



• The extraordinary Linda Griffiths as Pierre, as Maggie and as Henry the journalist (insert)

The taping of Maggie & Pierre

Linda Griffiths - video virtuoso

by Bruce Malloch

It started in 1978 during rehearsals of *Les Maudits Anglais* when actress Linda Griffiths cracked up the cast with a pretty good imitation of Pierre Trudeau. "That's it," shouted inspired director Paul Thompson. "That's your one-person show." Would it ever be. On Feb. 14, 1980, at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto, Griffiths and Thompson launched perhaps the most audacious project ever conceived in Canadian theatre, *Maggie & Pierre*, an imaginative leap to the private side of the most public marriage breakdown in Canadian history. The show became an overwhelming success, and Griffiths would perform it over 150 times in Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Ottawa, Edmonton, Calgary, London and New York until, exhausted by its demands, she turned the role over to another actress. But she had made herself a name: even if purists had bristled at the show's premise, everyone had to concede the energetic, young, vastly talented Montrealer had pulled off an extraordinary *tour de force*.

If Linda Griffiths' talents and creative energies swept a breath of fresh air into the Canadian theatre, they have roared like a gale-force wind into Canadian television production, as those who've seen First Choice's pay-TV adaptation of *Maggie & Pierre* can attest. Produced by Rick Butler and directed by Martin Lavut, this superbly conceived and handsome production, buoyed by Griffiths' awesomely magnificent performance, ranks among this country's finest-ever

television productions and represents the type of programming pay-TV needs to produce if it wants to win subscribers and supporters.

Canadian stage productions adapted for the small screen too often have received lamentable treatment. One could argue inadequate budgets have been to blame, but the real culprits usually have been opportunism and carelessness. Canadian plays, rife with Canadian content and with half the job already done, make an attractive quick fix. Hire a crew, stick a camera here or there, mike the stage and *presto*, a Canadian theatrical production becomes a low-budget Canadian TV drama.

Neither television, theatre nor audiences have been well served by such tactics, and these days more producers will acknowledge the shoot-it-like-a-hockey-game approach is out. Now, they say, you need a concept, an understanding of the conventions of the stage and TV, an aesthetic approach - and a lot more of those two great necessities, time and money.

Maggie & Pierre was licenced to First Choice when the national pay service was pumping \$21 million into independent Canadian production before its self-imposed production freeze last August. The original stage show stood out as exactly the type of material pay-TV was supposed to program - dynamic, contemporary, controversial; it had, in the words of producer Rick Butler, "a lot of heat." According to Griffiths, the only Canadian TV network not afraid to buy the play was First Choice, and it was commissioned by then-programming vice-president Joan Schafer; current First Choice program director John Ryan served as production monitor. Clearly, the TV version's unorthodox

approach, unusual length (75 minutes) and unique style developed in part from its being made outside of conventional broadcast programming channels.

But as with any creative endeavour, it was mostly the hard work, imagination and commitment of principals Griffiths, Thompson, Lavut, Butler and a dedicated crew which made the show's success. Yet *Maggie & Pierre* deserves more attention than it's received to date not only because it demonstrates how to do a right good job adapting a play to television, but because it proves pay-TV can play an important role within a system producing quality indigenous programming. With cultural initiatives in film policy and broadcast strategy concentrated on the National Film Board, the CBC and the Broadcast Fund, it's worth pointing out none of these agencies played a role in *Maggie & Pierre* (although, says Butler, the Canadian Film Development Corp., not the Fund, contributed "a small, much appreciated investment"). Responsible for this program, itself no cultural lightweight, are First Choice, the reprobates who loosed Playboy Weekend upon the nation, and Ontario's Global TV Network, until quite recently a notorious malingering in producing Canadian drama.

Looking back, Griffiths' ambitious one-person show seems ideally suited for television, since the small screen definitely enhances her concept of one actress playing three characters - two of them male. Many offers for a TV adaptation came in, but she and Thompson were protective of their baby. Griffiths adamantly opposed any "documentary approach" which would tape the re-

mounted stage show in a week with no pre-production. "The place to do that was when it played the Royal Alex (the prestigious Toronto theatre whose *Maggie & Pierre* was the first one-woman show to grace its boards)," she said. "We wanted to do a video, we wanted to take it another step creatively. We wanted to make a movie."

Writer and TV producer Rick Butler, who had mounted the stage tour's Ottawa production, secured TV rights in February, 1983. "It came down to money," said Griffiths. "You need money to do it (the show) right." Butler had co-produced the pay-TV version of David Fennario's *Balconville* with then-partner Gary McKeehan of Tapestry Productions and Standard Broadcasting and had produced a one-hour TV special *The Magic of Animation* for TVOntario, but *Maggie & Pierre* would be his first solo flight producing TV drama. He is currently writing and will be producing *The Black Donnellys*, a four-hour miniseries, with Irish television.

With the inception of the Broadcast Fund still down the road, Butler went ahead and licenced the show to First Choice in March, 1983, and later made a production deal with Global. "There is no easy answer to putting deals together," he said. "If the Fund had been in existence a year earlier, my life and the lives of my collaborators would have been made a lot easier. But we went ahead before the Fund and we put all the money on the screen. We have not compromised the quality of the show."

Retaining creative control, Griffiths and Thompson had final say on the director. Those proposing to shoot it live on stage were out, as were those who would do it as a newscast, which Griffiths dismissed as "too obvious." Any-

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● On the set of *Maggie & Pierre*: director Martin Lavut, actress Linda Griffiths, and producer Rick Butler

one suggesting Ultimatt or Chromakey—video processes which combine two separately-shot images together on screen—were shown the door. “The minute I heard the word ‘cutouts’ I said no,” recalls Griffiths. “I couldn’t stand to see the play made into a bad video. I didn’t want to cringe everytime I saw it rerun on TV.”

She and Thompson finally decided on Martin Lavut, who had directed the CBC-TV drama *War Brides*, the independently produced rock concert feature *Bruce Cockburn: Rumours of Glory*, and had honed his video skills on episodes of *Fraggle Rock*. “He was crazy,” comments Griffiths. She liked his cinematic style and affinity for old movies, but what ultimately sold her was Lavut’s admission that not only hadn’t he seen the play, he wasn’t particularly interested in theatre. “It seemed a prime necessity that the director go in there with an open mind,” she said.

Lavut had strong ideas on adapting plays for television, though. “You have to rethink the play, redesign it, redirect it. Don’t think of it as a stage play—find a way to draw the audience in. The audience is once removed if a TV play is shot as an event.

“A good photo catches the moment—a decisive moment. How do you get that on film? You place the actors at risk. Then the audience gets a first generation performance from them. Give an actor a live-minute take, she’s got to act.”

From the outset, those involved wanted the show to achieve a distinctive look. “We wanted to get away from the washed-out, flat video look everyone was so used to and so bored with,” said Butler. Lavut disdained the Ultimatt approach (“It was the obvious thing to do—which is why I didn’t do it.”) except for one shot near the beginning, which he considers “self-parody”. He rejected the conventional TV three-camera set up to shoot feature-film style with one lightweight camera which could move easily into the set. He lighted “from the floor”, letting his video lighting consultant, Barney Stewart, work like a feature film director of photography. What results, says the director, is a fluid visual style “which draws the audience into the set. It’s closer to rock video with its lighting changes and character changes on camera.”

Griffiths, Butler, Lavut agree the single most important factor to the show’s success was three months of extensive preproduction. “Pre-planning is essential,” said Lavut. “Normally, you don’t have three months to prepare, because the costs of rehearsals are so high.” Said Griffiths: “Shooting was a gas, I loved it. It felt like they were making this whole playhouse for me. But the preparation was really hell. Very, very difficult, given all the things we were trying to do.”

“Rehearsal was redesigning, restructuring, reinterpreting the play,” said Lavut. “Luckily, I had a cast of one, and the writer was in the cast.” Still, it didn’t come easy. “Sometimes we’d work all day and only get one idea.” He, Griffiths, and Thompson worked through the play on an empty stage at Theatre Passe Muraille. Griffiths faced a double challenge: rewriting her original text and finding the right style to play her roles for the camera.

Griffiths begins her writing on a rehearsal stage, improvising characters and scenes, trying things out, reacting to suggestions, all while tape-recording the action. She studies the transcripts and returns to the improvisations, and only after she is satisfied with this process does she sit down at the typewriter and work up the final draft.

Stifling a momentary desire “to rewrite the whole thing”, Griffiths mostly pared down the original text. “Cutting was hard, because I wrote the play in stage time and in the rewriting I didn’t have a sense of TV time.” Her yardstick eventually was “Will it hold for camera?” and not “Was it a good line in the play?” Then a major change developed. Lavut pressed Griffiths to justify why one actress should play all three roles; she answered that, at one level, the whole story is played out in Henry’s imagination. “It made me really dig deeper into Henry,” she said, and it resulted in a crucial departure from the stage show. As the character of the journalist grew, so did the play’s symbolic dimension: the basic male-female duality expanded into a series of emotional, intellectual, and artistic triads.

“*Maggie & Pierre* was an enormous challenge—a woman playing two men had to be acceptable to the audience. It had to flow, it had to draw the people into the action,” said Lavut. Forcing the

audience to confront her characters’ emotional truths was the central aspect of Griffiths’ stage performance; she had to find how to duplicate that for the camera. She struggled for a balance between “stageyness” and the cinematic understatement Lavut demanded of her. She even submitted to being videotaped during rehearsal on a bare stage with flat lighting, leaving her ego vulnerable. “I don’t think I’ll ever be afraid of rushes again. It was just awful to see those dailies,” Griffiths admitted, but it helped her pull her performance together. Said Lavut: “Linda’s an extremely brave actress to go through with that, she has more courage than I have. She had to redirect her whole performance, but she succeeded. She’s a natural film actress.”

Beside rehearsal, Lavut and Griffiths screened old Hollywood movies of the forties and fifties, studying the *film noir* look they wanted to evoke in the opening scene. As lighting, sets, costume and makeup were integral to the overall production design, the entire script was storyboarded to give the technical personnel a head start. Lighting consultant Stewart and art director Charles Dunlop frequently attended rehearsal: when Dunlop designed Maggie’s bedroom, described by Griffiths as “the perfect thirteen year-old’s bedroom, right out of the Eaton’s catalogue,” the actress picked out the wallpaper.

The preparation paid off, because after months of rehearsal Griffiths developed “an absolute conviction” she could accomplish the role. “When we hit the set, I was gold,” she said. “It was wonderful to be ready. For an actor, it’s so rare that you are.”

The actual shooting took place in seven days during August, 1983, at Global Studios, with a combined crew of independents and Global personnel. The workshop atmosphere kindled during preproduction sustained its momentum through the shoot. “People really, really worked,” said Griffiths. “They came in early to re-do scenes, they contributed suggestions, there was tremendous loyalty.” Gathering confidence from their star’s assured performance, the crew’s enthusiasm and energy increased

as they started to believe the long hours would pay off into more than just another TV show. Mostly film people thrown into a video environment for the first time, what they produced was a hybrid of film and video technique.

On his copy of the stage play, Lavut wrote: “The first shot has to be spectacular.” With Rough Trade’s “Fashion Victim” on the soundtrack, the shot begins with a slow disclosure—a pawn shop window with Pierre Trudeau’s face flickering on a TV set. The camera pulls back to a mirror revealing Henry’s face, then moves back further to reveal Henry under a bridge—his new “home”—then glides through the set, following Henry around pillars and down alleys. Henry talks to the viewer, his delivery a parody of the hardboiled movie detective; he stops to answer a ringing telephone. “I’ve outgrown journalism,” he growls as he quickly hangs up, the camera following him out into the rain. Light from a streetlamp filters softly through mist. John Mills-Cockell’s piano score pulses on the soundtrack. Henry stops again, his face now half in darkness, but keeps talking: “They were like King Arthur and Guinevere, Clymenestra and Agamemnon...” He lights a cigarette, walks out into the Ottawa street. Red light now permeates the set and the Parliament buildings loom in the background. A gong rings faintly through the night, and Henry, telling the viewer his story contains “Something that offended everybody,” walks on in the darkness. He removes his hat and shaking his head, soft brown tresses fall to his shoulders. The background changes from black to sandy-pink, and Henry’s face, softened by lighting, has become Maggie’s. It’s the second scene, five minutes into the show, and there hasn’t been a cut.

It’s the first of several stunning character changes in the show, and indicative of the craft, intelligence and innovation which distinguishes the production. According to Butler, the show’s total budget was a little over \$300,000. “But I think anybody looking at the show would be surprised,” he said. Working in video kept costs low. Lavut and Griffiths took advantage of the technology to replay takes during the shoot. Griffiths admits during one scene she didn’t really know how to play it right until after she’d seen the first take replayed on set. The advantages won her over. “I began to see the possibilities of video, rather than bemoan the fact it was not feature film.”

Editing was swift. “With videotape, you have the luxury of doing it right away. If you want a different dissolve, you just change the dial from 28 to 30 and there it is,” said editor Terry Pickford. After the shoot, Lavut took three weeks to make notes as the tape was marked with a time code in preparation for the first off-line edit, which took two days. Lavut took four more weeks for a paper edit before doing the second off-line edit in another two days. The final

● Producer Rick Butler



Photo: Lightwaves

on-line cut took 20 hours.

The music came together smoothly. John Mills-Cockell, at the time doing a show at Toronto Free Theatre, wrote the original score in two days. "It was like a Christmas gift," said Griffiths. Two Rolling Stones songs were used in the show, "Paint It Black" and "Wild Horses", but those aren't the Stones on the soundtrack. Producer Butler put together a sound-alike band and recorded the tunes at Comfort Sound in Toronto — and he says he hasn't met anyone yet who can tell the difference.

Pickford, a Canadian who spent eight years working in Los Angeles for the U.S. television industry, says *Maggie & Pierre* changed his outlook on Canadian production. "It really illustrates what can

be done in TV, and what can be done by film personnel in TV." When he was in Hollywood in 1982, says Pickford, "Film people were just starting to realize they'd better learn video if they wanted to continue editing. In the late seventies, video was considered a toy. Only recently has there been recognition (from film people) of its real potential for artistic expression."

First Choice has licenced the show essentially for five years. The pay network has it exclusively the first two years, except for eight playdates on TVOntario in year two. It's available to broadcast TV the third year, and Global has bought one playdate for Ontario. First Choice re-acquires it in years four and five. Video cassette right are avail-

able at the end of the first year.

No TV sale has been made to the United States or Europe, though a British distributor, London Films, is handling European sales and Butler travelled to MIP-TV in Cannes this spring to promote the show. Though he says it's "reasonably possible to get all its costs back in Canada," Butler is hopeful *Maggie & Pierre* can also be successful in foreign markets. "It's as handsome as anything produced by BBC or the U.S. networks. I've seen nothing that makes it look pale. The only thing standing in its way on the international market is its subject matter. Some people might feel it's too Canadian for a foreign audience."

If anything disappoints Griffiths, it's public misconceptions of her play.

"People who don't know the show think it's tied to current events and assume it's no longer relevant today. I feel the show can surface in five years and be able to stand on its own." And please, says the actress, don't call it satire. "I hate that word and its connotation that the play is spiteful." Director Lavut agrees: the show, subtitled "A fantasy of love, politics, and the media," is not really satire, preferring instead the term romance. "Some of it is funny, but it's not an anti-Trudeau diatribe. It's a feminist look at Canadian history." Whatever you choose to call it, if time proves that the only good thing produced by Canadian pay-TV's first year is *Maggie & Pierre*, it's a legacy the whole country can be proud of.

Martin Lavut's *Maggie & Pierre*

It often seems Canadian television dramas have existed exclusively in the realistic mode, the country's most influential genre being docudrama, those issue-oriented hybrids of fiction and fact which frequently achieve neither. Perhaps that's why the pay-TV adaptation of Linda Griffiths and Paul Thompson's hit play *Maggie & Pierre* feels so refreshingly different: though its subject is undisputedly factual, its approach is decidedly *not* realistic. Expressionistic, poetic, even surreal might better describe this magnificent one-person show starring Griffiths and directed by Martin Lavut.

This TV production has risen impressively to the original material: not since *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* has the English Canadian production industry so skillfully transformed such a hard piece of cultural currency to the screen. In both cases, not surprisingly, the original authors contributed greatly to the success. Linda Griffiths' tremendous resourcefulness as an actress shows fully here as she accomplishes three roles, two of them men, one the Prime Minister of Canada. If that's not enough, as co-author (with Paul Thompson) she has pared down the screenplay to a lean and efficient 75 minutes. Not padded to meet network time requirements, the shortened stage script achieves a taut TV rhythm of its own.

For director Lavut, whose film *Bruce Cockburn: Rumours of Glory* was that cinematic rarity, the compelling rock concert documentary, *Maggie & Pierre* represents another triumph in a perilous genre. Plays can start slowly: the audience has paid good money for their seats and no one's going to walk out after 15 minutes. On television, though, especially cable TV where converters have spawned a corps of "zappers" ready to change channels at the slightest provocation, programs must grab the audience immediately and hold them. How? It can "jolt" them with titillating bits — some sitcom analysts prescribe a success formula of one jolt every seven seconds — or do it the old-fashioned way, mixing quality writing and performance with compelling cinematic technique.

Lavut has taken the hard road. An avid photographer, he has placed great emphasis on the production's visual approach, designing fluid camera moves and striking lighting contrasts more sophisticated than those seen in the

average Canadian feature. He has relied only minimally on realism. The characters evoke the *real* Maggie & Pierre, but verisimilitude is not the intent: when Griffiths delivers Pierre's convention speech, the campaign posters are of her, not the real Pierre Trudeau. Careful attention to detail has been taken in the art direction and set design, as with Maggie's little-girl-perfect pink bedroom or the interiors of 24 Sussex Drive, with the furniture slightly larger than life-size, where the clutter of books, statues, and an inordinate number of portraits smother the scene with historical fixity, evoking the oppressive-ness of power.

The stage show's appealing character transformations have been stunningly accomplished for TV. With the camera on her bare feet as she rolls out of bed, Maggie steps into black oxfords, then into men's trousers, and as the camera pans to her face she has become Henry, trenchcoat on, microphone in hand, pursuing Pierre. In the press club scene, the characters of Maggie and Pierre change back and forth in the same perfectly credible shot through the magic of lighting and Griffiths' performance. For these marvellous transitions alone the show is worth seeing: they indicate a creative refusal not to fall back on the full conventions of realism.

It's ironic the production revives the story's original events on television, the medium which more than any shaped the national consciousness of Pierre and Margaret's public images. Television, which borrows dramatic techniques for its tidy little 90-second newsclips, is plundered by drama for source material: the confrontation on the steps between Henry and Pierre over the War Measures Act is lifted right off the six o'clock news. But the news media's pat assumptions clearly aren't enough to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of Griffiths and Thompson, who move the text a step further — into an imaginary world whose hypotheses nevertheless bear a sharp resemblance to the viewer's own personal experiences.

Though it makes the points that sex is political and politics sexy, the show ultimately succeeds through its hard, unflinching look at the discrepancy between how Canadian society exists and how it perceives itself. It stabs the country's complacency, narcissism, and guilt. Experimenting with "lifestyle", Maggie wonders what to do with her life: "Maybe I'll open a school for retarded children. Maybe I'll join the revolution and the Black Panthers. Maybe I'll drop out and do lots of really good drugs." Whatever her choice, her conscience will torment her: "Margaret, you still sound like a phony." Her insecurity and self-absorption, typically Canadian,

leaves her more worried of what others think than how she feels about herself.

Pierre does not share her insecurities. As an angry young man in Paris, he rises at six each morning to splash his body cold water. "Why? To be strong. What for? To fight. Who? Myself, and whoever else dares me." His determination and individuality bring him to power, but the play asks, What kind of person wants to be Prime Minister? One who envisions a Just Society which will "cast down the totems, break the taboos", or one, intoxicated by the job's uninhibited adulation, shrugs at the camera and says "It's hard to resist."

Maggie and Pierre's May-December marriage ideally could achieve a synthesis of complementary opposites, yet the play offers no grand vision of love. The real terms of their marriage are embodied in Pierre's motto, "Reason Over Passion", and the emotional chasm between them is manifested in Maggie's speech in the garden. "It looks like wings beating underneath the water," she says of raindrops falling on a pond. "Pierre would say, 'No, Margaret, it's just the intersection of the wind and the rain causing that configuration on the surface. But I know it's wings.'"

If Maggie is Passion and Pierre Reason, the third party, Henry the journalist, is Judgment. A passive recorder but active moralizer, Henry fills many functions. On one level, the story can be said to be played out in Henry's imagination, neatly taking the pressure off the show's use of real people and real events. With Henry, the play can explore the parasitic/symbiotic relationship between politicians and journalists, as when Pierre solicits marital advice from Henry. "Don't you have someone else you can talk to, like a friend?" asks the uncomfortable journalist. "No," responds Pierre, surprised at the question.

Canada's mythmakers and pop heroes have more often been journalists than writers and actors (who's *really* the bigger star, Barbara Frum or Gordon Pinsent?) so it's apt that Henry explains the country's attraction to Pierre: he wasn't what Canadians were like, he was what they wished they were like. "Pierre Trudeau? Oh yeah, just another typical Canadian. French? Sure, most of us are *bilingue parfait*. Sexy? It's the long winters." But after the October Crisis, Henry supplies the ammunition to turn this adulation into hatred. "We believed that this was one country that wasn't backed up by guns. He rubbed our noses into the fact that it was." But what exactly was betrayed, freedom or illusion?

After their marriage collapses, Maggie runs off to (where else?) the United States to "have fun" while Pierre shrouds himself in solitude and prayer. In these

final scenes, as Pierre bares his soul to Henry and Maggie delivers a searing indictment on hypocrisy from the Studio 54 dance floor, Griffiths makes the viewer confront her characters' humanity, forcing the audience to suspend moral judgment. She turns the tables, and suddenly it's clear that Pierre and Maggie have been standing in for a vast segment of Canadian society, affluent, complacent, bored, who live in a world of twice-a-year tropical vacations and of running off to Europe with "Five thousand dollars of Daddy's money", a world "run by Mums and Dads in their rented tuxedos and one long dress" where the kids sneak off to the bathroom to smoke a joint.

"Oh, we're so together, aren't we, ladies? We're so on top of it all," says Maggie to her legion of accusers, her voice wicked with sarcasm (her indictment no doubt influences Henry's decision to abandon journalism.) As Maggie dances at Studio 54, oblivious to her detractors, she has finally achieved freedom from the guilt that so tortured her youth. But she has paid her price, and her journey has led only to that den of narcissism, the disco. "Which do you think is my best feature: my legs... or my bum?" asks kinky Maggie, and the audience is allowed the illusion they're off the hook.

The play ends where it began, at a pawn shop under the bridge where Henry now makes his home, the TV set in the window playing the national anthem (the NFB's *Oh Canada* film, no less). The camera pulls back to reveal the crew, sets, and lights: a post-modern admission of the artifice. On the soundtrack, mad Henry's voice rambles: "An amnesia is spreading over the land... But I'll remember." Given the quality, strength, and imagination of this remarkable TV production, audiences will remember, too.

Bruce Malloch ●

MAGGIE & PIERRE d. Martin Lavut p. Rick Butler sc. Linda Griffiths with Paul Thompson orig. mus. & comp. John Mills-Cockell a.d. Gery Wilkinson creative cons. Paul Thompson orig. prod. Theatre Passe Muraille art. d. Charles Dunlop cost. des. Mary Jane McCarty make-up Shonagh Jabour hair Judy Cooper-Sealy, Ivan Lynch props. Enrico Campana asst. props. Gerry Wilkinson dance choreo. Norrey Drummond p. man. Jane Reid p. sup. Greg Copeland staging sup. Don Mortimer light. cons. Adrian Stewart light d. Adrian Goldberg light. ops. Bruce Whiteford, Tom Fennessey tech. d. Ed Yen audio sup. John McEwen boom Gord Chakra sd. efx. Ralph Cole, Roger Harris, Morgan Earl cam. Simon Dalrymple, Les Medon video Eric Posner, Richard Gundersen VTR Peter Light post-p. cons. Linda Pickford p. assts. Tim Sabourin, Bob Sorger, Ron French TV assts. Pat McEleney, Derwyn Barker grip Michael O'Connor sup. ed. Terry Pickford post audio Greg Zekkou sp. tnx. John Ryan studio rec. Comfort Sound p.c. Tapestry Productions, produced with the participation of the Canadian Film Development Corporation dist. First Choice Canadian Communications Corp. running time 75 min. lp. Linda Griffiths.