

Faces behind the camera

A portfolio of B.C. filmmakers

TEXTS BY CALVIN WHARTON

PHOTOS BY BRIAN LYNCH

Over the years British Columbia has developed a large number of skilled filmmakers. Some have ventured over the mountains to the east, others south to the U.S. But many have continued to pursue the goal of making films about B.C. in B.C. As a result, they are not necessarily well known outside the province.

The individuals profiled on these pages were selected by random poll. We asked a variety of industry leaders to submit names of people working in various fields that they felt deserved recognition. The following people were chosen by virtue of having been on several lists.



The Two Pegs

Filmmakers

Peg Campbell and Peggy Thompson, a dynamic duo collectively known as 'The Two Pegs', have been working together since the early '80s. They made the NFB film, *Street Kids*, and co-wrote the script for their short, *It's a Party!* (a group production with Cineworks, in Vancouver, and a Genie nominee). They have just completed *In Search of the Last Good Man* and are working on their first feature, *Pardon Me For Dying*, a 'film noir' they hope to begin shooting in fall '89.

They have a long list of reasons why they enjoy working in Vancouver. Both grew up on the West Coast, are interested in telling stories specific to this part of the country, and enjoy

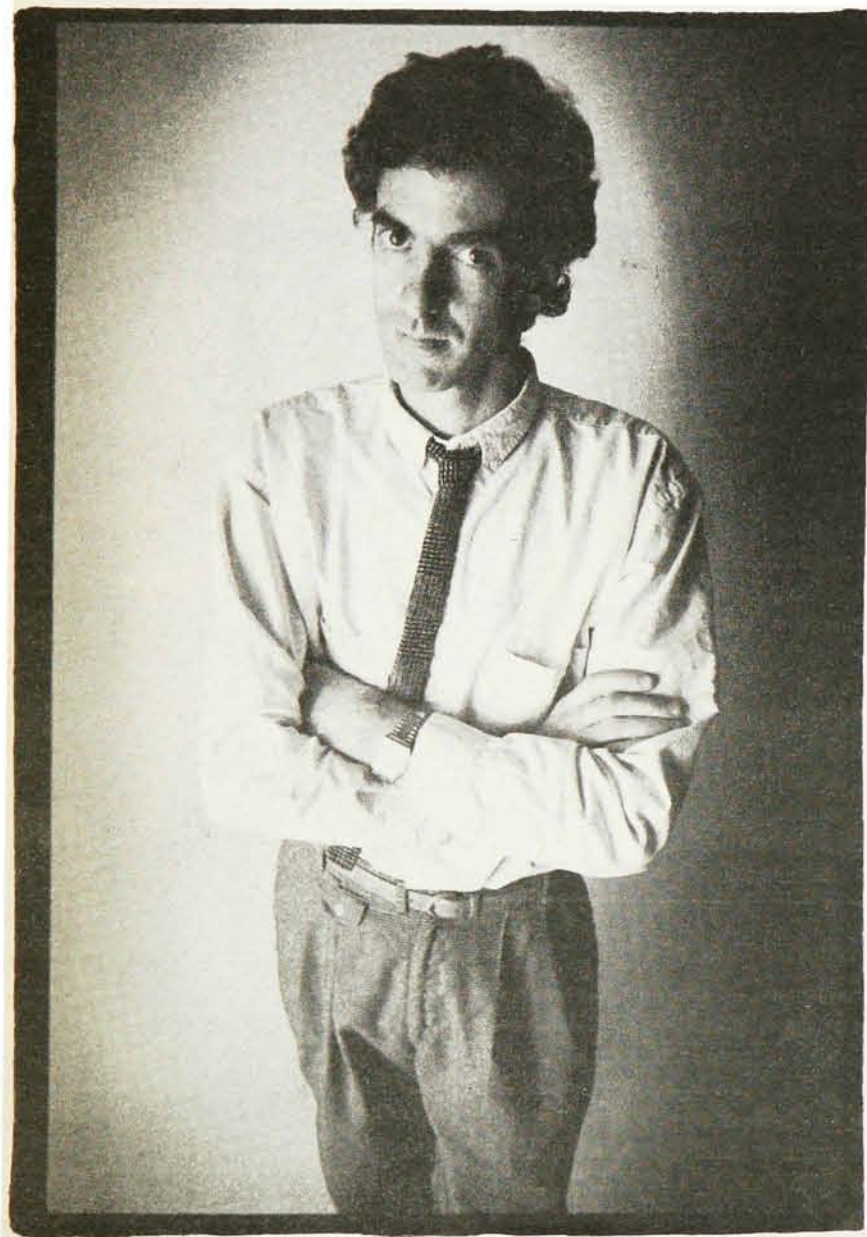
working with film "teams", which they say can be done here.

"We're developing a core group," Thompson says, "some faces are constant in each of our projects." She says her background in theatre has given her film work more humanity than the mechanical environment of movie-making alone would have.

Campbell says overcoming the difficulties and challenges of making films here has been good for them. "We have to be innovative," she says. "And people in this community - like Cineworks, Praxis and the National Film Board - have been very helpful and supportive. People here are getting more experienced in filmmaking and on the whole are willing to take risks."

Raymond Massey

Producer



Raymond Massey, who says he is among the 17 per cent of Vancouver residents who was born and raised here, is also the grandson of the actor he is named after. And he hasn't always been interested in film. "I just wanted to do something creative; my whole family is creative," he says.

Five years ago, he and his brother Nathaniel decided to go into film together. Nathaniel studied cinematography, and Raymond went to business school to learn the financial end of things. They formed a company called Massey Productions. Raymond is also a partner in Lighthouse Films, presently shooting a first feature, called *The Traveller* (directed by Bruno

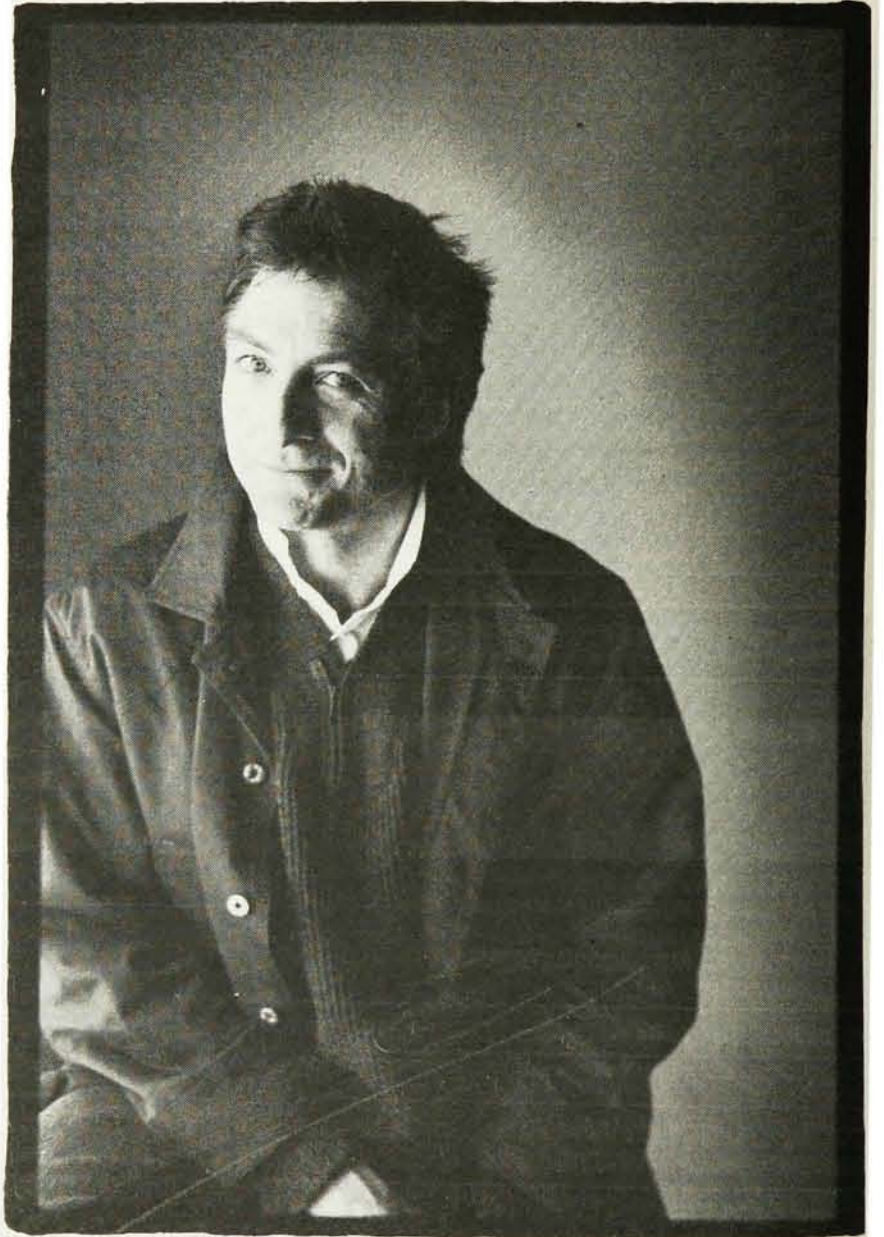
Pacheco).

Massey says he has worked in film for five years, doing sound, production work, writing commercials - almost everything. He is just finishing a half-hour film dramatization of Dorothy Livesay's poem, "Call My People Home." And Lighthouse is working toward producing a science fiction film called *City of Darkness*. "I feel I have to learn from each production," he says. "There is more to making films than making a buck."

Still, financing and cost problems have been the greatest obstacles to overcome, working in Vancouver. But Massey enjoys being part of the B. C. community. "I don't think there's a better place to be making films right now."

Colin Browne

Director / Writer



Colin Browne, who is just finishing a feature-length documentary, *White Lake*, or *The Making of Canadians*, says he fell into film in 1974 while working for the B. C. provincial museum in Victoria. "I was the one who wanted to be a writer, so when the idea came up to make films, I was given the job of scriptwriting," he says.

Although his previous work includes what he calls the "typical documentary form" films *Strathyre*, and *Hoppy: A Portrait of Elisabeth Hopkins*, Browne says *White Lake* questions certain aspects of the genre. "If this film is about any one thing," he says, "it's about the nature of the documentary portrait. Its real subjects are memory, landscape and narrative."

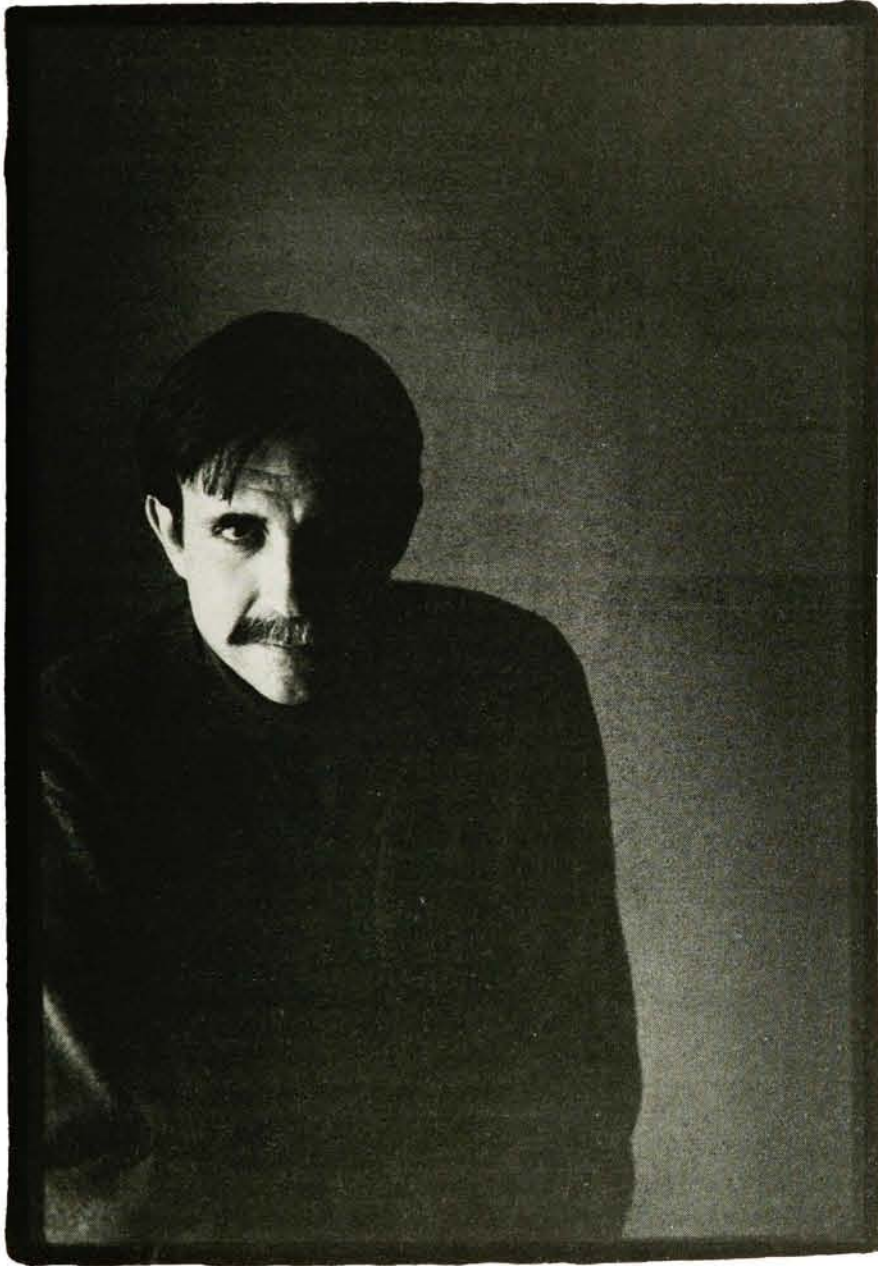
Browne is also a poet, editor of *Writing* magazine, and co-founder (with Patricia Gruben) of the Praxis script development workshop.

He feels the past few years have been a period of terrific growth for the B. C. film industry. "A lot of organizations are working to create a film culture here. That's got people writing scripts, and producing films and television," he says.

But he is no champion of regionalism. "As an artist, it's my work that counts, and that's what has to be served - not political boundaries."

Tom Lightburn

Distributor



Tom Lightburn, one of the founders of Norstar, which he says is a totally integrated motion picture company, came to Vancouver from Toronto a year ago. He has worked on such features as *Bullies* and *Hello, Mary Lou: Prom Night II* and is presently involved in the production of a B.C.-based film, *Deep Sleep* (screenplay by Patricia Gruben).

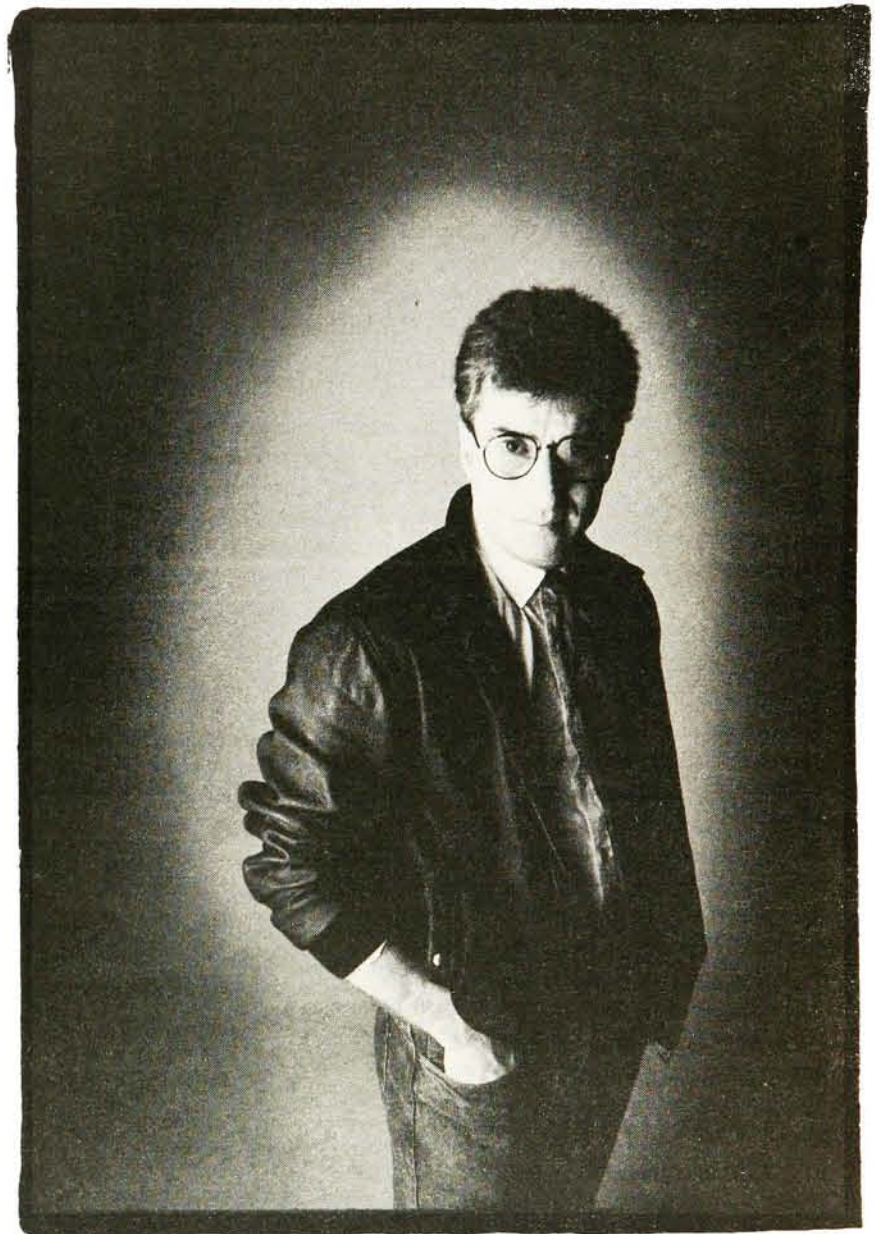
Lightburn expresses a guarded optimism toward the B.C. film industry. "I arrived here, interested in production and distribution, willing to execute distribution letters for any viable projects that came in the door," he says. "To date I have yet to sign a letter on a project that's been completed.

"Apart from the quality of life, the advantages to working here are few and far between," he claims. "Realistically, our focus has to be on Toronto. The infrastructure to finance films is already in place there. And that's the major decision-making centre of Canada [in terms of film and television].

"The main body of work here is going to have to be done in TV," he says. "If B.C. can produce three indigenous feature films per year, that would be healthy for our size of economy. But without other production opportunities, three features a year will not support a film industry."

Phil Savath

Scriptwriter



Phil Savath is a writer who describes his filmography as being all over the map. He's written a lot of television, including the pilot for *Rich and hairy* - what he calls "the monkey series" - about some wealthy chimpanzees. He also wrote the screenplay for David Cronenberg's feature, *Fast Company*; for a peculiar, low-budget film called *Big Meat Eater*; and, for the Northern Lights feature, *The Outside Chance of Maximillian Glick*. He says he's been nominated for everything - Genies, even a Juno for a song called "Santa Jaws".

"My tuxedo gets a lot of rental," he says. "I never win anything, but I always enjoy myself." Savath claims such diversity is how you

survive as a scriptwriter. And his career has certainly been diverse. On Broadway at 15, he later formed an improvisational theatre group in Toronto, did some television there, and came out to B.C. with the travelling Caravan theatre company.

"I'm committed to staying here," he says. "Although in Vancouver I'm out of the mainstream, which has some good and some bad - it's not hurting my writing, but it might be hurting my opportunities. The best thing about being here is I'm able to concentrate on my work rather than business things. People here have lives as well as careers - those are the kind of people who have heart, and that's what makes great movies."

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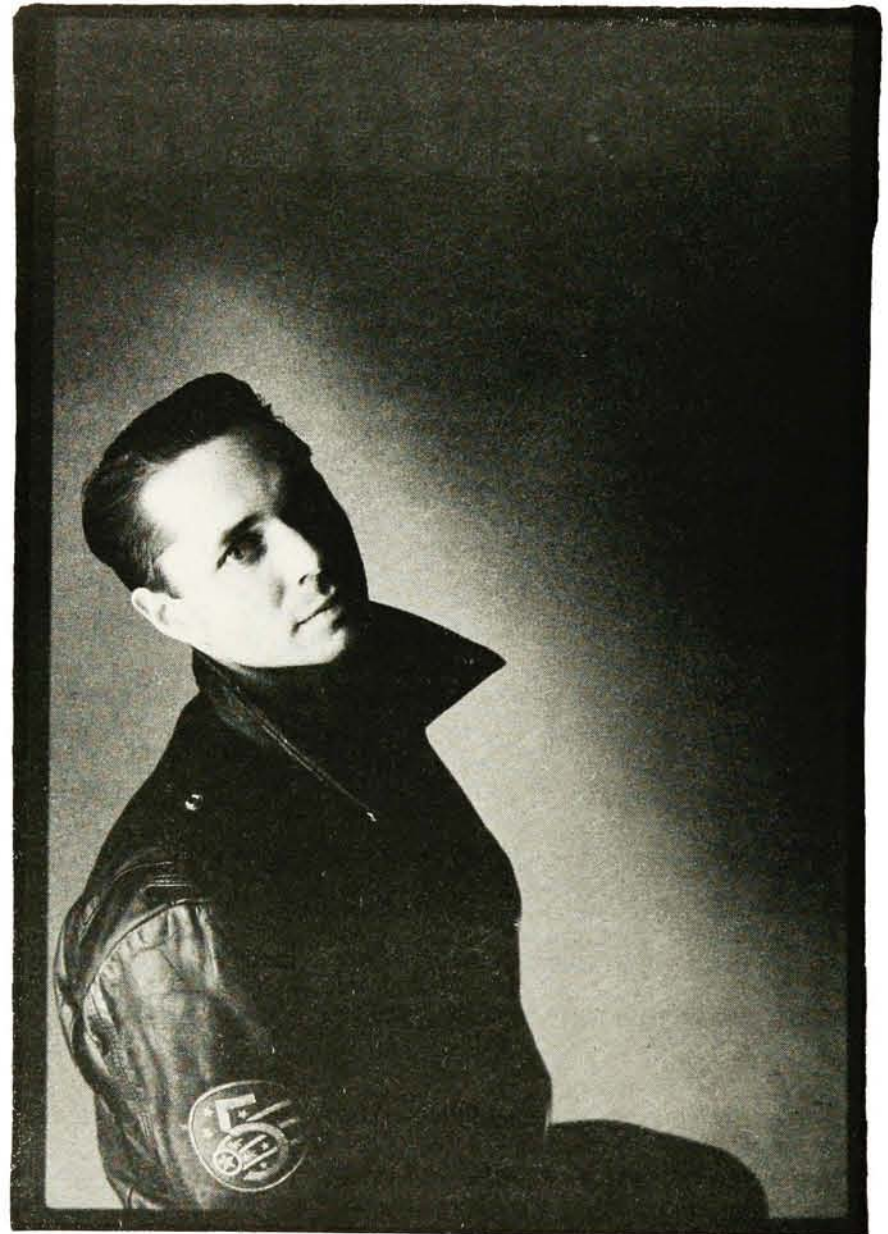
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Tobias Schliessler

Camera Operator



Growing up in Germany in what he calls "a film family" - his father makes documentaries and his mother is a film editor - prompted Tobias Schliessler's interest in motion pictures. He studied film at Vancouver's Simon Fraser University for two years and has since been a camera operator on numerous projects including Russell Stephens' *Regeneration* (as director of photography), and most recently, on the Rhombus Media feature, *The Top of His Head*. The affable Schliessler stresses that he's still learning and feels he's only beginning to explore all the elements of lighting, exposure and framing. "I was lucky - I came out of school and

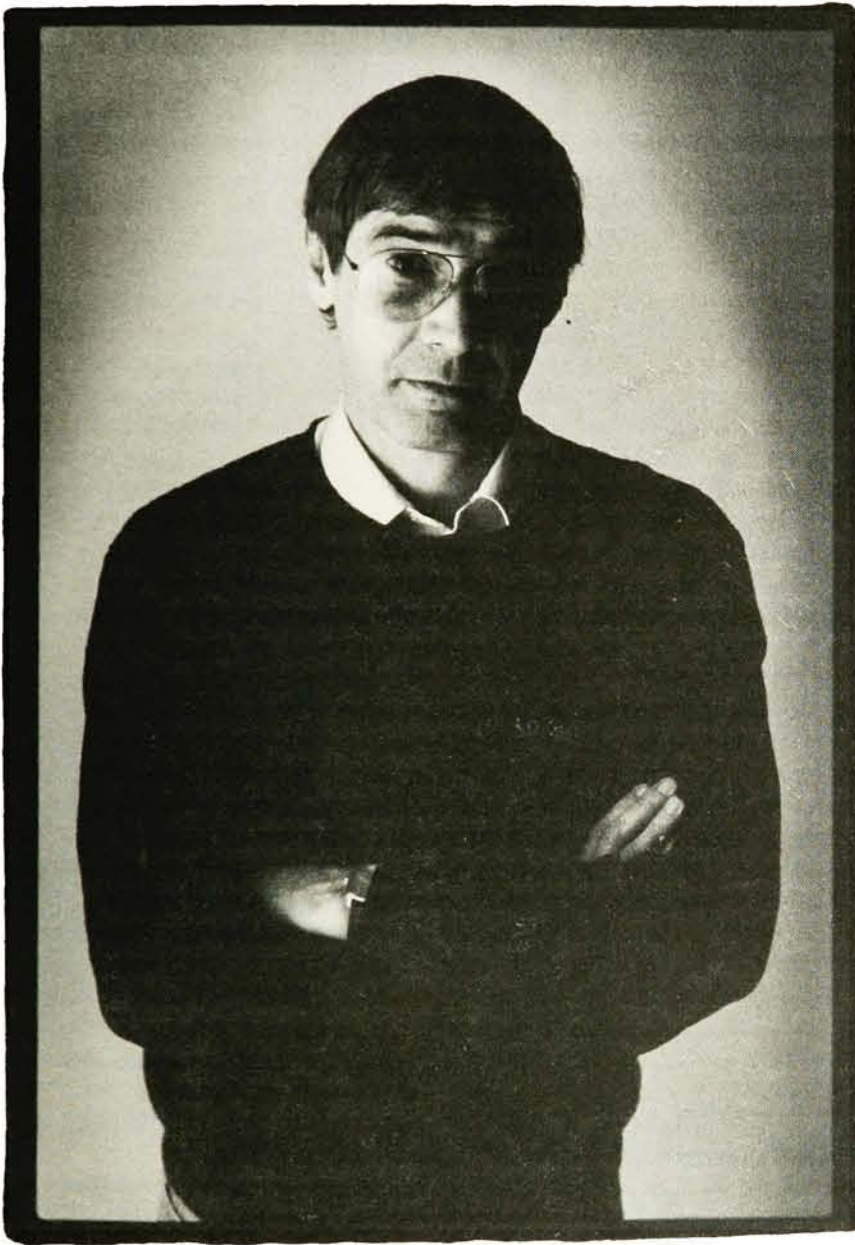
began shooting right away," he says. "I worked on a lot of low-budget films and learned from my mistakes and experiences, and also from the people I worked with."

Although he feels a part of the B. C. film community, he has had more work in the east, lately. "I have a strong feeling of wanting to be with the community here [B. C.] as it grows, but we shouldn't be split east-west. Canada can only be strong as a whole. We should see it that way and try to support each other," he says.

"I look for good scripts and directors I have a rapport with - I'm not as interested in making money as in making good movies."

Dave Hardon

Post-Production



Last July, Dave Hardon left Alpha Cine Service after 12 years, working on film and television projects such as *Beachcombers*, *21 Jump Street*, *Roxanne* and *Stakeout*, among others. (Alpha Cine has, for a long while, been the only major film lab in Western Canada.) Hardon left to set up Gastown Labs – affiliated with Gastown Productions – and when the company begins operation this April, Vancouver will have two processing labs.

"The volume of film work in this town over the last four or five years has gone crazy," he says. "We're going into business for all the right reasons. It's not a case of dog-eat-dog; this town needs another film lab."

Hardon, who calls himself "a transplanted easterner," began working for the National Film Board of Canada in Montreal in 1958 and later worked for Medallion Film Labs in Toronto. "I love working in Vancouver," he says, "I love the city."

Although Gastown Labs has no guarantee of work coming in, Hardon is confident. "We're projecting we'll do about 25 per cent of the market share to start. It's a case of being available and being competent," he says.

"The growth that's been happening in the industry here doesn't have to continue for this lab to be a viable idea," he says, "but I see no reason why it should stop."

Sarah Walker & Andrea Burchill

Actors

Sarah Walker and Andrea Burchill are the co-stars, with Christine Lahti, of Bill Forsyth's latest, film, *Housekeeping*, shot in Nelson, B.C. Their fine performances seem even more remarkable when you discover these were the first movie roles they have had, (although each had done some stage work and Walker had had a role as an extra in a *Danger Bay* episode). Both are members of the Vancouver Youth Theatre, and have worked in television and theatre since the film.

Burchill says she has wanted to be an actor since she was four years old, and feels it's something she'll always want to do. "I loved working with Bill, Christine and Sarah. Although, I thought a director would be a more demanding type of person. And I thought it would be all glamour – I didn't know about all the hard work involved in making a movie – the long hours and keeping up with school work," she says. "Eventually I'd like to go to Los Angeles and star in a television series."

Walker, who says she has other interests besides film – interior design, for example – would like to study theatre in New York or Chicago, to become a better actor. "I really enjoyed the whole experience of *Housekeeping*," she says. "It's great to have a start like this, working with Bill Forsyth. Before, acting was a hobby, but now I realize I could make a career of it."

Debra Coe

Animal Trainer

Until Debra Coe began to work at Washington state's Olympic Game Farm 12 years ago, she thought her interest in working with animals meant she had to become a veterinarian. Her first film work was for *Grizzly Adams* and, since, she has worked on a long list of television programs (*Beachcombers*, *MacGyver*) and commercials, and movies such as *Ice Man*, *Shoot to Kill*, and recently, on *The Fly II* and *Knights of the City*. Examples of her talent range from the otter in *Danger Bay* to the bird that sits on Steve Martin's nose in *Roxanne*.

Her specialty is handling exotic animals but Coe says she can't afford her own bear or tiger, yet, so she brings in animals from elsewhere, generally the U.S. "But dogs and cats are my bread and butter at this point," she says.

She has lived just outside Vancouver for six years and plans to stay. "It's healthier here for the animals than in Los Angeles," she says. "Working in films is stressful for animals – and for people – but a good trainer can minimize that stress." The most difficult aspect of her job is to make crews aware that a trained animal is not necessarily a tame one. "When I work with, say, a wolf on a lead, people want to pet it," Coe says. "A lot of animals, especially the exotics, don't like to be petted and touched by strangers."

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