

Transition

Edmonton's film Mothers reflect on a changing industry

by Michael Douglas

It was Mother's Day in Edmonton and so I decided to pay some visits to my favorite film Mothers to see how life and the changing film industry was treating them. The real mothers had left town - Anne Wheeler to finish *One's A Heifer*, her Atlantis/NFB co-production, and Grace Gilroy had just zoomed off to the airport and a plane to Toronto to begin work as production manager on *Evergreen*, an NBC mini-series that would eventually take her to Yugoslavia.

The film Mothers' 'World Headquarters' is a handsome two-story house overlooking the Saskatchewan River Valley, and home to at least four Edmonton production companies. Several of the boys were warming up for the next Oilers' play-off game. It was a beautiful day, summer was approaching and we all knew that the end of a chapter in our collective lives was just around the corner. A uniquely supportive film community where competitors are best friends and all had graduated through hundreds of sponsored films, now looks hopefully upon break-out productions to launch the 'household name' phase of our careers. With 22 motion picture projects in various stages of development through the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corp. loan fund, Edmonton's film Mothers are experiencing that most important moment in the birth of an industry, namely, transition.

Down in the green and jungly Riverdale neighborhood, in the co-op community called Sundance, Allen Stein was beaming from the back porch. His partner, Mairi Maclean, was upstairs nursing their brand-new baby girl and Allen confessed that he had missed his first script deadline because he'd been close to tears for most of the previous four days, overwhelmed at the joys of fatherhood and their daughter, Abby.

Allen has just swallowed the disappointment of being removed from the package of a low-budget feature. Someone in Toronto felt his clusters of awards and film credits were not quite enough to produce a feature and Allen was shaking it off.

Before him, he and Mairi and the *Shooting Stars* project; a dramatized documentary on the Edmonton Grads World Champion Women's Basketball Team, winners, of four Olympic Gold medals from 1924 to 1936. In the four trips, they had never lost a game. The film would feature a familiar mix of recreated dramatizations, historical documentary footage, and sync interviews. They had generated strong support from the CBC and the NFB, old and

Michael Douglas is a producer in Edmonton.

favorite clients of Allen and Mairi's. But on this Sunday afternoon, Allen was a little distracted and preferred instead to talk of Mairi's successful home-birth. No matter how his film fortunes would twist in the summer of '84, little Abby would provide the great equalizer. Allen would hear shortly about a contract to co-script a feature for a Montreal producer and as he looked back on his first interest in films, as a means of accomplishing social change, he couldn't help but be a little amused and justifiably hopeful. He had been a founding member of Filmwest, a relatively large collection of extraordinary talents who were probably right when they considered themselves to be the "best in the West" in the mid-'70s and at the least correct in its claim to be, as Allen put it, "the first local production company with intellectual pretensions."

Anne Wheeler and Tom Radford were also comrades at Filmwest and while Anne was beginning to dally in feature films, Tom had become executive producer of the NFB's Northwest Studio. Tom was biting his lip; tomorrow he would head off to Montreal to find out the fate of his beloved institution.

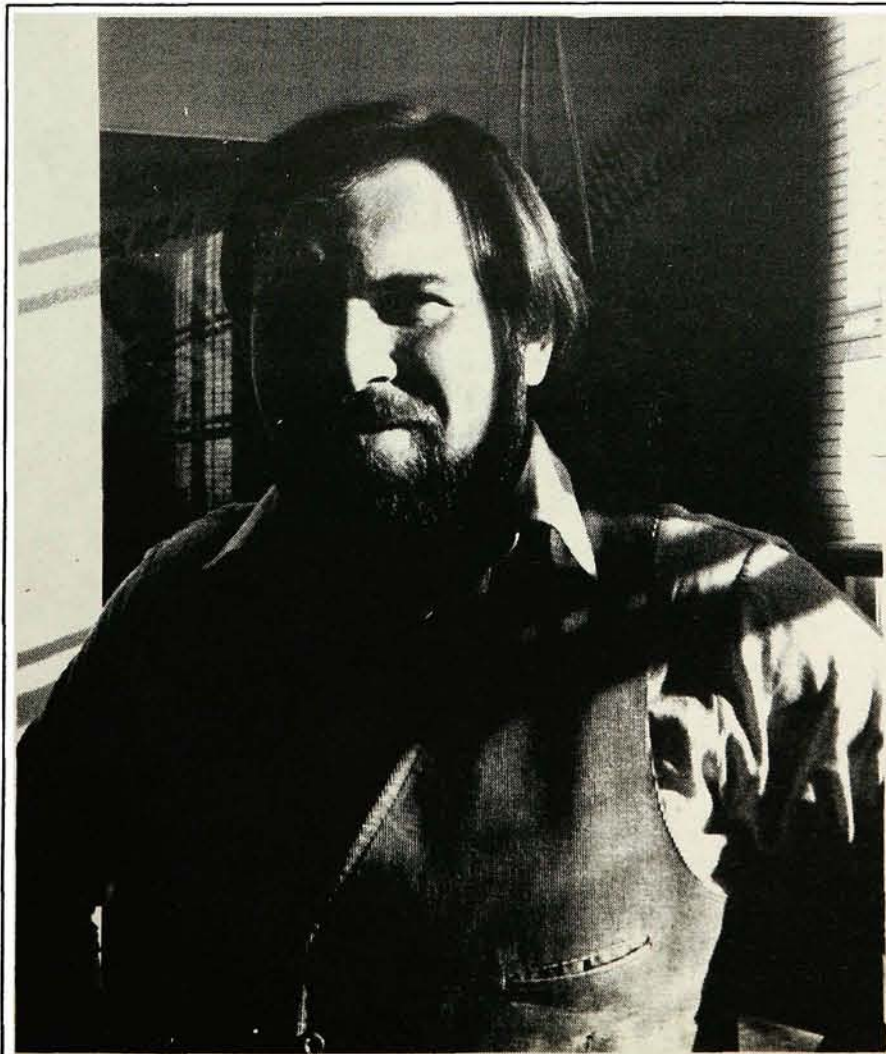
"Over the last forty years, the NFB is the only cultural institution in Canada that has achieved world fame. It has a tradition of excellence and I'm determined to see that the NFB tradition stays intact. I just love the films. If the government trashes it, then they'll have ruptured a great Canadian film tradition that has made us the uniquely talented nation in the world in respect of documentaries and animated shorts. And where did it all come from?"

Tom would be immensely relieved on his return.

Another moment in the evolution of the Edmonton film scene had been the Toronto invasion of 1975-76. Michel Lalonde was one of the many talented invaders. And on Mother's Day, this single parent managed to convince his four-year-old son that, while helping with the housework was great, he could dispense with vacuuming the pieces of his puzzle. Young René was easily convinced to try the hall instead and Michel sat down at the kitchen table to finish his coffee, keeping one eye on his industrious helper.

René was his inspiration, Michel declared on his acceptance of his second straight Best Editor of the year award at the Alberta Film and Television Awards broadcast over CBC. René jumped out of his seat at his father's dedication and would not soon forget the night his papa talked about him on television.

On the kitchen table, two magazines sat side-by-side, one featured classic movies while the other explored new video technology. Michel smiled at the irony of the contrast. Around the corner from the kitchen in what was once the dining room are two flat-bed Moviola



● Young man going west: Vancouver-bound Arvi Liimatainen

PRODUCTION

editing machines. Next week he'd undertake his first video editing job. A few weeks later he'd be gripping on a feature film. You had to be flexible to flourish in Edmonton these days.

Peter Campbell is easily one of the Edmonton Mothers' most charming survivors, and a former roommate of Michel's while they were studying at Ryerson in Toronto. For a little over five years, Peter had been a partner in the Douglas Film Group and had written and directed dozens of documentaries on everything from man and the environment to English as a second language.

This summer Peter's career clock would be ticking deadlines. He had just returned from the Legion Hall in Tignish, P.E.I., where half the village had swarmed to enjoy Peter's latest NFB documentary entitled *Alberta Bound*.

Peter shuffled through the proposals and background materials in preparation for his next trip, to the Banff Television Festival. He was checking for anything forgotten and feeling philosophical.

"I have to work really hard to maintain my self-respect and feel that I am doing the right thing with my life and have great respect for other people. It's really all you have.

"If I'm more broke now than ever before, I'm able to survive with the help of my friends. I believe in a karmic balance: the better you can be, the better you can become. I see so many faults in myself that I have a very hard time faulting anyone else. But overall, I have the feeling that I'll be very successful in this business. I'm lucky. I'm counting on it. And I'm in the process of figuring out how to get there. I know that I have to keep on developing projects and working with the best people I can find."

Peter was about to cash his first cheque from Telefilm Canada and it felt great. They'd loved his outline entitled *Hail Alley* written by Michael Mercer, of *Beachcombers* fame. Peter realized that it might take him the next three years to put it all together, less he hoped, but he was off to a good start. *Hail Alley* was based on a documentary he directed in 1978 entitled *The Alberta Hail Project* profiling an exotic weather modification program and he knew at the time that the subject made a terrific backdrop for an epic romantic adventure in the skies.

In the meantime, *Chez Burritto's*, an adult situation comedy for late-night pay or free television, was plodding along its winding development road. Peter and co-producer Arvi Liimatainen were hoping their comedy, built around the crazy characters who inhabit a Burlesque Palace known as *Chez Burritto's* would get a bite from Showtime, Playboy or some other American partner, to complement the support they had received from Superchannel and the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation. Before leaving for Banff, Peter would drop in at 'World Headquarters', to check with his film editor, Christopher Tate, on the progress of their 'no-budget' hour-length documentary on the raucous and uninhibited comic activities both behind and on-stage during the presentation of the Mr. and Ms. Nude Entertainer of the Year Awards, titled *Another Naked Night*.

Chris Tate was a little down that day, tired of working deferred projects and ducking bill collectors. He had edited several of the most prestigious documentaries produced in Western Canada in the last ten years and was putting the



● Edmonton's mothers of invention: (top) Mark Slippe; (center) Peter Haynes and Jorge Montesi; (bottom) Allen Stein

finishing touches to the music tracks on *Another Naked Night*. He contemplated whether performing as a sound mixer and IATSE steward on an upcoming feature film would enable him to work elsewhere with ease.

His loose, creative style complemented Campbell's and together they had celebrated some legendary nights on the town, the most recent of which may have accounted for Chris' feeling a little down. But the sun was streaming in the windows, the music was good, the picture was good and his best friend, Dave

McAree, had arrived from Toronto to help cheer the Oilers on to victory. Mac was taking a rest here with his old Edmonton friends and his bottles of brown buddies after an exhausting stint as assistant director on the last cycle of SCTV.

Down the hall on the second floor of 'World Headquarters', Marke Slipp sat behind his editing table in a sumptuous editing room that featured a 16/35mm Intercine flatbed and one of the best views that money could buy. Marke admitted that he liked being a big fish in

a small pond (he's 6'3"). He'd worked on something like 200 films and found it a little frustrating that folks he knew with less experience and wear-with-all were working on bigger projects in Vancouver and back East. But he had a Department of Defence film to produce, a profile of controversial architect Douglas Cardinal ahead of him, was really enjoying his creative work-mates and was sitting on a secret he was valiantly trying to keep to himself. The summer of '84 would see him launch into married life and a brand new set of responsibilities. He

PRODUCTION



● (top) Peter Campbell; (center) the boys (Tate, Lalonde, J.P. Finn, McAree, Campbell) warming up for an Oilers' game in front of World HQ; (bottom) Tom Radford

had a hard time keeping his smile from joining each ear. He also knew that marriage would probably prompt him to leave 'World H.Q.', realign his lifestyle and punctuate an end to this challenging chapter in his career. Changes are exciting; besides, after the first period, the Oilers were winning.

Everybody knew some changes were inevitable with the imminent departure of Arvi Liimatainen for Vancouver. Arvi, Grace Gilroy and Doug Cole, partners in Kicking Horse Productions, are the main tenants at 'World Headquarters' and

Arvi's departure, coupled with other transitions, would affect the viability of maintaining the place.

Arvi had just returned from Vancouver after directing an episode of *Beachcombers* and would return there in August to stay. In the meantime, he looked forward to moving into production offices for the feature film, *Drastic Measures*, where he'd perform as production manager in a building he once entered many years before, applying for a job in the warehouse. Luckily they turned him down and he went on to a

communications production course and the CBC. In 1977, he was in at the start of what was an instantly successful production company, Kicking Horse.

At the end of this summer he allowed himself to hope that the film script he was promoting would develop from letters of support into his first feature directing assignment.

Born and raised in Edmonton — "after 34 years anybody'd get restless" Arvi sighed — he couldn't wait to get to the ocean. The diversity of his career had received a shot in the arm the previous

week, when he'd received good reviews for his performance as one of the lead "heavies" in a remarkable low-budget feature entitled *For Sentimental Reasons*.

"I just loved seeing myself up on the screen and I'd never have got that chance anywhere else. I've learned so much from the variety of experiences and people I've known here, I know I'll miss it. For a little while anyway." Yet we all knew that few people who move to Vancouver move back again, no matter where they are from.

Jorge Montesi and Peter Haynes were joint winners by acclamation of the 'Filmmakers Guts and Persistence Award' for 1984. Their feature entitled *For Sentimental Reasons* had recently been sold to ten countries at the American Film Market and was slated to open in Canada in September. Inspired by Wim Wender's *My American Friend*, Jorge had starred in, directed, and edited the movie. Partner Haynes had co-starred, written and produced it. They'd used up all of Jorge's life savings of \$12,000 and had deferred the balance of their \$230,000 budget. When they started out, few felt they could pull it off including themselves. The fact Jorge finished the film was more an act of responsibility than of faith.

While living in the editing room on the third floor of a Granby Street house, Jorge screened his first cut for a distributor. The distributor bounced in, his gold chains jangling and insisted after watching ten minutes of it on fast forward that the film had no rhythm. Next.

Folks at pay-TV couldn't make up their minds if they would come and look at it or not. But when he called Pan-Canadian, two representatives were there the next day and, after half-an-hour, declared that they wanted to buy world rights and would supply some of the money needed to shoot the guerrilla war sequences that open the film.

When it was completed, Pan-Canadian sold everything but Canada, to Equitable Productions of Washington, D.C. They blew it up to 35mm, took it to L.A. and Cannes, got solid response, examined Haynes' books, disbelieving their incredible budget, and on verification, offered the Montesi/Haynes team a deal for three more low-budget pictures.

After close to three years, their persistence had paid off and they were on their way toward making movies wherever they wanted. They'd do the first few in Edmonton to repay the faithful who'd lent them their support and looked forward to paying back all the deferees by the spring of '86. These new productions will continue along the *film noir* route and Jorge looked forward to leaving the acting chores to someone else the next time around. Jorge was gratified the distributors had a problem. They felt the film was too artistic to market as an exploitation picture and one had even compared it to *My American Friend*. Jorge, a reserved and humble man, allowed his head to sail out into the clouds for just a moment.

He had left Chile after the Pinochet coup to make opportunities for himself in a new and open country. And amongst his peers in Edmonton, he, Peter, and the rest of the team were a source of pride. The popular sentiment being that when one succeeded we all succeeded.

As for me, I hopefully had some deals to do, some scripts to write and, like the rest of us Mothers, some transitions to make.

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