Where the Spirit Lives

n a cold dark morning in the mountains of Southwestern Alberta, Michelle St. John sits in a honey wagon with her make-up artist. He is busy applying powder to her face in an attempt to hide or at least soften the look of her freckles. Michelle is playing a 13-year-old Blackfoot girl in 1937 Alberta. Freckles are rare, if not nonexistent among all Native Indian tribes. Members of the real Blackfoot tribe wander about with their coffee looking for danishes.

Amazing Spirit Productions has brought them to Waterton National Park to work as extras, production assistants, and technical advisors. Michelle can frequently be seen talking to them, asking questions and studying their mannerisms. While she herself has Mohawk blood, this is her first contact with the Blackfoot. And they have accepted her with open arms.

But there are more than Blackfoot people on the set of Where the Spirit Lives. Producer Paul Stephens commented one morning as he walked into breakfast with the crew on how multi-racial (Native-wine) this production was. At one table there was a Mohawk complaining about the quality of his coffee, a Haida throwing her kilt and folk at her scrambled eggs with disgust, an Ojibway quietly eating pancakes drowned in syrup and a Micmac boy whining for some orange juice.

But the Blackfoot have a special interest in this project because the characters are Blackfoot and it's being shot on Blackfoot land. It's the story of many of their lives, as well as the lives of other Native people across the country. Where the Spirit Lives captures a period in Canadian history that many Native people don't wish to remember, yet don't want to be forgotten.

Indian Residential schools were common in the early half of this century. Native children were taken from their families and moved huge distances to large, sinister-looking schools run by various religious denominations. Often, the school you were sent to decide what religion you would follow. While at these schools, teachers, religious leaders and administrators actively tried to destroy the Native culture by punishing little children with physical beatings if they spoke their language or practiced any of their beliefs. It was a brutal form of assimilation.

"Most non-Natives aren't even aware of this legalized kidnapping by the government," says writer Keith Leckie. "It's a part of Canadian history that has been conveniently forgotten. That's why I wrote this story."

After three years of research and writing, Leckie came up with a script that CBC bought on the first draft. Leckie had interviewed about a dozen people who had been to Residential schools to get the real story. "Very little of the story is fiction, most of the things that happen in the script are from other people's lives."

Where the Spirit Lives, budgeted at $2.6 million, is being shot on 35mm. Amazing Spirit Productions is producing it with financial assistance from the CBC, Mid-Canada Communications, Telefilm, Ontario Film Development Corporation, TV Ontario, and Societe Radio Canada. Atlantis Releasing Inc. has signed to handle international releasing.

As well as the producers Paul Stephens, Eric Jordan, Mary Young Leckie and Heather Golden all worked on the Spirit Bay television series, also dealing with Native children growing up. "The difference with this one," contends Mary Young Leckie, "is it's a question of survival. Amelia (played by Michelle St. John) is in an unfamiliar, unfriendly environment that she and her brother must face. They must decide which culture to follow. Spirit Bay didn't have time to explore those moral and philosophical questions in a half-hour."

Nor the budget. An authentic 1937 Blackfoot vintage plane was located to fly actor Ron White, who plays a boy on the reserve, and an authentic 1937 vintage Blackfoot village was reconstructed in Waterton Park. Vintage cars were used, and many are still there. This is their story. It's being shot on Blackfootland.

"Never again, never again," says Mary Young Leckie. "It's an interesting comparison to what happened with the Holocaust. Many Jewish people have used what happened in Europe as a unifying force, we're all familiar with the cry 'Never again, never again.' It's the opposite with Native people. Most want to forget what's happened and go on with their life. In a way, this form of psychological genocide did make a lot of proud Native people ashamed to be Native. They were caught between two worlds and many are still there. This is their story."

Drew Taylor *

Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer

"C" amie View, that's what Boubu calls me. I'm a writer, pick-up artist, campal... and Black. I forget to say that for those of you who are blind."

That's how, speaking directly to the camera, View introduces himself. View is one of the two central characters of Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer, the first feature film for Quebec director Jacques Wilfrid Benoît (first assistant-director of Le destin de l'empire americain). The film is a Canada-France co-production. Anne Burke and Richard Sadler of Films Stock International are the producers on this side of the Atlantic. The screenplay is an adaptation of a best-selling first novel by Dany Laferrière, a Haitian writer who has lived in Montreal for over 10 years.

"Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer plunges us into a cosmopolitan Montreal, vibrating to the rhythms of soundtrack composer Masa Dibango ("Soul Makossa"). A Montreal inhabited by two friends: View (Isauch de Bankole), pick-up artist and quasi alter ego of Laferrière, and Boubu (Maka Kotto) philosopher of motorlessness, angel of the dole, and spiritual guide to View. A Montreal taken by storm by the fantasies of these two Africans who drift between Carrel St-Loius and McGill University, surrounded by their bevy of white Mizoos: Mizo Literature, Mizo Suicide, Mizo Mystique, Mizo Snob, Mizo Myth..."

Comment faire... treats the relations between two different cultures coexisting in a very urban environment with humour. "A way of seeing which mocks one's self and others at the same time in a modern situation and without ghettosizing; a vision which is not militant, but which is still political."

"A film which addresses everything because, as the author reminds us, 'the central theme of the book is universal: consciousness. One can apply it to one's self whatever race, colour, prejudices, attractors,' " says Dany Laferrière promises us hot, vital imagery. "The text of the film is European in flesh, the images flying by make it American in structure, which is like Montreal, a city of French culture and North American architecture and topography."

On this past August 16, in the dog days of summer and three days short of the end of the shoot, producers, screenplay writer and journalists watch attentively while directors, actors and technicians are busy getting the last