

Warming with Spirit

I'm late, again, and lost, so I frantically search for a cab. But there aren't many around, nor is there much traffic for that matter. This is the edge of Pointe St-Charles, the tough working-class section of Montreal where the anglo-Irish and franco-Québécois have been battling for years. My panic mounts; it's now 7:55 and I'm expected on the set by 8 p.m. Finally a cab appears, and I leap onto the street waving my arms madly. Surprisingly, the driver knows exactly where 45 rue des Seigneurs is. No need for me to explain it's an empty warehouse where they're shooting a movie, the same warehouse where *Pouvoir intime* was made.

A young man with a walkie-talkie meets the cab. He asks me who I am through the window while I scramble for money, then speaks into his walkie-talkie. I pay the driver, climb out and take a look around. Barriers block the road that runs beside the large, deserted and partly burned-out warehouse. There's nothing else here to indicate I've arrived at the set of François Labonté's latest film, *Esprit de famille*. A voice over the walkie-talkie says "dix-quatre" (10-4) and the young man indicates that I should follow him.

It's dark. So dark that one has no sense of the encroaching inner city. On my left are a lot of large, looming trees, just looking black against the darkness of a country-like night sky. Through them seems to be a body of water - I suspect it's the Lachine Canal. To my right is the warehouse with its walls burned out and part of the roof caved in. Huge lights have been set up inside the part where only half the walls are left standing, on the far side. Aimed at the sky, they rest on charred and fallen beams, highlighting the eeriness of the place.

About 20 yards down the road I am met by Jocelyne, the film's publicist, who leads me to the coffee before taking me onto the set. It's freezing cold for a mid-September night, and the temperature seems to drop 10 degrees the second we step inside the warehouse. She explains that if it gets too cold we can warm up in the extras' tent, where there is a large heater. The idea has great appeal after just 15 minutes.

The scene being filmed, and the set itself, are somewhat out of context with the description of the film - "a wild, charming and thoroughly delightful tale of the relationship between a cantankerous old man, Gaspard (Jacques Godin) and his uptight, prematurely middle-aged son, Claude (Gaston LePage)." It's



• Life is a garage, old chum - Yves Desgagnés in *Esprit de famille*

a comedy, about Gaspard and Claude's search for a winning lottery ticket that has been lost. The search leads them from Montreal to Venezuela, with many strange stop-overs between.

But the set looks like something from an underground sci-fi movie or a rock video. The scene takes place in an alternative-type nightclub in New York where Gaspard and Claude have gone seeking a woman who is supposed to know something about the lost ticket. There will be a performance, and she is the mother of the performer.

Hanging from the ceiling are tiers of car windows, approximately six or eight in each tier. They are hung in a semi-circle of nine or 10 tiers. Just off to the left is a stage set about 10 feet above ground and around it dangle car doors and bumpers. On that stage is an impressive array of percussion instruments - someone mentioned over 100 different instruments. Pieces of car bodies are strewn about the rest of the set. On tractor trailers the same height as the stage are too-sophisticated, little round tables with tablecloths and lamps.

Two tiers of the windows were painted blue last night. Tonight the performer (Yves Desgagnés) will paint some yellow, then the rest in red. He is dressed in white coveralls and boots, marked only by splashes of paint. The performance consists of his moving about the tiers while paint spurts from a tube that is rigged through his pants leg, down his arm and ends at the tip of his right middle finger. His movements are jerky; spasmodic yet rhythmic responses to the industrial, percussive music.

Two cameras are rolling tonight. In addition to director of photography Michel Caron, Jean-Claude Labrecque, director/cinematographer and Labonté's personal friend, is also recording the action. There are moments when the two cameras, with only the massive lenses peering out from under heavy plastic drapes, look like unearthly creatures brought to watch earthly creatures behave strangely.

Labonté is in control of all this. Like the maestro of some finely functioning orchestra, he lunges, points, jumps, twists and turns, but says very little. When he gives direction, he walks straight to the person concerned and explains personally what he wants done. Warmth comes through his quiet intensity and remoteness. Perhaps that is what brought out such fine performances as those of Jacques Godin and Eric Brisebois in his last film, *Henri*.

Tonight, the performance must be done in one take. Once the windows are painted, there's no re-doing them. Labonté goes through just two or three rehearsals before we hear "silence, on tourne!" It calls for precision, and relies upon the expertise of everyone; the timing between lights, performers, music and effects is split-second. On the sidelines, I get a sense of the thrill a good take must induce.

Many others not required on the set have turned up to watch the scene being shot. Gaston LePage is here, even though he is not in the shot, as are Denis Larochelle, who is doing the original score, screenwriter Monique Proulx and Suzanne Hénaut, coproducer with Claude Bonin.

This is one of the last nights of the Montreal shoot. After this, there is just one more location to be filmed before Labonté goes to Venezuela for another two weeks. Approximately half the crew will go along, but the rest will be Venezuelan.

Several hours remain before the nightclub is finished with, however. At 4:00 a.m. they're shooting a scene where a madman enters the club and smashes all of the brilliantly painted windows. I'd love to stay around and watch *that* performance. But it's midnight, Labrecque has donned his parka and I'm turning blue with the cold. A trip to the extras' tent wasn't enough. And besides, judging from the skill Labonté evidenced in *Henri*, it just may be more fun to see that scene on film.

Jamie Gaetz •

Hollywood Comes to Dawson City

A new Yuletide story will be airing on the CBS network this December. It's called *Christmas Comes to Willow Creek* and is, by all reports, a standard made-for-American-TV production. As such, it promises not to cause much of a stir amongst viewers.

But in the Yukon Territory, almost everyone with cable-TV will be excitedly tuning in.

That's because Yukoners have been waiting to see *Christmas Comes to Willow Creek* edited and complete, ever since Hollywood came to Dawson City last May.

The Bell Productions film stars former "Dukes" of Hazzard John Schneider and Tom Wopat, who play two truckdrivers bringing the ultimate Christmas gift - economic revival - to a single industry Alaskan town on the skids. The Yukon's Dawson City, home of the world's greatest goldrush and the poetic heyday of Robert Service, stands in for the fictitious Willow Creek.

Bell Productions' decision last spring to locate its 'Alaskan' shoot in the Yukon's most historically significant town created quite a sensation in the local arts community and media. Whitehorse headlines read "Movie needs players", "Everyone pitched in to keep shoot on schedule" and "They'll tell Hollywood all about us"; and the accompanying articles oozed awe and excitement.

It wasn't the selection of exquisite turn-of-the-century buildings nor the availability of extras who were already colourful characters, however, that first drew Bell Productions to the Klondike. It was the abundance of snow.

Ironically, production planned for April was held up by a few weeks; and by the time producer Blue Andre, director Richard Lang and the leading cast arrived on the boardwalks of Dawson, most of the snow was gone.

A snow machine digesting blocks of ice from the still-frozen banks of the Yukon River, with the added conditions of potato flakes and firefighters' foam, helped make up for Dawson's melting assets.

And once on location, the Hollywood crew found new advantages to rave about. For instance: a unique and picturesque town with extremely cooperative officials, and good prices on rentals and sites.

As producer Andre explained it to a local news reporter, "We originally came for the snow. Then, creatively, we fell in love with the place."

photo: Bertrand Carrière

The five-day love affair between wonderstruck Yukoners and Bell Productions was chaperoned by a Whitehorse firm, Locations North, and Yukon government film commissioner Kevin Shackell. The remaining two-thirds of the "Hollywood" film were shot in British Columbia.

Yukoners will watch the upcoming CBS flick mostly to see the brief screen debuts of friends and relatives. But what they're really looking for, in the future, is a film production that sets out to capture a fuller picture of life in the Klondike — its stunning beauty, its wild and literally woolly folk.

Canadian producers in particular should give the idea some thought.

Chris Scherbarth •



• Sandy Wilson directs *Mama*

Circa '59

Etobicoke, at the west-end of Toronto, seems almost like another world. The home of Mattel and Domtar, the city is littered with street names such as the prophetic Diesel Drive and the ironic Treeview Avenue. Yet, in this city of suburban row-houses and vast industrial plants, there's nothing to hint at the near-miraculous time warp taking place behind the rail yards at Father Redman Catholic School.

In the auditorium, the set designers and technicians are decorating the hall with paper cut-out snowflakes and silver garlands for the school's Christmas concert. The year is 1959, and the stage is set for one of the last scenes in Sandy Wilson's forthcoming CBC movie, *Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird*. As stagehands busy themselves with last-minute preparations, a slow stream of extras in period costumes drift into the auditorium from the temporary make-up department set up nearby in the school's weightlifting room. After a long while, the transformation is complete. When young Tess (Rosa Anderson-Baker) finally lip-synchs to *Silent Night*, you could almost swear that you were back in 1959 — present-day Etobicoke seems very far away.

Watching this Christmas concert, many facets of the modern world do seem very far away, and one of them happens to be the subject of *Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird*. The film is about a family coping with the father's death from cancer. Unlike the book by Jean Little on which the film is based (which takes place in the present), the film is set, perhaps not coincidentally, in the same year in which Sandy Wilson's first film, *My American Cousin*, was set.

"There's something very alluring about 1959," says Wilson. "It's the end of the decade. The year Buddy Holly died and the year Elvis went into the army. It was the end of the first golden age of rock 'n' roll, before we got into the tumultuous '60s and lost our innocence." The '50s seem to have a very strong appeal to Wilson, but its attraction is not rooted solely in nostalgia for the good old days. Whereas the novel dealt largely, though by no means exclusively, with the modern technology surrounding present-day cancer victims, Wilson, along with screenwriter Anna Sandor and producer Bill Gough, was most interested in the personal side of the story. "We wanted to give it another dimension. In 1959, people thought of cancer very differently — there was a sort of non-comprehension about the subject. By setting the story when we did, we found ourselves able to tell a straightforward story from a 13-year-old's point of view."

The 13-year-old in question is Jeremy (played by Louie Tripp), who along with Kate (Linda Griffiths) and Sarah (Marsha Moreau), make up the family at the centre of *Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird*. And just as the family learns to come together in a time of crisis, Wilson has come to depend on her cast and crew to help her articulate the chief concerns of her film. Says Wilson, "It's a very personal film, but for me there's a real challenge in the fact that it's not my story. I think working with other people has really led towards a shared vision. It has made things easier for me. Working as part of a well-organized team means that there aren't any unexpected surprises. On *American Cousin*, I felt I was flying by the seat of my pants. In comparison, this shoot is a lot more organized and secure."

Meanwhile, on the stage, Rosa has finished her rendition of *Silent Night*. The auditorium is abuzz with activity as the crew busily prepares for the next

set-up in the school cafeteria. It is now unquestionably 1987, and 1959 is buried in the past and safely committed to film. But even as stagehands move props and lights into the hallway and the 90-odd extras mill around, relaxing after being straitjacketed into period costumes for the last couple of hours, there's a real sense that something both truthful and emotional has been captured.

Greg Clarke •

Raxlen with Horses

Rick Raxlen is no longer 'on location' with his first feature *Horses in Winter*. That 'easy' part is over. Instead I found him at another location that is, by many, considered of equal importance to the actual puzzle that is the finished film — the editing room. Here, surrounded by images and sound, and lit by that mystical little Steenbeck screen which makes the film live, the game-plan will finally be put together, the puzzle taken to its near completion.

Horses in Winter was shot in 20 days in August on locations in and around Montreal and in cottage country near Lake Aylmer, in Eastern Quebec. The PBR Richard production, in co-operation with the Main Film Co-op in Montreal, was shot by a relatively small 10-person crew and used some 20 actors.

The minuscule \$65,000 budget includes a Canada Council grant and private investment. The film is in the initial stages of post-production and Raxlen is now evaluating his material and designing the editing plan that he thinks will work best.

The notion of a film puzzle may have more relevancy and reverberations here than in other works, for, as Raxlen describes the basic story and storytelling process, *Horses* has no straight and easily executed narrative. "It's the story of 40-year-old Ben Waxman living in a tense and disjointed urban environment in 1986, looking back on the wholeness of a perfect summer he spent at his parents' cottage in 1953. The film will be told in a collage method with the focus shifting randomly between the two time periods, with about two-thirds of the film set in the child's world."

The film was shot from a script but it is the intuitive sense of the editor that will bring the specific design to it. It seems that Raxlen's evaluation process will have to take this into account, as he generally ponders where each shot will actually fit into the finished work. He points out that "the film includes different conflicts: in the boy's life it's the overheard idea that the parents will sell the cottage and send him to camp. This makes him run away from home to stay with his friend George, the Indian man. In the older man's life, it's the tension of his city life, an especially cluttered one since two sons from a previous marriage are visiting him. There are also parallel movements in both stories — the trip out of town, the problems."

On the Steenbeck one sees endless images of the beautiful Eastern Townships with their rolling hills and rich greenery. "This is little Ben's idyllic garden of fishing, swimming, picnicking and general freedom and wholeness. He fundamentally does what he wants," Raxlen says. "The older man is bothered by responsibilities, money concerns, sharing time between families — constant battles with the environment, with life. The puzzle of adult life can't seem to be resolved whereas the life of the child seems total and whole."

But that's what editing is about — sort of. Making a film total and whole, in a little room which tends to become your whole life. In this case, and for this film, there is further irony to be mined here. The editing 'suite' is located in, and part of, the Main Film co-operative on St. Laurent Boulevard in Montreal. And Rick Raxlen is president and one of its founding members. Outside the room, on this particularly busy day, I found one filmmaker-member cutting his own film negative, another member working at the computer, and three others arranging the projection system for a free screening, where anyone can bring and show their film. Raxlen can draw on these people for opinions, just as he drew on the membership for many of his crew positions. "Everyone got paid, although not the high industry rate. It was a real co-operative effort and everyone