



by Almos Magyar

The press release had an impressive title: . . . CABLE FIRM COMEDY 'PREMIERE' MARKS START OF NEW INDUSTRY. . . .

Then an invitation came by way of repeated telephone calls: would we care to come to a preview press screening of a 30 minute teleplay entitled "Nothing Changes Much," to introduce us to a totally new concept in locally originated cable programming?

We gave in and attended the event, held in a Toronto hotel suite. A close circuit color hook-up enabled the producers to present the programme on the regular hotel set. But first we met David Battle, Producer/Director of Grand River Cable TV Ltd. and Hans Mantel, of Dynatel Systems, co-producers of the programme.

Mantel's company provided transportable color camera and one-inch video recording equipment for shooting on location in Waterloo county, on and near the Grand River, above Freeport. Mantel himself developed in Canada the basic system now used for editing videotape electronically, frame by frame.

"This is the first in a series of television dramas we intend to produce for sale to outlets in Canada and the United States," claimed Battle, an impressive, energetic man with an uncanny resemblance to U.S. TV's Captain Kangaroo. "To the best of our knowledge, we are the first cable television company in North America to take this approach to providing entertaining material for cable viewers - or for that matter any television viewer."

We thought that last boast was a bit too much. There are approaches and there are approaches, but what's so

unique about producing a half hour comedy on videotape and then marketing it? But then Cable TV is just in its infancy.

In July, Grand River Cable called for scripts from area writers for short teleplays, and received excellent response. More than 15 scripts were submitted, including some from Nova Scotia and Manitoba, and a query from British Columbia.

(That still doesn't explain what's new about the approach.)

"We are making a serious attempt to develop in this area the skills necessary to produce videotaped and filmed materials for sale to television, educational and industrial outlets," Battle went on. "These products could be commercials, documentaries, dramas, sales films, or any number of different kinds of training films."

"Our people in the writing, acting and technical sides of this business are learning with every project we tackle. We believe that we can build good Canadian-made visual communications products, if we give our talent the opportunity to express itself with guidance."

(Well, we're still not convinced, but let's see the tape anyway.)

The release describes it this way: "The teleplay 'Nothing Changes Much' is a light-hearted story of a young Canadian tycoon, played by Robert Trotter of Elmira, who becomes lost in a swamp clad only in under shorts and T-shirt. (It is as unbelievable as it sounds! ed.) He stumbles into a cabin occupied by "Grampa", played by Robert Minty of Kitchener, and his attractive granddaughter "Anna", who is Cathy MacDonald of Preston. Kitty Cree of Stratford takes the role of "Bak-Tak", the Indian matron who blindly keeps the household going, while Arnold Highman of Kitchener adds a threatening cloud to the proceedings as convict "260", freshly out of prison with a loaded gun.

Most of the cast have a history of experience in little theatre and musical groups, while Miss Kitty Cree acted in four character roles in the 1971 Stratford Festival production of "Volpone." John Meyer, the author, was born and raised in Bremen, West Germany, and emigrated to Kitchener in 1953. He has acted at the Bremen Playhouse, and on radio in that

city. He wrote commercials for the German Hour radio program in Kitchener, short stories for the Tillsonburg News, and directed little theatre in Tillsonburg, where he now resides.

The plot of "Nothing Changes Much" sounds corny, and it is. The acting is amateurish at best. Technically, the show suffers from bad sound, faulty editing and unimaginative camerawork. But granted, it's a start.

Still, to bill it as a start of a new industry is a bit too much. Let's just say that at least David Battle and Grand River Cable TV are actually trying to do something, even if it is in the wake of the CRTC ruling that Cable companies have to fill so much air-time with self-produced programming. At the same time, they're trying to sell the 'product' to a lot of other TV outlets. There's nothing wrong with that, if the quality of the show improves considerably after their first effort. Battle claims it will. He says they've learned a hell of a lot doing this one.

The financial angle is always suspect. Are they just out to make a lot of bucks using non-professionals, because they claim they can't afford ACTRA rates? This show cost Grand River \$2,500 (actual cash out-lay was only \$1,500), but from the very first dollar earned from it, they'll divide each buck according to a percentage rate. The writer and the actors will divide 40 per cent of that first dollar. This is refreshing, since the usual gimmick is for the producer to get his money back, before he starts paying off the talent.

If Meyer's script was the best they could find, we'd hate to see the rest. But even television writers have to start somewhere. And as someone pointed out, what happens to a writer who has been rejected by the CBC? The only alternative open to him is to head for New York or L.A.

To sum up, Grand River Cable, the third largest cable concern in Canada, is heading in the right direction. One wonders how successful a pilot project like this has to be financially, before the others catch on and jump in for a take of the action. ●



NOTHING CHANGES MUCH

—by Kirwan Cox

I don't think that it is possible to evaluate the Grand River Cable TV production **Nothing Changes Much** by John Meyer without placing it in the perspective of the cable industry in this country. That happens to be a shocking perspective.

Grand River has given a chance to a writer who cannot get his work accepted or developed by the CBC. Where does he go? Usually the answer is south. The most recent example of this ageless phenomenon is *Londos D'Arrigo* from Toronto who writes for Phyllis Diller and the new Jack Paar show, but can't get the CBC to buy his work.

Grand River is beginning a policy that may give these people another outlet to grow and learn and produce. I understand that this new series of half hour dramas using Kitchener talent is a speculative venture where everybody is in the same boat. If the tapes don't sell anywhere too bad for everybody, if they do, the performers and writer will get a share (40 per cent total).

But to get back to the shocking perspective, let's look at the cable industry. Cable is a growing business and there were 314 cable systems in the country

operating with 900,000 subscribers. In 1967 the industry made a net operating profit of \$8,415,123 on \$22 million revenue; in 1968 the net profit was \$12,725,744 on \$31 million; in 1969 the cable companies netted \$15,132,629 on a revenue of \$37 million. Now we come to 1970 which was a boom year. These 314 stations took in \$54 million with the top 39 stations accounting for \$37 million of this. Total operating expenses were \$30 million and net profit for the industry was \$24,658,710 with the top 39 taking a profit of \$20 million.

How much of this money goes to develop Canadian production talent or to buy Canadian films? In 1970 the entire industry spent a ridiculous \$12,693 on "film expense". They spent \$263,839 on program origination which includes studio sets, technical services, program supplies, etc. Yet try to sell a feature film to these people and they will claim poverty of the worst sort.

The broadcast television systems spend money in producing their programs or buying them — why not the cable systems? Both Grand River and Metro Cable TV are subsidiaries of Canadian Cable Systems which also owns 48.8 per cent of Famous

Players. Yet Grand River can only afford \$1.00 per minute to buy film when it does and Metro is even stingier (even though they have 50,000 subscribers and are only at 35 per cent saturation of their potential market).

The most disturbing thing about all this is that Grand River is perhaps the most progressive and production-oriented cable system in the country. The larger systems could and should be doing more. In years to come as capital costs are amortized the cable systems will become ever more profitable. Yet these profits are not going to pay to develop local talent or purchase the work of our filmmakers. Grand River is only one of those top 39 systems that made a net profit of \$20,000,000. What are the others doing?



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