New kids on the block

by Susan Devins

In 1985, 4,900,000 BBC viewers were enchanted with a children's series that took place on one street in one neighborhood in one city in Canada. The Kids of Degrassi Street, seen from Singapore to Saskatoon, has garnered national and international acclaim for its 26 episodes filmed in Toronto's East End. It's often witty, sometimes disturbing, frequently instructive, and always warm. The series is so true to the tiny neighborhood of Degrassi Street that it creates quiet tremors of recognition in neighborhoods all over the world. Not only is the series Susan Devins is a freelance writer in Toronto.

exemplary of what children's programming should be, its production company, Playing With Time, Inc., is in the forefront of a new breed of Canadian independent producers. Buoyed but not initially dependent on Telefilm Canada's Broadcast Development Fund, PWT, throughout its seven-year history, has maintained one consistent vision of starting with kids programming and staying with kids programming. And PWT founders Linda Schuyler and Kit Hood represent what's dynamic and vital about Canada's own children's production Brat Pack.

On Queen Street in Toronto's East End, Playing With Time's office—just three blocks from Degrassi Street—is as charming and unconventional as the "Kids" series itself. It's an old house that was a former real estate office during two generations of the Ferron family-run business and before that, a butcher shop. Schuyler and Hood, the ebullient producer-director team, attribute most of the factors leading to their partnership to serendipity, including the building, which they used to gaze at longingly from their former cockroach-ridden offices across the street. It's not surprising, considering their quirky style, that the office is now inhabited by two ghosts. "There's Marietta Ferron, the mother of eight kids of the real estate family, and Wade, the one-legged butcher," Schuyler explains with a smile, "but they're a benevolent presence."

These days the office is hopping with production preparations. The picture window in front of the house boasts a dizzy array of plants, a "Degrassi Street" road sign, a school crossing guard jack-et, and clapsticks from the production. There's a reception area and a main, cozy living room where the actors congregate for script readings and brainstorming sessions. Strewed throughout the premises are an old copper washing machine (a gift from Hood to Schuyler, who are off-screen partners as well), a tricycle, and pink flamingos.

Schuyler, 37, a former schoolteacher who had made a couple of her own 16mm films while teaching, and Hood, 42, a former commercial editor, got together in 1976 on a "disastrous" film that Schuyler was working on which needed, she recalls, "a brilliant editor." Schuyler got into making her own films because of the dearth of spirited audiovisual aids. "There was so little appropriate material for kids in the classroom," she laments. "I used to use three
or four films all the time. But when you got a film that was entertaining and interesting, the kids would open up and talk about the screen characters and the way they related to them.

One way that film has been a class project, Between Two Worlds, zoomed in on how immigrant kids dealt with living one life at home and another life in the real world. "I got honest, open interviews and was knocked out with the power of it and how you could reach kids through film."

She proceeded to do another docu, Blue Mountain Crude, about a summer music camp (this is the one she dis- misses as a failure). But Hood, who left his native England in 1969 and had been doing commercial editing on advertising accounts in Canada such as Dristan and Hush Puppies, was called upon to salvage the footage. The film never gelled, but their partnership did.

Their first project together was a documentary about the 76-year-old man, Jimmy Montecito, who was trying to make a film. Schuyler did a heartache involved as to how Ida would make a movie. Schuyler did a heartache involved as to how Ida would

Muller's aim is to depict the natural state of children's drama, which premiered in January 1986 on CBC, is about seven videos per half hour. In the first year Bob Schneider appears most frequently as a performer, and mime Peter Jarvis pops in as various other characters, including an emperor, a presley, and a楼主. The show uses film animation, digital video effects, and interactive elements to give a contempo- rary feel and to increase its commercial potential.

But Muller has a full dance card for future shows, one of which, titled from Anne Murray to New York City street performers, from the Boston Pops to Chris and Ken Whiteley. There are "event videos," with kids on location skating, tobogganing, or at the Caribana festival, and there's a Kid Dance Club, where all 500 kids bump and grind to the latest rock tunes. There are also specific dramatic forays acted out with Schneider.

Muller put out an open call through newspaper ads and general world of mouth for the huge show and dancing cast that acts as the size of money CBC only had allowed us to do cheaper kinds of programming. It was becoming virtually impossible to do in- house productions our budget, so it was the beginning of the end of using them,"

PWT had a CBC presale for Ida Makes a Movie for $7,000 at a 4:30 p.m. time slot. The film was a one-shot, aired on the network, and got a very good response. PWT showed it to dis-
Six episodes a year, for a total of 26. The years they produced between four and eight, and their distributor, Magic Lantern, was shot in their own neighbourhood, with a series that wasn’t star-based, that used amateur actors. The story was designed to appeal to children, and would really respond to the kids who were watching. It was a great socio-economic mix.

All of those elements were in Ida Makes a Movie. It had the same socio-economic richness that PWT wanted to capture. They didn’t want slick, upper-middle-class kids. And they wanted a variety of faces, with a different central character in each story.

“I’m so glad we worked with CBC on this,” says Schuyler. “Nada really understood what we were trying to do. We didn’t want upscale kids and CBC didn’t push in that direction. Nada saw that we were genuine. The series wouldn’t have been the same without CBC.”

Harcourt concurs: “Both Kit and Linda were very much in touch with the true lives of kids and were energized by it. They translated that intimacy with children to the screen and it coincided with my philosophy that Canadian audiences would really respond to 3-D children — there were very few of those on the air. There wasn’t that much television from a child’s point of view.” And Harcourt was also working with other independent production companies at the time — Nelvana, Cinelflicks, Sunrise, and Atlantis — who all had similar hopes for children’s TV.

So Schuyler and Hood proceeded with a series that wasn’t star-based, that was shot in their own neighbourhood, and used amateur actors. The story was all-important. They had presales to CBC and their distributor, Magic Lantern, sold it to schools and libraries. The first year PWT did three episodes, which then became six. Over the next four years they produced between four and six episodes a year, for a total of 26. The last six episodes made up a self-contained children’s miniseries, Degrassi Yearbook, about the kids’ graduation from Degrassi Street School. PWT’s style had been slow and steady, to say the least — 26 episodes in five years is practically a record setter in the industry, but it suits Schuyler and Hood, who wanted to stay lowscale, true to their subjects, and complete in their production style.

The first 20 episodes ran in the 4:30 p.m. afternoon time slot, while the last six aired on Sunday nights at 5 p.m. However, that air-time presents a problem for children’s programming. As Harcourt points out, “The dilemma is how do we get on to the bigger stage without compromising the target audience.” In Kids the children are not defined by adults, and children are in the forefront of the drama. It’s not a 50-50 mix, which is often true in primetime.

In each half hour, The Kids of Degrassi Street tackles themes that range from nuclear war to parental separation. Death, jealousy, friendship, sibling rivalry are all dealt with in a natural, honest way. The tone throughout is based in reality, grown-ups are peripheral to all the plots, and kids are in the forefront making decisions. Each episode features one character and the problems he/she has to face.

For example, in “Griff Gets a Hand,” when Griff’s friend Danny, the school crossing guard, dies of a stroke, Griff is devastated. He’s overwhelmed by ennui and feels what’s the point of life? Griff just gives up, but by doing that he risks losing everything, even graduating from grade six. It’s a realistic introduction of how to cope with death.

“Karen Keeps Her Word” deals with the ethical conflict of whether to accept an important donation toward the yearbook from a company producing nucle­ar missile components, after the class had voted itself a nuclear free zone. And in “Benjamin Walks the Dog,” six-year-old Benjamin finally convinces his older brother Billy to give him a chance to take over his after-school dog-walking responsibilities (while Billy goes off and smokes cigars with his friend Pete), but then has to face him when the dog runs away and he must admit defeat.

Schuyler and Hood devised a work­shop method for the corps of twenty actors. The kids come to the comfortable office space and do a readthrough of the script out loud. A lot of vernacular comes out as they correct each other’s mistakes while reciting the language on the script. Their suggestions are often incorporated by the writer. PWT spends a long time on the writing and development, which results in totally credible dialogue.

The workshops started with Ida Makes a Movie and not having money, notes Schuyler, but it became an integral part of the preproduction scheme for the series. Hood had tapped into what he learned as a child actor, and Schuyler remembered techniques she used in the classroom to develop self-confidence, concentration, and expression. “In kids we look for that bright spark of vulnerability and honesty,” says Hood.

How has PWT come up with plots for 26 episodes? Schuyler shrugs with a broad smile: “We pull an Erik Nielsen — there’s a lot of eavesdropping that goes on.” In addition to what they remember from their own pasts and what Schuyler has culled from her classroom experiences, they pick up bits of conversation from the actors who hang around. “We do get feedback and a lot of that makes it into the script,” says Hood. “For example, we have a brother and sister team (Sarah and Christopher Charlesworth). When their parents split up, that became the episode, ‘Catherine Finds Her Balance.’ Then there was a mini-romance on the set. When the boy asked the girl out, the girl’s parents said she was too young. Finally the mother could go out only if she had a chaperone. We did that film and Lisa (Stacie Mistysyn) said, ‘I’m taking this script home right now and showing it to my mom.’ Basically we listen to these kids lives.

Through the realistic scripts Schuyler wants “to make the kids think, to give them an opportunity to be exposed to a thought process. Also, I prefer if kids don’t watch our shows in isolation. Our scripts are designed so that kids can talk to each other about it afterwards.”

The local kids still seem unaffected by their acting duties. Schuyler stresses that PWT bans the word “star” from their vocabulary. Hood tries not to put undue pressures on their lives. “I expect commitment from them and a sense of responsibility,” says Hood. “I try to treat the kids almost the way a schoolteacher does. And that’s why we get such good performances.”

PWT’s artistic philosophy also extends to their financial dealings. They used some Canadian Film Development Corp. money in the third cycle of four episodes, but when Tele­vision Canada’s Broadcast Fund became available, they tapped into that for the 1984 and 1985 set of episodes. As budgets began at $70,000 per half-hour, then rose to $90,000 and steadied at $96,000 during the Degrassi Yearbook, their per-episode costs were $250,000 for half-hour dramas. But PWT feels kids shows are not cheap to do. Says Schuyler, “In the marketplace people draw the correlation between little budgets and little people. There’s no reason a film for kids should have any less care and attention.”

Both Schuyler and Hood sing Tele­
film's praises, but since they began without Telefilm money and describe themselves as survivors, they say they're sure if the money wasn't available they would have found some way to finance their dramas.

"But there's no doubt Telefilm Canada certainly helped us," Schuyler affirms. "Telefilm has made things a lot easier for us. They have money in our new series, giving us the luxury of proper development. Telefilm for us picked up the slack lost when tax incentives pulled back. There's got to be some government assistance. If Telefilm’s fund were to evaporate, children's programming would suffer most. It's an area that stations don't consider a high priority."

Since the creation of the fund in July 1983, Telefilm has invested in 53 English-language children's projects (through December 1985) for total budgets worth $22,204,563. Telefilm's participation in that was $15,781,457.

What Telefilm has done has made it easier for PWT to be stronger with potential American partners. For example, Disney, which is now running all the Kids episodes in the U.S., had wanted to be a co-producer of 13. "They really liked what we were doing and thought we were very strong in our storytelling," says Schuyler. "But we hadn't even gotten to the point of talking contracts and Disney was already asking for changes." Because PWT is so adamant about the credibility of their scripts, they declined the offer. While Telefilm might encourage other producers to go into U.S. coproductions, PWT is going solo in association with CBC.

So today, Schuyler is a crackberry dealmaker whose company has stayed small and gives their investors returns. She outlines a typical transaction: "I presell to the CBC — approximately 1/3 of my budget is there. Then I go see Telefilm Canada to make sure that conceptually and financially we're fine and to get them on board for CBC. The formal application goes in. Then I package an investment memo and sell units. So if, for example, Telefilm comes in for $100,000 and I'm selling units at $10,000 a piece, Telefilm takes it in the form of 10 units. Then private investors come in for 10 units. The CBC money becomes income. Our investors get tax write-offs (over two years) and they know they'll make back the CBC money. Magic Lantern (which handles the U.S.) puts up guarantees for what they'll get over a four-year period. We've been able to attract investors because we've kept our budgets modest and they know over time they'll make their money back."

In the U.S. Kids has run on HBO and Showtime, and then all 13 episodes went to the Disney Channel. Then HBO and Showtime stopped buying children's half-hours and the second set of 13 went directly to Disney. Now PWT is negotiating with PBS.

In Canada the shows have gone first to CBC, who has run all 26, and will soon be picked up by TVOntario for a second window. Because the series was produced piecemeal, PWT had to wait until they amassed all 26 before they were able to be available for a secondary market. This year was the first time that Kids was shown in a time slot that had ratings on CBC — the Sunday night timeslot of 5 p.m. for Degrassi Yearbook. Ratings were impressive — 32% of their target age group of kids from 6-12 were watching.

If Telefilm Canada is making back their money on children's shows it's because children's budgets are relatively low and foreign sales become a significant chunk. Also, according to CBC's Angela Bruce, children's shows have more shelf life, more of possibility of international sales, and are generally less risky. They're more usable in other markets, including extensive runs in libraries and schools. The strength of Kids is that many countries are buying the shows and the shows themselves have not dated.
Isme Bennie, PWT's foreign sales agent, has made sales for Kids in the U.K., Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Malaysia, Singapore, Italy, and the Middle East (Turkey, Dubai, and other countries). She's currently negotiating with France and Australia. What makes the series so successful internationally? "It's a combination of things," says Bennie.

"They're very real stories and even though they take place in Toronto, they're universal and apply to kids everywhere. They do have a lesson, but it's not hammered home. They're done in a very amusing, interesting way. The series is strong on the production level of acting and directing." Bennie finds Kids' similarity to other high-profile Canadian children's programming that is so well received in other countries. And buyers keep coming back to her for more episodes, even notoriously finicky ones like the Scandinavians.

Molly Cox, the CBC's head of acquisitions for children's programming, is even more philosophical. "People forget the passing of the extended family," she notes. "The value of Kids of Degrassi Street is that it causes the street and school to represent the 19th-century extended family, with its loyalties, conflicts, and frictions with the potential of extended ideas."

But Hood feels that kids love their shows around the world because "We are very true to a small area of the world. The truer you are to something you understand well, the more global you are. If we tried to make Degrassi Street look like Anystreet U.S.A., it wouldn't have worked."

In addition to attracting international kudos, the series has also racked up a number of prestigious awards, all hung on the 1985 American Film Festival, where the series won the Blue Ribbon for Best Independent Production. "The film business needs to be much more aware of the potential of extended ideas." And they may look down the road to do a feature film which will naturally be a movie for children. A couple of stories they worked on in Kids would work better in a feature-length structure, they feel. "We're incredible believers in evolution," says Hood, but the subject matter of their evolution remains the same.

Both Schuyler and Hood agree with Bruce that "as a country we have more potential for getting such an international reputation for children's."

And there's excellent work being done all around by Atlantis Films with their Sons and Daughters Canadian short series and their Origins series, for example. And they're doing something else to get better air time for children's programming. "Our goal is to get better air time for children's shows around the world because they're universal and apply to kids though they take place in Toronto, and they're very true to a small area of the world."

Bruce feels that kids are so nice to each other," laughs Hood. "The new series is going to be raunchier. We can deal with some harder-hitting issues. It's still going to be a morally based show, but you'll meet some screen characters with a harder edge.

And they'd like to capture the world of the adolescent. These kids are really understood in terms of television."

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Owen Schuyler, PWT's executive director, feels "the series reflects the children's perspective on the events of their daily lives, and therefore children relate to it very easily."

The budget per episode jumps to $200,000 in Degrassi Junior High, and it's aimed for a slightly older audience of 12-15-year-olds. PWT will start with 26 episodes which covers one year at school. The kids will move from grade 7 to grade 8 in the course of a year. If "we become attached to some characters, we might do spinoffs," says Schuyler, but the series as initially structured is designed to run for 10 years.

PWT could have cliffhanger plots (which would truly make it like a soap opera) or resolved plots. The partners see it as a Hill Street Blues for kids, using both horizontal and vertical storytelling.

Once Degrassi Junior High gets going, PWT might even do a few more episodes of Kids, but not in the same capacity as before — more on a supervisory level. PWT is expanding, moving their post-production and workshops to another location, but they still want to stay small.

"There's a lot of the teacher in PWT," says Hood, "and one of our goals is to almost become a school. We can use the same kind of workshop setting for young writers as we do for actors. The film business needs to be much more fluid, a place for people to learn. We can become a workshop area in all fields of production. We need young, vital people to keep it alive."

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