

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

PHOTO: MARNI GROSSMAN



Isaach de Bankolé, Roberta Bizeau and Alexandra Innes crossing the McGill University campus in *Comment faire l'amour...*

scenes of the film onto celluloid. According to all, the 33 days of the shoot have gone very well, without a hitch and in an atmosphere of passion and good humour. "The nucleus of four principal actors lived and thought in terms of the film," says Laferriere. The nucleus was made up of Isaach de Bankolé (*Black Mic Mac, Chocolat*), Maka Kotto (*La Vieille dame et l'Africain*), Roberta Bizeau (*Night Heat, The Dead Zone*) and Myriam Cyr (*Gothic*).

An example of this great availability is Maka Kotto. He arrived in Montreal two weeks early with Charlie Parker records, the Koran, and the works of Freud in his luggage, all the better to enter the skin of Bouba. He took to sleeping on a mat in his hotel and walking around the city at night. In fact, both Kotto and De Bankolé were observed by Sadler and Laferriere walking the streets of Montreal by night in preparation for their roles.

Speaking of actors, the cast brings together an interesting collection: an international cast which conforms to the mandate of an 80 per cent Canadian and 20 per cent French coproduction, and to the necessity of assuring an international impact. And perhaps also a cast which reflects that Montreal which Laferriere depicts. "It's a very realistic film, but at the same time it's a fable on fantasies. So we had to play with those two dimensions and find actors who were both very competent, and who also personified these fantasies. The producers are satisfied with their choice," says Laferriere. "The actors give on screen what they are in life, with all the required subtlety," stressed producer Ann Burke.

What is interesting is that the black actors do not feel they are playing cliché roles. "It's very rare that we're offered characters like those in this film. Usually we see black actors in caricatured roles, endlessly repetitive archetypes, the negative roles of dealer, pimp, outlaw... The richness of my character, Bouba, has greatly inspired me," comments Maka

Kotto. And according to Richard Sadler, the other producer, a film with such a complete racial mix has no precedent.

In all, 39 actors and 570 extras have occupied the set of "*Comment...*" in the course of the shoot, only a third of which was filmed in studio.

"And to think it all started because I bought a Remington..." Having the distinct impression that everything has snowballed since the publication of his first novel, I ask Dany Laferriere to tell us about the road he has travelled since that time. Shortly after its appearance, Richard Sadler bought the adaptation rights, seduced by the type of "hymn to liberty" which the novel inspires. So began for the two men the difficult but enthusiastic adaptation of the novel for the screen, a project which took them several months. Laferriere took on adapting the dialogue and Sadler attacked the structure of the screenplay. New faces, new locales and more dialogue were added to transmit the humour which permeates the novel. From the book they kept all the flavour of the text and the penetrating insight of a stranger into the society he is discovering.

"I have no regrets and no scruples about distancing myself from the original text. It's a new creation... Film has its rules which are not those of literature... for me art is something very concrete: a deadline, a budget," says Laferriere. When the laborious process of screen adaptation was finished, both the Société Générale (SOGIC) and Telefilm Canada asserted that it was the best screenplay they had received in a very long time.

A screenplay for which producers Richard Sadler and Ann Burke, together with Henri Lange on the French side, found a budget of \$2.5 million. Telefilm and SOGIC guaranteed close to 75 per cent of the Canadian financing. This financial backing was very difficult to get because it's the first work for both writer and director.

There has rarely been a film which, even during its shooting, has inspired so much infatuation from the media and distributors. When production began last June, Aska films of Montreal bought the distribution rights for Canada and the rest of the world, except France. But there too, the film is keenly anticipated. Two important distributors are showing interest.

And, to the inevitable question, "where will the film be launched?" producers and distributors are said to be betting on a breakthrough "Black Package" and on rising stars for a spring '89 attack on Cannes. Optimism abounds among the team and Richard Sadler has no fear of competition, even if it means some powerful lobbying to carve a place next to Denys Arcand's next film. Sadler rules out nothing: the Director's Fortnight or even the official competition. "The film has all the ingredients." As for Dany Laferriere, he has no fear of campaigning for his film. For some time he has prepared himself to take on the French media, and here in Quebec, he is already a familiar, nearly ubiquitous figure.

As we leave the studio, I ask Dany what future he would like for his film. "A film that lasts, as we say! That makes a large or medium debut, but which lasts. I like the films one sees at the repertories... A film that lasts, that's it!"

Christine Martin •
(Translated from the French by Naomi Guttman)

Alberta Bye Bye Blues

This place is big. So big in fact, that I'm having a fair amount of trouble finding out which building I'm supposed to be in. This is the new Allarcom Studios in Edmonton, now one of the most complete film and television centres in Canada. The press release boasts a "52,000 square foot complex housing a 15,000 square foot soundstage, an underground pit and Allarcom's state-of-the-art post-production facility." The local film community is convinced that this facility, coupled with the new \$7 million in funding for indigenous productions coming from the Alberta government, will induce radical change in the local film industry. As I finally find the correct entrance, I realize that the studio is in the process of losing its virginity. *Bye Bye Blues* is Allarcom Studios' first feature.

After seating myself in the gleaming reception area, I notice the security guard ask an extra to sit behind her desk for her. She disappears for a few moments, and upon her return is full of the kind of giddy excitement one only ever expects from a 15-year-old cheerleader. "Where did you go?" inquires the extra. "I had to get some autographs," she replies, "I got Stuart Margolin and Kate Reid!" She has been collecting autographs since the beginning of the shoot.

The cast is an impressive one and includes Rebecca Jenkins, Luke Reilly, Michael Ontkean and Susan Woolridge in addition to Margolin and Reid.

After being led down the hall and into an office, I meet an equally excited woman who is raving about the new studio. "It's magic! It's like a gift from the gods, really. This is the first time I've ever shot on a soundstage - it's an extraordinary facility. I've laughed out loud thinking about this place." The woman is Anne Wheeler, director of *Loyalties* and *Cowboys Don't Cry*, and she is filming segments of her third feature *Bye Bye Blues* on the soundstage here. The crew have already finished a two-week shoot in Rowley, Alberta and another shoot is scheduled in Pune (poo-nah), India later this year.

The screenplay for the \$4.5 million production, written by Wheeler, concerns a young Dr. Cooper and his wife, Daisy, who are stationed in the British Medical Service in India in 1941. He is transferred to Singapore, and Daisy and their two children must return home to smalltown Alberta. On her arrival Daisy learns that Singapore has fallen to the Japanese and her husband has been taken prisoner. Without any money, Daisy decides to join a swing band and sing for a living. Finally, Daisy is torn between her work and the memory of her husband.

Bye Bye Blues is, in an odd sort of way, a sequel. The prequel was the take of Wheeler's father, who was a Japanese prisoner of war during World War II. Wheeler, after a great deal of research into the period, wrote a script based on her father's diaries, and the result was a feature-length docu-drama entitled *A War Story*. *Bye Bye Blues*, a film "inspired" by her mother's experiences, could then be seen as the other side of the story. A pseudo-sequel, perhaps.

This has put Wheeler in a delicate situation. She kept *A War Story* as close to reality as possible, while *Bye Bye Blues* is a predominantly fictionalized account of her mother's experiences. Wheeler cringes when she hears someone say the film is based on her mother's life. "I'm trying to avoid that label now. I say that it was inspired by my mother's wartime experience. I've taken a character and put her into the situation my mother was in during the war. But (unlike *A War Story*) I play a lot of fiction into it."

As Wheeler talks about her mother, it is clear that she has great admiration for her. What an interesting angle on *Bye Bye Blues*: an interview with its inspiration. I'd like to interview Wheeler's mother. "She doesn't want to be interviewed. She's a fantastic woman, but she's also a very shy woman. It's been a fragile line I'm walking because I put this character in the script into situations my mother never would've found herself. She's been very supportive, just as long as I make it clear it's inspired by her situation and not actually about her. I said 'Mom, I'd like to make a movie about you and your piano-playing.' She said 'Well, pretty