

State of the art

New Brunswick filmmaking update

BY BETH POWNING

The film industry in New Brunswick has grown to such an extent that the Hatfield government, in 1986, commissioned the Coopers Lybrand firm to produce a hefty tome called "A Study of the Film and Video Industry in N.B." Most N.B. filmmakers, encouragingly, are too busy to wade through it, but those who have read it find it disquieting. "Art," protests Rudolf Caron, of Ciné Marivie, "is not a business like making shoes. The government is looking at film as a potential job-creation industry. They forget that you don't make films simply to make money."

This comment typifies the attitude of independent filmmakers in the province who continue, despite perennial lack of funding and increasing competition for available funding between "commercial" video companies and "artistic" filmmakers, to make the kinds of films they want to make.

The National Film Board gave a few people their start 15 years ago, with loaned equipment and training allowances; it continues to be a central force in the province, both in the francophone and anglophone filmmaking communities. NFB films examine questions both of identity and of human rights; *Toutes les photos finissent par se ressembler*, by Herménégilde Chiasson, has won recognition for its portrayal of a generation passionately committed to an Acadian identity. This fall, several films by Acadian women filmmakers won awards at the Atlantic Film Festival; the Award of Merit for Direction went to Claudette Lajoie for *Les Femmes aux filets*, a film exploring the difficult working conditions of women in fish-packing plants; and an Award of Excellence went to Anne-Marie Sirois for her animated short, *Maille, maille*. Herménégilde Chiasson examined Jack Kerouac's Canadian roots for NFB's "Americani-té" series with *Le Grand Jack*, which won an Award of Excellence. Currently, Fredericton-based Kevin Matthews is directing a 30-minute documentary on groundwater pollution, a hot issue in N.B. at the moment.

It's possible, now, to at least make a start as a filmmaker without leaving the province, thanks to two co-ops, "Ciné Marivie", in Edmunston, and the "N.B. Filmmaker's Co-operative" in Fredericton. Both are nonprofit co-operatives where students and independent filmmakers have access to an equipment pool, studio space,

editing facilities, film production workshops and seminars, and public screenings. Canadian Filmmakers Distributors, in Halifax, picks up some of the co-ops' completed films. Again, few of these films are inspired by the profit motive, which allows for experimentation; *Manic Film Session*, for example, by Bev Thornton, is described as a "post-modernist experiment in spontaneous cinema." A recent Fredericton co-op success was *The Spectre of Rexton*, made with funding from the Canada Council, the NFB, and the provincial government. This film, based on a local ghost story, was shot at King's Landing Historical Settlement, and was enthusiastically received.

But there are, of course, different financial realities for larger productions. Jon Pedersen,

deal specifically with independent films, and Pedersen feels that a small distributor would work harder to market the film. A film like *Tuesday, Wednesday*, he feels, might be simply absorbed by a large distributor and never seen.

Capitol Films started in 1984 and has worked hard to gain credibility. That they have done so is evidenced, Pedersen feels, by CBC's recommending his company to produce *The Unpainted City*, a \$2-3 million film about Saint John, N.B. in the early 1950s. The project is still in negotiation, with the possible involvement of the NFB and Telefilm. Their LEAD grant comes to an end this month; "The government gave us a chance to gain credibility. Now they'll be expecting us to continue with revenue from the films we've made." There may have to be some cutbacks this

Germany, and would be shot in N.B. and other parts of Canada.

Maurice Thorburn, film commissioner for the province of N.B., is working hard to entice outside producers to come to the province. The new government, he says, "really wants film and video to go ahead here." And "outsiders," like Patrick Palmer, producer of *Children of a Lesser God*, have spread the word about N.B. "The big plus here is the friendly atmosphere. People in N.B. are in love with movie-making; here, it's new."

To date, four outside films are under discussion, with one of them, as Thorburn says, "150 per cent sure." *Via-le-Monde-Bertolino* will be producing *Où va le vent*, a \$3 million film co-produced with France. To be directed by Bruno Carrière and produced by Monique Messier, the film will be shot on the rugged Fundy coast, near Cape Enrage and the Hopewell Rocks, as well as in the fishing village of Caraquet. Shooting is scheduled to start in the fall.

Contingent on financing, other films that may be produced in New Brunswick include a film on the life of the N.B. boxer Yvon Durelle, a \$3.5 million production directed by Bruce Pitman; *The Truce*, a \$4.5 million (U.S.) Plumm Production, to be filmed in the Saint John area; *Trails and Tails*, a travel-adventure film; and *Evangeline* by East Agencies, a Boston studio which plans on opening a studio, with sound-stage, "somewhere in the province."

The film industry in N.B., while large enough to warrant a government study, is small enough to be extremely vulnerable. Independent filmmakers have recognized this problem, and to address it have recently formed a chapter of the IFVA (Independent Film and Video Alliance). This organization will not only address the problem of lack of communication between filmmakers themselves, but may also influence government policymakers to view the industry as filmmakers would like it to be seen, not merely as a component of a job-creation strategy. Given an entirely new government, the task of influencing decision-making may be easier than it was with long-established and more intransigent politicians.

"The people making films in New Brunswick," says Jon Pedersen, "are very busy." The most positive trend, he says, is the growth of self-confidence among N.B. filmmakers. "It's not really so important what they think of us in Toronto," he says. "It's what we think of ourselves that is changing. We're doing okay."



Marcia Pilot and Herménégilde Chiasson, director of *Toutes les photos finissent par se ressembler*, an Award of Excellence winner at the Atlantic Film Festival last fall.

executive producer of Capitol Films, N.B.'s first film company, got off the ground with a \$1.03 million grant from Employment and Immigration through the Local Employment Assistance Development (LEAD) program. LEAD is part of the Community Futures program, one of six initiatives that make up the Canadian Job Strategy. Pedersen has combined idealism and pragmatism in order to make the kinds of films he believes in. His first feature film, *Tuesday, Wednesday*, an 82-minute, 35mm colour film, was shown in the World Film Festival of Montreal, the Atlantic Film Festival, and the Olympic Arts Festival in Calgary. The film is currently being "shopped around" by a producer's agent based in L.A., who will also show it at film festivals around the world. Capitol Films hopes that the film will eventually be taken by a small distributor; there are about 12 in the U.S. who

month, but Pedersen is confident that both funding and revenues will continue to come in, and has three films in various pre-production stages; *Four Way Split*, a film based on the life of a rock and roll musician; *Goodbye Pussyfoot*, the story of an Acadian nun who encounters prejudice in a Saint John convent in the 1930s; and *Chemical Eric*, a parody of "an academician in stress."

The only independently-owned sound-studio in the maritimes is owned by Carota Films, located in Shediac, on New Brunswick's east coast. Carota's bread and butter comes from high-quality industrials, but its sister company, "East In", produces feature films. A fantasy-adventure, *Warrior of the Borrowed Heart* is currently in development, and looking for financing. This film, co-scripted by Karen Carota and Bill Wilson, would be a co-production between Canada and

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