Don Haig: Self-Portrait

by Pat Thompson

Don Haig was this year's winner at the Genies of the Air Canada Award "in recognition of outstanding contributions to the business of filmmaking in Canada." He's never been 'written up'; his profile is low; he doesn't keep photos or mementoes of his life in film, and he's not keen on interviews. However, to a vast legion of filmmakers across the country, he is mentor, counsellor and, perhaps, godfather.

For over 20 years his company in Toronto — Film Arts — has been a first-rate post-production facility handling many television award winners: This Hour Has Seven Days; Vietnam: The Mills of the Gods; The National Dream; the fifth estate; Homage to Chagall — and that's just the tip of the iceberg. Film Arts has also produced in excess of 100 short films, documentaries, specials and features covering a broad spectrum from sports through nature and science to drama.

The company picks up prizes regularly. A sampling includes The Wilderness Award for One More River and the Mills of the Gods; Canadian Film & Television Association awards for Truck Stars, David Milne, and this year for Alex Colville: The Splendour of Order, which also won at the Atlantic Film Festival and the Yorkton International Short Film & Video Festival.

Many filmmakers have been able to make a first feature, or continue a career, through the practical business acumen of Don Haig. He's a producer in the best sense of the word. He doesn't just find the money and package the deal, but gives the kind of stability and encouragement a filmmaker needs, especially when putting a toe into the shark-infested waters of the feature-film industry. A first-time director gets good technical support all along and into post-production and, most importantly, visibility via distribution.

Don Haig was interviewed in Toronto a couple of days before the 1985 Genie Awards. He'd just paid a flying visit to Filmex in Los Angeles for the world premiere of Brigitte Bermain's Artie Shaw: Time Is All You've Got, her second documentary after BIX, and he was executive producer on both.

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Patricia Thompson is editor of the Canadian Film Digest.

Let's start right at the beginning! I was born in Winnipeg in 1935 — a Cancerian. As a child my father took me to see a couple of films and I had terrible nightmares. But I remember Jane Withers, Donald O'Connor, Peggy Ryan and a couple of Shirley Temple movies, but it's like a series of snapshots. I really got hooked in a strange way when we lived the St. Vitale suburb of Winnipeg. I went behind a movie theatre one day and in the garbage was a bunch of trims, pieces the projectionist had sliced out. Fascinating! It was like mercury-touching. I couldn't believe it. I kept going behind the theatre and then, at around seven or eight, I can't quite remember how, I found out there was a long row of film exchanges downtown. In the back lane you could look in the windows and see the girls inspecting the films. I used to hang around there in the summer holidays and one day the girls at Paramount let me in... probably because I was cheap labour. And they taught me how to rewind film at 10-years-old. I still have a name round there — everyone calls me Donnie.

I went on hanging round theatres and, while going to school, at about 16, got a job as a doorman-usher in the State Theatre on Selkirk Avenue in the north-end of Winnipeg. That's where I first ran across Larry Zolf and Beryl Fox at the Yiddish and Ukrainian movies sandwiched in-between American films. I did grade nine and passed into grade 10, but by then I was so mad about getting
into the film business that I was allowed to quit school.

I got a job in the inspection room at MGM repairing films. That was the heyday when we were sending maybe CBC, and started to go out to small towns in

I was absolutely fascinated. In this period we made some very good films like One More River which won a lot of awards, and Beryl Fox’s The Mills of the Gods on Vietnam. They had been a progression, as far as I was concerned, up to 1950 when the studio was kind of up. It was starting to work all right, and then I began to feel wander-lust. I thought I’m going to continue to do this, and I’ve never been to Europe.

I met Allan King who had an office and a company, and a camera crew and some editing rooms in England. He said that I could probably cut some stuff over there for shipping back. He was doing Rickshaw for a few months and got kind of tired of that - there was nothing to do.

I remembered Allan saying he had some stuff made in Canada plus a projector and a moviola. So I said to him, “I’ll make a deal with you. If I can go over and set up a little edit at RCA and do some work at the BBC, I’ll come back.”

I left CBC, close to 1962, went over to England and cut a couple of films for Allan. One was for CBC Close Up on Charles de Gaulle, and a few other things - Peace Makers was another. We worked with Allan for a couple of months and then I left. There was nothing to do.

I got a job in the inspection room at CBC, and I got an interview with Bill Ross who said, “You can start Monday.” I walked down the street and bought a new car. So I drove to Toronto and bought a new car and I joined the CBC.

I started in the CBC Film Department. I assumed that when the projectors you were doing was the only place from which any real revenue will come, and I find a distributor for it. It’s been taken off the air, and I’m going to do a bit more. Then I went to CBC and I got a job working with her, wanted to come and talk. They came over with some nature footage and we made a little program out of it, but it didn’t trust the guy who shot it. The footage was beautiful, and Rona said, “If you’re going to buy the film, then you’re going to take control of the whole thing.”

The filmmaker was quite happy. I got hold of a writer, did the editing place and produced a film. In a subsequent long talk with Rona, I said it was too bad we couldn’t get an umbrella title for these kinds of films. More and more films were being made and they were filmmakers out there, but a lot of the stuff was rejected for technical and other reasons. So we did a few of these nature films. I called this the ‘underground’ that seemed to be going without anyone at the top in CBC knowing or caring. The money was peanuts - about $3,000 a time.

As is the case even now, I’m making my own arrangement with the filmmaker and, after the direct costs have been recovered, we share 50-50. I arrange the CBC purchase because that’s the only place from which any real revenue will come, and I find a distributor for Canada and around the world. Many filmmakers have been able to get their films into syndication. That’s the way a lot of people got started.

It really started with nothing. I had a loose partnership with Allan King. I think we were on a 50-50 basis, using my talents and his equipment. I stayed on Woodlawn for a while but, to handle Seven Days, moved into a new apartment building at 105 Maitland and took over a whole floor with a promise on paper from CBC to pay a certain amount of money. I acted as supervising editor, and hired the freelancers needed - some people who left CBC. Ron Carlisle and Bill Fruet - I’m missing some names. So, as we started doing This Hour Has Seven Days on the first floor of an apartment building, I was starting up West at City and asked me if there was a possibility... so in extra space in the apartment base- ment, we can build a film studio. So, in 1960-62, I was cutting and it was a fairly big operation with about 15 people coming and going.

In the same year I remember Rena Kravagna who’s in CBC Program Purchasing. ‘Phoned me and said she and Roz Farber, who was working with her, wanted to come and talk. They came over with some nature footage and we made a little program out of it, but it didn’t trust the guy who shot it. The footage was beautiful, and Rona said, “If you’re going to buy the film, then you’re going to take control of the whole thing.”

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to do a feature. He came in – and at least he listens! I had a long talk with him and proved (I think) that he'd be much better off to try a half-hour kids' drama. He came back with a couple of scripts that both Rena and I didn't like – a bit too much fantasy. He finally presented a cute little story called 'Jimmy and Luke'. He learned a lot shooting that half-hour.

He was given a professional crew to work with on location, and some students from Sheridan College came down for the ride and the experience too. Larry made a nice little film, and he should probably go and do a couple more, rather as Leon Marr did before him, going to do when you go out to make that feature. It's a process of developing where in the country, and see a kind of desperation. It's very hard for people to get a feel of what you're making, to handle it – have to call from wherever they like it or not, and whether the Canadian distributor would involved work on the film and not even strike a print, using the only 35mm print that was available. They paid good money for ads – and put the film in the wrong theatre, The Eaton Centre. Annette Cohen, the producer on the film, said, "Look, this is a suburbs picture." The distributor promised to open the picture in the suburbs, as well as The Eaton Centre, but never did. It ran for two weeks and was pulled. Here's a picture that had five Genie nominations and had a Juno for the music – 'Rise Up' is the theme song in the film. Why can't the distributors exploit it? Can't they run it? It's a Canadian film, and that's why they won't. But they are forced, in a sense, to run their American product whether they like it or not, and whether the picture is good or not. A lot of Canadian film distributors have gone down the drain because if a Meatballs comes along, Paramount gets it. I think the Canadian Film Development Corporation/Telefilm has really failed in putting harder and getting theatres across the country, even if they have to go and four-wall them. There are people out there who know how to get films to 'commercial' areas across the country. Those repertory theatres are working. In downtown Halifax, right across the street from the Paramount theatre and the NFB building, there's the Wormwood's Dog and Monkey Cinema. I've been in it and people go there. In Winnipeg, on Main Street, the National Film Board runs a little program, and there's Regina Public Library, the National Film Theatres in Ottawa, Edmonton and Kingston, the Pacific Cinemateque, the college film courses; I could go on and on.

These are the concerns I talk about across the country when I'm invited to speak to independent filmmakers, students and people in our industry – how to find the money and put it all together from the start to distribution and world sales. There a vast amount of energy out there. I don't know what's going to happen. I think some parts of the industry are going to become healthier, that's my positive viewpoint. But we should be very careful about the false thing we've got now. If I were in Vancouver I would be happy to be a technician because I'm working very, very hard on American films. But one day the dollar is going to find its base, and there won't be any industry out there. And it's happening in Ontario too. That bothers me. We haven't been able to build or develop our own thing. There's a lot of money coming it and technicians are busy, but it will stop one day.
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