's first completed screen play. It will probably be directed by R. Martin Walters, whose first feature was **Marie-Anne**. Like many of the film people Fraser is gathering around him, Walters' expertise comes primarily from working on American features shot in the Canadian West.

Fraser is obviously a man of many ideas and deep convictions. He shows no sign of awkwardness when he calmly asserts: "We're reinventing the Canadian film industry." But in spite of such self-confidence he remains aware of the painful fate awaiting failed producers. "With every project you're putting yourself on the line intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and of course economically." Why expose yourself to these dangers? Fraser replies: "I'm turned on by the entrepreneurial challenge involved in making films in Canada at this time. Everybody says you can't do it, but if you ever really win---WOW!"

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## john trent

Since John Trent arrived here from England in 1957, he has become a most forceful individual in the Canadian film industry. He began his career as a writer for a music magazine, but soon moved into the fast growing field of television. He has literally hundreds of credits to his name for producing and directing projects ranging from a **Profile of Mao's China** (1962) to **Wojek** (1966) to **Moment of Truth** (1965), a soap opera done for NBC. This is one of several experiences Trent has had working for American organizations such as MGM, but he has repeatedly returned to Toronto where his family is settled. In Canada his involvement with the film industry has been on many levels. A sampling of his activities include a term as president of the Directors' Guild of Canada, and a period of the Advisory Board of the CFDC. Trent is also a founder of the prolific Quadrant Films Company.



Producer John Trent

**Riel**, a CBC co-production, is John Trent's latest project in a career dominated by ambitious undertakings. "Basically it's a film of revolution," he explains, comparing it with **The Battle of Algiers**. "Revolution is a reality close to every country," Trent continues, "and so **Riel** is a universal story." His interest in the international appeal of the production is understandable because he has a financial interest in its world sales through Green River Films, the co-producing company. This is the first time the CBC has made such a production arrangement, and so it represents an important breakthrough in the Corporation's policy. Says Trent: "The CBC is beginning to become outward looking. Its management under Don MacPherson understands that there must be some relationship with the private sector. They believed that the time was right, and that I could do a good job for them for the money."

Trent's reputation as well as his wealth is riding on the fate of **Riel**, and thus his career is currently in a holding pattern. Assuming success, he would like to go on doing stories about the history of the Canadian West. Other situations he would consider dramatizing involve the War of 1812, the saga of the United Empire Loyalists and the condition of the Italian community in Toronto. Like the Albertan producer Fil Fraser, he maintains that "Canadian films will find a place on the world market only when they are about Canada."

In spite of such pronouncements, the completed work that Trent seems to

hold closest to his heart is **Homer**, which he directed in 1969. Although filmed in Ontario, this anti-Vietnam War movie is dramatically set in rural Wisconsin. The picture earned high praise from sources such as Rex Reed, *The New York Times* and *Time*. It is currently winning renewed attention in the USA as an important document of social history. Trent contrasts the handling he has received from the American press to the treatment he gets at home. The local media, he believes, was especially unfair in its savage criticism of the **Whiteoaks of Jalna** series, which he produced in 1971. Pointing to a vindictive attack on **Riel** in the June 12th issue of *Maclean's*, Trent maintains that the Canadian press is once again gathering forces to kill an attempt to create art in this country.

Trent claims that his displeasure with some factions in the media stems not from personal bitterness at having been criticized, but rather from a deep conviction that journalists are hindering the development of creativity in Canada. He explains: "In Britain and the United States, they have a way of bolstering their own culture, their own artists and their own situation. On the other hand the press here never stands up for anything that's Canadian." Trent feels that this lack of press support is one of the major reasons many of our best show business people leave Canada for the United States. "They train on stuff our critics say is bad," he declares, "and later go on to achieve success elsewhere which belies the judgment made in Canada about their earlier work." "It is very sad," Trent sighs.

Like so many who touch the story of Louis Riel, Trent sees parallels between contemporary injustices in Canada and the persecution of the famous rebel leader. The "cripple kickers" in the press, he believes, "drive show business talent out of the country just as they drove Riel out of the country." What makes him stay in an environment he believes to be so unappreciative of the artist? Perhaps it is the sheer challenge of surviving against the odds as a filmmaker. "When you do things in Canada you do them for the first time," he exclaims, adding: "When you consider that we're right next door to the most powerful media machine in the world, it's incredible that our film industry has come as far as it has in the past ten or fifteen years." □