TV DRAMA

ON THE RECORD:

by Gail Henley

The year 1985 marks the 10th season of For The Record - the CBC's primetime flagship series of drama specials. When John Hirsch became head of TV Drama in 1974 he brought with him a deeply felt belief that art has a social responsibility. It was his vision that drama could be relevant to mainstream Canadian experience in the way that only current affairs were at the time. Hirsch recruited Ralph Thomas and Stephen Patrick, then working as current affairs producers in Toronto and Halifax respectively. They were immediately excited by the potential of drama to explore the news stories that formed the political and social nexus of the country and in 1975 the first season of five 'journalistic dramas' went into production. "John Hirsch took enormous risks and the CBC took enormous risks, and that went down the line. It put an obligation on Ralph and I, as producers, to take risks," says Stephen Patrick.

The first on-air season, in 1976, created a sensation and caused an immediate public echo. Outstanding were: The Insurance Man from Ingersoll, about government and union corruption, directed by Peter Pearson, and A Thousand Moons, about a Metis matriarch, directed by Gilles Carle. Right from the beginning, For The Record established for the CBC a vigorous voice in contemporary drama. "The first season of For The Record attracted tremendous attention to CBC drama," says Hirsch. "We accomplished what we had intended: to focus attention on important political and social issues."

The launching of For The Record sent excised reverberations throughout the artistic community. "I'm very proud to have started and been associated with For The Record," says Hirsch, "It was an extraordinarily productive time. I created a whole new opening that allowed young actors from the alternate theatres in Toronto to find work in television films. R.H. Thomson, now a major actor, had his first television acting role in an early For The Record. I brought in the best directors from Quebec, Gilles Carle and Claude Jutra, to work in English-Canadian television when they had not even done the same for French-Canadian television. It was a wonderful climate, at that time. Taking risks with new writers, always discussing what programs we should be doing, taking more risks with subject matter. It was a breeding ground; new people came in with fresh ideas and an ability to carry out those ideas. And I'm extremely proud to have been instrumental in helping Ralph Thomas, who is now a major Canadian film director, to make the transition from documentaries to dramatizations."

After the first season, Stephen Patrick left, and Ralph Thomas continued as executive producer for the next two seasons. The dramas that Ralph Thomas produced were remarkable for their courage in taking on powerful industries and revealing the political machinations he perceived at the heart of the problems affecting society. Most who remember the productions of the second season simply repeat the titles as if they're great symphonies: Maria, Someday Soon, Dreamspeaker, Hank, Ada and Tar Sands. It was an unprecedented year for the CBC. At the Prix d'Italia, Dreamspeaker got a standing ovation, people reportedly stood up and wept: Alberta premier Peter Lougheed sued the CBC over Tar Sands; and Washington requested to see Someday Soon, to understand why Canadians were so upset about the Grand Coulee Dam. "We were doing news stories that needed to be dramatized," says Hirsch, "because they touched some political or social flaw that needed further exploration."

In 1978, Hirsch left as For The Record's executive producer. That season, Dying Hard was the journalistic drama that skewed politics and big business. It illustrated worker abuse in a story about a mining company's indifference to the health of its workers. There was endless debate in the press over the fine differences between docu-drama and journalistic dramas, and the ethics of dramatizing contemporary events on television when actual transcripts of the conversations among the real-life central figures in these events either did not exist or were incomplete. The CBC's out-of-court settlement of the Tar Sands lawsuit with Peter Lougheed ended the debate: Ralph Thomas left as executive producer and with his departure went the tradition of journalistic dramas.

For the next four seasons, from 1979 to 1982, Sam Levene was For The Record's executive producer and oversaw the production of 22 episodes. A noticeable change was that the shows became what Sam Levene terms "topical dramas," dealing with important social as opposed to political issues. Highlights of this period of For The Record were One of Our Own on Down's Syndrome; The Winnings of Frankie Wals on unemployment; A Question of the Sixth on euthanasia; A Far Cry From Home on wife-beating; Running Man on homosexuality; and Blind Faith on TV evangelism.

Although there was a distinct change - less emphasis on political issues and...
more emphasis on social issues – the shows themselves were no less heart-breaking and their impact on the public was tremendous. The Record had re-established its original mandate – to produce dramas dealing with issues that touched people’s lives in this country in a real way. Under the tenure of Sam Levene, this middle period of For The Record achieved significant growth. The profile of For The Record remained high and a conscious effort was made to remain ahead of the time with stories about society’s changing attitudes and concerns.

John Kennedy and Sam Levene were responsible for improving work opportunities for women in For The Record. Seven of the 22 episodes in this period were written by five different women writers: Carmel Dumas, Anne Cameron, Florraine Adelson, Margaret Atwood, Anna Sandor. Kennedy and Levene gave Vivienne Leebosh her first opportunity to work as a producer of drama; and promoted Maryke McEwan from script editor to producer. Anne Frank was encouraged to produce A Far Cry From Home which in 1981, in the sixth season, garnered an audience of 1.6 million viewers, the largest of any For The Record show to date.

The different treatment of social issues on American dramas went counter to the conventions of established television drama formats. At the beginning, would there be a show on wife beating, produced by a woman?” Kennedy asks. “Most American shows tend to get a much more ‘relaxing’ level, 0 to +20. They seldom fall into the negative area. Yet, For The Record does this year after year, show after show, and not by accident. The producer does not want the viewer to sit passively, but to be involved, to think. It is demanding viewing. The series is unique because it is structured to appeal to thinking viewers,” Levene says. For example, audience research has shown that current affairs and news programs such as The National and The Journal are less demanding viewing than many For The Record shows.

The different treatment of social issue dramas is also reflected in their differing impact on American and Canadian societies. Sensationalizing wife-abuse in The Burning Bed produced public response in America that took the form of a rash of burning-bed murders following the telecast. “The Burning Bed was manipulative and exploitative,” comments For The Record producer Maryke McEwan. “In my opinion it’s morally wrong to screw around with it.” The impact on the Canadian public after A Far Cry From Home was broadcast was for more positive. Associate producer McEwan received countless letters from women thanking her for the show and saying they now understand the constructive alternatives available to them.

Here, the relationship of protagonist/ antagonist/teacher is perfectly delineated. The battered wife is not only up against a husband but her own troubled
situation and what she must do about it. “Are you sure you can’t settle this between yourselves?” a policeman asks the badly bruised wife at the kitchen table. The answer is so apparent it doesn’t need a response. Her own awakening and realization is what has been dramatized. When the protagonist goes through the process of leaving the house under police escort and entering a shelter for battered wives, viewers are taken through the steps of a course that can be taken and shown what can be expected if this option is exercised. A real shelter was used. Interval House on Huron St. in Toronto, and the extras were the actual women and children in the shelter at the time. The show, as so many in For The Record, had a two-fold effect: good drama—A Far Cry From Home won the Silver Award at the International Film and TV Festival in New York in 1981; and social significance—a Senate committee requested a screening of A Far Cry From Home to help in the preparation of the 1983 white paper on wife abuse.

Sig Gerber took over as executive producer of For The Record in 1983, in its eighth season, and will be responsible for launching the series into its second decade. “To stay unique,” says Gerber, “we have to strengthen our shows in our original direction. The tradition of For The Record is for stories with an emphasis on truth, fairness, serious research, all combined with entertainment.”

Certainly the dramas in the last few seasons have been diligent in their responsibility to show honest portrayals. In 1983, Ready For Slaughter won the Rockefeller for Best TV Drama at the Banff International Television Festival. The detailed delineation of the role of the farmer’s wife, portrayed by Diana Belshaw, was the most enriching aspect of the show. Nothing in For The Record, one soon realizes, is left to chance. Every aspect of the drama was scrutinized for truth and honesty. “We’re always trying to break new ground in drama,” says Maryke McEwan, who produced Ready For Slaughter. “Exploring different characters, struggling with new ways of dealing with things that have become cliché.” The role of the farmer’s wife was written into the script based on what the research revealed. However, during the shooting on a farm in the Bruce Peninsula, a local women’s group called Concerned Farmwomen, approached the producer and expressed their concern about the portrayal of the farmerwoman in the script. When the script was shown to them, they were satisfied with the fairness of the depiction. “They’re partners on a farm. The job on a farm is seen as a partnership between a man and a woman,” says McEwan. “and our research which had been done prior to the shooting had helped shape the correct image of the farmerwoman in Ready For Slaughter. For The Record has been at the forefront of CBC’s effort to correct the image of various characters presented on television and to establish better role-models for viewers.”

What we’re looking for,” says Sig Gerber, “are shows that have big headlines, but favour issues which on the surface are fairly small, yet in the way we execute our telling of the story, over the course of an hour, add up to something very significant.” Some may argue that this is as much a reflection of the present climate of the CBC as it is of the change of direction of For The Record.

For The Record: A filmography

1976 – Executive Producers: Ralph Thomas & Stephen Patrick
The Insurance Man From Ingersoll
News of Shadows
A Thousand Moons
Kathy Karus Is A Grizzly Bear
What We Have Here Is A People Problem

1977 – Executive Producer: Ralph Thomas

1978 – Executive Producer: Ralph Thomas
A Matter Of Choice
Scoop
Dying Hard
Seer Was Here

1979 – Executive Producer: Sam Levene
Cement Head
Don’t Forget Je me souviens
Home Coming
Certain Practices
Every Person is Guilty
One Of Our Own

1980 – Executive Producer: Sam Levene
The Winnings of Frankie Walls
Hand Reared
Maintain The Right
A Question Of The Sixth Lyon’s Den

1981 – Executive Producer: Sam Levene
A Far Cry From Home
Small Birds
Running Man
Cop
Final Edition

1982 – Executive Producer: Sam Levene

1983 – Executive Producer: Sig Gerber
Ready For Slaughter
Out of Sight, Out of Mind
Reasonable Force
Moving Targets

1984 – Executive Producer: Sig Gerber
Kate Morris, Vice President
I Love A Man In A Uniform
Hide and Seek
Silk and Seduction
Rough Justice
Change Of Heart

1985 – Executive Producer: Sig Gerber
The Boy Next Door
The Front Line
Tools Of The Devil
Where The Heart Is

Hit list:

For The Record’s foreign sales

HIDE AND SEEK
(biggest sale ever of any one hour drama)
Australia, Finland, Holland, Malaysia, Singapore, USA, Brunei, Hungary, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Czechoslovakia

LOVE A MAN IN A UNIFORM
Home video South Africa

ROUGH JUSTICE
Home video South Africa

SLIM OBSESSION
Germany, Bermuda, Bahamas, Trinidad, Norway, Finland, Yugoslavia

READY FOR SLAUGHTER
Trinidad

REASONABLE FORCE
Sweden, Finland Denmark, Philippines, Albania, India, New Zealand, Bermuda, Hungary, Norway

OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND
Curacao, Jamaica, Philippines, New Zealand, Home video South Africa

MOVING TARGETS
Trinidad and Tobago, Gibraltar, Denmark, Norway, UK Cable, Bulgaria, Home video South Africa, Ireland, Czechoslovakia

BECOMING LAURA
Norway, Denmark, Finland, Curacao, Iceland, West Germany, Philippines, Trinidad and Tobago

BLIND FAITH
Holland, Curacao, Iceland, Denmark, Jamaica, Philippines, New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago

BY REASON OF INSANITY
Curacao, Trinidad, Jamaica, Singapore, Philippines, Ireland, New Zealand, Home video South Africa, UK Cable, US Cable, Scandinavia Home Video

HIGH CARD
Curacao, Sweden, Israel, Singapore, Philippines, New Zealand

FAR CRY FROM HOME
Caribbean, Mexico, Jamaica, Ecuador, Trinidad, Mexico for Central America, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia, Czechoslovakia, Iceland, Hungary, Philippines, Columbia, Curacao, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Belgium, Norway, Sweden

ROUGH JUSTICE
Home video South Africa

FINAL EDITION
Mexico, Trinidad, Argentina, Paraguay, Columbia, Uruguay, Mexico for Central America, Columbia, Ecuador, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Curacao, Argentina, Romania, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, Iceland, Hungary, Norway

RUNNING MAN
Finland, Trinidad, Argentina, Paraguay, Columbia, Uruguay, Mexico for Central America, Columbia, Ecuador, Norway, Curacao, Iceland, Jamaica, Philippines, Sweden, Bermuda

SNOW BIRD
Denmark, Trinidad, Mexico for Central America, Columbia, Ecuador, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Curacao, Philippines, Scandinavia, New Zealand (two runs), Bermuda

COP
Trinidad, Mexico for Central America, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Columbia, Ecuador, Curacao, Israel, Philippines, New Zealand, Home video South Africa.
There are so many stories to be done now," says John Hirsch. remebering the first exhilarating seasons of For The Record. "I can think of five subjects that should be touched immediately because of the political significance." For instance, For The Record has not done a story on abortion. Hot issue or not, it needs further exploration and was one of the original mandates of For The Record - to dramatize stories that point to political and social flaws and that touch the lives of people in this country in a real way. One possible approach would be to consider hiring a team of writers - two men and two women - half pro-life, half pro-choice - and see what a team For The Record could come of it. But there are problems, both within the CBC and outside.

"It's likely that the CBC feels it's not in a position to rock the boat because of the extraordinarily conservative times," says John Hirsch. Yet to avoid challenges such as exploring these stories is simply not utilizing the series to its optimum. In the past 10 years For The Record has proven its solid performance record, and the ability to do shows on important themes. This performance record must continue to be enhanced, he says. "The vigor of For The Record is an indicator of the vigor of the CBC as a whole. It is no time for the CBC to be timid.

Independent producers, having gained new arrogance from the government subsidies injected into the private sector, have served notice they are able and willing to produce privately such established programs as For The Record. But as John Kennedy cautions: "The independent production community is a profit-oriented community. And Canada is not a market that can easily support drama programming of any kind."

For The Record is one of the few opportunities on television for individual Canadian voices to be heard. The structure so easily, so enviously can do something that no one else in this country has proven they can consistently do-produce high-quality programming for a small price and set the standards for the independent pictures of this country.

"The actual amount for drama production has been reducing but the amount for For The Record has stayed the same within the budget," says Kennedy. "That represents support in lean times."

For The Record is showing four new dramas in its 10th anniversary season, between February and March 1985. One of the most courageous shows of this season - and characteristic of the best impulses that propel For The Record - is the drama Where The Heart Is (broadcast Feb. 24) that deals with Canada's shocking violation of internationally agreed-upon civil and political rights in its steadfast resistance to change the legislation on native women's rights. The drama was based on a woman who lost her status as an Indian when she married a white man, and in the face of Canadian indifference to her plight (and that of an estimated 100,000 women like her) took her case to the United Nations. Written by Suzette Couture, her first script for television, and directed by Carol Moore-Ede: with an all-Indian cast, Where The Heart Is will, like Someday Soon or A Far Cry From Home, be instrumental in its impact on lawmakers in changing legislation. Like the 1978 National Film Board-produced Indian feature Cold Journey, Where The Heart Is is another outstanding example of Canadian distinctiveness in public broadcasting. And that's for the record.

Ultimately, with its distinguished dramatizations of individual battles to change the injustices in the system, this is where For The Record's heart is.