

Huggers: The emergence of Allan Eastman

With over 100 TV productions and two feature films behind him, Allan Eastman, Canada's hardest-working director, feels the time has arrived to emerge from the workaday world and claim some recognition.

The reason? *Huggers*, Eastman's third feature, an Allegro Films and National Film Board coproduction, which completed principal photography Sept. 12, marks, says Eastman, the new, self-confident approach to current Canadian feature filmmaking.

Until *Huggers*, says Eastman, "I was just sort of happy doing the work and leaving it at that — and as long as the producers knew (about me), that was all that mattered."

Huggers "is a really interesting film; we're doing something really good and really special here, so I don't mind promoting it a bit," says Eastman whose quiet professionalism these past eight years has seen him mainly helming series from *The Littlest Hobo*, *Grizzly Adams*, *The Beachcombers*, *The Edison Twins* to *Danger Bay*.

Huggers, budgetted at \$1.65 million, is a story about the great Canadian theme — "communications. It's very much a romantic love story between this very eccentric kid that Kiefer (Sutherland) plays, and the deaf girl that Vanessa (Vaughan) plays." With the difference that *Huggers* co-star, 16-year-old Vaughan, in her screen debut, isn't just playing; she is deaf.

"It's fascinating," says Eastman, "that what is necessarily perceived as a handicap can be a strength. Because of her handicap she's an incredibly expressive person; her facial expressions for the picture are just outstanding. She's very good at conveying the different kinds of emotional states of her character because all of her life has been a struggle to communicate well."

The idea of a feature involving a deaf person goes back to a conversation almost a year ago between *Huggers* co-writers and co-producers Tom Berry of Allegro Films and Stefan Wodolawsky of the NFB (who played Blue in *90 Days*). Berry and Wodolawsky had together just produced *Blue Line*, a one-hour drama (which ran on U.S. and Canadian pay-TV this September), and everyone was happy. "We were happy with *Blue Line*, our investors were happy. So we were ready for the next one," Berry recalls. The upshot of their brainstorming was *Huggers*, a feature about deafness, often referred to as "the forgotten handicap", though it is estimated that one per 1,000 North Americans are deaf.

The search for an actress to play the part of Anne began in May, 1985, not long before Eastman arrived on the



Huggers' director Allan Eastman, with leads Kiefer Sutherland and Vanessa Vaughan

scene, just back from Yugoslavia where he had shot *The War Boy*, a feature for Toronto producer William Marshall, starring Kenneth Welsh and Helen Shaver.

After interviewing hundreds of people including trained actresses in Montreal and Toronto, Berry and Wodolawsky settled on Torontonian Vanessa Vaughan to play opposite Kiefer Sutherland (son of Donald), who himself had not long before had his own feature debut in *The Bay Boy*. With them appears Peter Spence, who had a supporting role in *Blue Line* and starred brilliantly in Don Owen's *Unfinished Business*.

But as Eastman, ever the professional, says, "You never know until you get them on the set and before the cameras." And what Eastman was bringing to the shoot was "a lot of professional discipline" and "a huge bag of tricks" carefully built up from his years of television work.

"My strong point as a director is storytelling. I like to use a very fast-moving style with a movie camera and the other part is I love working with actors. There are a lot of elements to this script — three major plotlines — and what I was doing was bringing all that together to make a smooth narrative."

Another thing Eastman brought to the *Huggers* shoot was what one could call the 'Toronto style' — "a tighter, faster, slicker kind of activity."

"This is a gross generalization, of course, but I get the impression that things proceed at a little more relaxed shooting pace in Montreal. I always know what I want when I go in. In my style, I like to try to not come back to the same shot — so every shot in the movie is a different shot and that, you know, requires a lot of set-ups.

"We got it up to about 20-22 (daily set-ups), which is about what I need. Shooting television, especially a lot of

action television, it's not uncommon to get to 35 (set-ups). With a feature like this, which calls for a lot more precise performance with the shot, with the lighting, 20 is pretty outstanding."

If *Huggers* was initially set up financially with Telefilm Broadcast Fund money and CFCF-TV participation as a television feature, Eastman says "All of us believe we're going to make a good enough picture here that we'll get a good theatrical release next summer. I think we're all going towards a good commercial release."

Born 36 years ago in Winnipeg, Eastman, after graduating from the University of Manitoba, went on to post-graduate studies in England in 1972 at the University of Bristol Film School. "It was basically a totally practical production course — they threw you in over your head and you surfaced 16 weeks later knowing how to make a film."

Like many an aspiring young filmmaker, head sodden with the French New Wave — "It wasn't until later I realized they'd stolen their best ideas from the great American directors" — Eastman too would make that first feature, *A Sweeter Song* in 1976, a \$125,000 film "that only got made because I wouldn't take no for an answer." A parody of the great Canadian loser — "the angst-ridden boy drinking himself to death, isolated against the wilderness" — the film starred actors and actresses whose names are well-known today: Nick Mancuso, Susan Hogan, Jim Henshaw. He's not sure whether the film's criticism of the Canadian film establishment helped or hurt his career, but Eastman wouldn't touch another feature until this year's two — *War Boy* and *Huggers*.

"What I really wanted was to work a lot, work with my craft and get really good at it. And that's essentially what I've been doing for eight to 10 years now," says Eastman, self-confessed workaholic, adding — immodestly but

not untruthfully — that "basically I've been working more than anybody else in this country in the last five years — and it's certainly showing itself now. People have known me as the best TV director in the country, and I hope soon I'll be known as a feature director. I'm very optimistic," says Allan Eastman.

With *Huggers* now in the can, the rest of us will have to wait just a little longer to see for ourselves.

Michael Dorland •

Danger Bay: Thrills on land, sea, and air

Danger Bay is filmed on land, sea and in the air — in Vancouver, on the coastal waters, in the forests and rugged interior regions of British Columbia. For the 50-member crew and the cast, it represents a gruelling five-month schedule of non-stop filming — one episode a week for a total of 22 weeks. At least 75% of the show is filmed on location, with the remainder shot in the company's Burnaby studios.

The action-adventure format calls for an impressive number of boats, planes, helicopters, stunt and safety people, air-and-sea rescue teams and technical expertise. Much of *Danger Bay's* action takes place on the water and, for this, a veritable ocean-going studio has been created. This floating island includes a main barge for the generator/lighting and grip truck, a dressing-room trailer and a smaller barge which also serves as a helicopter-landing pad. The fleet of