



Celia Merhur

Paul Shapiro, director of *The Tank*, one of the *Life Times Nine* films

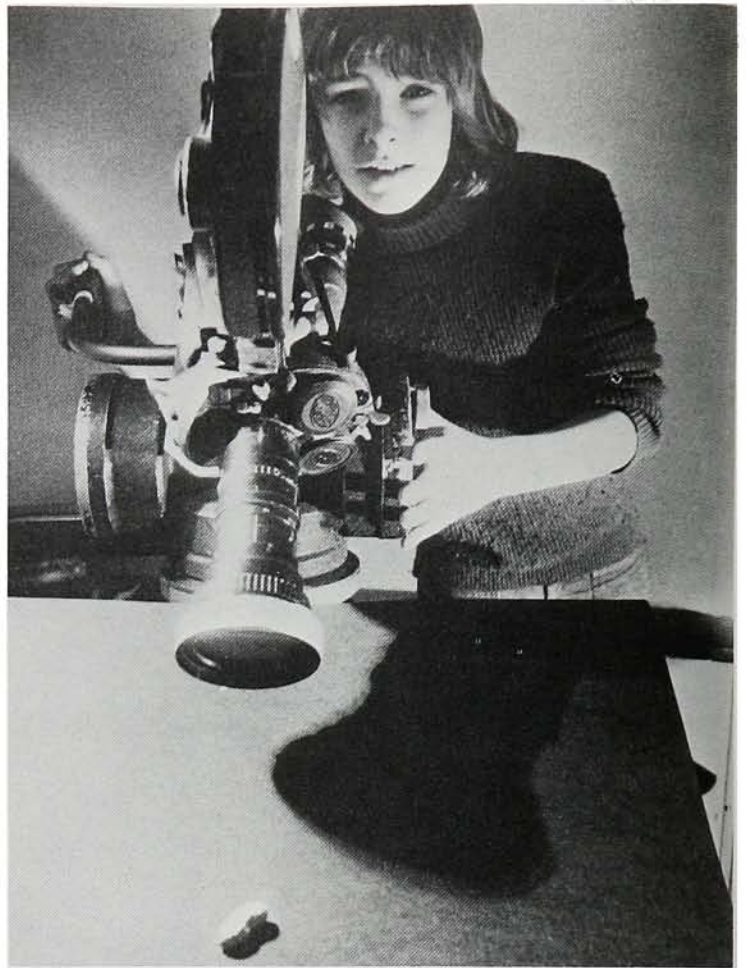
For the second year in a row, a Canadian made film has been nominated for an Academy Award. Last year, Tadeusz Jaworski's documentary *Selling Out* lost out in stiff competition, but perhaps this year the naked little gold-plated man will once again venture north into chilly Canada. The chances are good. One of the three finalists in the Short Film, Live Action category is the delightful children's film *Life Times Nine*, produced by the Toronto based film company Insight Productions. The directors of the film (nine of them) are a group of children ranging in age from 11 to 16, who were selected by Insight from two Toronto free schools to make their own movie.

INSIGHT

The Philosophy of Success

by Günter Ott

Pen Densham, co-owner of Insight says that his group approached the kids at Seed and Hawthorne Free Schools to get them interested in the idea of film. Densham believes that children have a great deal of creative potential which is eroded away as the kids get older. So that the children would not be intimidated by the physical side of filmmaking, Insight provided professional cameramen and technicians who would carry out the ideas which the children wished to convey. "We tried to avoid contributing any ideas to the film because we wanted to show that the kids themselves could understand and communicate their environment."



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Ricky Clark, director of *The Peanut* segment

In the space of a few short months, the resulting film has won international acclaim for its youthful exuberance. Densham admits to some bewilderment but is pleased over the fantastic reception given to *Life Times Nine*. In a sense the film marks the culmination of three and a half years of evolution for the young film company.

Insight Productions was formed in the summer of 1970 by a group of young filmmakers, disenchanted with the prevailing pessimistic attitude of the Canadian film industry. Two of the founding fathers, Pen Densham 25 and John Watson 26, having watched their company grow out of its dingy basement beginnings, are convinced that the friendly reception accorded their film is based on their operating philosophy; an optimistic attitude towards life that permeates all of their films. Densham explains, "We try to make films which we really believe in... films that are open to the audience in a McLuhanistic way. You can put your own meaning to them, but at the same time they possess a strong story structure... we put as much quality, energy and ingenuity into the film as we possibly could and make sure that the film has a strong humanistic heart to prevent it from seeming contrived."

Humanistic idealism might seem like a strange attitude for Canadian filmmakers to take, but the philosophy appears to work. One of Insight's earliest films, *Sunburst*, attempts to relate a particular piece of music (Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture) to images of flowers, fields and glittering sunlight. By means of clever, careful editing the entire effect comes off as a rhapsodic tone poem extolling the marvels of nature. Critic Clyde Gilmour has said, "It exudes an expansive affirmation of life. *Sunburst* almost magically restores a feeling that life is still worth living despite all its pitfalls." The film is in great demand by libraries and school boards because children are delighted by its fresh approach and older persons are captivated by its tremendous sense of vitality.

It hasn't always been easy but the continuing desire to explore and refine their philosophy has made the Insight craftsmen work longer and harder at their tasks. When the company was formed, there were two factors very much in

their favour; they had at their disposal a very capable film editor in John Watson, and a cameraman who already had a film in the can. This film, **Playground**, contained the basic elements of the Insight point of view.

Pen Densham made the film "to capture the feeling of being young and productive in an environment which many people regard as unproductive." By talking and playing with the children, by allowing himself to become part of their world, Densham was able to capture on film an experience of growing up without injecting a false note of sensationalistic social comment.

Money from the sale of **Playground** allowed the novice filmmakers to work on short photographic essays for the CBC, further developing their style by teaching them how to work smoothly as a unit. Doing fillers also taught them structure — how to tell a story or provide a mood in a minimum of time. As they began making longer films, they learned of the varied requirements of libraries, schools and television, forcing the filmmakers to develop a sensitivity to the audience as well as the subject.

While studying a number of American short films, Densham and Watson became aware of a trend which tended to distort and demean the films they saw. A consistent pattern of obligatory sequences seemed to be forced into the structure of these films. "They would go through three or four distinctive commercial sequences; the pretty girl sequence, the clown sequence with suitably comic music, the action sequence and the grand finale" Pen notes. Watson in particular was offended by such filmic puppeteering, feeling that by controlling the audience response, the American filmmakers were giving in to a Disneyish attitude of saccharine indifference. Films of this type were robbed of their integrity and a sense of humanity.

In an Insight film, it was decided, any humour had to be the natural humour arising from a situation, not manipulated by the filmmaker. No anthropomorphized animals either (Oh, look dear at the cutsie-poo animals acting like people).

Thus in their film **Streetworker**, Insight focusses on the positive side of community work, people helping people rather than succumbing to helplessness. The big city streetworker doesn't force himself on the young troubled kids; he is their friend to lean on whenever they need him. The film remains a positive work by refusing to focus on the sensational aspects of youth work. There are no terrifying drug trips or confrontations with authority here, only mutual respect and the desire to help.

Mutual respect and a willingness to work is also a keystone of Insight Productions. The basic group of five people has evolved through a trial and error process. People joining the group have been forced to work in an environment of almost communal responsibility. No bosses dictate what must be done; everything is achieved collectively. People who cannot operate without guidance usually become frustrated and leave while those who have caught onto the loose structure and all pervading philosophy of the group tend to thrive and provide new sources of inspiration for the group. Though Densham and Watson are the nominal heads they reject such titles as Producer or Director. To them, the total contribution of a dedicated team that understands what Insight wants, will generate far more valuable ideas for a film. "We try to level with new people, give them guidelines of what we expect, that is, that they contribute and that they enjoy working on the film".

The success of a film is in direct relation to the amount of enjoyment of the people working on the film. If they are happy with it, then there is a good chance that the public will enjoy it as well. "We encourage our people to explore in the medium. They can wander off and take sound effects if they think this might contribute something to the whole project. People who have worked with us several times (Insight uses freelance crews) now understand our ideas and can contribute some of their own. We try to get the most out of every day and work exceedingly hard to get the most out of a subject . . .

to attempt to do more with less" says Densham.

Such participation pays out in a film like the collective work **Life Times Nine** where, because of lack of funds and the nature of the experiment, almost a hundred people contributed their time and energy in some way.

Insight provided the school children with total freedom of expression, making only two demands on the project — that it be a positive film selling life, and that it be constructed as a commercial (the kids would be familiar with this form and would not attempt something that was too long and overwhelming.) The results, as indicated by several awards and the Oscar nomination, speak for themselves.

Awards are becoming quite common to the filmmakers at Insight. In fact, a whole wall of their office is covered with various citations such as the one from the Canadian Film Editor's Guild for best documentary of 1972, awarded for **Thoroughbred**, a film which the horse racing press has praised in glowing testimonials. *The Daily Racing Form* calls it, "a movie gloriously free of hack-neyed comments about the horse. A poetic treatment of familiar scenes, the smell of the stables, the roar of the crowd." "A sensitive work of lyrical beauty . . ." writes Peter Willett of *Horse & Hound*.

Such accolades reflect the careful craftsmanship of the film as well as the conceptual integrity of all Insight films. Even an industry sponsored work like Insight's snowmobile film, **White Days — Red Nites** expresses its message of snowmobile safety in an exuberant, fresh manner which avoids the traditional clichés of safety films. This film received the C.F.E.G. award for best Industrial and Promotional Film for 1973.

Not everything runs smoothly, even in a creative democracy, according to Bob Grieve, another member of the Insight Productions team. "With five people in this space week after week, there are bound to be breakdowns." But conflicting views generally bring about more ideas and serve as an intellectual stimulus to the work at hand.

Everything becomes grist for the Insight idea mill. "Working on the children's film," Densham admits, "taught us how to write a script and follow it through to completion with acting and post production work. Seeing the kids do it so well gave us the courage to do as well."

At Insight one project generally stimulates ideas for a new project. "We discovered a group of actors we liked while working on the **Life Times Nine** film." These are being used in a longer film (a 1/2 hour comedy) which again forces the group to reach beyond its past experiences and accomplishments. "Fresh people and fresh ideas break down our resistance to change and become tools to eliminate camera and editing clichés. By building on structures that have worked, we generate new, interesting and intriguing ideas."

Being a small and relatively new group on the Canadian film scene has provided its own problems. A lot of creative energy must be diverted away from the films themselves into establishing exposure and interest in their work. For **Life Times Nine** they received very little attention until the Academy Award nomination, after which they were flooded with requests for information.

Their main fear now is that, having placed Insight in the centre of attention, the press will blow them up out of all proportion and then deflate them for not living up to the press releases. This, however, seems highly unlikely. Barely pausing long enough to tuck their Oscar nomination under their collective belt, the Insight crew is plunging again into a hectic production schedule. With more than eight new films in various stages of completion, they cannot stop to rest on their laurels. Densham admits that financially they could stop now . . . "but it's too much fun, we keep learning too much to stop now."

Insight, as ever, is optimistic about the future. Whether they win their Academy Award or not, they plan to continue making the kind of film they are happiest with; bright entertaining films that express their joyful approach to life.

Günter Ott is a freelance writer and film reviewer living in Toronto.