

Tricker Treat

In the Ottawa suburb of Alta Vista, on a tree-lined street, a maroon car was trailing a young boy riding a green and yellow bicycle. Inside the car, director and screenwriter Michael Rubbo was finally feeling certain that a long, risky search was over.

For months, Rubbo had been traveling all over Canada, auditioning thousands of unknown 10-to-13-year-olds for the principal characters in his children's film, *Tommy Tricker and the Stamp Traveller*. This afternoon, he had told four kids – three boys and one girl – that they were going to be in the movie. For 20 minutes, they excitedly asked questions like, "Will we have to wear make-up?" "Will there be people going by in the background?" "You mean, it's going to be in theatres?" "My heart," said one of the kids, a motor-driven and precociously witty boy named Andrew Whitehead, "is still fluttering."

The kid on the bike, Anthony Rogers, was showing his excitement by pedaling hard as he led the people in the maroon car toward the apartment building where he lived. Rubbo shouted, as excited as a kid himself, "It's a shot from the movie!" Through the windshield, the story's central character was appearing for the first time in flesh and blood. Tommy Tricker was speeding between the trees – strong and devil-may-care.

Tommy Tricker and the Stamp Traveller will be the seventh of the *Tales for All*, the hit series of children's films being produced by Rock Demers's Montreal company, Les Productions La Fête. It is company policy to hold open, as opposed to what Rubbo calls 'agency' auditions, and to cast non-professionals who show signs of both undiscovered talent and quirky humanity. Slick pros who have been groomed into TV child-oids don't get parts.

The kids must also more or less match in type the characters they will play. For example, Rubbo wanted Tommy to be a bit of a punk, but a charming one that girls like – as well as "a hard-knocks kid who experienced the hard knocks of



• A stranger in Trickerland, director Mike Rubbo

photo: Maurie Alioff

life." To find the tough little charmer, and the other characters, Rubbo and his casting director, Lois Siegel, would arrive in a city, check out possibilities in a few selected schools, and then hold a big, well-publicized audition that anyone could come to.

In Ottawa, the open call drew about 1,000 people into a hot, stuffy high school auditorium. Up on the stage, Rubbo – shaggy hair, roguish moustache, green pants and shirt – introduced the audience to the characters of the film. Pompous Albert. Vulnerable Ralph. Protective Nancy. The trickster, Tricker. Rubbo floated his listeners into the story, which he took to the edge of a cliffhanging climax, and then stopped. Applause. He said they would all find out what happened next when they eventually saw the film. Laughter. (Little did the audience know that Rubbo himself didn't know everything that would happen next, that for months to come, he would be continually looking for, as he puts it, new keys in the final stages of the plot.)

The performance over, the kids were

hearing Michael Rubbo say that a few of them might – even though the odds were against it – get the roles they had just heard about. Many of the children in the room were thinking, "Sure – about as likely as getting a phone call from Madonna." But others were feeling, "Why not me? Maybe it can all go as smooth as ice cream." Andrew Whitehead, who eventually became Albert, remembers, "Something in the back of my head said, 'It would be nice to be in a movie – wouldn't it, Andrew?'"

At the Ottawa audition, all the children who showed up were streamed through a classroom containing Lois Siegel and a video camera operated by a razor-thin guy in black. The kids stepped up to a mark on the floor, looked into the lens, and said a few things about themselves. Some were nervous, others thought it was funny, all were expectant. There was a buzz in the air.

Whatever their dreams, most of the kids remained quite cool and had fun. The sad side of the whole thing was that some of them – and probably their parents – had become too intense about the

audition. There were adorably tilted heads here, brassy but cute wisecracks there. One girl cocked her hip and clamped her hand on it as if she were auditioning for *The Big Broadcast of 1938*.

The kids who made it through Siegel's scrutiny were sent into another room to "work with Michael." This was the best part of the game. He greeted the kids, cracked jokes, called himself "Mad Rubbo." Then he began to play – quickly explaining a scene from the film, assigning roles, activating. He said things like "You're feeling really icky." He told a potential Nancy that she was a little afraid of Tommy, but she also liked him. She thought she could save him.

Most of the kids were off instantly, even coming up with nuances or improvising funny lines. "Some people call me an animal," mugged Anthony Rogers, just beginning to get inside Tommy Tricker. Rubbo followed the kids, taping everything with his Sony 8, suggesting changes, adding details, grinning from ear to ear whenever a few sparks flew. He had a way of making the kids feel like

Words, words, words, nothing but words...

... I've Heard the Mermaids Singing, Un Zoo la nuit, Crazy Boys, Le Sourd dans la ville, L'Homme renversé, À Bout de souffle, L'Année dernière à Marienbad, Les Fous de Bassan, Dancing in the Dark, Le Déclin de l'empire américain, Henri, Anne Trister, Le Film d'Ariane, Pouvoir intime, La Ligne de chaleur, Kalamazoo, Mario, Sonatine, Return to Dresden, Haïti Québec, Le Crime d'Ovide Plouffe, Le Dernier glacier, Post Scriptum, Zarico, La Fiction nucléaire, Les Années de rêve, Le Jour 'S...', Le Règne du jour, La Femme de l'hôtel, Beyrouth! À défaut d'être mort, Duplessis, Journal inachevé, Maria Chapdelaine, Debout sur leur terre, Un Monologue nord-sud, Lucien Brouillard, Quel numéro What Number?, Les Gossipeuses, Les Fleurs sauvages, Les Traces d'un homme, Les Yeux rouges, Mon Amie Pierrette, Les Beaux souvenirs...

KINOGRAPH Inc.

Film translation: Subtitles, scripts, festival interpreting, and more
Robert Gray 1018 Gifford Montréal H2J 1P6 (514) 523-3457

accomplices. They were clued in. They had always been playing this game.

Once the cast was selected and the shooting of the film began, the game continued in several Montreal locations, including a haunted-looking 19th-century factory that is actually an atelier for a man who manufactures paper by hand. On the various sets, Rubbo went on drawing his actors into what he referred to as "a form of self-hypnosis," in which, hopefully, nothing existed outside the world of the film. Jill Stanley (Nancy), a pretty little girl with a wistful sidelong glance, says, "When we had to cry, sometimes he told us sad stories and stuff to help us. Crying is really hard."

Lucas Evans (Ralph), a wide-eyed, sweet-natured boy, remembers, "I was surprised to see that it was mostly waiting and not doing much, but then, when the second week came, it started getting more and more built up. There was a lot more scenes to do. And it felt a lot easier." In fact, by the end of the Montreal shoot, the kids seemed almost blasé. "It's not hard to get used to," says Andrew, the philosopher of the group. "It's just life if you're in movies." Rubbo, at times quite blasé himself, was talking to them without any condescension — as if they were both adults and professionals.

But during breaks, the kids would drop out of movie life — with its constant, nagging attention to minute details — and just play. With these alert, energetic kids as the focal point of the shoot, the **Tommy Tricker** crew seemed to be a particularly relaxed and friendly one. Line producer Ann Burke, first assistant director Carle Delaroché-Vernet, d.o.p. Andreas Poulson, script Marie Beaulieu — and everyone else — worked quickly, efficiently, and with affection for the project.

On a damp afternoon in August, the company was completing one of the last, and most difficult, shooting days in Montreal. (Sequences were still to be filmed in Hangzhou, China and in Australia, during the month of September). The location was a leafy suburban side street. The families of all the kids were there. People from the neighborhood stood around. Both a TV and a radio crew were taping documentaries.

The camera tracked with the main characters as they pursued Tommy Tricker. Then a mountie — dyed pink from boot to hat — galloped behind the actors on a pink horse, reigned in for his tight shot, and earnestly delivered his line: "I think you need me."

Everyone giggled. Church bells rang, and Andreas Poulsson was suspended just under the tree tops, on a Chapman crane, waiting to shoot the last image of the day.

Anthony Howard was on his bike, in a jean jacket and shades. He and Paul Popowich, a sinewy kid, who played Tommy's accomplice Cass, waited for their cues. "Ride a little faster, gesture a little later," Rubbo said to Anthony. "Be careful." Anthony, who was obviously relishing his role, grinned wickedly. "Don't worry. We're metalheads."

"Action!"

Rubbo watched as the two boys took off, the crane swivelled down, and the camera framed Tommy Tricker and Cass speeding away between the trees.

Maurie Alioff •

March in Newfoundland

"What we need is a revolution of ideas."

— Ken Pittman, playing the man at the bar in *Roland's Progress*.

"In Newfoundland, there's a strong history of individual filmmaking and the collective process. It could be precarious to make a feature film assembling the conventional Canadian funding sources — Telefilm and private investors. You hope whatever you do will be another step forward for this dynamic film community, not a reverse step."

Funding versus creativity, conventional structures versus collective arrangements; writer/director Ken Pittman has good reasons to be considering these issues. His first feature film, **Finding Mary March** was shot near Buchans, Newfoundland in July and August, and he wonders how this \$1.2 million budget film will fit in the provincial film scene, where films have most commonly been made on a wing and a camera.

With financing from Telefilm, a distribution contract with René Malo, and a broadcast agreement from CBC, Pittman has gone where no other Newfoundland filmmaker has gone before. With an idea taken from a documentary he made on the Beothuks seven years ago, he ended up with the most well-nourished Newfoundland feature film.

"It's a low budget, the average would be twice what we worked with. But I wouldn't want to work with a larger budget on my first feature film. You could make a 90-minute film for less, with much the same substance, but who would get to see it? Who would see this

piece of work with so much of people's time and ability in it?"

"There are a lot of great dreams existing in people's pillows. I have no problems with beautiful dreams in pillows, but I want my dream up there on Canadian screens.

This particular dream is set in contemporary Newfoundland; it develops through the forest and along the shores of Red Indian Lake, winter home of the Beothuks. Ted (Richard Boland) a trapper, and his daughter Bernadette (Tara Manual) live in the woods. Ted continually clashes with the mining company and social services, as he won't send Bernadette to school and threatens anyone who strays across his personal boundaries. Into this comes photographer Nancy George (Andrée Pelletier) who specializes in native cultures and wants to capture some Beothuk artifacts. Somewhere along the lakeshore is the grave of Mary March, a Beothuk princess buried in the 19th century.

Nancy's presence aggravates the ongoing conflicts between father and daughter, and highlights the tension between the mining interests and the ancient, echoing wilderness.

"Using a contemporary story with real people was almost an accident. I did it without thinking. It was a matter of the interesting dynamics between people, quite apart from the question of the Beothuks."

"But the subject of the Beothuks is a universal one," said Pittman. "It's another example in the history of human beings when the challenge to respect each other and co-exist is rejected, and really unacceptable conflicts are produced. That process is endless. It's not just between Europeans and North American Indians, but between communities and families and individuals."

The location adds to the story, it plays a starring role in itself. Cast and crew travelled a long way from home to set up in this scenery. The flies were bad, and moose roamed the highway frequently, which made driving sometimes an activity of white-knuckle caution. The unusually warm weather made problems for continuity as the river levels fell by in-

ches and previously green forest clearings were burnt dry and brown. A storm scene had to be improvised with the Buchans fire department, many willing townspeople and some huge fans from the Buchans mine.

The 30 day shoot found the crew in various spots. One evening 20 people are crowded into a small, hot cabin, shooting interiors. The next morning they're standing up to their knees in the Exploits River, or floating on a platform of canoes, following Ted and Nancy as they paddle their way across the water.

"Using this location added up to a third of our budget," said Pittman. "It translated into a lot more demands, working longer, climbing down grades to get the cables across. We're not just a few hours from a film community, we're six hours from St. John's and an hour from Buchans. But it adds a realness to the film. Films that look like they could have been shot anywhere are drained of place."

It will be a challenge to keep this hard-won scenery through the editing. "If you're slowly masking down the setting, you could end up with a brand new film."

The script itself was revised as it was processed through funding agencies and distributors. "Most of the changes were practical," Pittman said. "There were some compromises, but you know you have to make some if you go through these conventional sources. The question is, where do you stop these compromises? You have to decide that, you have to control their ability to exploit you."

"There's a whole new approach to drawing on these resources. Where Canadian filmmaking generally is so departmentalized, standards in other parts of the country are just not admissible here."

"You have to ask how the industrial mode for feature filmmaking would apply here. We've had a pretty dynamic film community since the late '60s, and this film could be an aberration or a detour. That's a worrisome prospect."

The adaptable and cohesive arts scene means many people work in several dis-

• Ken Pittman looking for **Mary March** with Bob Petrie and Michael Jones

photo: Manfred Buckheist

