That's why I wrote this story.

...on the Spirit Lives

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 manners. 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 recounted one morning as he walked into breakfast with the crew on how multi-racial (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, and a Ojibway quietly eating pancakes drowned in syrup and a MRCmac boy whining for some orange juice.

But the Blackfoot has 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 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 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 $2.4 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 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 TV series, also dealing with Native children growing up. "The difference with this one," contends Mary Young Leckie, "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," adds director Raymond Manybears. "It was 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."

"And the budget," adds director Raymond Manybears. "It was 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."

"And the budget," adds director Raymond Manybears. "It was 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."
Isaach de Bankolé, Robert Biseau 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 Lalatrierre. The nucleus was made up of Isaach de Bankolé [Black Me Mor, Cheech!], Maka Kotto [Le Vielld’aliاس] and Robert Biseau [Night Heat, The Dead Zone] and Myriam Cych (Gefic).

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 Boba. 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 Sudler and Lalatrierre 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 Lalatrierre depicts. “It’s a very realistic film, but at the same time it is a fairy tale on fantasies. So we had to play with two dimensions and find actors who were both very competent, and who also personified these fantasies. The producers are satisfied with their choice,” says Lalatrierre. “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’ve offered characters like those in this film. Usually we see black actors in caricatured roles, endlessly repetitive archetypes, the negative ines of dealer, pimp, outlaw... The richness of my character, Boba, 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 Lalatrierre 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 men the difficult but enthusiastic adaptation of the novel for the screen, a project which took them several months. Lalatrierre took on adapting the dialogue and Sadler attacked the structure of the screenplay. New faces, new locations 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 Lalatrierre. When the labourious 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 infiltration from the media and distributors. When production began last June, Ask 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 ’99 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 Lalatrierre, 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 Natasha Goldman)

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, one of the most complete film and television centres in Canada. The press release boasts a 152,000 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 excited! “It’s I’m walking because I put this character in the story,” she replies, “I’ve 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, Michelle Montreal 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-neh), India later this year.

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

Bye Bye Blues is, in an odd sort of way, a sequel. The sequel was the tale of Wheeler’s father, who was a Japanese prisoner of war during World War II. Wheeler, after great deal of research into the period, wrote a script based on her father’s diaries, and the result was a feature-length documentary 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 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 am 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 her 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