



David French as Neil (foreground) and Mathew Briard as the bully.

Vancouver

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 a lot since the bully (played by Mathew Briard) exposed him. Now his family is worried because he has mysteriously withdrawn and no one knows why.

"It's more about boys just uncovering the mysteries about girls," says Andrew Seebaran, 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 Easton. It's their first produced dramatic piece. They saw the Family Pictures Series as their big chance.

"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 leave 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 10 years doing documentary films such as *Farewell 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 •

Nova Scotia

The Vacant Lot

The crew is a study in cultivated seediness. Everyone seems to be wearing filthy sneakers, faded khaki shirts and out-of-shape, torn blue-jeans. Taken out of context they look like the defeated remnants of a Central American army. In fact they are the people who are rolling the cameras, snapping the light switches, spray-painting the cardboard boxes, fading the clothes and otherwise making the wheels spin on location at the filming of Bill MacGillivray's newest feature film, *The Vacant Lot*. They may look like out-of-work mercenaries but their appearance belies their professional approach and set-ups, rehearsals and shots move, if not always with anticipated speed, then at least with precision.

The Vacant Lot is another of MacGillivray's assiduously "real" Picture Plant dramas drawn from the living fabric of east-coast life. This time it concerns the growing relationship which develops between David, played by musician Grant Fullerton, a rock & roller whose life and career are on the skids and Trudi, played by newcomer Trudi Petersen, described as "a young and emotionally deprived girl" who is a musician in an all-female punk-rock band called *The Vacant Lot*. Music, in this film, is a metaphor for a relationship with place and people much in the way that architecture (in *Aerial View*), journalism (in *Stations*) and visual art (in *Life Classes*) have played front and center roles in previous MacGillivray productions.

As always MacGillivray's directorial style (he is also the writer, executive producer and co-editor with Angel Baker) is one of consultation and consensus rather than dictatorial fiat. He moves amongst his crew asking, listening, suggesting, musing and finally directing. Also, as per usual, it is MacGillivray who holds the complete conception in his mind's eye and this knowledge is always the ultimate arbiter in deciding how to shoot a scene. Many of the crew members have worked with MacGillivray before and he prides himself on their loyalty pointing out that some actually turned down work on other projects waiting for *The Vacant Lot* to get its final fiscal green light.

The \$1 million plus budget has been pulled together from a variety of sources. Telefilm is, of course, a major player as is the legally nonexistent but nevertheless functioning Nova Scotia Film Development Agency currently administered by Nova Scotia's Department of Small Business which put \$250,000 into the film - a major expression of confidence by the province in this project. Presales have also been arranged to First Choice Canadian, CBC and CITY TV. This is low budget for a Canadian film but a large one for MacGillivray who has always

PHOTO: CHRIS BERGE

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. Fullerton is slouched across a decrepit couch picking out a screaming series of chord phrases on an electric guitar connected to a tinny amplifier. A knock comes on the door. It's a member of David's band telling him he's been cut from the group. David doesn't open the door and tells him to take a hike and then in frustration smashes a tape recorder. It's a simple scene but MacGillivray is shooting it in a single shot with the camera mounted on a dolly with complex camera movements including zooms and pull-focuses. There is one rehearsal after another to get all the components right. All this is very different than MacGillivray's early style of static tripod shots with few cut-aways, dollies, zooms or even close-shots. 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.

NIFCO's (Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers Coop) Paul Pope is first a. d. and he lumbers 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 Cari Green, unexpectedly on the shoot as Assistant to the Producer, sent here on an apprenticeship program by B.C.



Shooting a scene at the Razor's Edge Club, a location in Bill MacGillivray's new film *The Vacant Lot*.

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 Gusset, 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 Classes*), 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 son, Jess (last seen in *Stations* and now a good several feet

taller!) is back as part of the Turk's Gut band. Even location manager Gary Swim turns up in the film as an airline ticket agent.

But back to the Bean Sprout. Much to Pope'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 the amp and there is an unplanned long, drawn-out feedback howl in the empty room. MacGillivray holds and holds the shot before cutting. A smile spreads over everyone's face. "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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- FROM COAST TO COAST -