

Keeping Track: On-line, on-time, on-budget

FCF's main Ogilvy Street studios in Montreal, a large, square-angled, beige building, the very picture of bland high-tech efficiency, is unusually colorful and bright on this pre-Christmas week-end. On customarily bare walls, highly stylized yellow – and – black cards reading *Keeping Track* mix with bright Christmas decorations to garland the usually musty halls. Now equipment boxes, racks of winter coats, a ravaged buffet table and a milling crew vie for every available square foot of hallway.

The *Keeping Track* set itself is amazingly small and crowded, a cubicle dominated by 21 television screens to one side. The converted TV control room, already a compact environment, has become denser and even more crowded with the addition of lights, screens, main camera, cables, mikes and various technicians setting-up for the day's shoot. There is a subdued tension in the air as the crew struggles to set-up in the restricted space.

To one side, seemingly oblivious to the general hubbub around him, sits director Robin Spry studying the 'pinks' of this day's script. On first sight, one might mistake him for an absent-minded professor rather than the highly-ranked TV and film director he is. Winner of a multitude of prestigious national and international awards including two Nellies, nine Genies, a British Academy Award, first prize in both the Chicago and Melbourne Film Festivals, and so on, Spry, in his loose gray blazer and blue slacks, looks instead like a don from the London School of Economics or Oxford. And, in fact, he's been both.

Despite the palpable tension caused by the very narrow set, Spry retains a sense of quiet, low-key authority that stands out in the noisy chaos swirling around him. Speaking in a soft, quasi-basso voice, Spry discusses production details with line-producer Bob Presner. Presner's compact nervous energy, his constant movement and hurry contrasts yet nicely compliments Spry's slow, thoughtful purpose. As they speak Presner visibly slows down. "It's amazing how Robin Spry takes you inside with him in the making of a film," Presner says later. "If anyone else had called to ask me to be line-producer on this film, I might have refused. But not for Robin. We all have immense respect and admiration for him."

Keeping Track was in its seventh and final week of shooting, the last days in a tight 35-day schedule. Four weeks of these were exteriors (of which half were nights) where crew and actors alike suffered the vicissitudes of Canadian late-fall and early-winter weather. In one night of shooting, clear skies were followed by rain, wet snow, freezing rain and finally hail. "All the crew



photo: James Rae

• Eyeline match: *Keeping Track*'s Michael Sarrazin and Margot Kidder

were tops. An amazing performance", Presner says, proud that the film has stayed on-line, on-time and on-budget.

Some of the location shooting took place at the Railway Museum in St-Constant, the U.S. border crossing at Rouses Point, Montreal's Windsor Station, Place St-Jacques, and Place St-Henri. The super modern St-Laurent Post Office, jewel of high-tech automation, was transformed for the film into a facsimile of a giant computer company. At the suburban Fairview shopping center, amid an estimated 75,000 hurrying Christmas shoppers, a 720-degree Steadicam shot (two full slow circles) was performed within the teeming crowd, as crew swirled behind the camera like the tail of Hailey's comet.

For another complicated scene, some 15 taxicabs were converged simultaneously to one spot. A myriad other vehicles were used in this production: limousines, CFCF News vehicles, police

cars, two Winnebagos, one Honeywagon, seven five-ton equipment trucks, in addition to the accompanying crew of 55.

Based on an original story by Spry and Montreal writer Jamie Brown, and written by Brown who's also co-producer with Spry, *Keeping Track* is an adventure spy story dealing in international intrigue, high-tech weaponry, murder and triple treachery. It has been described as "*Three Days of the Condor* with a funny-bone." Internationally known Canadian actors Margot Kidder and Michael Sarrazin play two strangers bonded together by twisted fate and by the realization that they can trust no one, except each other – maybe.

Even though its methods, intention, multi-million-dollar budget and use of two major 'name' actors keeps *Keeping Track* aimed straight at the international market place, this film retains an intensely Canadian setting and atmosphere. Montreal is played exactly as it is

(no sign reading 'Welcome to Chicago' fronts the Montreal skyline on this one), and the actors as well as the roles they play are Canadian, both in description and fact. French-Canadian actors (such as Donald Pilon, Léo Iliak and Renée Girard) refreshingly play their roles without disguising their Québécois accents. Montreal taxi drivers can be as authentically churlish as Manhattan cabbies.

On this day's shoot, for example, actors Ken Pogue, John Boylan, Vlasta Vrana and Jim Morris are involved with leads Kidder and Sarrazin in a scene of confrontation and story twist. Says Vrana, "This year I've been involved in three films: *Morning Man* where I played a convict, *Choices* where I played a minister, and in this film, I play a cameraman. Perfect!" Boylan, Vrana and Morris are among the 15 primary and 35 secondary cast who, with the crew, form the totally Canadian complement.

As the crew finish their set-up it is the actors' turn. Margot Kidder emerges from make-up, clutching a handful of the Christmas cards that she has been furiously writing during her every spare moment. She is joined by Sarrazin on the crowded set as they all gather around Spry in a run-through. Carefully, they feel for the scene and its intricacies. Sounds on the set automatically grow strangely hushed. In deference to the work of the actors, the crew continue on with their business but more silently now.

The tension is soon replaced by fatigue. One crew member actually falls asleep in a chair, weariness etched on his young face. They will all be here till midnight, another long day at the end of a series of 12-hour days.

André Guy Arseneault

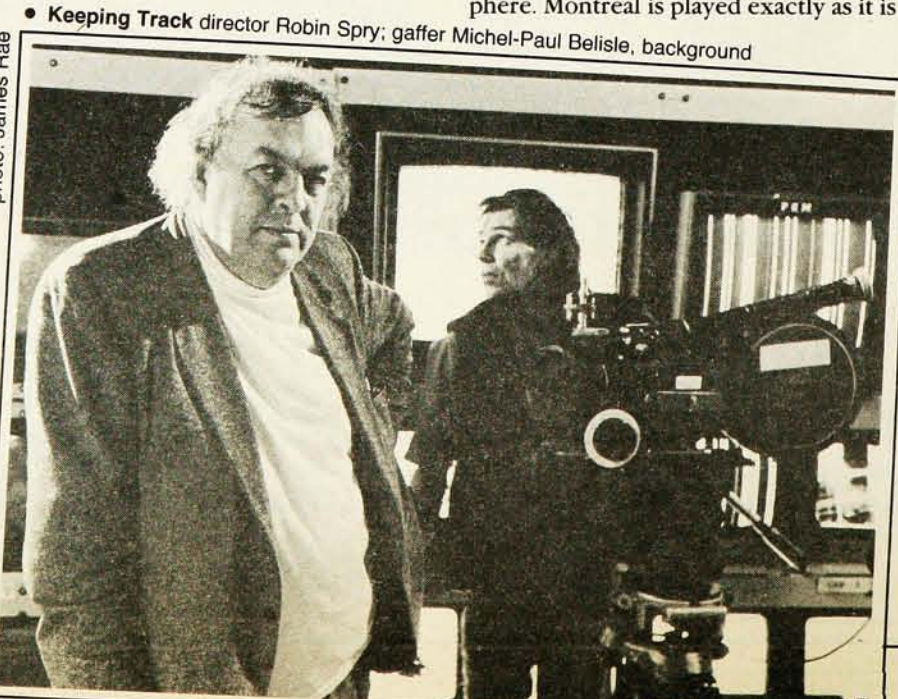


photo: James Rae

• *Keeping Track* director Robin Spry; gaffer Michel-Paul Belisle, background