

# Toronto Law

"When I first saw the place, I couldn't believe it," says Maryke McEwen, executive producer of CBC's new urban law series, **Street Legal**. "It's as if it had been built for us."

True. The day Mono Lino Typesetting went out of business overnight, leaving lock, stock and half-empty coffee cups behind, was a godsend to McEwen. The building at 420 Dupont came equipped with such luxuries as his-and-hers bathrooms, loading docks, high-ceilinged workshops on the ground floor and brightly-lit offices on the top. The building was perfect. It wasn't long before **Street Legal** moved in and started setting up house.

"Sometimes you forget you're on a set. It's like home" says Sonja Smits, who plays the series' topnotch criminal defense lawyer, Carrie Barr. True. Once you enter the building, past the reception area, the crew's kitchen, and the stars' dressing rooms, you find yourself in the offices of Barr, Robinovitch and Tchobanian – the world of **Street Legal**.

You are standing in the firm's library, appropriately lined with rows and rows of 'real' law books. On the right is Leon Robinovitch's (Eric Peterson) office, complete with indoor greenhouse and a picture of Tommy Douglas on the wall. Carrie Barr's (Sonja Smits) and Chuck Tchobanian's (C. David Johnson) offices are on the left. Further back, there's the boardroom and, beyond that, the court's main hallway, adorned with stained glass windows, and the courtroom itself...

There is more... turn a corner and you soon find yourself in Leon's cozy living room and well-equipped kitchen... further on you stumble onto prison halls leading to a cell. There is also what will soon be known as Carrie's loft apartment. And, there is still room to expand... little by little, as the characters develop, gaining depth and background, the little house on **Street Legal** takes shape.

The series, which had a six-part run in January, has been renewed and expanded to 13 episodes this season and, if McEwen has her way, is here to stay.

**Street Legal** examines the trials and tribulations of a team of three dedicated young lawyers, Leon, Carrie, and Chuck. It is about the firm they put together after law school, in the Queen Street West District. It is about life and friendship and love. And it is about Toronto, the city, its neighbourhoods and streets.

The series is the brainchild of Maryke McEwen who patiently nurtured the project through the three or four years it took the CBC to approve it. Previously associate producer of **For The Record**, McEwen is an energetic and versatile woman who knows what she wants and leaves nothing to chance. New to the fast-pace, back-to-back shooting and heavy schedule of a dramatic series, she works long hours, seven days a week.



• Sonja Smits' Giacconda smile

The day I was there she had a story meeting, a music meeting and a budget meeting on her schedule.

"What I find hardest is constantly having to switch gears from the creative to the business," she says. Not to mention the ever-expanding union demands resulting in ever-shrinking workdays... and those budget cuts. It gets pretty hectic.

McEwen handpicked her crew and, since it is crucial to the show's continuity and rhythm, she does her best to keep them happy.

"At first I was nervous because I never knew what was going to happen to my character, and I didn't know if I could do it," says Eric Peterson.

Peterson plays Leon Robinovitch, the series' idealistic left-leaning lawyer; a lover of the downtrodden and of worthy causes. To research his character, he spent many hours observing sessions at the municipal court, and chatting with a lawyer friend whose philosophical and political bent is similar to Leon's. Having overcome his initial fears, Peterson now thoroughly enjoys acting in a series. Far from routine, the challenges of mastering a new script, collaborating with a new guest star and adding dimension to his character, keep him on his toes. This feeling is shared by the series' other two principals.

C. David Johnson, the most ambitious of **Street Legal**'s three lawyers, is fascinated by the way his character, Chuck, has grown, becoming more defined and complex as the writers explore every aspect of his personality. "It's a bit like Christmas... you never know ahead of time what is coming up," he says.

Johnson, who most recently starred in CBC's **Red River**, is happy to be back in Toronto but misses the outdoor life and the camaraderie of a remote location. "We are all very close on this set, but at night everyone goes back home to their

own life," he says.

To prevent burn-out, **Street Legal**'s actors, producers, directors and writers work on a rotating basis. Every episode features one of the three principals in its main plot, giving the other two a chance to develop their character in a sub-plot situation. The show's two producers – David Pears and Duncan Lamb – each take a show and pick their director, writer and guest lead.

The day I visited the set, they were shooting **Star Struck**, this year's second show, written by Don Truckey and directed by Alan Kroeker, recently arrived from Winnipeg where he directed **Heaven On Earth**. By all accounts, it was a quiet day and everything was going according to schedule... without a hitch... well, that's if you don't count a passing train rudely interrupting a scene (the tracks run right in back of the building) David Johnson's wretched cold and Sonja Smits occasionally giggling at one of her lines.

"Up until now Carrie had no personal life," says Sonja Smits of her character. "I felt like a nun. But they've found me a lover and apparently in next week's scene, I end up in bed with the guy without even having met him... Sometimes I wish they'd shoot this thing in sequence." (burst of laughter).

"It's all in a day's work, I tell you, I've been in the business for 22 years," said Bob, one of the light men as we walked to the corner greasy spoon at lunchtime. It was around 12:30, there would be no displaced lunchtime penalty... definitely a good day.

Toronto is one of the characters on **Street Legal**. At least 50 per cent of the show is shot in its streets. According to Maryke McEwen it is time the beauty of Toronto be captured on celluloid, just as it has been for New York, Paris or Rome. Well... OK. But this presents some minor

problems. One, it irks many Canadians whose favourite pastime is actually to hate the city. And two, there are thousands of crews out there doing the same thing; many of which, far from trying to capture Toronto's elusive soul, are busy using its body to portray Anonymus City, U.S.A....

Why just the other day **Street Legal** ran into **M.R.T.**'s crew, while trying to shoot behind old City Hall...

Well, it is 2:00, time to get back on the set. The crew in the kitchen have finished eating their grilled tomato sandwiches, Eric Peterson has come back for the natural food store a few doors down, Avril, the first assistant director is shooing everyone back on the set to block the next scene... the happy little family is ready to resume its day's work.

"Don't say that, it sounds suspicious," says Johnson.

Maybe... but in this case, I don't think so.

Josée Miville-Dechêne •

## Shooting Britain's King

Napoleon is dancing the fox trot badly.

For René Pothier, first assistant director on Donald Brittain's latest docudrama **Mackenzie King**, that is just one of the little problems he is trying to deal with this morning.

The Napoleon-like figure is an extra who, together with the remainder of disguised extras, is barely past his teens and looks like he's never heard of the fox-trot, let alone danced it. Now he and the others are being rushed through an impromptu lesson under the fretful eye of Pothier. They throw themselves with total abandon into the dance. After a while they actually start to look good. But Pothier keeps cutting in with further instructions about positioning and looking happy and stopping at just this point and...

The setting where they swirl is the Tudor Room, one of those grandiose Victorian staterooms, rich with a beauty of former times and eloquent with a history unspoken, on the fifth floor of Ogilvy's, one of Montreal's oldest and largest department stores. On this sunny Sunday morning it has been dressed up prettily, for a special occasion, a special illusion. A costume ball at the Governor General's residence, circa 1920's.

The liveried waiters – who look pinched in their too-tight tuxedos and smart haircuts – and the art-deco lamps combine to form visual hints of an era in our history when Mackenzie King was our young nation's Prime Minister – not



yet the odd-ball mystic we later got to know through his diaries.

The era texture is also reproduced. The dark and rich wood panelling of the Tudor Room and the way it is lit exude an aesthetic quality that speaks of the upper-class and power – prized qualities in the Ottawa of those days. Even the multi-hued garlands that presently color these walls, together with the pure white roundness of the dancing young ladies' shoulders as they peek out of strapless period gowns, interact with the textures in this visual theatre – enhancing the whole.

The dancers swirl in a rising and falling circle around the high-tech grayness of the modern camera. An 'audience' of similarly costumed extras, perhaps 40 all told, forms a kind of multi-colored crescent moon around them. A '20s tune is booming out of the high-power speakers just off the set, filling the room with a party atmosphere that is real and vivacious. Into this setting of noise and colour enters a man wearing a baseball jacket of the now-defunct and ever-losing Saint-Louis Browns. Leaving the jacket draped on the director's chair, he then pads over to the camera and sits behind the eye-piece. They have a physical run-through as he studies how the scene will look. They do so only once, for he nods his approval quickly and camera operator Susan Troy returns to her controls, smiling.

He is Donald Brittain, four-time Oscar nominee, several-time winner of countless Genies, Nellies and other international awards, and the writer-director of



• Donald Brittain gets the hell out of the way

photo: Fun Diamond

this film on one of Canada's greatest and most complex statesman.

A \$2-million NFB/CBC co-production, **Mackenzie King** is set to be a three or four-part mini-series to be aired next November or January. Shooting on a 45-day working schedule in several locations around Montreal and Ottawa, **Mackenzie King** stars Sean McCann in the title role (already familiar to most as **Night Heat's** crusty but kind-hearted Lt. Hogan) in a film that promises, like Brittain's **Hal C. Banks: Canada's Sweetheart**, to be multi-faceted, realistic, sometimes humorous but always painstakingly detailed and researched.

Asked to describe his formula for success, Brittain once said, "Get a good subject, get a good crew and get the hell out of the way," and on this morning he seems to be living up to his maxim. He allows first a.d. Pothier to handle most of the technical aspects of direction while he concentrates more on the general look of the scene, on the actors, and how they handle the material. In the beehive-like activity of the set he is not the Omnipotent Director but more the chief interpreter of the vision, first among equals, a team player.

Indeed he is painstaking in his preparation of the scene with the actors,

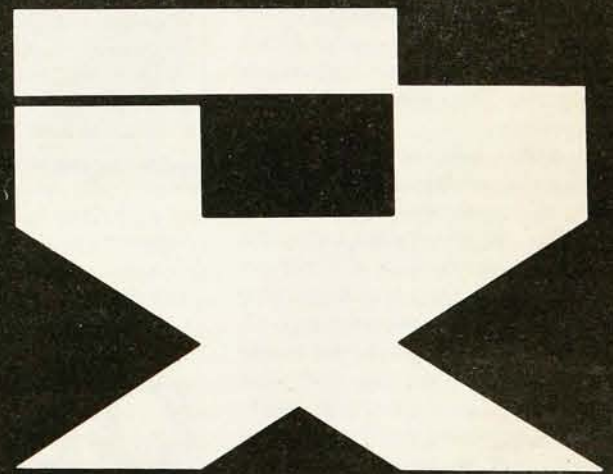
searching with them for how the scene should or *could* go. Richard Farrell, playing Governor General Lord Byng, and Patricia Collins, in the role of his marriage wife, listen intently as Brittain talks to them in his distinctive low voice. "Brittain is known to rewrite much of his films as he goes along," says the film's press attaché Ron Jones. "At night he'll rewrite the next day's shoot, sometimes even on the same day, locked up in a side-room just off the set."

Now that several rehearsals have fine-tuned the scene to Brittain's satisfaction, he turns to his a.d. and calls for an actual take. As Pothier's voice rises to call for filming, the crew become instantly aware, everyone going to their respective positions, intent, listening. A bell rings. A red lamp just outside the set begins to flash. The people who walk on the large wooden floor near it stop, for their steps are noisy on this surface. For a moment, everything else seems to freeze, everything except the play of the actors. Under the hot, fiery lights, before the rolling camera, before the 50 or so extras, crew and onlookers are attempting not to make noise, they *look* and *listen* – the actors play.

Then, for that crystalline moment, there is no audience, there is no director, there is no camera, there is only the delivery of a scene rendered in time and space – its images etched on chemically-treated moving plastic, its sounds magnetically captured elsewhere – the beauty of its capturing, yes, forever ours.

André Guy Arsenault •

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