BOWLING, SAVES THE DAY BY BRINGING HIS LOVE

What's Wrong With Neil?

Have you ever been in one of those situations where you attempt to pass a love letter to the object of your desire, only to have it intercepted by the class bully who reads it out in class, totally destroying your reputation, your chances of making it with this person and your life in general?

That's What's Wrong With Neil!, Omni Films' first dramatic production, another Family Pictures anthology installment brought to you by the CBC.

On the top floor of a suburban, west coast yuppie house, a stone's throw from Grouse Mt. in North Vancouver, Neil (played by David French) stares at a fish tank at the foot of his bed while director Brad Turner stares at him through an Arriflex. Neil has been keeping to himself and no one knows why.

"It's more about boys just uncovering the mysteries about girls," says Andrew Seebaren, 11, who is playing Neil's friend Jasper.

Neil's sister, played by 15-year-old Sarah Bowling, saves the day by bringing his love interest up to his room where the two end up being good friends and, deep sigh, Neil can go back to school and not be so depressed.

"Neil has a real adult outlook on everything," says Bowling who describes the Neil character as a "nerd" with only one good friend (Jasper) in his life.

Paul Vitols (Cinema Canada's West Coast writer from 1978 to 1984) co-wrote What's Wrong With Neil? with Warren Easter. It's their first produced dramatic piece. They saw the Family Pictures Series as their big piece.

"This seemed like the ideal opportunity," recalls Vitols who followed the Family Pictures bible to come up with the concept. "The strength of it is in the depiction of a universal situation," he says. "Neil's whole drama is in his head, but most people would see it as just another incident among many."

The 24-minute anthology format doesn't have a lot of room for complicated character or plot development which is why Vitols focused on "an important incident, but small enough for a half-hour."

But Neil's problem complicated everybody else's lives, which is why director Turner focused the show more as an ensemble piece, while the script still seems focused on Neil. Turner is perhaps the reason this basic half-hour boy-wants-girl-boy-loses-girl-boy-meets-girl-and-they-end-up-being-friends comedy drama works as well as it does. His years with SCTV and TV Ontario, and directing serial dramas like the Twilight Zone, has led to his philosophy of creating an atmosphere on set that will somehow translate to film.

"You have to open up the gate... create an air of solid creativity," says Turner. "Comedy is more an environment, it's not necessarily in the script. If you can create the environment on set, you can create the air on screen."

Producer Michael Chechik and Omni Films partner Rob McLachlan, who is DOP on What's Wrong With Neil?, have worked together for the last 11 years doing documentary films such as Ferrall Ancient Mariner, About Sea Turtles, Rites of Spring, about the seal hunt and a film with David Suzuki called The Nuclear Past. Chechik says they have a couple of features in development and that they intend to keep producing documentaries.

Chechik found the experience of producing the anthology short was helpful, if frustrating. "It's a good showcase for our work and it's good in terms of going through it to anticipate problems at the feature level. We had to go through all the hoops with them (the government agencies) as if it was a feature," he says. "It wasn't until the day before yesterday (the first day of photography) that we got our first check."

Perhaps when Neil grows up he'll be asking that universal question of struggling independent cash-starved producers: "What's wrong with the industry?" What's Wrong With Neil? will be aired this spring on the CBC.

Ian Hunter
made a determined effort to keep his film’s budgets as low as possible.

It’s early afternoon in the landmark “Bean Sprout” building in downtown Halifax which The Picture Plant crew are using as a location today. The set is singularly unglamorous, dressed as David’s faded and run-down digs.Today. David doesn’t open the door

Sitting on an apple box I ask him about this new approach. MacGillivray laughs; “I’m getting lazy. I’d rather structure the shot in the camera than have to do it at the editing table.” Nonetheless he acknowledges that his style has evolved. It’s more fluid; has more motion - something that he himself might have rejected five years ago as being too commercial or too much the “Toronto” approach to filmmaking.

NICO’s (Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers Co-op) Paul Pope is first ad. and he luminos around the set trying to crack the whip in his own amiable style and providing a nonstop running commentary of off-the-cuff Newfoundland humour. Attentive in the background is B.C.’s Carl Greer, unexpectedly on the shoot as Assistant to the Producer, sent here on an apprenticeship program by B.C. Film. She is an open admirer of MacGillivray’s work and is taking in every detail. Must be the first time that someone from B.C. ever came to the Maritimes to learn about filmmaking!

Director of photography is MacGillivray’s longtime cinema eye Lionel Simmons, and Dominique Gosset, another collaborator, is first camera assistant. The Jim Rillie/Alex Salter team is back recording sound. They all tell me that the shoot is going very smoothly - unheard-of eight-hour days and a lack of any frantic changes. Everything is on schedule. Everyone is getting enough sleep! Rillie is also pleased because of the number of rehearsals that are going into every shot. “It makes it possible to do a real work of art with the sound,” he says with obvious pleasure. All the music, some of it in places such as punk-rock clubs with heavy-duty band equipment, makes for some interesting acoustical challenges. I visit the shoot a few days later when they are filming a sequence in just such a locale and it is a riotous combination of sound, light and raucous personalities. The Vacant Lot crew are, in fact, to be seen in all the grim and dingy corners of Halifax pursuing what they call, in a press release, “reduced surroundings.”

The Vacant Lot features a variety of expected and unexpected faces. Back are Leon Dubinsky (from Life Cycles), this time as a mechanic and Marty Reno (from Stations) as Johnny Sadler. Nova Scotia College of Art and Design video guru, David Askevold, makes a surprise appearance as the manager of the Turk’s Gut, a punk-rock club and MacGillivray’s soon-to-be-seen-in-Stations and now a good several feet taller!) is back as part of the Turk’s Gut band. Even location manager Gary Swin turns up in the film as an airline ticket agent.

But back to the Bean Sprout. Much to Pop’s relief, after uncountable rehearsals, the scene is finally ready to shoot. Everything goes like clockwork. The shot finishes with Fullerton getting up and striding angrily out of frame. He throws his guitar on the couch and it falls facing outwards, a real work of art with the sound, “That was great!” says MacGillivray to Fullerton in obvious pleasure, “but let’s do another take, just because it feels so good to shoot it.” The entire crew nods in agreement. Christopher Majka ●

See “Production Guide”, page 58 for other productions on location

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