

Chasing Rainbows

Time turns back sixty years and location travels south-west from Montreal to Toronto for CBC's current 13-hour drama mega-project, **Chasing Rainbows**, produced in conjunction with Northernlight and Picture and starring Paul Gross, Michael Riley, and Julie Stewart. This production has already received a dose of media-blitz for its use of the High Definition Television System (HDTV) from Japan, an electronic cinematic system that is touted to match the crisp look of 35mm, while lending itself to the production capabilities of the computer age.

But what is interesting about **Chasing Rainbows** and its use of HDTV is its effect on a 'period' piece and the sets and props. Mark Blandford, executive producer, was prepared to tackle this period piece after his experience in the same capacity on **Empire Inc.** He and writer Douglas Bowie isolated the period between the two world wars of this century as being rife with dramatic potential for this script.

"It's impossible not to be ambivalent about the period," Mark Blandford reflects in a telephone interview. "On the one hand, you've got all kinds of stories that are waiting to be told." He rhymes off a series of characters and incidents that have been integrated into the body of the script. "But there is also the freedom that you have with the period, though. And I don't mean license, I mean freedom to talk about people who were real people."

One of the characters he refers to is Reg Steffenson, who is based on the real, long-ignored Canadian pioneer of wireless broadcasting, Reginald Fessenden. Set decorator Armando Sgrignuoli originally intended to visit the Edison Museum in Michigan to find the necessary gadgetry to equip this character's attic and rooftop. But when he visited Toronto's Vintage Radio Store, radio buff Mike Batsch invited him into his home where he found a treasure trove of early radio equipment. Batsch was also a storehouse of information on Fessenden. From him, Sgrignuoli discovered that one of the inventor's eccentricities included his habit of serving his



• **Chasing Rainbows'** Roaring '20s look: from left to right, Alison MacLeod, Kim Cayer, Michael Riley, Louise Laparé, and Malika Mendez

cat Mikums sips of brandy from a wicker-encased thermos bottle.

"But the other advantage of a period piece is that people love it," says Blandford. "It's more expensive of course. You've got costumes...the Montreal of 1919 no longer exists, so you've got to matte it. So every second scene, somebody's saying, 'Wait a minute, did it look like this? What *did* the street look like across from the Windsor Hotel in 1919?'"

But he is also contending with working out the bugs of applying HDTV on this shoot. He is tight-lipped about any problems in working with the new system, but he likes the pioneering aspect of it all. "Certainly, you're on a new learning curve, and therefore it takes a little longer for everybody to know what the strengths and limitations of a new thing are. But the quality of the picture and the quality of the matting that we can do is beyond belief. And the quality of excitement that is generated on the production is astonishing."

With HDTV's increased number of lines - 1,125 instead of the usual 525 - veracity takes on a whole new dimension. Indeed, the constant thread of tension that is generated by the creation of illusion for the camera while maintaining reality is being somewhat redefined on this production.

Consider the case of the flask: props master Ron Ror was challenged to come up with one that an upper-class but spunky twenties darling such as Paula Ashley (played by Julie Stewart) might carry discreetly tucked away in her stocking (with a suitable restorative, of course). An imitation won't cut it here - any reproduction using cheap metal would show its base nature for HDTV to catch. What Ror eventually found in his antique store ramblings was the genuine item cast in elegant, sterling silver. A quick look at the in-truck monitor confirms the luminous colour and a richness of tone not generally seen on video.

The money of the age was not easy to come by either. Police and the R.C.M.P. were reluctant to allow the antique though still legal tender to be reproduced (read counterfeited), and the CBC legal department finally had to guarantee that its movie money wouldn't be used anywhere than on set. The bills were colour-Xeroxed on a slightly thicker kind of paper than the original so they wouldn't crackle on tape. Ror is now keeper of the money - he carefully doles out the oversized notes and locks them up at the end of each shooting day.

On this particular night, one of the shabbier warehouse districts that skirts

the downtown Toronto core is the locale for one in a series of week-long night locations. A huge spotlight at the mouth of a gaping alley lights up the ubiquitous Winnebago and blue CBC panel trucks. Dense rolling fog drifts quietly from the heart of the warehouse enclave onto the busy Friday night street.

On set a vintage 1921 Dodge is demanding obeisance from actor Booth Savage. It sputters and dies every time he tries to reverse it. Finally, his companion played by Claire Rodger (chummily referred to as 'Dollface') starts and warms the engine before he throws himself into the driver's seat and drives off. Never underestimate a woman's touch...

Mark Blandford is sharing directorial duties with William Fruet in order to gain first-hand information about working with HDTV, directing episodes three and four. "There are those who think that I'm out of my mind," he notes wryly. But in living on the cutting edge of this new technology, he is also able to deal with its new demands and work the lessons of that experience into upcoming production scheduling.

Audiences will have a chance to look at the results of this gamble in 1988.

Patricia Michael •

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Pater Noster

The finale of the feature film *Pater Noster* is to be filmed tonight on the piece of land ear-marked for Toronto's domed Stadium. As I approach one of the archaic buildings on the site, a service garage once used by C.N. to refurbish their freight cars, I am struck by an immense feeling of decay and tranquility, a feeling of quiet respect as if I was visiting a monument to a past era. Inside the warehouse-sized structure, however, the mood abruptly changes. There is a flurry of activity as crew members assemble a macabre stage, an unmannered collection of wood pieces lit ominously by a candle chandelier.

"What's going to happen here?" I ask a long-haired fellow standing nearby. "This is where the brother runs at the stage," he replies. "He thinks his girlfriend's son is hanging there (pointing to the stage), but it isn't the son, it's a midget."

The explanation is rather confusing, so I set off to find the director to get some clarification. David Mitchell is standing outside in an open area speaking with the line producer and an assistant. "I want him to look like the Wicked Witch of the West, you know, going down...down." David compresses his small frame into a ball on the ground, and glances up to make sure that the assistant has understood.

I introduce myself, and we are left alone to talk. "It's latin for 'Our Father,'" he says in response to my first question about the title. "I would consider it to be a young adults' film," he begins. "It works on two levels. It has the action which attracts some people, but it also goes deeper. It asks religious questions, questions of morality. The subtext of the film is a city out of control. Look at some of the major issues today. Look at all of the homeless people who are out on the streets of L.A. It's more pitiful than anything else. The theme of this film is that the strong will inherit the earth, and that greed and corruption are the products of weakness."

"This film cost \$1.3 million, all financed through pre-sales," he continues. "We're getting good production value for our money. Do you know that Daimien and I have never accepted a dime from Telefilm, and not a dime from the CBC. We can't have the CBC saying 'Oooh, that's too heavy for us.'"

Daimien Lee, the other co-founder of Rose and Ruby Productions, is the writer, producer, and one of the actors in *Pater Noster*. He and David have been working together for about ten years. They started at CTV with *Wide World of Sports*, working for Johnny Esaw. Many of the crew have been with Rose and Ruby for quite a while. For some, it is their fourth or fifth feature together. But this is a non-union set, and so, for another half-dozen kids, this is their first film.



• Director David Mitchell, near eyepiece, on the *Pater Noster* set, a film about a city out of control

I go over to the crafts table and get myself a cup of coffee. In the fading light, one can discern the silhouettes of broken concrete structures, decaying barrels, and moving people. Overhead, a flock of chattering seagulls pass by. It is all very Felliniesque.

"Quiet on the set please. Let's go, guys," shouts the first A.D., who goes by the name of Roman. To one side, a young lady in red overalls is struggling with a piece of cardboard, trying to direct the vapours from the smoke machine across the set. "Stick around, later on we're going to set someone on fire," whispers the second A.D. A great billow of smoke rolls across the stage as the actor, an older man wearing a grey trenchcoat, begins to speak. From where I'm standing, I can only make out strands of the dialogue, lines such as "The whole world is crumbling apart," and, "There's no good, Paul, no evil, only strength."

Halfway through the next shot the generator fails. From up on stage Roman shouts, "Anybody know any campfire songs?" Then, before waiting for a reply, he breaks into a rendition of 'Four Strong Winds.' The Soundman quietly sings the second line with him.

Outside, in the truck housing the generator, a large fan has been set to cool it down. A bunch of us gather, while someone on the roof of the truck pours water into the top of the generator.

It is a while later. The camera is tracking backwards, while the actor in the grey trenchcoat is advancing. I am standing next to the Soundman and one

of the few actresses in the film, Maria. "I worked with these guys in the last picture," she tells me. They're great to work for. They're interested in making movies rather than making money." As if to cast doubt on either eventuality, the generator promptly fails again. We are now completely shrouded in darkness, except for the light thrown from the fiery flame bars. We begin discussing the upcoming scene. "Yeah, on stage they're going to have a fight," says Maria. "See, the father is pitting son against son, brother against brother." On the dark stage, the man in the trenchcoat is practising a death grip on a younger actor. "That's supposed to be my fiancé, the good brother," says Maria pointing to the young man. "But what about the midget?" I ask. "The midget is in cahoots with the father," pipes in the Soundman. Maria is getting cold. As she walks away, the Soundman chuckles. "I don't know if you're going to get your article," he says. "You're going to have to write that there is no article because you couldn't see anything."

After 20 minutes, however, the generator is working again. A bearded giant is posted guard by the temperature gauge. "If it gets too high I'll shut her down," he growls.

After partaking in a dinner of chicken à la king and coleslaw, I finally catch up with Daimien shortly before he is to act out a confrontation scene with the good brother. (He plays the evil brother.) He is dressed in ragged clothing, and looks like some kind of marauding caveman with his bushy beard and mouth covered in fake blood. Despite the ugly

appearance, an easy charm and warmth radiate from him. We talk at one end of the service garage, while the rest of the crew is preparing to film an explosion sequence.

"This has been an awfully ambitious project," he tells me. "And everyone has responded extremely well to the pressure." We talk about the script, and about what makes a good scriptwriter. We talk about the wide pre-sale of the film, which includes distribution to parts of Europe, the United States, and Canada. We talk about the chicken à la king. When I mention the generator problems of earlier in the evening, Daimien gently brushes them aside. "These things are to be expected," he smiles.

Roman comes over and ushers everyone out of the shooting area. "This is going to be a big explosion," he warns us. A moment later, with camera rolling, a large pile of twisted metal and rotten two-by-fours explode into flame. The noise is deafening. It's time for me to go.

Outside the service garage, relics of the past sit patiently, consigned to demolition in order that Toronto might lay claim to a more cosmopolitan image. Behind me in the repair garage, a burst of simulated machine gun fire can be heard. Ahead of me, out on a misty Spadina avenue, officers from three patrol cars are diligently performing spot checks.

Phil van Steenburgh •