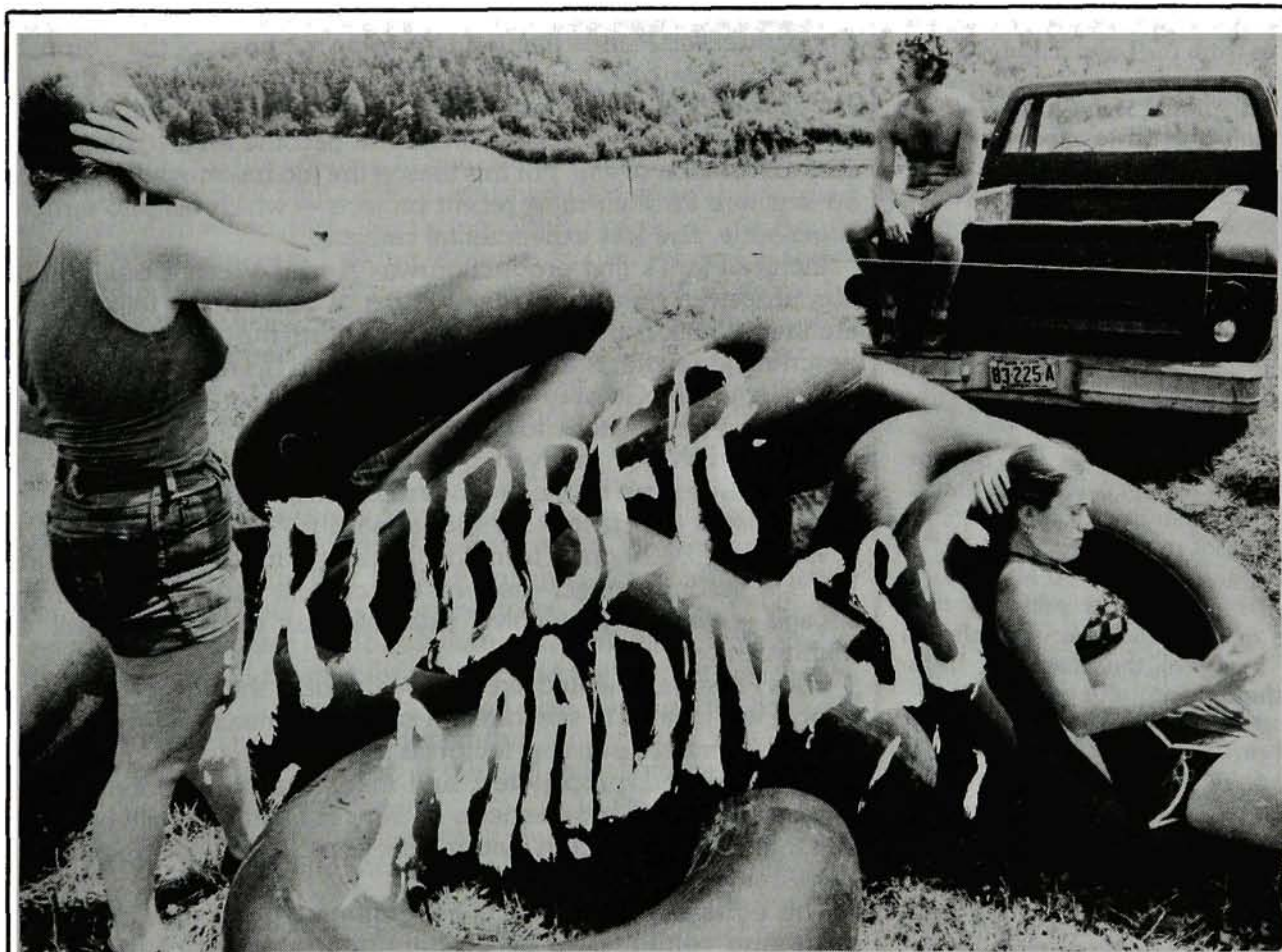


# eastern extracts

by christopher majka

Atlantic filmmaking is coming into its own. Christopher Majka highlights some of the historical roots, and current action centres representative of the Maritime mosaic, and includes Newfoundland in his preview of a forthcoming Atlantic film tour.



credit: Cordell Wynne

Time to roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer for this group of rubber freaks in Cordell Wynne's new film *Rubber Madness*



The last several years have seen the emergence of a dynamic cinematic movement in the Maritimes, characterized by the growing number of filmmakers in this area who are breaking out of the 'regional' mould to deal, in a mature and professional way, with a wider variety of issues. An increasing sense of self-assuredness is expressing itself in a variety of media.

For the most part, the history of cinematography goes back to the formation of the Atlantic Filmmakers' Co-operative (AFMCO) — the largest, and in some respects the most diverse of the co-operatives in the country. When it was established in 1974, there were varied and diverging views on what filmmaking in the Maritimes should be. Gradually, however, a certain consensus was reached, which allowed the Co-op to become a forum for a small but dedicated group of people. Together they work on their own vision of cinema, learn from each other, and achieve positive results. In the last six years the members of the Co-op have made roughly twenty-eight films, and several more are just being released. Documentary, drama, animation, and experimental films have all been produced, ranging in length from three minutes to over one hour.

In *Voices from the Landscape* (1975), *Two Brothers* (1976), and *Island Memories* (1978), John Brett has made a triptych of films which explore the lives and customs of the Acadian people of Morris and Surrettes Islands in Nova Scotia. They are sensitive and perceptive documentaries of these people and their changing way of life. Neil Livingston's film *Budworks* (1978) is a comprehensive documentary delving into the issues and controversy surrounding the annual spraying of forests in Eastern Canada for the spruce budworm. Ken Pittman's *Gene* (1977), and *George* (1978), are both short dramas which deal with man's response to the alienation, boredom, and dissatisfaction of modern society.

Not only has the work of AFMCO been beneficial *per se*, but its presence has stimulated a variety of other projects. In six years many of the members have matured their vision, refined their techniques and ideas, and moved out into tangential projects.

The work of AFMCO has not been confined to production. The Co-op has held innumerable workshops from Parrs-

boro to Pictou, for school children, teachers, university students, and simply for interested people. Subjects have ranged from censorship, to film use for teachers, to film production. Its 'visiting artists' program has included such people as Donald Brittain, Caroline Leaf, Joyce Weiland and Byron Black. Co-op members have also been instructing a film course, offered by the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Of major importance to film lovers in Halifax, Wormwoods Cinema (run by AFMCO), shows alternative films and organizes special

events and festivals.

In the last year, two other co-operatives have been founded in the Maritimes. The New Brunswick Film Cooperative in Fredericton has only recently acquired a space; however, work is already underway on several projects including an animation film, a co-production with the NFB and the National Museum of Man on the Maliseet Indians of New Brunswick, and a documentary ethnic film called *Friday Night at Baba's* by Saint John filmmaker Richard Davis.

The Association Acadienne du Cinéma

## 'made in the maritimes'

As a natural outgrowth of the activities of the Atlantic Filmmakers Co-operative (AFMCO), and very much in the tradition of the Co-op, Lionel Simmons, Bill McGillivray, and Gordon Parsons have founded a production company called Picture Plant. As founding members of the Co-op, Simmons and McGillivray have had considerable input into its activities and orientation. They feel that it is important for the Co-op to be both an ambient and open forum, where beginning filmmakers can become involved in a relaxed and easy exploration of film. For this reason the trio has moved outside of the Co-op structure for their most recent projects — which fall into a more formal, larger-scale, and less experimental category.

Picture Plant's first production was *Aerial View*, a one-hour dramatic film produced on a shoestring budget of \$22,000. It tells the story of an architect who forsakes his practice to reaffirm the integrity of his own ideals, describing the effects this has on his life and his relationships with people.

Simmons, McGillivray and Parsons believe in the importance of an indigenous film culture to a region, and share a conviction that films of quality, which are interesting and deal with contemporary social and political issues, can be made modestly. Thus, Picture Plant does not view its current level of activity as a springboard to 'bigger' ventures.

With a \$40,000 grant from the Canada Council the group is embarking upon a second project — set in the context of a trans-continental train voyage — which will involve psychological themes as well as media manipulation.

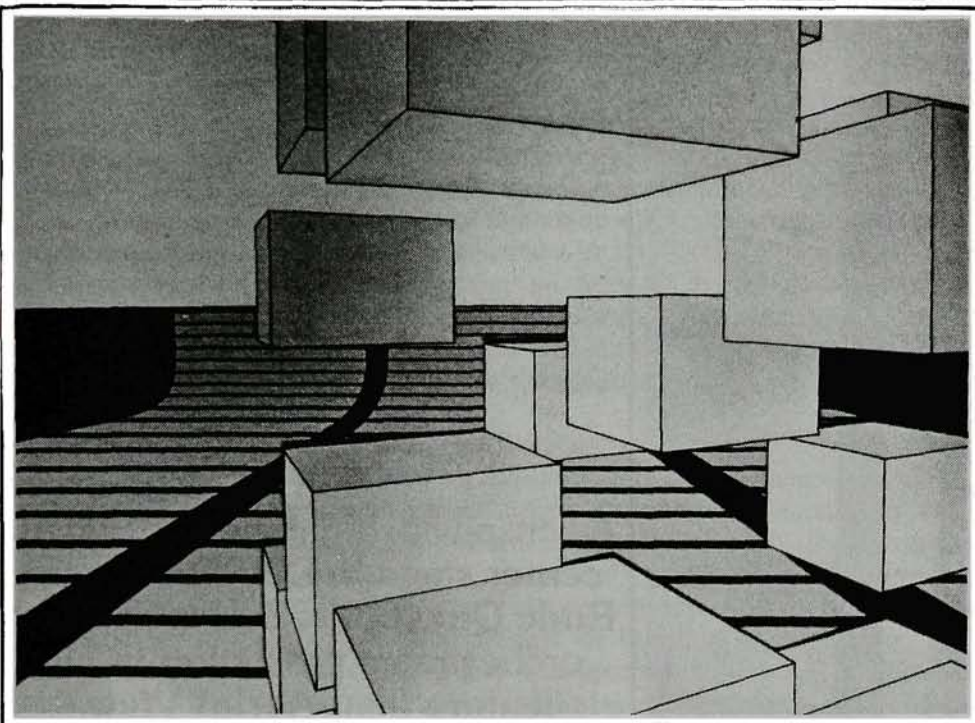
Says Parsons, "I would like to reveal a lot of the mystery of film, whereby people will be able to see that film is, in large measure, a technical process. One of the most disturbing factors is the public's lack of knowledge on how film is produced, propagated, and manipulated. An intelligent audience must understand these aspects of film." This theme will be incorporated into their next, full-length feature film, which they also hope to complete on a low budget.

This educational impulse is not confined to this new production. It has been, and continues to be an important element of the functioning of AFMCO. Bill McGillivray sums it up:

"You can't be involved in making alternative films and expect that an

*Christopher Majka is a free-lancer writer, broadcaster, and photographer based in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He has worked around the world, from Peru to Iran, as an oceanographer and biologist. He has a special interest in Eastern European film, and has recently returned from a six-month stay in Poland and the Soviet Union.*





It's anyone's guess which end is up, in Floyd Gillis' new animation film *Perspectives*, produced by Doomsday Studios

credit: Floyd Gillis

audience will appear from nowhere. One has to go out and educate people."

From beneath the waters of the North Atlantic comes Surfacing Films — with a production about a Canadian submarine in World War II. Called **South Pacific, 1941**, it is the creation of Paul Donovan who, after studying at the London International Film School, returned to Halifax and teamed up with brother Michael to form Surfacing. With the script for **South Pacific** under his arm, he went looking for funds to turn it into a feature-length 35mm film. After great persistence they managed to raise the \$445,000 (which was the film's budget) despite the fact that their application to the CFDC had been turned down.

**South Pacific, 1941** first screened this year at the Film Market in Cannes, and the Donovan brothers are now awaiting critical feedback. (As yet, Canadian distribution plans are uncertain.)


As Maritimers, they are interested in further exploring Maritime history and culture through film. They hope to produce one feature-length 35mm film a year, which, despite being made in this region, will appeal to and reach a wider audience. For this to happen, they place an important emphasis on the financial potential of their projects. Says Michael, "We feel there is a world-wide structure for 35mm feature-length films, and so what we want to express should be structured to fit into that, and it will find its best audience if it does so. Hopefully, it will also give us the financial solvency to continue." They are convinced that it is possible to produce films of integrity, which will also draw wide audiences and be financially successful.

The script for their second project is already completed, and if funds can be found they will start filming **Imalone** sometime later this year. A Canadian rum-runner which was sunk by the Americans off the coast of Louisiana in 1929, the *Imalone* sparked an international scandal between the USA, Canada, Great Britain, and France. Filming of the story will be done largely in Lunenburg and Chester, Nova Scotia.

is just setting up shop in Moncton, with the aid of a Canada Council grant. This is a group of Acadian people who are interested in producing films as well as establishing an alternative cinema. For the time being, production will be in Super 8, to allow people to train in film techniques.

Large-scale productions are also beginning to make an appearance in the Maritimes. Surfacing Films is a feature film production studio founded by two Halifax brothers, Paul and Michael Donovan. They have already completed their first feature, **South Pacific, 1941** (See *Cinema Canada* April/May 1980), and are now working on their second.

The east coast film scene is an exciting one. Co-operatives, independent filmmakers, animation studios and feature film commercial productions are all a part of the picture; and the projects are as diverse as the people and organizations involved. Despite their differences, those involved share the conviction that first-rate cinema can be produced in this area, and that it will have significance for audiences both in, and outside the Maritimes.



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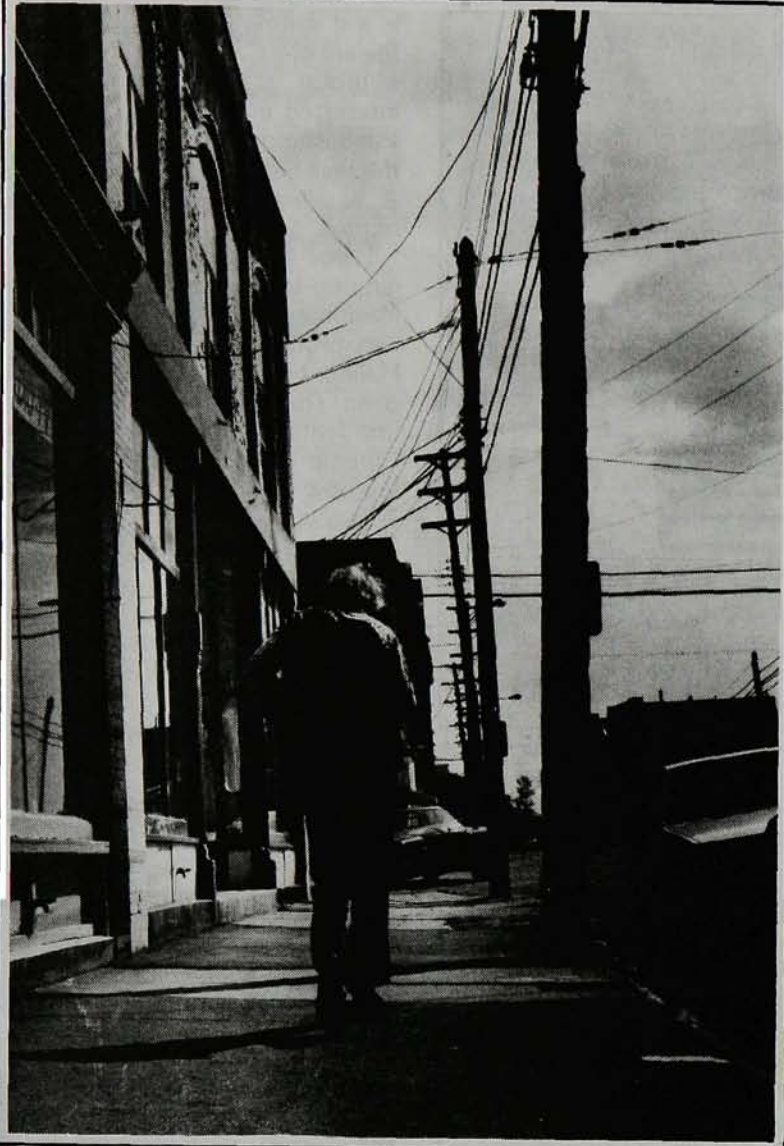
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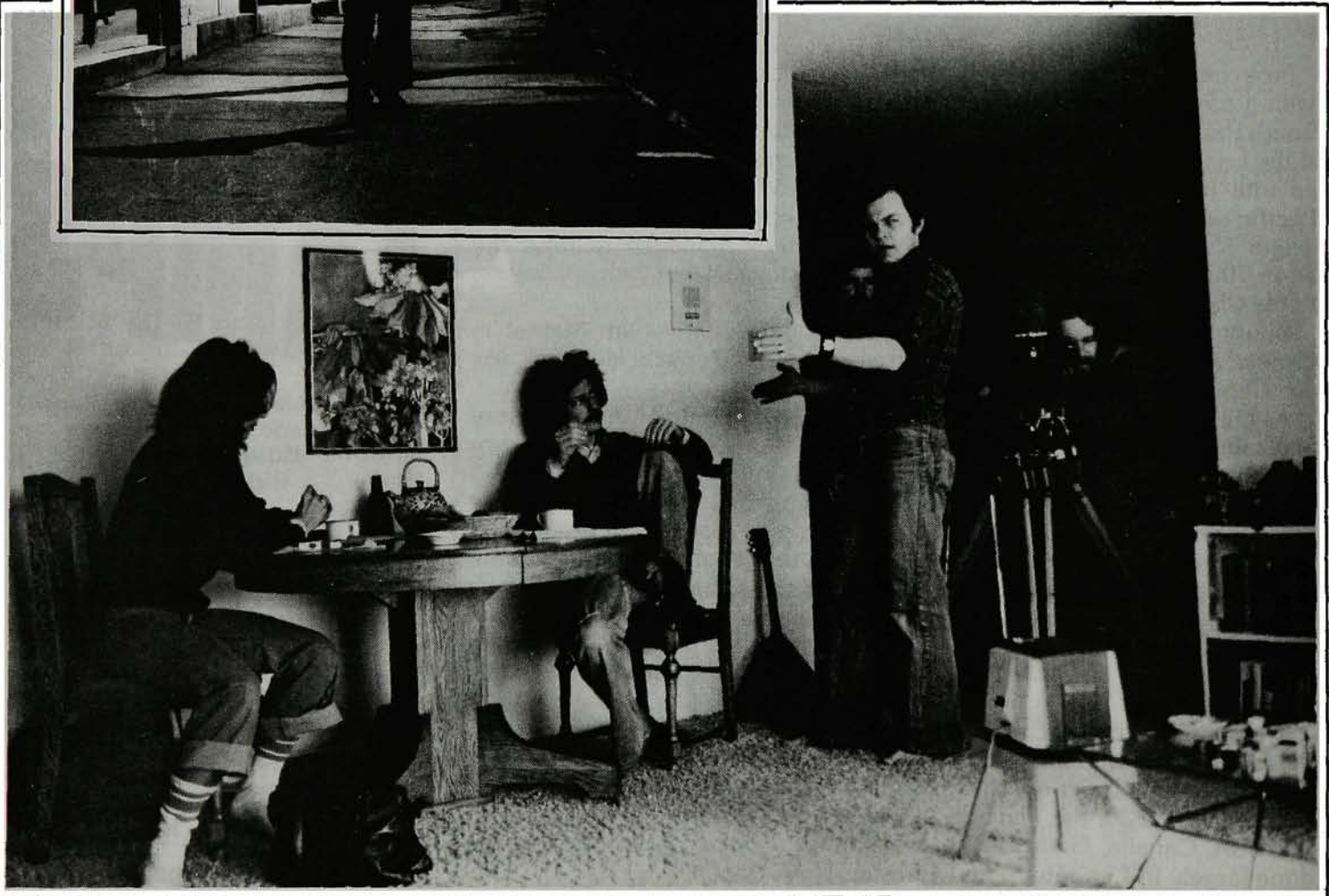
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photo: Douglas Pope



A "crisp-witted antiquarian" holds center stage in Douglas Pope's **Rude Questions**. Bill McGillivray orchestrates the action in his feature film, **Aerial View**.





In a small, unassuming house on a Fredericton side street lives Arthur Makosinski, a filmmaker and electronics wizard who has a personal and distinctive approach to cinema. He began his filmmaking experience in the mid-sixties with a series of short 16mm musical films, which he produced, more or less as a hobby, with his own money. In 1972 he won several awards and this prompted him to move toward more ambitious productions. He has now completed some twenty-five films including **Ski Peru** and **Skateboard Peru**, both filmed in Peru in 1978. The first is a twenty-eight minute 16mm film concerning an attempt to ski down Mount Huascarán, the highest peak in the Peruvian Andes. Rights to the film have been sold in Canada, Japan, Scotland and England. The latter film is a more experimental one, of the director's skateboard ride down from one of the highest passes in the Andes.

Makosinski's other recent films include **Pierre Jean Louis**, a film shot in Lamequé, New Brunswick, about an Acadian man; and, **Those Wild, Wild Mushrooms**, a dramatic film about collecting wild mushrooms. In this humorous film, the half-Polish, half-Armenian Makosinski, draws upon some of his own cultural traditions.

As a latter-day backroom inventor, his creativity has spilled over into his cinematic ventures. He is in the process of building a computer-type electronic synthesizer which he will use to produce the sound tracks for some of his films. During the filming of **Skateboard Peru** he needed an extremely small, lightweight, 16mm film camera which could be used, for example, on a skateboard. Unable to find one on the market he started work, and the "Dupka" was born. It weighs a mere two pounds and has only three moving parts. Having built a couple of prototypes he hopes to produce a limited number in the future.

Makosinski has already found a portion of the funding that he will require for his next cinematic venture. He plans to make a film about the people of Armenia and Georgia in the Soviet Union (some of whom live to be 130 and 140 years old) and the reasons for their renowned longevity.

Ramuna McDonald is a sparkling, energetic Lithuanian who has drawn together a group of imaginative people to form Doomsday, a year-old animation studio in Halifax. Although the name might strike a bleak and foreboding chord in some, Doomsday represents one of the brightest and most active places in the city.

Ramuna thinks of herself, principally, as an experimental filmmaker, but her productions include **Regan's Cove** (1976), a short dramatic film set in a small Nova Scotia fishing village; and **Spirits of an Amber Past** (1977), a delightful and captivating documentary of Lithuanian folk art in Canada.

She had been interested in animated film for some time. The discovery of an unused animation stand and camera at Dalhousie University was just the spark she needed. The result was Doomsday, which now has five projects in various stages of completion and several more on the go.

A heavily-animated film about local artist Sarah Jackson was made with NFB assistance and is ready for release, as is a short vignette about Halifax called **Barometer Falling. Perspectives**, a short film by Floyd Gillis is a delightful and analytical view of streetscapes and their components. In the can, but as yet unedited, is Ramuna's experimental dance film called **Substance**, and on the drawing board is **God's Island** which will treat the history and landscape of Prince Edward Island as seen through the art of island painter A.L. Morrison.

Eloquent, dialectical, political, intense, serious, and critical are all adjectives which apply to Tom Burger and Bill McKiggen. They have a well-honed and specific approach to film which is highly political, issue-oriented and

## atlantic film sampler

... A film combining a Russian, Chekhov-style psychodrama with a searing look at an alcohol/coffee dazed group of freaks complete with transvestite? Could anyone produce such an insane juxtaposition? Only the Newfoundland Independent Film Makers' Co-operative (NIFCO) could, and has; and the hilarious result directed by Mike Jones, called **Dolly Cake**, is only one of a group of films that you can see on an upcoming cross-Canada tour. The Atlantic Filmmakers' Co-operative (AFMCO) has included it in an Atlantic Provinces Film Sampler that it has put together. There will be two, ninety-minute collections of some of the most recent work from east coast filmmakers.

Another film by Mike Jones, called **Morning**, explores the sights and sounds of an awakening St. John's. Fellow Newfoundlander Mike Riggio has made a short optically-printed experimental film showing two people who pass but never meet. Derek Norman takes a two-minute mystical look at the winter landings of Dovkies in his film **Bullbird**.

One of the highlights of the tour will be Bill McGillivray's hour-long drama called **Aerial View**. Beautifully acted and beautifully filmed, it is an important film about personal integrity and human relationships set in a Maritime context. Film critic Peter Harcourt has written, "Though its range is modest and its tone quiet, **Aerial View** is a mini-masterpiece — a supreme justification of regional filmmaking and a distinguished example



of a film that is original, sensitive, beautifully crafted, and totally Canadian."

A peculiar form of Nova Scotia insanity is chronicled in Cordell Wynne's **Rubber Madness**. Down the Gaspereau River every summer go countless thousands of inner tubes bearing singing, laughing, drinking people, and this film captures a little of this crazy joyful event. This same spirit of madness pervades Paul Michel-tree's **Jump Run**. Don't forget to bring your parachute, because it will take your breath away!

There are several short films from new filmmakers at AFMCO. One of these is Claire Henry's simple but imaginative film called **Billy Doucette's Hornpipe**, which in some nice way manages to capture the rhythm of this toe-tapping fiddle tune. Doug Pope's **Rude Questions** is a curious and mysterious look at the life of a crisp-witted antiquarian. **The Crystal Comedy** by Shean Whalen is essentially a visual allegory set to music. This film explores two different kinds of love relationships, one sensual and immediate, the other estranged.

Two dramas by AFMCO members are **Paradise** and **Education of a Young Boy**. In the former, a professor, his graduate student, and a friend find themselves caught in the flow of interwoven sexual relationships, and Charles Lapp manages several new twists on the Adam and Eve story. The latter film by Ken Pittman, is a multi-level complex of images and sounds in which life and death are referred to as the central dynamics of the learning process.

The films will be exhibited in about fifteen theatres across Canada, from Québec City in June to Vancouver by late-July, and then back to the Atlantic Provinces in September. Watch for them.

action-based, and they are critical of those who they feel back off from dealing with the tough and central issues of today's society. They sustain a belief in the possibility of video and film as tools to help community and labour groups achieve their educational and organizational goals. Although they are AFMCO members, their work lies outside the main tradition of the Co-op.

Tom Burger has a wide background in film-related activities. He worked as a soundman for such films as **Revolution in the Electric Family** and **Zero the Fool**, and later as a cameraman for Patrick Watson's **Witness to Yesterday** series. He also directed and filmed a CBC vignette about Bruce Cockburn and his music. Bill McKiggen has been an action-oriented community worker from the copper mines of northern Saskatchewan to the fish-plants of the south coast of Newfoundland. Together they have collaborated on a series of productions dealing with labour and trade union history in the Maritimes. Their first project, a video piece entitled **Work and Wages** was produced through the Video Theatre in Halifax and deals with the problem of unemployment in the Maritimes. Says Burger, "We wanted to communicate the shared experience of unemployment. It's not you (the unemployed person) who has the problem, but our society and institutions. We wanted to personalize it; to communicate a commonality of cause."

A more ambitious venture, a just-released half-hour production called **The Finest Kind**, deals with the 1939 Lockeport Fishermen's Union strike, and the concerted effort made by the local fish companies to break it and the union. This video tape has been sold to the Nova Scotia Education Department.

Burger and McKiggen have already begun work on a third film, this time in 16mm, which will deal more generally, from a labour standpoint, with fishermen's issues and union formation in the Maritime provinces.

The range of scope of the films made in the east is great, and the picture they give of the Maritimes is a complex one. It would be hard to identify any central theme, or themes, or find any unity of vision in these films. yet the Maritimes have a profound and distinctive influence on those who are born, or come to live here. These filmmakers speak from within that influence. There is a quality of both humor and pathos, resignation and anger, exuberance and fidelity, reflected in these films which is characteristic of this fog-shrouded coast. Canada, take note of your children. ■



Aerial View cinematographer, Lionel Simmons (far left) watches from the sidelines as the crew prepares for the next shot