

On Location

Nova Scotia

George's Island

It's nighttime. The sea smoke billows thick off the surface of the water, strangely quiet at this time of the year. Somewhere, shrouded in the fog, you can hear the rhythmic splash of a set of oars, and after a time a small dory rows into view. Suddenly the mists draw back and the imposing bow of a 16th century Dutch frigate looms up out of the darkness. The bowsprit is a hideous skeleton leering out at the two terrified boys who flail at the oars, trying to pull away from its path. The pirate ship bears down on them and rams into the dory with a resounding crunch. The terrified boys leap into the water. There is a moment of silence and then director Paul Donovan shouts, "Cut! Print that one."

The illusion shatters and we find that, amazingly, we're not on the shores of Terrance Bay, where the action is ostensibly set, but in a warehouse in the Burnside industrial park. "Let's pull it back for another take," says first assistant director Cordell Wynne, after a hurried consultation with Donovan, and four men in wetsuits and chest-waders pull the 8 metre vessel back through the gigantic pool, (32 metres by 13 and containing over 340,000 litres of water) to the start mark. Donovan himself is tangled in the ship's rigging, hanging just below camera operator Harold Ortenburger who is perched on top of the main mast.

This is *George's Island*, a children's feature film written by Donovan and creative partner Maura O'Connell. It tells the tale of Captain Kidd's buried treasure and two children who attempt to find it. Helped by their grandfather, a former ship's captain, they set out and en route are beset by ghosts, pirates and buccaneers. Donovan tells me that it is based on Nova Scotia folk tales and legends, such as 'the man in the red coat' but that the story itself is their own invention. The \$2.5 million film teetered on the brink of production for most of the fall, waiting for the final signal from Telefilm (further financing came from the NFB, First Choice and private investors) and once it got the green light, surged into a 34-day shoot.

Donovan likes the control of shooting in a studio. His visual and narrative taste calls for shots and effects that are difficult to achieve on location. "People at the NFB told me 'Why build a tank to simulate the ocean when we have the sea all around us?' but imagine trying to shoot this material at night; in November, on the Atlantic." He makes his point when he turns back to the next scene which is ready to roll. A demonic Captain Kidd, his eyes fluorescent green under a directed beam of ultraviolet light, is sinking to the four-ply polyethylene bottom of the tank to rise directly up under his floating tricorne and gleam through the fog-machine mist



Director Paul Donovan stands in the rigging of the pirate ship surrounded by (clockwise from top) Harold Ortenburger (camera operator), Bob Zimmerman (focus puller), Rick Bold (boom) Forbes MacDonald (Clapper/loader) and Walter Klymkiw (key grip)

into the camera, tracking at water level on a dolly. He manages the shot without so much as losing a contact lens. The North Atlantic is less forgiving.

Focusing lights and adjusting barn-doors poolside is DOP Les Kriszan, longtime collaborator of the Donovan brothers and a master at creating evocative shots in the seamy, steamy, dark situations favoured by brother Paul. Kriszan has shot quite a bit of the film himself but finally found there were so many lighting, set-up, and special effects details to deal with that Ortenburger was brought in as camera operator to give him some relief. "I have more time to concentrate on the overall look of the shot, but still," he says a little wistfully, "it's not the same as sitting behind the eyepiece." Back from several trips to his native Hungary where he had a chance to work on Istvan Szabo's most recent feature, Kriszan tells me he is bringing some new elements to this shoot which will augment his already classic 'European' style.

Behind him lie a variety of sets created by art director Art Flemming, all in various states of

assembly or dismemberment. A basement belonging to the children's parents is filled to overflowing with bottles of wine, supposedly made from curious substances such as turnips and parsnips. In another corner is a log cabin belonging to their grandfather, Captain Waters. Towering above pirate-shipwright Radek Przygoda, who is spray-painting the slightly battered bowsprit, is another pirate ship. This one is full-scale and is replete with black styrofoam cannons. Donovan is now sitting on top of the mast, planning the next shot. While he issues directions and a slightly harried clapper/loader Forbes MacDonald reloads the magazine, contracts and letters are passed up the mast for him to sign. Finally he descends and crawling over the dolly tracks tells me: "This is a perfect metaphor for the film industry. I climb up a mast; sit there for awhile; come down again and I've spent \$10,000."

There's more, too. Just round the corner is a second warehouse. A few days before, I opened the huge double doors and found myself in the mysterious, sylvan depths of an east-coast fog-bound forest. Spruce trees stood on the hills

and dales surrounding a clearing where two children were digging a hole. Or at least pretending to, for when I crept through the thicket close enough to see, they were just brushing the last vestiges of dank earth off a huge wooden trunk. Prying the lid open they fell back when a golden light poured out. An easy special effect, but far from simple was the next shot in which a flying pirate had to grab the children and soar with them through the (always) foggy forest. Many rehearsals were required to work out the complex logistics of ropes, pulleys, camera tracking and hanging harnesses. Slightly harried sound recordist Alan Scarth adjusted wireless microphones on the actors as he tried to filter out the sound of the rain, which was thundering down on the resonant warehouse roof.

That day, behind a small hill, I notice another camera and while props master Shelley Nieder uproots a few small trees to dress the set for the next shot, I go over to investigate. There I find model-builder Dave Albiston carefully re-articulating the bones of a skeleton. Tonight, when the crew leaves at 11 p.m. to look at the dailies, he'll start animation on a special effect which involves a pile of bones pulling themselves into a skeleton which then sits up. It's an eight-second sequence and with his special single-frame camera he hopes to have it shot by mid-morning of the next day. All this takes place on the forest floor and when I leave he's trying to figure out how to secure pine needles in place.

In the backroom, key makeup person Betty Belmore applies makeup and false eyelashes to a soft-foam, life-like severed head which special effects man Gus White has created. It's an easy day compared with yesterday when she had to insert 20 pairs of contact lenses into the reluctant eyes of a crew of pirates. Today's bunch, with gruesomely convincing slit throats, sit behind her and play cards waiting for their shot. Wardrobe assistant Patricia Fish thumbs through the hanging racks looking for another set of trousers which will fit a (currently) bottomless ghost.

In the front room sits executive producer Maura O'Connell, "handling the brush fires." Always calm and personable she deals with the problems, the conflicts, the cash flow and anything else that might threaten to become a conflagration. The phones ring, the computers churn out paper, the photocopier flashes and another potential difficulty is dealt with; now on to the next one.

Driving over the MacDonald Bridge on my way home I look down at the namesake of this production, *George's Island*, sitting dark and brooding in the mouth of Halifax Harbour. With a start it seems to me that I can see a man in a red coat waving to me. I straighten my car in the lane and then look back but... well it must have been my imagination.

Christopher Majka •