

why shoot the teacher?

For the first time in Canada, private television has teamed up with an independent production company – and one from Edmonton at that – to make a feature. The following article tells the story from two points of view as Larry Hertzog, producer, talks with Katherine Gilday and Silvio Narizzano, director, talks with Peter Haynes.

a part of our history

(1) the production

by Katherine Gilday

The CTV network has just finished its first feature film, **Why Shoot the Teacher?**, in co-production with Fraser Films. Despite the impression created by the title, the film is not a blood-and-guts thriller but a surprisingly gentle and low-key human-interest story. Based on the book of the same title by Leacock Memorial Medal-winner Max Braithwaite, it concerns the coming-of-age of a coddled young man, during a year spent as an ill-paid schoolteacher amidst the grim Depression realities of a small Prairie community.

A somewhat risky proposition for the private network's first feature film venture, one would think, given the preponderant box-office success of Canadian formula pictures such as **Death Weekend**. But Larry Hertzog, Director, Drama Development at CTV and one of the film's producers, believes an even greater risk is to be imitative.

"We've tried to create an impression of a period—the 'Dirty Thirties' – that's an integral part of our history and of our experience as Canadians, but that's been pretty much overlooked by our artists and filmmakers." At the same time, Hertzog sees a strong universal appeal coming out of the very simplicity of the story. "It's about growing up –

that first transition everyone makes, you know, from hanging on their mother's apron to facing reality and taking some individual responsibility."

Hertzog had some particular reasons of his own for responding enthusiastically to Braithwaite's reminiscences. He was born in Alberta himself and acquired much of his early professional training in Edmonton theatrical organizations. When Fil Fraser brought him the "property", this record of the poverty-stricken Prairie Thirties, he was thrilled at the idea of exploring and portraying something of his personal roots. "I was born into the middle of it all, but at the time I had no understanding of what was going on. For me the book was a description of what my parents must have been going through."

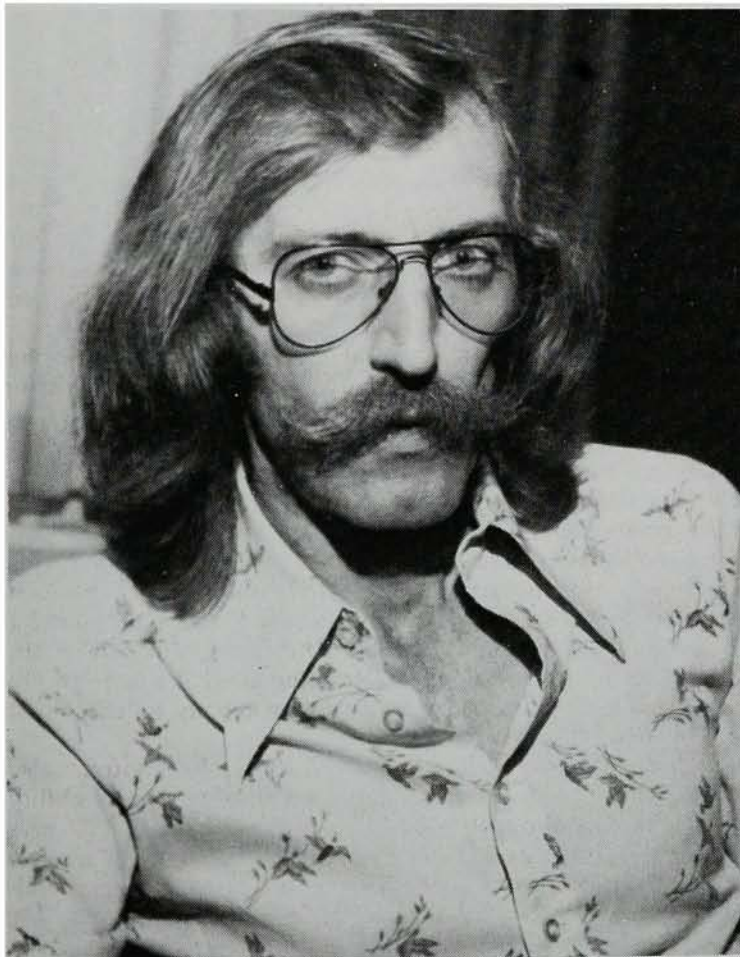
Fraser, whose company is based in Edmonton, also brought along some strongly held views about the viability of an Alberta film industry. The film was shot in Alberta with the intention of utilizing as much local talent as possible. Hertzog claims they were impressed by the provincial government's history of supportiveness towards the arts in general, as well as by the expertise developed by local technicians on the sets of big American features, such as Altman's **Buffalo Bill**. He points to Pierre Berton's estimate in *Hollywood's Canada* that 75% of all features made in Canada have been shot in and around the Rockies. "The general feeling out there was – here we've been getting all this experience; why doesn't someone come along and use it to make a *Canadian* feature?"

The crew ended up largely Albertan, "except for a few key positions." The Calgary branch of IATSE, local 212, signed its first contract ever, as an independent branch,

Katherine Gilday is working on her PhD on twentieth century poetry at the University of Toronto. She was production assistant on the Durrell series, The Stationary Ark, and is currently trying to finish a short film about a window.

with the film's producers – “a big step forward for them,” says Hertzog. He defends their importation of talent for the most important positions by explaining that for certain functions, the experience hasn't yet formed in the province. “The idea was to *develop* Alberta's talents further. But in order for someone to be an apprentice, you need a master. I supplied some masters.”

One of the “masters” supplied was the director Silvio Narizzano, a Canadian who has worked largely in England for many years and is best known for directing **Georgy Girl**. Hertzog claims to have screened the work of several resident Canadian directors before turning, in his dissatisfaction, to Narizzano, an old CBC colleague of Jewison, Kotcheff and CTV's president and managing director, Murray Cherkover. As cinematographer, he chose Marc Champion (**Slipstream, Breaking Point**), whom he quotes as having been relieved to be working just once on a film “where I won't be told the cinematography was the best part.” Samantha Eggar, the British actress whose most famous role was the abducted art student in **The Collector**, was brought in from Los Angeles to play Alice Field, the worn-out war bride of a harsh Prairie farmer. American Bud Cort, of **Harold and Maude** and **Brewster McCloud** fame, was given the title role of the ingenuous young schoolteacher. Chief supporting parts went to Canadian actors from the East – Chris Wiggins, Gary Reineke, Michael J. Reynolds and John Friesen.



Larry Hertzog, co-producer of **Why Shoot the Teacher?**

Fil Fraser acted as the film's executive producer, coming down occasionally from Edmonton to confer with Hertzog, who was on the set on a daily basis. The frictions that must inevitably have resulted from this arrangement seem to have proved relatively minor. Hertzog praises Fraser, who like the network had never before produced a feature film, for bringing to the project, along with his enthusiasm, some finely honed entrepreneurial skills and useful government contacts.

Between them, the film's producers managed to raise around a million dollars. The CFDC put up \$200,000 and the Alberta Opportunity Company, the provincial government office set up to encourage a local film industry, contributed \$150,000. Additional investment came from CTV, Famous Players, Quadrant Films and Ambassador Films (responsible for foreign and Canadian distribution, respectively), Film House and private sources in Alberta. It was, appropriately, Hertzog's first employer, Dr. Dick Rice of CFRN in Edmonton, who was instrumental in bringing together the private financial backing from Alberta.

More uncannily, the film was shot in Hanna, Alberta – the small town where Larry Hertzog was born. “It was an accident that really blew my mind – and there was a lot of fear too: like, when I got out of the car, would I get struck down because I'd completed the cycle...?” Shooting went on for two months in the early spring and, aside from the normal difficulties of bringing a host of different talents and personalities together in a rather inclement location, the production proceeded, according to Hertzog, on a surprisingly even keel. The film did end up going over the original budget of \$850,000 by \$150,000, but \$30,000 of that went towards shooting a key blizzard scene in a Los Angeles studio. Snow is one thing you would have thought to be in ample supply in Hanna, Alberta, but Hertzog says he needed the controlled conditions and technical expertise available only at this studio. “It was the only place I could get my choice of three different sizes of snow. Seriously.”

Decisions like this one are central to the producer's role, Hertzog believes. “The combined producer-director figure that comes out of our documentary tradition just doesn't work in a feature film of any size. The director is hired to do a specific job. The producer has to retain full control over what is going on.” He is not talking about money, primarily. Artistic considerations, in his view, are so inextricably woven with financial ones in the day-to-day questions that arise in filmmaking that the producer must be acutely sensitive to each of the major creative components – writing, directing, acting – that go to make up the film's unity. In addition, he must act as a catalyst on the set in order to get “all the energies flowing together... This is one of our problems in this country – we don't have enough ‘artistic’ producers. And most of the problems you run into aren't financial ones – they're artistic decisions, where the *bottom line* is ‘how much?’ One mistake – and you can blow an entire film so easily.”

Why Shoot the Teacher? will be out around Christmas, its opening planned tentatively to take place in the West. A lot is riding on the success of this film – for one thing, probably, CTV's future involvement in feature film production. Fraser Films and CTV have an agreement to develop more feature film concepts that rests explicitly on the fate of their first co-production venture. There is also the possibility of a spin-off into a television series, if things go well at the theatres. For Hertzog, the film represents an attempt to prove that indigenous subject matter, professionally handled, *can* provide the basis for a commercially viable film industry – as well as for some quality programming. With pay-TV looming in the near distance, the question of “what we do in a market penetrated by the American signal” becomes ever more crucial. Recently returned from two weeks of viewing European television programs in Italy, Hertzog is enthused about what he sees as the Europeans' greater seriousness towards what appears on their home screens, their concern with articulating through the medium something of their society and their history. “That's what we need more of here – programs and films done with care, that are distillations of our own time and place.” □

(2) silvio narizzano an interview

by Peter Haynes

*Silvio Narizzano is a Canadian director who has worked mostly in England and now lives in Spain. He has made, among other films, **Fanatic**, **Georgy Girl**, **Blue**, **Loot**, **The Man Who Had Power Over Women** and **Redneck**. He was recently in Alberta to direct **Why Shoot the Teacher?***

Mr. Narizzano is a softspoken man, pleasant, affable, and engaging. He stopped smoking a long time ago, but he knows to the day how long it's been. "I look on every day as a struggle against starting again. It's a special mental discipline." Mr. Narizzano considers Fellini and Antonioni to be great directors. I asked him how he first got involved in film.

"I wanted to be an actor at first and that's what I was in school and through college. I joined a repertory company and worked very hard for two years and then after a particularly disastrous night – I forgot all my lines – I filled in an application for a job with the newly formed CBC-TV and got accepted.

"Initially I was slated to be a floor manager but after the training period they decided that I should be a director. And that's how it all started, directing TV drama for the CBC. That went on for about five years and then, in 1956, I went to England to join the independent television network there. It was bigger, better, brighter and it offered more money! Of course, it also offered professional advancement; there was a huge pool of talent there. I didn't expect to stay for so long – I don't think any of us did, Jewison, Hiller, Kotcheff – but we stayed anyway.

"Now I'm back to make **Why Shoot the Teacher?** Do you know what I find? 'Canadian' this, 'Canadian' that; 'Canadian content', 'Canadian film'. Maybe the jingoism was a good thing in 1967, maybe it helped get rid of our insecurities as a nation and assert ourselves. But there should be no jingoism in art: they should take the word 'Canada' out of film. You don't hear the Americans or the British talking about 'American film' or 'British film'; I don't think Goya thought of himself as a 'Spanish' painter; he was just a painter who happened to paint Spanish subjects.

"I was at a symposium in Winnipeg some time ago and there was a group of filmmakers there who were the 'Canadian content' group. I said some pretty unpopular things – I'm saying them now again, aren't I? – but they have to be said. You can't make films by searching out the Canadian subjects; this is ridiculous – don't you get an image of these people rummaging through magazines looking for the especially Canadian? – you must pick the story on its own merits and on the merits of the script.

"When I was first handed the script to **Why Shoot the Teacher?** my first reaction was 'What a hell of a good story!' You see what you must do is this: pick your story and then, by virtue of making it here in Canada with Canadian actors or technicians or whatever, you will automatically end up with a 'Canadian' film with 'Canadian' content. It will be Canadian because it is taking place here, dealing with Canadian people – how they get up, brush their teeth, get a bank loan, how they rape somebody. The problems of its people will be universal, if the film is any good at all, but they will also be Canadian; and their solution will have a Canadian flavor to it. What more do you want?"



Silvio Narizzano, director of **Why Shoot the Teacher?**

"**Why Shoot the Teacher?** is my kind of picture. It's not suspense, not mystery, not horror, but real people in real situations dealing with their human problems. That's what all of my pictures have been about. I don't see any other connection between my films, although there may be something to what that man in *Film and Filming* – I don't remember his name – said: that all my characters are in search of themselves, in search of an identity that they're happy with. Georgy can be seen as a girl coming to accept that she's a square; in **Blue** the central character is trying to discover where his true loyalties lie.

"I am dealing with real life in my films and so my films have a real-life look to them. The lighting is usually quite flat, the camera angles are conventional. I am not dealing with suspense or fear as Hitchcock does and therefore I do not need elaborate lighting, I do not need long shadows cast on empty walls. I conceive a certain shape to a scene, which tells the thing in the most simple, economic way.

"Of course, I work out many of the details of the way a scene is to be shot with the DOP. Filmmaking is a cooperative affair. Part of being a good director is being able to pick out the good advice from the bad and then following it.

"I like to start with my editor from day one. We look at each day's rushes and I tell him what I was trying to do. But I leave him free to play with the material any way he wants to. Often what the editor will come up with differs considerably from what I had originally conceived and is better than my conception. Sometimes I go with my first idea. The great thing about this stage of the process is that nothing that you do is irreversible; you can try what you like.

"All this talk about cameras and editing makes me sound like a 'technical' director. I am not: I don't squint down the camera all the time and present the editor with a completed blueprint of the film before we start. I am not Hitchcock; I am an actor director primarily. I would love to spend some time on Altman's set to see how he gets those things out of actors. Marvelous, isn't it?" □