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-15-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 makeup?" "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. 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. 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. "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 were feeling high, 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 improving funny lines. "Some people call me an animal," mugged Anthony Rogers, just beginning to get inside Tommy Tricker. Rubbo followed the kids, tapping 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
ON LOCATION

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 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 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."

"If you're slowly masking down the setting, you're losing some of the real shooting."

"Finding Mary March was an aberration or a revolution of ideas."

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 districts.

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

photo: Manfred Buckheit

Maurie Alioff

ON LOCATION

Maurie Alioff

October

Telefilm 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 makes handmade shoes. 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 film. Jill Stanley (Nancy), a pretty little girl with a winsome sidelong glance, says, "When we had to cry, sometimes he told us sad stories and stuff to help us. Crying is really sweet-natured boy, remembers, particularly relaxed and friendly one."

The camera tracked with the main line: E'er everyone giggled. Church bells rang, and Andreas Poulsouss 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.