



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 Track 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 Berman's Artie Shaw: Time Is All You've Got, her second documentary after BIX, and he was executive producer on both.

Don Haig was affable, charming and nervous—in fact, quite himself—when interviewed. The nagging feeling persisted however that, as is usual, he only disclosed what he wanted to let out, and perhaps underneath it all is a sub-text.

Let's start right at the beginning! I was born in Winnipeg in 1933—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 250 prints out each week. I moved up to shipping for quite a while and then finally to the booking department. I was with MGM for six or seven years. At the same time I picked up a 16mm projector and started to go out to small towns in the evening with film shows. I had five towns I went to every week and screened in halls in little places. They had to be at least 25 miles away from a regular movie house. I used to pay someone to drive me, and eventually bought my own car. So I did that at night and worked during the day.

Then television came to Winnipeg. The future at MGM started to look weaker because, instead of shipping two shows a week to the towns, we were only shipping one. And even in my own small halls I could tell things were starting to change. So, in the summer of 1956, I came to Toronto.

I had names from some people in Winnipeg who knew people in the CBC Film Department in Toronto, where Oscar Burritt, O. C. Wilson and Bill Ross worked. I had an interview with Bill Ross who said, "You can start Monday," and this was a Thursday. I said "No way. I've got to drive back to Winnipeg, sell my little projectors, tell my parents I'm leaving..." Anyway, he hired me on the spot. I went home and came back to Toronto in September, 1956.

I started in the CBC Film Department splicing commercials into shows. In those days there wasn't a network and we'd have 30 Ed Sullivan shows and we'd cut out all the American commercials and put in the Canadian ones. The Film Department was at 22 Front Street West and the building is still there. I guess it was through Oscar Burritt that, somehow, I got to join Toronto Film Society and be invited to special little gatherings. Actually, I remember what my entry into the group was. When I left MGM I had to destroy a lot of 16mm prints because the rights had run out. I ripped out a lot of the musical numbers and had three big reels of the stuff. Like two hours of *That's Entertainment!* So I think that was my passport into this seemingly elite group up in the Burritt's apartment on top of 20 Carlton Street. Someone would call, "Oh, you won't believe what I've found!" and that coming Saturday or Sunday you'd be invited over to screen and drink some cheap wine. All mad! I was absolutely fascinated.

Then a nice chance came along at CBC. They started to do a bit more

original editing on documentaries. *Close Up* was pretty popular around 1958-59. About that time Doug Leiterman came on the scene and he was directing and producing interesting documentaries. We really bounced well off each other because he, like me, wanted less of the staid talking-head type of thing and more action, documentaries with meaning like *Summer in Mississippi* – in other words, let's put some pictures on instead of having a talking head. 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. There had been a progression, as far as I was concerned, up to 1961-62. It was fun at CBC, and everyone was kind of up. It was starting to work all right, and then I began to feel wanderlust. I thought, I'm just going to continue to do this, and I've never been to Europe.

I'd 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* and a few others. Anyway, 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. Then I went to Spain for two or three months and got kind of tired of that – there was nothing to do...

I remembered Allan saying he had some sound equipment back in Canada, plus a projector and a movieola. So I said to him, "I'll make a deal with you. What if I go back and set up a little editing place and try and get some work?" I came back in 1963 just before *This Hour Has Seven Days* started. Beryl Fox had a house in Toronto, and I rented a place in the basement and opened Film Arts at 21 Woodlawn Avenue East. I got work – a few Telescopes and some kid stuff, *Razzle Dazzle*, that sort of thing. And Doug Leiterman and Patrick Watson were gearing up for *Seven Days*. I can't remember who approached whom, but somehow we started talking. He knew it was going to be difficult to do a show like that within the boundaries of the Corporation. So I made a daring attempt and said, "Why don't I set it up as a whole company to handle this and try and get CBC to give us the contract?" So that is, in effect, how the big Film Arts got going.

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 100 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, Tom Berner, Bill Fruet – I'm missing some names. So, as we started doing *This Hour Has Seven Days* on the top floor of the apartment building, Peter Riley was starting up *W5* at City and asked me if there was a possibility... so in extra space in the apartment basement we also handled *W5* for its premier season. By 1966 *Seven Days* had been taken off the air, and *Sunday with Darryl Duke* was being formulated, and Film Arts got the contract for that. We went through *Sunday* and then moved to Church Street for *The Way It Is*, and I was still cutting. Around 1971 we were editing along and it was a fairly big operation with about 15 people coming and going.

In the same year I remember Rena Krawagna (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 wanted to make a little program out of it, but didn't trust the guy who shot it. The footage was beautiful, and Rena said, "If we say we're going to buy the film, will you make your own arrangement with the filmmaker and put it together?" The filmmaker was quite happy. I got hold of a writer, did the editing, and produced a film. In a subsequent long talk with Rena, I said it was too bad we couldn't get an umbrella title for these kinds of films. More and more material was needed on air, there 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 still the case even now, I'll make 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 done very well this way and a lot of people got started – Mark Irwin was one of the interesting people who went out and made these 10-minute films. A lot have now melted into the television world.

So, naturally, out of this you'd get someone saying, "Can we do a feature?" And I'd think, "My God, what are we getting into?" But we did get into features

with *125 Rooms of Comfort* directed by Patrick Loubert who's now a producer with Nelvana. The first person we approached at the Canadian Film Development Corporation was Michael Spencer, to whom I really give credit, because he was taking a chance on a low-budget picture. There was a drought in the industry and not an awful lot happening, but lots of very energetic young people were out there.

Another example is *Alligator Shoes* with a different form of financing in a sense. Allan King recommended that I look at Clay Borris's *Rose's House*, and I really liked it. It was just about finished but Beryl Fox, then with the National Film Board, Ontario Region, asked me to do a tiny bit more trimming, and I got to meet Clay. He came along with the continuation of his family after *Rose's House*, which was *Alligator Shoes*. This feature was put together with one private investor, Doug MacDonald at Film House contributed the labbing, and I put in the editing and sound transferring. Based on some of the rushes, Clay was able to get a grant from The Canada Council and from the Ontario Arts Council. The crew was hired and given little stipends of money and an investment in the film, and it has been successful. It went well at Cannes, and on pay-TV here, and on CBC. It's a small film with a lot of energy in it. The investors have been getting their money back, and now the crew will start getting their money because it's going into syndication. It's been bought by CITY-TV, and for Vancouver and Calgary. So, to make a feature film now, you need a big pie into which everyone puts pieces.

It used to be much easier to deal with both CBC and Telefilm, to call a person and say, "This sounds like a good idea, let's help develop this kid," or "He or she wants to make a drama now, say a little kids' drama – let's go out and do it." I think we are losing a film industry now in making movies for TV. The key word "development" has gone – the Canadian Film Development Corporation is no longer here; it's Telefilm Canada, and their first thought is the bucks. When a filmmaker comes in with a reasonable budget under a million they get cold feet. I would rather see 10 low-budget features made regionally and if only two of them click, so what? You are keeping an industry going, you are training. It's like the old studio system – if you worked at MGM you did *Passing Parades* and shorts for a while, half-hour two-reelers, moving up to B-pictures. It's the only way to develop people.

Another example is Larry Moore. He'd done a couple of shorts that Rena Krawagna picked up for CBC, and he wanted

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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. You get a feeling of what you're going to do when you go out to make that feature. It's a process of development.

And it's this kind of continuing thing which I'm afraid is not in the *Joshua Then And Now* camps. I think the Broadcast Fund should really have gone to the CBC as a separate entity, to handle made-for-TV movies, and Telefilm should never have come into existence. To me, it's like grabbing the bucks because that's where they are – in television. Everyone knows that, but I'm disappointed there isn't a clear line of learning. My feeling is that, in the future, the National Film Board will probably get more and more into the development of young talent.

I go to speak in Halifax, and elsewhere in the country, and see a kind of desperation. It's very hard for people to fight the system. They call it the "\$500 'phone bill'" to have to call from Vancouver or Halifax to Toronto to talk to people. Finally, Telefilm is opening an office in Halifax after long discussion, but if you are in Winnipeg or Regina it is

really, really hard.

As I mentioned before, I hand over a lot of films I've been involved with to Canadian distributors – Ron Hastings, Isme Bennie, and there's Anne Harper in Wales, who used to be a librarian in Canada, and now sells a lot to the U.K. markets. There's an interesting explosion happening with home video. I was able to sell to Viacom, *Who Has Seen The Wind?*, *One Night Stand*, *Alligator Shoes*, *125 Rooms of Comfort*, *Summer's Children* – you name it, they'll take it. People ask, "Why would anyone want *Summer's Children*?" My theory is that people go looking at the weekend, and pick up *Superman* and *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* and, for another two bucks, what does it matter? If the title looks interesting, they'll take a carton of stuff home. So I think there will always be this kind of continual market. As for pay-TV it has proved something to me – I would stay away from whoever did the marketing research in this country. It has been demonstrated without a doubt that we didn't get what they said we were going to get, and again the CRTC falls flat on its face. All those promises that the industry would go insane, that there was an animal out there waiting to chew up, and eat, and keep looking for more product and talent – well, look where we're at.

And then there's theatrical distribution. I think Telefilm and the Canadian Film Development Corporation have failed miserably with Canadian features. We've all heard the stories from the distributors; the gentlemen's agreement never worked and a quota won't work. I don't know why the CFDC/Telefilm didn't book theatres across the country and take our pictures on parade.

Outside of Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver, I doubt whether many Canadians have seen a Canadian film. In the days of the Canadian Film Awards, Gerald Pratley took programs of winning films on the road, and I would have taken the Genies Showcase out too. The distributors and exhibitors here are lazy. The package of material comes up from New York – all the publicity stills, trailers, everything – you simply buy the time and throw it out. If a picture comes along which needs some work, everyone gets cold feet. For example, I was co-executive producer on the recently made Don Owen picture, *Unfinished Business*. A good solid little film, obviously made for television, but it was blown up to 35mm and could have had a nice chance. I cannot understand why the Canadian distributor involved would take 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 got a Juno for the music – Parachute Club's "Rise Up" is the theme song in the film. Why can't the distributors exploit it? Why 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 not pushing 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 'non-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 Cinémathèque, 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 in and technicians are busy, but it will stop one day.

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