
thumbs up -- and all is surfacing

by teri coburn

Although male support has been all-out for the filming of Margaret Atwood's best selling novel *Surfacing*, feminist producer Beryl Fox says: "The ones who really risked were women." Atwood turned down a better U.S. offer to give "a Canadian woman" a chance and her choice was Fox, a woman ready "to risk even failure to achieve a movie."

"There is an energy, a sense of something building in Canada; and a special sense of community in this film."

Beryl Fox, Producer



Kathleen Beller emerges from Mazinaw Lake as "Kate," a plucky survivor.

photo: Jack Rowand

Picture a very big man in a very brief swim suit emerging from a forest of Ontario pines with a Florida tan and a bush of sun-bleached hair, and you have ageless "Big John" McLaughlin, professional diver for over thirty-five years, underwater cinematographer and engineer, stuntman and — seven wives later — ladykiller. His first words to the female stranger in his midst (on location for a day and a half to cover the shooting of *Surfacing*), "We must stop meeting in the woods like this!" — an old line, but his irresistibly boyish grin could get away with... almost anything.

But what's he doing on the edge of a forest beside Mazinaw Lake, six miles out of Cloyne, when he could be working on yet another James Bond film in the Bahamas, or deep-sea diving in a Navy salvage operation, or adjusting an oil rig in the Persian Gulf?

Flown in by the production for only two days, he's heading for the Mazinaw's sunken cave. It's eight feet high, ten feet wide, seven feet from end to end, fabricated out of styrofoam, fiberglass and six-hundred pounds of concrete. This Scenic Productions masterpiece, shipped in four pieces from Toronto to location for the filming of *Surfacing*, took five hours to sink. (A touch too much styrofoam, someone said.)

Because sinking a cave, and then filming what goes on inside it is a tricky business, *Surfacing* Film Production Inc. imported Big John's know-how. And does he know how! Having doubled for Richard Keele in the underwater shots of *The Spy Who Loved Me*, Big John boasts, "You know the guy who bit the shark? Well that was me!"

While Big John orchestrates the shoot by the lake, second assistant director, Don Brough shouts four miles away, "Clear the frame. Settle for shooting." There, at the second location's log cabin, part of the crew is filming Canadian actor, R.H. Thompson ("David") as he threatens to rape pretty Los Angeles actress, Kathleen Beller, as "Kate." ...All in a day's work.

Meanwhile, back at the beach, *Surfacing's* art director, Bill Beeton sits on a log in his faded blues, looking bemused as he watches the divers manoeuvre a huge white tarpaulin into the water. "It's to reflect the light off the cave floor and keep the silt down," he explains, clarifying that, "The problems of the set are essentially mechanical, not visual." When asked if he had been involved in the cave's installation he confesses, "I'm not really an underwater type. Everytime I go under my glasses get fogged up." As for the wilderness experience, "There are too many flies. And they all have teeth!" But Beeton has more important things to worry about, like whether or not to use real or plastic leeches for the cave's interior; and how to keep his bucket of crayfish and minnows alive for tomorrow's special effects. Of course, everyone is concerned about the clouds, because it is Thursday. If the sun doesn't shine for Friday's shoot, there is no waiting around. The cave will have to be moved to a swimming pool in Toronto, as the crew must quit their Mazinaw site on Saturday morning.

Jack-of-all-trades Beeton is also the fellow — culprit perhaps? — responsible for the petroglyph artwork on the steep cliffs bordering the lake. Recalling the Indian rock paintings in Margaret Atwood's best-selling novel, *Surfacing* (upon which the film is based), he grins. "I had to draw a moose... and a few other things." Elaborating

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Joe Bottoms hiding behind a maple leaf

photo: Jack Rowand

on those "other things," Doug Tiller, property master, confides, "Some of those pictures would make Linda Lovelace choke!" (What? Porno petroglyphs?)

But Beeton's biggest baby is a specially fabricated dummy corpse. "Best I've ever seen," praises Big John. "And I've seen the real thing." Except that it is minus hands and toes to preserve them, Beeton wrapped them in newspaper and put them in someone's cooler. When he went back to retrieve them for their reunion with the body, they were gone. Bon appetit! In their place, a package of garlic and bean-sprouts...

The dummy poses a further dilemma. Propped casually against a tree, observer Mike Lawson from Canadian Press dryly sums it up. "You can lead him to water but you can't make him sink." (Oh, for a film called *Submerging*.)

Seems both corpses are temperamental. Beeton still beefs about the dead heron. "It was only the size of a chicken. I thought it would look like a sparrow when we strung it up to the tree. And we had to keep stretching its wings because the muscles had set shut... I don't know how many close-ups they got of it. It was pretty foul!"

Foul or not, he was grateful for producer Beryl Fox's foresight when, discovering the corpse in her barn, she had the presence of mind to shove it in her freezer — in readiness... Two years later it surfaced none the worse for wear, but for a lick of ice cream on its wings.

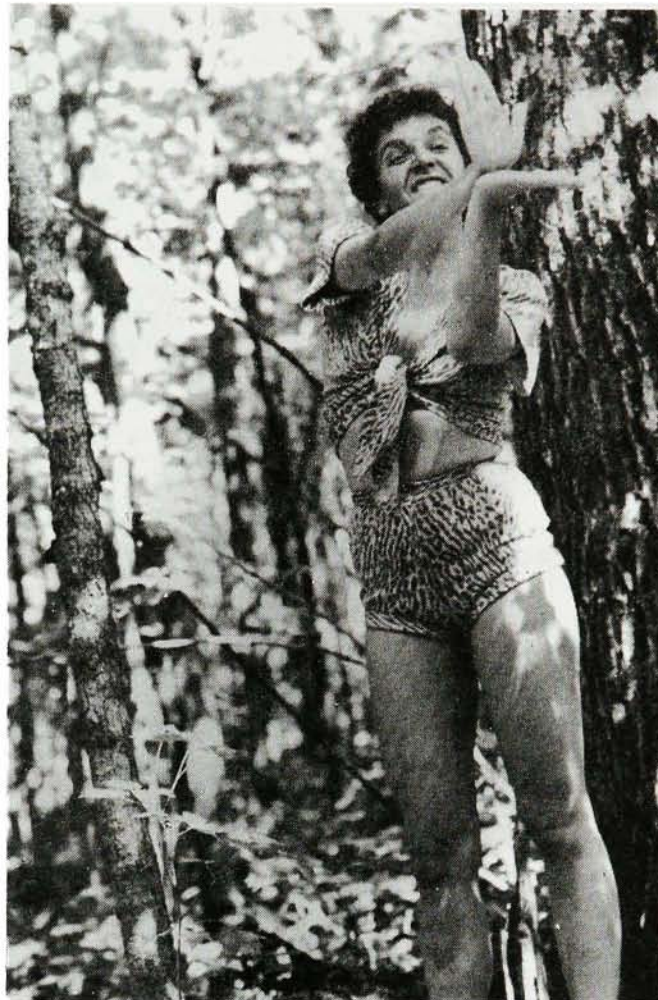
As assistant to the producer Edie Yolles describes the moose-hunting scenes shot on a previous location in Northern

Quebec, one seriously wonders if Fox's description of *Surfacing* ("Basically a wilderness love story"), doesn't leave something out. According to Yolles, "Finding a moose is a big operation. And not everyone wants their moose tranquilized, if they only have one. Luckily there were a lot of them on the reservation," and the Indians co-operated.

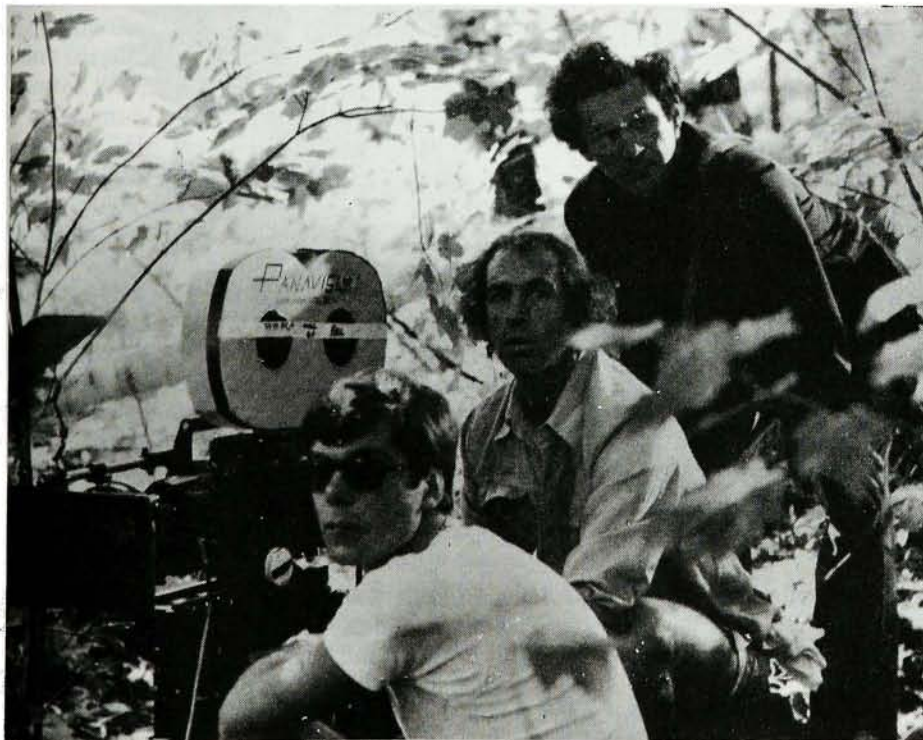
Miraculously, the *Surfacing* cast and crew remain undaunted. Co-producer, Doug Leiterman believes that their survival experiences have actually united them. Take their white water trials for example. In one incident on location at the Palmer Rapids, Richard Leiterman, director of photography; Bob Morgan, canoe expert; and actress, Marg Dragu ("Anna") suffered an accident which might have been fatal. Leiterman describes it, modestly insisting that there were no heroics on his part, "merely a matter of calculation. Bob couldn't see past my camera and misjudged our entry into the rapids, so we tipped. I held onto the camera, but fifteen seconds more and I'd have had to let go." The outcome? He got some great shots of Dragu's face as they dumped. Enter King Baker, the other canoe expert to the rescue, just in time. Even the footage was saved. It was kept in the magazine, put into a pail of ice water from the rapids and shipped to Toronto pronto. (It's important to develop film while it's still wet.) The only thing lost was Twenty minutes of shooting time!

Not to be outdone, actor Joseph Bottoms ("Joe") declined the services of a stuntman during his take, in favor of pitching himself into the raging torrent, only to surface moments later, grinning and unscathed. Beller recalls her own frightening experience. "They needed a close-up of me in the rapids. Our canoe instructor taught us that the rapids would push us up then pull us under in a bouncing motion. Trouble was, the water level was low during our practice session. During the shooting it was much higher. The suction pulled me under and I didn't take a deep enough breath. I was only under a few seconds but it seemed like an eternity."

Meanwhile, Beeton noticed that one of the dixie cups used



Margret Dragu as "Anna":
black flies and cheese cake
photo: Jack Rowand



Claude Jutra (right) directs assistant cameraman Jock Martin (left) and DoP Richard Leiterman, members of a "blue chip" crew
photo: Jack Rowand



Kathleen Beller and R.H. Thompson tense up before shooting the Palmer Rapids

photo: Jack Rowand

to mark a water site "had broken away and floated off to the other bank." He urged that it be retrieved because, "It's no good to have a dixie cup floating by in the wilderness. It screws up your special effects."

In an understatement, Richard Leiterman remarks, "This is a physically demanding film... And there is no time to spare.

We are doing an eight week shoot in five. Dolly tracks and cable runs are nothing in the city, but out here you're always crashing through bush and manoeuvring around boulders." Fortunately, due to the ingenuity of the ACME Grips even the worst terrain is eventually conquered. And much of the credit for remaining on schedule, and within the film's bud-

get, goes to Bob Linnell, production manager. Frequent location changes, bogged-down generator trucks, personal misfortunes facing cast and crew members are only a few of the headaches he weathers. And when the going gets really rough, he's hardly a stickler for protocol. Confides Doug Leiterman, "When one of the women complained about a problem with the toilet, it was Bob who cleared it up." Literally.

In listening to cast and crew alike, it becomes obvious that co-operation is the name of the game; that individual ego-needs are subservient to the pervasive team spirit. Beller, among others, emphasizes their sense of community, contrasting it to her experiences in Los Angeles where, "Actors are more segregated from the crew and unionism is more apparent.

"The crew is blue chip," says Fox. "The best I've ever worked with." Words echoed by Richard Leiterman, who hand-picked many of them himself and feels that the quality of their work has been universally inspiring. "The Americans are no longer afraid to come up here and use Canadian crews because they've been tested."

As **Surfacing** prepares for its final week of shooting in Toronto, an attractive, petite Beryl Fox sits at a table in the Mazinaw Inn, wearily reflecting on the costs of producing her first feature film. After mortgaging her house twice, working for three years without pay and investing all her savings in it, it is no wonder that there have been days when she has "prayed to be hit by a mac truck." Despite her fatigue and all the pressures, she grows increasingly animated as she talks. Obviously, she knows the ropes — has climbed most of them the hard way. But her enthusiasm and courage is infectious. It is suddenly easy to see how she convinced her final supporters — including Doug Leiterman, who admits he had doubts.

Although the male support followed, "the ones who really risked were the women," she qualifies: Women like Margaret Atwood, who chose to gamble so that her novel would be translated into film by a female Canadian producer. One quickly detects a special note in Fox's voice as she refers to her friendship with Atwood, remarking, "She's a very sophisticated lady, a lovely person. She realized changes would have to be made due to the commercial considerations of filmmaking." Her tone intimates her hopes that the film will justly represent Atwood's vision despite deviations in the script. Ultimately, her goal is that **Surfacing** will be "a film with layers," yet one that "appears enormously simple on the screen."

Adapting Atwood's complex novel wasn't easy. Four different scripts were rejected before Bernard Gordon came up with the fifth and final version. In struggling to align their separate visions, "Bernie and I had some terrible, terrible fights," Fox confesses. "But he's a real pro with a strong sense of justice. We both wanted to make it universally relevant... which required a re-thinking of the last ten years of feminism."

The outcome is a screenplay about explicit relationships, tested in the wilderness, as opposed to that of one woman's traumatic inner awakening. The ages of the protagonists have been lowered in an attempt to relate to today's youth. Fox stresses that the film is aimed at men as well as women, because "a woman is not free to love until she's free."

Of director, Claude Jutra, she is confident. "Claude is an actor's director, and he's working with some really splendid

actors. He is not always the easiest director, but they love him, turn themselves inside out for him." Directing his first English language theatrical feature film, **Jutra**, like Fox has had his "moments of exaltation and moments of 'Why the hell am I here?'" He admits that, at times, "I'd like to be making films in Quebec and be what I began as." But he thrives on forward motion too much to turn back. He does regret never being home long enough to fix up his new home in Montreal's Carre St. Louis.

"It's a pleasure to work with Claude," says **Surfacing's** editor, Toni Trow, who has worked with him before. "Some jobs are band-aid jobs. You're re-writing the script in the editing room. You seldom have to do that with Claude's films." Being with the crew on location at the Mazinaw Inn has been a treat for her. "I'll hate to leave here. It's been like summer camp."

With mixed feelings, proprietors of the Mazinaw Inn, Janet and Stan Withell, witness the crew's final day of activity. Stan has been occupied repairing the hot water tank that timed its explosion for two days before the crew's departure, leaving everyone without showers. Representing the general spirit of generosity so apparent at the Inn, Janet is anxious to give due credit to the unsung heroes of her staff — like Bertie, her staff co-ordinator. As for the unconventional nature of her guests, she admits that, at sixty-one years of age, it has been pretty demanding. At times, just feeding them all was chaotic at best. Then with a mischievous glint in her eye she confides, "I've never known who slept where, but twenty-one rooms were rented out for three weeks... Oh, but you can't print that!" No? "Well... sure you can print that."

Would she do it all again? After a pensive drag on her cigarette she suddenly leans forward, deadly serious, and wants this written down. "I've been here thirteen years and I've never washed a guest's socks. But I washed Claude's socks. I even Fleeced them because he's such a delightful man. In all sincerity, they're beautiful people. Some of the most gracious and kindly I've ever met." No doubt, the feeling is mutual. □

Surfacing's Cast and Crew

d. Claude Jutra, 1st asst. d. Rick Thompson, 2nd asst. d. Don Brough, 3rd asst. d. Rocco Gismondi, Keith Locke, sc. Bernard Gordon and based on the novel by Margaret Atwood, ph. Richard Leiterman, camera op. Nick Brook, canoe ex. Bob Morgan, King Baker, sp. ph. effects Arne Boye, underwater consult. "Big John" McLaughlin, 1st asst. camera Jock Martin, 2nd asst. camera Raul Randa, ed. Toni Myers, asst. ed. Catherine Leiterman, sd. mixer Christian Wangler, gaffer Malcolm Kendal, key grip Andy Mulkani, b.b. grip Robert McRae, b.b. electric Gary Deaneault, boom Randy Milligan, a.d. Bill Beeton, set doc. Bill Reid, continuity Pattie Robertson, props Doug Tiller, Stunt per. Gordy Huxtable, Catherine Leiterman, Bob Vince, Julia Leiterman, driver cap. Larry Sullivan, driver Gordy Huxtable, Bob Vince, craft serv. Julia Leiterman, cost. Ann-Marie Tree Newson, makeup Bill Morgan, gener. op. Herbert Geischl, l.p. Joseph Bottoms, Kathleen Beller, R.H. Thomson, Margaret Dragu, casting Claire Walker, Janine Manatis, assoc. p. Michael Zolf, exec. p. Bram Appel, Del Andison, p. Beryl Fox, p.s. asst. Edie Yolles, co. p. Doug Leiterman, Philip F. Hobel, loc. manager Roberta Kip, publicity Edie Yolles, p. manager Robert Linnell, p. sect. Gabrielle Clery, p.c. Surfacing Film Productions, (year) 1979,