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 soared 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 handled 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 Schaefer; 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 those proposing to shoot it live, responsible for 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 mini-series, 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 news cast, which Griffiths dismissed as "too obvious."

Former Cinemag reporter Bruce Malloch is a Toronto freelance writer.
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. "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 hard. Very, very difficult, given all the things we were trying to do."

"Rehearsal was redesigning, restructuring, 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 rewrite of the production design, the entire script was pared down to a catalogue, after months of rehearsal Griffiths developed a line edit in another two days. The final script was a litte over $300,000. Griffiths mostly pared the script and scenes, trying things out, reacting to suggestions, all while tape-recording the action. She studies the transcripts and approves the improvisations, and only after she is satisfied with this process does she sit down at the typewriter and work up the final draft.

Stilling 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.

"Actors were 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 undertone Lavut demanded of her. She even submitted to being video-taped 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 didn't change her performance. Griffiths added, "for me, this was easier than any clothes rehearsal." - 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 make-up were integral to the overall production design, the entire script was storyboarded to give the technical personnel a head start. Griffiths said it 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. After months of rehearsal Griffiths developed an "absolute conviction" she could accomplish the role. "When we hit the set, I wasgold," 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 work shop atmosphere kindled during preproduction sustained its momentum through the shoot. "People really, really worked," said Griffiths. "They came in in an atmosphere of confidence. We were creating something that 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 another 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," the shot begins with a slow disclosure - a pavement 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 grows as he quickly hangs up, the camera following him out into the rain. Light from a streetlamp filters softly through the 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, Cymenestra and Agamemnon." He lights a cigarette, walks out into the Ottawa street. Red light now permeates the room where he built a video studio. A Harpo Marx loom in the background. A gong rings faintly through the night, and Henry, telling the viewer his story contains "something that offended everybody." he walks on in the darkness. He removes his hat and shaking his head, soft brown tresses fall to his shoulders. The back-ground changes from black to sandy-pink, and Henry's face, softened by light, 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 litle 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. It's quick." 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. "I took four more weeks for a paper edit before doing the second offline edit in another two days. The final
Martin Lavut's Maggie & Pierre

It often seems Canadian television dramas have existed exclusively in the past - a time when virtuoso performances and postmodern iconography were the rule. The Canadian film industry has always been a bit of a third wheel, not quite as sophisticated as those seen in the U.S. approach, designing fluid camera moves and shooting over a sound-alike band and recorded to music. Maggie and 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 more convincing than the facts of the situation. Maggie and Pierre represents another triumph in a long line of Canadian film achievements.