

# Danger Bay

## The secret of hitting airdates

### An interview with executive producer Paul Saltzman

by Connie Tadros

From 1975 to 1981, Paul Saltzman and his wife Deepa, made the television series *Spread Your Wings* for their company, Sunrise Films. What started as two pilots, filmed in India, became a 26-part series about creative young people and the passing down of creative traditions. In the process, Saltzman graduated from filmmaker, who with a crew of three (himself included) shot documentaries, to television producer. Although the Saltzmans shot the first 15 films themselves, the rest of the series was contracted out because, as Saltzman says, "all of a sudden, we were learning what series production is about – hitting airdates. So we hired other directors and it became a question of producing, controlling and doing the editing and the rest in-house while trying to maintain the quality of the series and its sensitivity. This was incredibly difficult."

Coming out of that documentary experience, Saltzman was ready to try his hand at drama. Not only did he want to tell stories with more freedom than the documentary form allowed, but he realized that the major marketplace was for dramatic productions. The move-over wasn't easy: "We went into a period of almost a year-and-a-half of spending money we borrowed from the bank to develop projects..."

Although Saltzman couldn't convince anyone in Canada to let him try his hand at directing drama, two persistent years talking with Bob MacDonald of Learning Corp. of America eventually led to *When We First Met*, a one-hour drama that kicked off the Home Box Office Family Playhouse and received the highest ratings of any of the Playhouse dramas. Meanwhile Saltzman, like other Canadians in search of an industry, was in Los Angeles where the idea of *Danger Bay* developed.

Now, having wrapped the 26th episode of *Danger Bay* – which began principal photography on its first episode a scant 15 months ago – Saltzman, in the following interview, looks back at his move to drama, the *Danger Bay* experience, and the values which he considers crucial to good filmmaking.

The initial concept for *Danger Bay* came originally from a documentary idea by a writer from California. He was an associate of mine – well, an ex-associate of mine, who had a concept for a documentary series which had to do with children and the sea. He spoke to me, wondering if I would be interested in co-producing *Children of the Sea*. We then took this idea to (U.S. pay web) Nickelodeon which said: "No, we're really looking for a drama pilot to do." This was in 1983. So I said: "Well, you know there is this very interesting documentary that might be a good idea for a drama series. It happened to be one of the ideas from that series which was about a real young man who drove his father's research boat in north-west B.C. during the summer-time. The father was a scientist. So Nickelodeon was interested and we developed that further. In the end, Nickelodeon decided it was more interested in comedy than in drama and but by that time it was on Disney's desk as well. Suddenly Disney

said: "We really like this, so come on down and talk to us." So I went down to L.A. The concept for *Danger Bay*, the original idea to do a drama series like that was mine.

Within a week, totally unconnected, the CBC called and said they were interested. That was the beginning of the Denis Harvey régime and, to me, having been around the corporation almost for 20 years at that point, there was a whole change coming, a renaissance. I found that in Juneau, Harvey and in (TV drama head) John Kennedy were guys with the guts and the balls to look at a project and say: We should do this and go for it. Denis Harvey basically said: This is the kind of family programming with the action-adventure kind of heart to it that we want on the air.

It had been proven that you couldn't survive as a Canadian production industry in features, nor could you build any kind of Canadian semblance of identity in broadcasting through features. They are just too big, they take too long and



• *Danger Bay* actors Donnelly Rhodes and Susan Walden, with exec producer Paul Saltzman

there's too few. So making series was basically the way to go. *Danger Bay* was sold on a 10-page proposal stapled together, no fancy photographs, and no 4-color printing but it was a concept whose time had come, in a certain sense.

The idea was to fictionalize the documentary story and have the hero be a curator of animals at the Vancouver Aquarium which is itself a fabulous facility in fact. The real people at the Vancouver Aquarium very much embody *Danger Bay*. We had thought of *Danger Bay* fictionally and then we went to the Vancouver Aquarium and discovered that those people were, in a sense, the kind of people our characters were drawn to be. So it came out of a documentary idea.

**Cinema Canada:** *In terms of the input of Disney and CBC, did they have a lot to do with how the concept was developed?*

**Paul Saltzman:** What we did was present them with a concept which they bought. In December 1983, Disney and CBC said they were interested. In January 1984, Disney and CBC said they wanted it. In February 1984 we were doing the location survey and initial interviewing to hire the people. In March we set up the story department.

At the end of March, we as yet had no scripts we (Sunrise Films, which owns *Danger Bay* Productions) got Disney and CBC together in the same hotel suite in Toronto and for two days Peggy Christiansen and Pamela Hanson from Disney, John Kennedy and Nada Harcourt from CBC, and our team sat down and discussed all the nuances of the concept – everything from how much violence, to whether we would deal with alcohol, drugs, and some of these areas which are used too often on television. We decided no, we didn't want the *Danger Bay* kids taking drugs and Dad having to deal with it – there's enough of that on TV already. CBC felt that, Disney felt that and we felt that.

Two very small but important things: Television is a model from which we learn an enormous amount of how to get along in daily life. It's the main teaching tool of most children in terms

of ethics. Much more than school. So these things were discussed in the same hotel room for two days and at the end of which we came out with a "bible" for the series which the clients, Disney and CBC, and Telefilm Canada agreed upon.

**Cinema Canada:** *What about John Dugan?*

**Paul Saltzman:** We had talked to a number of Canadian story editors and a number of them were simply not available. At that point, I was very pressed to revamp my story department. We were starting to shoot in three weeks and I found out about John Dugan and hired him on the telephone.

Dugan is a story editor and writer from L.A. who was a professor of writing and drama until he was 40. He was a decorated hero from the Second World War as well. At 40 he entered the TV business and he's now 64 years old. He is a wonderful combination of a man who has enormous writing ability and skills, a wonderful heart and a desire to do quality, humanistic entertainment programming. He's a guy who also has a desire to teach part of his chemistry.

Dugan was the first story editor on the *Little House in the Prairies* and Michael Landon credited Dugan publicly in that period of time as being one of the two or three people who made *Little House in the Prairies* what it was, which was a big hit. Dugan also had written 200 hours of American episodic stuff, *Star Trek*, *Kung-Fu* – all kinds of stuff. He had also won four Writers Guild of America nominations which is award in itself. So, in a sense, John Dugan came to me with the same good fortune as a number of people came to the project that were terrific.

**Cinema Canada:** *How do all of the principals get together on the scripts?*

**Paul Saltzman:** It's not a committee approach in the sense that we only have to deal with one person at CBC and one person at Disney on creative scripts. So really, in that sense, there is a four-sided conversation. John Dugan and myself for *Danger Bay*; Nada Harcourt at CBC and Cathy Johnson at Disney. Certainly, everyone brings their own sensibility,

and certainly we have the push-and-pull of creating such that at one time Disney might want a little more or a little less of that, and CBC might agree or disagree, and I might agree or disagree with both of them or one of them. And then, there's just a question of compromise. We did a story on the birth and death of a baby Beluga whale which CBC loved. Disney really didn't want to do it because they were worried that the television audience would not like the ending when the baby Beluga dies. The reaction we had from Disney since we delivered the films is that they liked it very much. But there was a lot of "creative arguing" about that one. So, it's like, how can you get away with that? You've got clients and the clients do have their own ideas but no, they haven't distorted what I wanted to do.

We don't come together and look at every script because we are in three different cities. Nada's in Toronto, Disney is in L.A. and I'm somewhere in between and often in Vancouver. John Dugan is in L.A. Concepts are approved by Disney and CBC, and scripts are approved by them, I have to approve them from my end of the production. We come together twice or three times a year and in two days and we go through as much as we can go through.

**Cinema Canada:** *How about the financing?*

**Paul Saltzman:** It is terribly expensive to produce real action-adventure. And we have boats and airplanes and real-life animals and kids and all the stuff you are told not to do, combined – water shows and everything else like that. So, first of all it's very expensive to do and my standards are high.

We've all been brought up on American television production values and when I imagine in my mind the way a scene plays, I imagine it with those production values. I imagine it with my Canadian heart and my Canadian sensibility, if one can say that (though I hope my heart and my sensibility are more international which is why I like travelling and that's the kind of person I am) but, in that sense, it was hard to make it look wonderful because I knew we were competing with an American au-

dience. Our competition was all our American prime time shows that are made with three or four times as much money per minute and, in fact, one of the battles I had to fight early on was for a budget that would at least give us a chance at that kind of competition.

I found myself saying things which seemed fairly simple, but I had to think them through. I had to say to Disney, and CBC and Telefilm: No, we need this kind of money because aren't you in your mind imagining us competing with prime time? And they would say, yes we are imagining that, yes, we are competing with American prime time, and I said, well, do you realize that they spend \$1 million to \$1.5 million U.S. for that stuff? If we are going to spend \$300,000 Canadian for one half-hour, it's pretty tough to compete. Now obviously competition is in heart and in story, but it's also having the resources not to be boring.

*Danger Bay* works very well, as a half-hour. It really is an hour concept which is honed into a half-hour time slot. The more we do, the easier it becomes, but often the number of locations and set-ups is equivalent to those of an hour-long drama. In *Danger Bay* this year we are being much more ambitious than in the first year. We did a *Danger Bay* this summer which had 27 locations and a five-day shoot ending with a 28-minute film for Disney and a 24-minute film for CBC. John Eckart said to me: We are doing mini-features here. And I said: Well, you found me out!

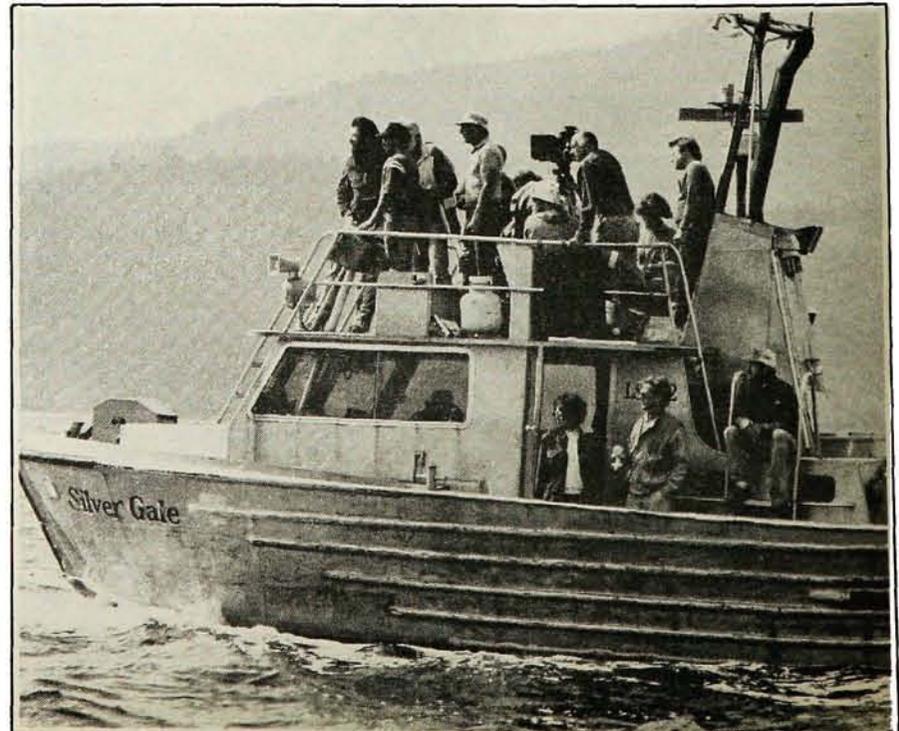
**Cinema Canada:** *What do you think about the difference in working for television and on features?*

**Paul Saltzman:** I think that in terms of production, if you want to do features, of course television is a wonderful training ground because you have to get it done, and have to get it done in a hurry and get it done on a relatively lean budget. Other than that, I think features are just a different kind of book. A hard cover versus a soft cover. And one's not better than the other...

**Cinema Canada:** *But when you are making a film for television, a series*



• Machines and cameras go non-stop on *Danger Bay*



• *Danger Bay's* camera boat

photo: Joseph Lederer

for television, aren't there certain limitations in the medium like the need to have it at 28 or 27 minutes, or the need to film to the ads? With a feature, you have an hour-and-a-half straight out... Don't you feel the constraints?

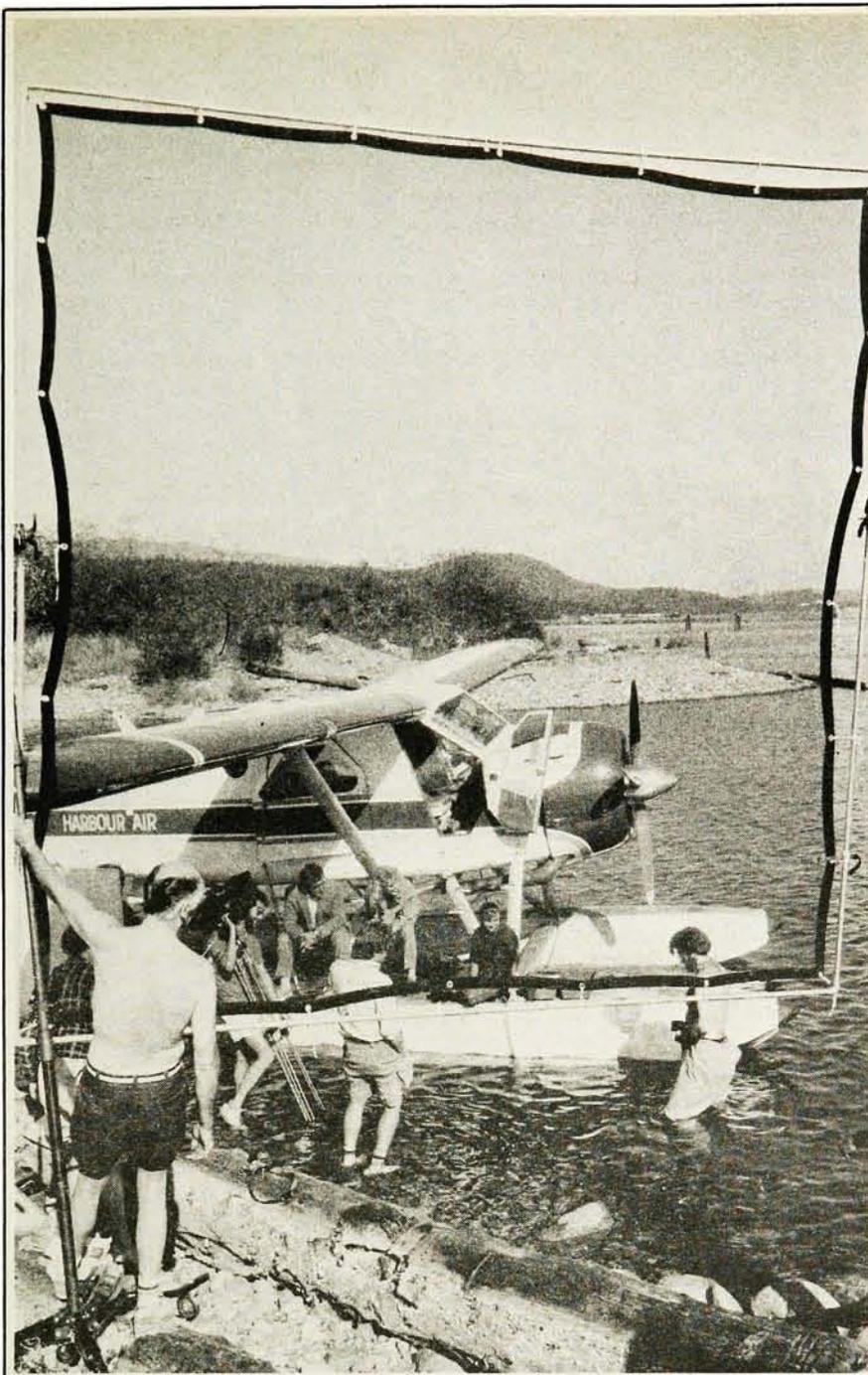
**Paul Saltzman:** No, because it's just a question of discipline. If we have to do it in 24 minutes because there are commercials instead of 28 minutes, then we have to do it in 24 minutes. The fact of the matter is that there are subjects, there are things that must have more time. You aren't going to tell *Roots* in 24 minutes. But in terms of turning out a weekly series, I find it a thrill. I have no constraints. I find it a thrill creating it as well as production-wise as a producer.

**Cinema Canada:** Do you feel the *Danger Bay* episodes are your films?

**Paul Saltzman:** Yes, they are my films with a different function. I exec-produce them. I approve all the stories, I approve all the scripts, I approve all the essential casting and the essential parts of it. In that respect, I try and do it to the best of my filmmaking abilities. I draw on my filmmaker heart and filmmaker talents all the time on *Danger Bay*. I'm not a producer sitting behind a desk with my feet up smoking cigars... First of all I don't smoke and, second of all, I still like to be out and doing things as opposed to sitting behind a desk. Yes, I think *Danger Bay* is part of my published work and the work of all those people who help on it. I don't think in a single, egotistical way. Literally *Danger Bay* and any film we've ever made is all the people that put their guts into it too. I feel strongly about that and I'm very careful of credits, and am very careful to give credits where they are due and not to take any for myself or anybody else that aren't due.

This year there are some changes. This year I have a magnificent supervising producer in John Eckart who sits out in Vancouver. I give him my input and as little of my input as I can because he's a top professional and why screw around with that? I let him go ahead and pay him well and ask him to please do a wonderful job producing the show on a day-by-day basis. Which is a relationship that I believe he likes. He doesn't really want to be sat upon by a Paul Saltzman saying: well I'll do it all differently. He's got to take the ball and run with it.

I have an absolutely marvelous post-production producer in Paul Quigley and I'm absolutely convinced that John Eckart and Paul are absolutely the best in the business in this country and I'll bet you that they are the best, the top 5% in the whole of North America or the world. John is magnificent in what he does, Paul is a marvel. I've never understood why people in any business, let alone a creative business, would ever let their egos get in the way of hiring the best people because I love strong people. I want to hire people who are better than I am and, if they can't be better than I am in a certain little department, as good as I am. I've never been able to understand why a producer or a director or a film-company owner would hire anybody except the best they can possibly afford. Because that only makes the project better and, if one wants to be totally selfish, it only



## Stereo Television – Sounds of the Future

*Danger Bay* is the first television series in Canada to be produced with a stereo soundtrack. Post-production has combined conventional film audio, digital audio, multi-track tapelock mixing and computer techniques in order to produce "high-tech" stereo sound.

With VCRs now available in hi-fi stereo and stereo broadcast just around the corner, television sound is changing. In the past, television audio was only as good as what a three-inch speaker could produce, so producers were not too concerned with the quality of audio produced.

Today, producing television programming in stereo gives an added dimension to the overall impact of the show; it provides a "you are there" experience. As well, the advent of rock videos has made audiences more aware of the combination of stereo sound and television images.

For its sound, *Danger Bay* uses conventional film-mixing techniques

for the dialogue tracks. This dialogue pre-mix is then transferred to two-inch tape. Stereo music and stereo digital sound effects are laid up on multi-track and mixed down to a six-track stereo master. At times we lay up as many as 54 tracks of audio.

Mixing in the conventional film manner can, however, be slow and cumbersome. But with a tape-lock system, one can access mixing start-points very quickly without losing one's concentration, which gives more time to be creative.

In Canada we produce soundtracks which are equal in quality and creativity to any where in the world, and that is precisely the attitude on *Danger Bay*. In fact, the Disney Channel people have told us that they have never heard television stereo as good as ours.

After all, if God had wanted us to hear in mono, he would have given us only one ear.

**Paul Quigley •**

makes one better. So I'm absolutely thrilled to have Eckart there who is better than I am at doing that. I could not produce *Danger Bay* on a daily basis as well as he does. I could not come close to touching post-production as well as Paul does. But the fact is both report to me. I look at the script, I look at the rough-cuts, I say to Paul what I think, I listen to the music, I go to some of the music sessions, I say what I think, my feeling runs through the show and I try to make that a positive thing. I have the same relations with John Dugan and Elizabeth Pontsa who is the associate producer and production accountant. These people are just wonderful. I thank God that I found them... that that's come together.

**Cinema Canada:** How long do you expect the series to run?

**Paul Saltzman:** Both Disney and CBC certainly seem at this stage committed to keep it running as long as there is freshness in it and content in it. Certainly Disney would like to go to enough episodes to be able to reach syndication number.

**Cinema Canada:** How many episodes is that?

**Paul Saltzman:** Well, it depends who you talk to – 65 episodes, 120, that's the kind of figures that Disney have spoken about – and certainly CBC seems keen that it continue.

**Cinema Canada:** What is *Danger Bay* for you as a producer?

**Paul Saltzman:** First of all, it's a God-send because I'm the kind of producer who cares about the subject matter. And I'm not suggesting that most don't. But *Danger Bay* for me is an opportunity to tell lots of stories, real stories about essentially real situations that have a positive or a constructive punch line to them. I really do believe the world has to be a better place. It is a wonderful place and an insane place all wrapped up together and the difference between being an insane place and wonderful place is the human will, human desire, human vision. So I want to come down on the side of trying to put out over the tube, which forms so much of our imagery of life and ourselves, images which give people courage to live their lives well, at its fullest. So, that really is what *Danger Bay* is to me more than anything else.

*Danger Bay* is also, and equally so, the saving-grace for me as a producer because it's ongoing production which is necessary to get out of debt. I've been in debt in the film business for 20 years and maybe by the end of this year I'll get out of debt. One or two people, like friends, have said they find that hard to believe. But the fact is the first 13 shows of *Danger Bay* almost bankrupted me. We went into debt for a year-and-a-half after *Spread Your Wings* to move towards drama. Then we got *Danger Bay* and, because it was so important to put money up on the screen and not in our pockets, we ended up in greater debt. The second season of *Danger Bay* will, if I'm very careful as a producer, actually get us to a point where we aren't in debt.

*Danger Bay* is also a marvelous opportunity to continue in my chosen love which is making films. It's an opportunity to build a financial base for a

corporation that he definition wants to keep going in more film. I've got 100 ideas in my mind of films that I think would be good to make. Out of those 100, there are six mini-series, four features, and three documentary series and 10 individual dramas which I passionately want to make that I feel are terrific. The only thing that ever stops me, besides my own limitations as a human being, is money – the fuel, the kind of corporate machine that's necessary to produce. All I want in my professional life are the resources to do as much as I can.

I think *Danger Bay* is only a game for me. It's only a game for me because it does allow me to do what I want in terms of the heart. But it also becomes a launching pad to do even more that I want for the heart. For example, Deepa has for a couple of years wanted to do an Isaac Singer trilogy in a two-hour package – three Isaac Singer stories which relate to growing old, love and all that. I think I stand a much better chance to help get the money together for her now than before *Danger Bay* started. So I don't see it as a single thing. It's really a launching pad to have credibility outside Canada as a Canadian producer to be able to sell all kinds of concepts. When you go anywhere, they say: what have you done? Just as people said to me as a director: if what you've done is less than more, it's harder than easier to put money together. It still is always tough because this country is too damn small to support a bona fide industry in a certain way.

I suppose the biggest thing that I gave up in making *Danger Bay* is time. Because I'm on the road an awful lot between Vancouver and Toronto and also occasionally to L.A.

Television reaches more human minds than features do. So, as a tool of communication, for putting out something into the air that contributes to the shape and soul of our universe, the fact is that television is a more powerful medium of communication. So therefore it's not a middle ground to anything. It's an end-ground in certain ways.

The revolution in Canadian television, the renaissance in Canadian television towards Canadian production is absolutely marvelous, on several levels. Level number one is the fact that it puts out a different kind of product than American television. The Canadian psyche is slightly different from the American psyche, not as different as I might like, but it is different. And in some ways I guess, to be fair, the American psyche in certain areas is preferable. They have the attitude of go-and-do-it, let's not sit back and look at ourselves and discuss too long about who we are...only in the sense of that kind of attitude – get it done, just go for it, balls to the walls, let's just do it...I think that attitude is something that we need in this industry.

We have to work from our own roots but we do have to keep an eye on the world market and keep our eye on being excellent. If, in fact, people are bored by something that's slow-moving, then let's make it faster, it does not hurt it. It does not hurt it necessarily. I think that in that respect Telefilm has a hard road to walk. It needs to support indigenous production but it need not itself recoil over the way a Canadian story is



• In episode "White Water", leads Donnelly Rhodes and Christopher Crabb save guest star Jason Michas

done. If it's done well enough to be international, i.e., just because it has pizzazz, it does not mean that it's not good. Having higher production value does not mean that it's not good. There is nothing inherently beautiful about small and simple. It can be beautiful, but again it's just really in the concept and in the heart of it.

I'm very aware of, and very interested in, the spiritual side of our existence. And I suppose that comes through in caring about what I do, but I cared about what I did in film before I ever thought that maybe there is a spiritual side to existence. In the Hindu religion, divisions are understood and delineated in that you are a bramacharia student at one stage; in the next stage you are a householder and in the next stage you go off and leave your household whether physically or otherwise and you became an ascetic, you go into the woods into the traditional form, traditional paths to enlightenment, you become an ascetic and you go in search of God. The fact of the matter is that between being a student of God and going off and becoming an ascetic and wanting nothing more than to find God, there is the householder stage.

So, in that sense, as a producer I don't find any dichotomy between myself as a producer and myself as a filmmaker. I'm doing both and they each give me enormous satisfaction. I do projects I care about, as long as I can say, no, I don't think that is a type of *Danger Bay* story that's come in the door and, yes, I do think this is. And it certainly is a lot of fun to do one's work.

Jeff Sterling was the first and perhaps the only person that I ever heard say, as

he did to me in 1972, (and he was a multimillionaire, he used his money well): "Money is just green power. It's like a hammer; it's just a tool." And that stuck in my brain. I don't know what I thought about before that, but ever since that time, that's how I've thought about money and "power", which I think is just an absurd thing to be interested in. It's just a question of doing one's work.

What I say to anybody who comes to me for a job, whether I have one or not at that moment, is basically: What do you want to do? What's in your heart? Because whatever you want to do which is in your heart is the beacon to follow and so, in that respect, if somebody wants to be a filmmaker, you can be a filmmaker. All you have to do is find the path that you go on. There are hundreds of them, so it's not that difficult. You beg, borrow, steal a camera. You ask for a grant, you go to a broadcaster and sell a concept. You go to a Paul Saltzman or a Bob Lantos or anybody else and say: I've got a terrific idea and if Saltzman or Lantos can't see you because they are busy, you take your lunch and you sit on the step every day for a month because, at one point or another, any of us will stop and say, Jesus, this person is so serious, we better listen. So if somebody is serious about wanting to be a filmmaker, there is nothing to stop them.

In terms of young people, there is the mechanical, there is the process to go through. If you've got an idea for a film you want to make, write it down. Write it down well, conceive it well, think it through. Look at it from different points of view. In effect, you've got to sell it to

me or anyone else wanting to buy it. And that depends on how clearly you've visualized it. So, basically, correct thought precedes correct action. You put it down on paper and you take it around to people who have the money or the ability to help you make it. You go to a television station or another producer who is more experience or a broadcaster or a grant-giving body and in the end, if you can't do it in any of those ways, and you really believe in it enough, then you go out and you borrow a camera and you start to shoot it. Then you go and show somebody the film and, at some point, somewhere, somebody's going to look at it and if it has such heart and passion, they are going to be touched and that's the key to the door. Touching people. That's the key to the door that Sunrise Films he used. We always made it.

**Cinema Canada:** *How large a role does ambition play in all this?*

**Paul Saltzman:** Well, ambition, as in "desire," is how I hear that word. Ambition as desire to get somewhere. So I think it's the first 100% and then the next 100% is devotion and I suppose the next 100% is some kind of perseverance...

I think that in a traversing of this lifetime, it behooves one to be a warrior. Now, it does not mean that you have to be a warrior in any area other than the one you choose. So the fact of the matter is, yes, I want to do my project and I'm going to go at it as best I can as a warrior, within my own limitations, and I'll overcome those limitations, and heart and compassion are upmost in my mind.

photo: Bob Arester