Manitoba
The Last Winter

The small, relatively unknown towns of Oak Lake, Virden and Lenore might seem unlikely places to film Manitoba's latest $3 million feature, but the producers wouldn't have it any other way.

The Last Winter, a warm family drama, penned and directed by Winnipegger Anton Kim Johnston, is creating employment for a crew of nearly 100 adults, children and animals.

The largely autobiographical screenplay stems from Johnston's childhood memories of growing up in the same rural areas where the film is being shot. It chronicles the poignant relationship of Will, a dreamy 12-year-old farmboy and his colorful old Granpa Jack—and the changes in their lives when the youngster's family decides to move to the city.

As part of a six-member documentary crew, I made the three-hour trek from Winnipeg to the sub-zero climes of The Last Winter set near Oak Lake twice recently. The crew came together at the Winnipeg Film Group's documentary filmmaking workshop with the one-and-only Janis Cole as our guru and mentor. Using the knowledge she imparted in our brains from the two previous shorts we produced with her (With Worlds Collide and Dearth: The Impossible Escape), our plan was to film the kids on the set of the feature for a documentary on child actors under fledgling director Hans ter Horst.

But on both occasions, once in March and again in April, we encountered well below normal temperatures and high windchill factors. Temperatures aside, we still managed to steal some beautiful footage and heavy duty mugging from the little ones thanks to the cooperation of Johnstone, co-producers Jack Oement and Ken Rodeck and the crew.

Our initial visit encompassed only the second day of shooting for The Last Winter, so things started off a little hairy. Both scene writers and the producers were still reeling from the sight of a frozen Will (Josh Murray) and Granpa Jack (Nathaniel Moreau) standing in the snow with only one difficulty—it was at least -10°C.

The second scene was to be done beside the same building, but there was a bigger problem: the windows were to be rolled down halfway. The crew set up the scene, but it was too cold to go on with the shooting. The crew left for lunch, and when they came back, the film was still being shot. The van became our set for interviewing some of the principal child actors—Josh Murray (Will), little sister Katie (Winnie, who did turn out to be adorable). It was particularly interesting to catch director Johnston at work with Josh, as he described how Will's flights of fancy should be acted out.

Later on in the day, we met Natalie's excited and charming sister Marsha (Kate) and Adilyn, the pair's mother, in their Winnebago. Marsha couldn't have been happier to finally get her mom in front of a camera, though Adil definitely did have her reservations before consenting (after Marsha begged her).

In the end, however, it was Adilyn who gave us the most understanding about the motivations of the kids. There's something to be said about any mom who gives up her own homelife to travel thousands of miles with her kids to "exotic" locations like Virden and Oak Lake. She spends long days on the set with them, goes to bed at 11:30 at night after going over her kids' lines with them, only to get up six hours later to work on the expense sheets.

Although she tried to convince us that it's really no big deal—that Marsha and Nathaniel simply needed her around for moral support system—we found her to be one special mom. Heck, we'd take her any day.

Gaylene K. Dempsey

See “Production Guide”, pages 35-38, for other productions on location
March 15, 1989

Mr. René Malo
Malofilm Group
1207 St. Andre Street
4th Floor
Montreal, Quebec
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Re: The distribution of MALAREK - A street kid who made it

Dear René,

On behalf of everyone at Telescene we would like to thank you profoundly for the extraordinary job you did promoting MALAREK across Canada earlier this month. We were delighted with the quality of your campaign, the quantity of advertising of all sorts, and the intelligence and dedication with which you and everybody at Malofilm worked on this launch. Again and again we were told by other filmmakers and other people in the film business what a pleasure it was that for once a Canadian film was being launched fully and properly by a Canadian distributor.

We all thank you for doing such a fine, thorough and professional job.

With best wishes,

Jamie Brown
Producer

Robin Spry
Producer

Roger Cardinal
Director

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