

Alberta

Where the Spirit Lives

On 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 busily 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-national (Native-wise) this production was. At one table there was a Mohawk complaining about the quality of his coffee, a Haida throwing her knife and fork 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 is 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 decided 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



Raymond Manybears (extra), Rick Tailfeathers (actor and consultant/translator) and Wallace Manyfingers (extra) on location in Waterton Park, Alberta

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 35 mm. Amazing Spirit Productions is producing it with financial assistance from the CBC, Mid-Canada Communications, Telefilm, Ontario Film Development Corporation, TV Ontario, and Société Radio Canada. Atlantis Releasing Inc. has signed to handle international releasing.

Leckie, as well as the producers Paul Stephens, Eric Jordan, Mary Young Leckie and Heather Goldin 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 village was reconstructed in Waterton Park. A vintage plane was located to fly actor Ron White, the bad-guy-turned-good, in and out of the village whenever the temperamental wheather would allow.

Three days later the crew moved to the Blood Reserve in Southern Alberta, about 150 kilometres south of Lethbridge. This is the home of the Blackfoot people, the largest reserve in Canada. The producers had located a former Residential school on the Blood Reserve that was about to be torn down. This was one of the rare schools that was actually located on a reserve. Through some wheeling and dealing,

permission had been secured to use the school as an exterior location as well as some of the surrounding locale.

For 10 days the crew mumbled about the gopher holes, the badger holes and the cow pies, while at the same time admiring the scenery. The film was beginning to look like a western with the Indians as the underdog good guys. Windburn and sunburn were common as a Chinook came in over the mountains and raised the temperature to the mid-twenties.

On a lark, Marni Grossman, the stills photographer, and I drove into Standoff, a small community on the Reserve, in search of T-shirts for the crew. There we met a middle-aged man and his mother running a local convenience store. Once he learned who we were, the son jokingly said his mother wanted to be a star. The older woman giggled and asked what kind of film it was. We told her and the humour drained from her face. She looked down and said she wouldn't want to remember those days for anything. That brought home the impact Residential schools had on people.

"It's a powerful story, a story the Canadian public might not be ready for," 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 •

Montreal

Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer

"Call me Vieux, that's what Bouba calls me. I'm a writer, pick-up artist, cannibal... and Black. I forgot to say that for those of you who are blind."

That is how, speaking directly to the camera, Vieux introduces himself. Vieux 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 Wilbrod Benoit (first assistant-director of *Le déclin de l'empire américain*). The film is a Canada-France coproduction; 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 Manu Dibango ("Soul Makossa"). A Montreal inhabited by two friends: Vieux (Isaac de Bankolé), pick-up artist and quasi alter ego of Laferrière, and Bouba (Maka Kotto) philosopher of motionlessness, angel of the dole, and spiritual guide to Vieux. A Montreal taken by storm by the fantasies of these two Africans who drift between Carré St-Louis and McGill University, surrounded by their bevy of white Mizzes: Miz Literature, Miz Suicide, Miz Mystique, Miz Snob, Miz 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 ghettoizing; 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, attractions." 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