

Oh! For A Little Southern Comfort

by len klady / david demchuk

Braving the elements is the name of the game for the production crew of *Silence of The North*. Len Klady's production profile tells the tale of how 'Hollywood' hit Winnipeg. David Demchuk's exposé of a night in the life of a paltry P.A. (production assistant) is a less glamorous look at a movie-in-the-making.



Olive Frederickson (Ellen Burstyn) with John Frederickson (Tom Skerritt) and baby Frederickson in a heart-warming scene before the heart-break
photo: Shin Sugino

Violence Of The North

Preface

On Tuesday, October 9 and Thursday, October 11, 1979, Allan King's *Silence of the North* dropped into Winnipeg for a few scenes and a quick bite to eat. While it was there, a number of starving freelancers leached onto the production as P.A.s, in order to earn enough to pay a small portion of the monthly rent. These brave souls, named in the following pages, were Roman, Lin, Andy, Vonnie, Ihor, Michael, Cindy, and David. Everyone else, no matter how nice, was still part of the real crew.

They, too, deserve sympathy. Just not as much. After all, they got *union* wages. They had their money to keep them warm.

What did we have?

Bloody weak tea and onion soup, that's what.

Thursday, October 11 11:00 p.m.

'Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart. I think the cream cheese on my bagel has gone funny.

We've been trying to get this Bluebird Café scene for four-and-a-half bloody hours. Before that, we spent two hours on a little scene shot on Albert St.

Ellen Burstyn has a trailer. Gordon Pinsent has a trailer. The two little girls have a trailer. Roman has a coffee truck.

I have chilly kneecaps.

You might suppose from reading this far that I have nothing exciting to do — relatively little to do at all. Very perceptive.

12:00 Midnight

Gabby is by Ellen's trailer, I think. Gabby is one of the more remarkable people on the crew. She has wit, charm, personality, and a down-filled jacket.

I am longing for a walkie-talkie. I had one the other day, and it's the only way to find out what the hell is going on.

I don't think Allan King has a walkie-talkie.

Draw your own conclusions.

12:10 a.m.

I have just been corrected. Allan King does indeed have a walkie-talkie. It is turned off.

Now, draw your own conclusions.

Silence of the North is the true story of Olive Frederickson, a pioneer woman who lived in northern Alberta in the 1920s. Her tale is the stuff of great adventure yarns. She married a trapper, bore his children, and successfully provided for them after he died in the Athabasca River.

Actress Ellen Burstyn was the real force bringing the property to the screen. She read Olive's autobiography five years ago on the advice of her agent. Recognizing its filmic possibilities, as both a romance and an adventure story, she went to British Columbia to convince Olive that she was the only person who could do justice to her life.

Burstyn subsequently convinced Universal to produce the movie. However, a series of unsatisfactory screenplays and exiting directors — like William Friedkin — brought the project to a standstill. Finally, the film became a reality when Universal opened a Canadian production office and decided to make the film under the new tax laws.

The production office is quick to remind people that the film is being made for Universal Productions Canada Inc.: as such, it has a full complement of

Len Klady, writer, teacher and broadcaster, covers the film scene for the *Winnipeg Free Press*.



photo: Shin Sugino

Olive — a "hero" determined to survive



photo: Shin Sugino

The Silence Of The North production crew on the Athabasca River, with 500 hp wind machines on the barge

Canadian actors and technicians, and is being directed by Allan King. The only visible American is Burstyn. Ironically, the American influence of Burstyn and Universal may be the chief factor in making **Silence of the North** the most authentically Canadian movie shot this year.

The production arrived in Winnipeg in early October, after having filmed for over four weeks in Alberta. The crew was in good spirits, and made the Alberta shoot sound like an extended party.

Everything about the production was expansive. For one thing, it was the costliest, wholly-Canadian film that had ever been made; supporting a permanent crew of over sixty, which at times swelled to almost one-hundred.

Deep down, though, I was suspicious... Could it be that **Silence of the North** was the latest chapter in the Canadian film follies? It seemed impossible to make an 8.5 million dollar film in ten weeks, travelling from northern Alberta to Winnipeg, to the Toronto studios, and back again — the production seldom remaining in the same location for two consecutive days. Who could expect tempers, let alone sanity, to prevail during the making of such a film?

On location in Winnipeg the production recreated Calgary of the 1930s, complete with soup kitchens, dance halls and Chinese restaurants: because the historic buildings necessary for the shoot were non-existent in Calgary, the production resorted to Winnipeg's Old Market Square.

The city was suddenly caught up with the notion that Hollywood had arrived, and six-hundred locals auditioned to be extras. Crowds stalked the locations. Re-routed traffic caused major tie-ups in the downtown area. Few people really got a good look at headliner Ellen Burstyn during the unseasonably cold shooting.

To prepare for her role, Burstyn began riding horses for the first time in twenty years. "I also learned to canoe, cut down trees, and shoot a gun." Referring to Olive — her real-life model — as a real "hero," as opposed to a heroine, she explained, "A heroine is someone who's dependent on men." (She made no mention of her precautionary, electric foot-warmers.)

12:30 a.m.

The worst has just occurred. I have been condemned to stand watch on Albert St., near the infamous Royal Albert Hotel, for the remainder of the evening. No walkie-talkie. No nothing. Not even a bloody bagel. What could be worse?

I'll tell you what could be worse.

I'm stuck here with a cop.

Not just any cop, mind you. This one has a very special problem.

He is... what is the polite way to put it?... in rut.

Yes, my cop is lusting for every female creature (including children and dogs) within ten miles of this spot.

I am not amused.

12:45 a.m.

My cop has gone for coffee. It's like he never left at all. He's that dull.

1:15 a.m.

The first thing my cop does when he gets back is tell me a rather dreary, dirty joke. I do not laugh. This leads him to believe that I do not get it. I'm beginning to wish he would go back to being dull.

1:30 a.m.

Andy comes over from where the action is and asks me if I need anything. Impetuous fool that I am, I ask him for his long underwear. I settle for tea with sugar.

1:35 a.m.

Andy returns with a styrofoam cup of brown water. I taste it. Even though my tongue is numb, I detect the definite flavor of unlaundered socks. I thank him anyway.

2:00 a.m.

My cop has gone to urinate in the alley. Maybe he'll get lost and won't come back.

2:10 a.m.

Wishes never come true.

2:35 a.m.

Finally, they've finished with the friggin' Café shot! Now's my chance to re-enter the civilized world while they get set up for the Dance Hall scene.

There's Libby over there, talking to Allan King. Libby's one of about three A.D.s. She's also my boss. Well, she's all right... for one of *them*. She doesn't whip me or yell at me or boot me around the set. It's not written into her contract, I guess.

Ellen's over there, keeping warm. If she has so much control over this film, why didn't she have the setting changed to the Bahamas?

There's Bryan, whom I know (from reading my little black D.G. of C. book) is a trainee assistant director. God only knows what they have him doing around here; but whatever he's doing, he's important. All cute people are important. I think I'm in love.

And there's Andy, with another styro-foam cup for me.

"What's this in my tea?" I ask, indicating a large, mucilaginous (look it up - I had to) strand of something on my lip.

"That isn't tea," he says. "That's onion soup."

"Oh," I say.

3:00 a.m.

I'm back with my cop. Words cannot fully capture my ecstasy.

3:35 a.m.

I'm still here. My cop is urinating in the alley again.

4:00 a.m.

Andy brings more soup. I send him back for a straw. My tongue is frozen to my fillings.

4:50 a.m.

Another brief reprieve. A gang of us (Lin, Roman, Andy, and I) huddle together, resting against the side of a white half-ton truck. We refer to this manoeuvre as "Group Warmth."

5:00 a.m.

Vonnie, the head P.A. or something (no cracks, please), sees us huddled against the truck. She pities us and our lack of activity, and asks which one of us wants to leave the most. She doesn't realize that we may have to be chipped apart.

Lin won't go.

Andy won't go.

Roman won't go.

That's it. I've done my time on this rockpile. I turn to Vonnie and, in my coolest Brooklynese, say "Call me a cab, you crumb."

Barbara Stanwyck, eat your heart out.

David Demchuk is a free-lance writer, an independent filmmaker, and a member of the Winnipeg Film Group.



photo: Shin Sugino

Better safe than sorry. Colin Fox, Ellen Burstyn, Richard Farrell and David Fox in *Silence of the North*

After several days in Winnipeg the production moved to Lakeshore Studios in Toronto. The budget was increased, and consequently the Los Angeles executives flew to Toronto to get a first-hand look at the operation. Then, the film disappeared from Universal's 1980 release schedule.

In December, when the production returned to Winnipeg, it was obvious that things had changed. Tension was building and the mood was cautious. The toll of weeks of filming had made everyone anxious to finish, go home, and take a long siesta.

Instead, everyone knew that they were headed for Catastrophe — Lake Catastrophe, near Kenora, Ontario, where the final sequences would be filmed. □

Silence of the North

exec. p. Murray Shostak asst. to exec. p. Alma Lee sec. to exec. p. Penny East Universal Studios Doug Green p. Bob Baylis d. Allan King p. man. Gwen Iveson loc. man. Michael MacDonald p. account. Lacia Kornylo p. book. Joanne Jackson, Rochelle Charron (asst.) p. co-ord. Trudy Work, Judy Roseberg (Toronto) cont. Penny Hynam a.d. Rob Lockwood (1st), Libby Bowden (2nd), Bryan Gliserman (3rd-xtras), Kim Winther (3rd-set) p.a.s. Gabrielle Clery (1st), Dave Hone (2nd), Vonnie Hoogstratton (3rd) coffee Roman Buchok, Debbie Tiffen (asst.) p. design. Bill Brodie art. d. Susan Longmire, Daniel Bradette (trainee) cost. design Olga Dimitrov ward. Lynda Kemp, Nadia Ongaro (asst.) dress. Mary McCready, Laura Duncan make-up. Bill Morgan, Cindy Warner (asst.) hair Paul LeBlanc, Rita Steinman (asst.) d.o.p. Richard Leiterman cam. op. Bob Saad, Craig DiBona (Panaglide) focus Jock Martin, Raul Randla (2nd asst.) Stills Shin Sugino d.o.p. 2nd unit Matt Tundo, Peter Luxford (1st asst.), Zoe Birse (2nd asst.) key grip Andy Mulkani, Robert McRae (asst.) grip David Sheridan (1st), Kelly Soucherow (2nd) gaf. Ray Boyle

best boy Malcolm Kendal elec. Eddie Preston, Lindsay Harris gen. op. Rodger Dean trans. captain Nick Sweetman, Pat Brennen (asst.) sd. rec. Bruce Carwardine boom op. Glen Gauthier, Marc Chiasson (appren.) props. John Berger, Grant Swain (asst.) set dress. Gerry DesChenes, Earle Fiset, Barry Kraft (asst.) construc. man. Ron McMillan scenic art. Richard Sturm bus. co-ord. Lynda Haller spec. effects John Thomas, Ken Johnson (asst.) wranglers Norman Edge, Lyle Edge (asst.) sp. animal consult. Hubert Wells wild anim. handlers Mark Weiner casting Bill Batliner (Universal L.A.), Eleanor Kilgallen (Universal N.Y.), Claire Walkes (Canadian Casting Assoc.—Toronto), Joan Scott (Credo Group—Winnipeg) l.p. Ellen Burstyn, Tom Skerritt, Gordon Pinsent, Colin Fox, Richard Farrell, David Fox, Jennifer McKinney, Donna Dobrijevic, Ken Pogue, Chapelle Jaffe, Jeff Banks, Booth Savage, Linda Mason Green, Graham McPherson, Chester Robertson, Ted Johns, Larry Reynolds, Ken James, Murray Westgate, Kay Hawtrey, Thomas Hauff, Tantoo Martin, Sean Sullivan, Tom McEwen, Janet Amos, Frank Adamson, Albert Angus unit pub. Prudence Emery p.c. Universal Productions Canada Inc. (1979) col. .35mm.