

By Martyn Burke—Director
During nearly five months last summer and fall a film crew and I had a unique look at North America. On numerous trips in this period we were filming with the Amusements of America — a multi-million dollar carnival that travels from Florida to Three Rivers, Quebec. Complete with strippers, freaks, and roustabouts, the Amusements of America, is virtually a community unto itself, moving across this continent.

The film — *Carnivals*, is as much a look at America as it is the story of Yak-Yak, Shorty, Speedy and all the others who make up the Amusements of America. To be seen on the CBC in Canada as a ninety-minute film, *Carnivals* is also intended for theatrical release in other countries.

Essentially our approach to this film was to regard the hundreds of carnies as unscripted actors, constantly improvising their own lives and coping with their own problems, and sometimes the problems of the society around them. Behind them was the fascinating set of the carnival — and behind that set, lay America. It was a difficult approach to take both in terms of stamina, and technique. It meant constantly second guessing as to when something of significance would happen. Often we would have several "sets" lit at one time, waiting in one of them for something to happen.

Other set ups were different. Carnies are natural performers and the filming of some of the acts could be done with a more planned style of shooting. This was also true of the circus people whom we visited a couple of times at Hoxie Bros. Circus which travelled roughly the same route as the Amusements of America.

Before shooting one foot of film, I reached a vital agreement with five Vivona brothers who own the Amusements of America. This agreement gave us unlimited access to any of their travelling offices, shows and personnel. They lived up to this arrangement and the result was a number of fascinating human situations developing before the cameras.

Yet, despite the wealth of human elements, we were constantly battling difficult technical problems (as Ed Higginson more fully relates in the following article). Often times we would find that your best visual locations were nearly impossible for sound because of the incessant din of the huge generators stationed all over the lot. And there were times in the cavernous circus or strip show tents when merely getting a workable exposure reading seemed an accomplishment.

We ended our filming in the same kind
Cinema Canada 54



CARNIVALS



By Ed. Higginson—Cameraman

When you're a kid the excitement of going to a circus or a carnival could keep you awake nights in anticipation. If you're filming on a carnival or a circus you have the same problem. Producer-Director Martyn Burke wanted actuality and realism for his feature documentary — *Carnivals*. The end product will certainly contain those elements as well as some exciting and unusual sequences.

Our plans called for intermittent shooting from June to October. It was to be a three man crew — myself as cameraman, Bill McClelland as soundman and Dave Usher handling lighting — to be shot in 16mm Celo and using as portable a package as possible. The end product was to be 90 minutes that would be used for TV release and also blown to 35mm for Theatre distribution. Two Blow-up tests were made — one by Film Optical of Toronto and one by a large Hollywood optical house. On screening we felt the Film Optical blow-up gave us excellent results from our original 7242 and 7252 stock.

of chilly nights that we had encountered when we began. But this was autumn in North Carolina, and between those nights and the earlier ones in New Jersey and Quebec lay twenty cities, and locations as diverse as Parliament Hill in Ottawa and skid row in Philadelphia. ●

Our first two week shoot was planned to spend seven days with Amusements of America in New York and New Jersey and the second week with Hoxie Bros. Circus in Pennsylvania. Burke decided that it was essential to become part of the Carnival and Circus milieu; both groups

Dave Usher bouncing a 1K multibeam off a white sheet pinned to top of "Wall of Death."



are extremely close knit and leery of non "carnies". So we rented two "Open Roads" – a kind of camper trailer similar to the Winnebago mobile homes. We arrived on location with our two trucks and one Station Wagon feeling we had good accommodation: Kitchen, Shower, Toilet, Refrigerator, – all the comforts of home. It looked great until we spread our gear out, then it was a question of keeping the cheese out of the lenses, the batteries out of the sink and the tripods out of the shower.

Our filming with the carnies went smoothly enough, over the 18-19 hours a day until we came to filming the Wall of Death. This is a circular fifteen foot high wooden structure that holds motorcyclists barreling around it doing tricks. Considering the walls are vertical and the bikes and riders travel at a ninety degree angle to the walls it made for some interesting problems. Direct lighting onto the riders could blind them causing a disastrous spill. The top of the Wall of Death had a multi-coloured canvas tent top. Hence, no natural light. The problem of the depth of the structure plus the safety factor dictated bounce light – but off what? Dave Usher decided that pinning white sheets onto the tent top would be the answer. The next problem was to fasten them to the centre – ten feet from the rim of the dome. While one daredevil Wall of Death rider held a ladder – daredevil Usher climbed out over the dome and pinned the sheets to the canvas. Onto the poles holding up the top, he fastened eight 1k multibeam units directing them up to the sheets. In the center at the base where the bikes were parked we placed two more sheets and two more 1k lights to get some bounce fill on the lower area. This gave us a 2.4 reading on 42. The next problem was filming. The high shots were firm but from below the bikes, panning with them at speed produced problems. The whole structure shook as the bikes roared

around. After a number of experiments we resorted to that old standby – hand-held shooting. Using an Arri S with an 8mm lense I pivoted as many times as possible before falling over completely dazed. It worked.

Then to the Circus – the glamour of the flying trapeze artists, the jugglers, the clowns, the sawdust in your blood or the elephant dung all over the cables, the mud, the smell of the lion cages and the second week of a diet of hot-dogs and cokes. This circus was in a 300 foot long by 100 foot wide tent. Every night the whole thing was torn down and trucked at dawn to its next location. And when it moved we moved. The tent would be set up by 5:00 p.m.; the show started at 8:00. This meant that our cables from the generators and the lights also had to be set up every day. At night, with the tent being ripped down under the two 100 watt bulbs and the elephants ripping out the quarter poles, our lights had to be stripped down in about 20 minutes.

For filming the acts we had decided to light one of the three rings at a time. The lights were put on the quarter poles which was fine, until a wind came along causing the tent to heave and flap. This in turn would cause the quarter poles to rotate leaving the ring in blackness but the camera itself magnificently lit. It rained almost every day and inside the tent was roughly comparable to being in one huge shower. People and equipment were quickly mired in mud.

In the carnival strip show sequences there were again the problems of the rotating tent poles. Just as troublesome however, was the stage that was part of two Tractor Trailers. Setting up to shoot on stage was tough because it reacted to the dainty footed strippers as a trampoline to a bouncing elephant.

We tried on most sequences, wherever possible, to tripod, but because of the action flow the main portion was off the shoulder. I felt that by establishing the sequence on a tripod, the following hand-held footage would amplify the immediacy of the scene.

Many of the Interior Sequences were shot at an Usher F stop. That is 2.8. Considering the scope of Burke's enthusiasm on some locations as far as area is

concerned, this was amazing.

Crane shots? Why not? Particularly when the only crane facilities in Reading, Pennsylvania consisted of wheezy old Hydro linesman's trucks with single buckets, rusted bolts, and leaking pressure plates. Place an O'Connor Head and Tripod and one 200 lb. hulk and once you're up there you begin to wonder whatever possessed you to embark on this venture. The shot called for a "Magic Hour" sky – with the ride lights on. Start on a P.A. Horn pull back, drop down, simultaneously revealing the Carnival, onto a shot encompassing the "Lush Wagon" (executive office), zoom in to door. Four takes later it was a wrap. I went tungsten, giving the sky a nice steel blue quality and lighting the horn and the wagon. Tracking shots? On the double ferris wheel – of course. Or from the back of a wagon with no tailgate on an expressway at 60 mph.

One of the major lighting considerations was simply a matter of spreading our lights around as economically as possible, thus giving us the flexibility to move quickly from one pre-lit set to another. At one point we had the strip show stage lit with six 1k lights, some with coloured gels; the "lush wagon" with a 750 and five clip-ons; and another office tractor trailer lit for filming the conversations and arguments that were a part of carnival life.

The constant change from daylight to tungsten and from 7242 to 7252 necessitated three filter holders being ready at all times – one with clear glass, another with an 85 and a third with an 85N6. We kept four magazines loaded, two with 42 and two with 52.

From a cameraman's point of view Carnivals was a constant battle with the elements, technical problems and the long hours that resulted from both filming and living a carnies life. And yet after looking at the results with such crazy and very human scenes as Yak-Yak deciding in the beerhall to run for President; Speedy listening to a tape made by his son just before being shot down in Viet Nam, or a forlorn Shorty limping off after losing another argument, there emerges a quality that has made for a great deal of fascinating and powerful footage. ●



Cameraman Ed Higginson with soundman Bill McClelland filming in Ottawa.