Chasing Rainbows

Time turns back sixty years and location travels south-west from Montreal to Toronto for CBC's current 13-hour 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 ripe 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 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 (famously 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

Miracle Workers

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