

The fame game

It takes more than talent to be a star.
Without the right image, the expert sales pitch
and solid industry support, even the best are by-passed.

by Krystyna Hunt

What makes a star a star? Good looks? Dynamic presence? Super-human persona? Bankability? If the star is the most attractive, most humanizing aspect of a film, the medium through which the message of the producer, director, writer, and crew is conveyed; if a star reflects the qualities we most want to see in ourselves and have others see in us, then why, in the Canadian film industry, are there no Canadian stars?

This is one of the fundamental questions being asked in the industry today. It has divided the business element from the creative, with both groups hurling accusations at the other.

Talent agents blame actors for being badly prepared, producers for lacking interest, and the media for not actively seeking out Canadian stars. Actors blame agents, producers and the media for the same reasons. Producers blame lack of bankable star material, economics, Hollywood, and agents who don't build stars for them to buy.

Publicist Glenda Roy finds the main difference between Canadian actors and American actors to be naïveté. "I can't say how many times I've tried to publicize a local actor, then asked him for his publicity material - and gotten a résumé. You can't tell anything about a person from a résumé that an editor or a talk show producer wants to hear. Americans have it all ready from the time they decide to become actors - bios, pics, interview material, anything that shows an interesting personality. To be quite honest, I don't think that a lot of agents here are any more aware of the necessity of these things than are the actors."

Canadian agents, to many people in the industry, have not established a reputation for aggressive, decisive or imaginative action. Many actors believe that agents want them to do all the work, and will not go out of their way to discover an unknown. Stratford actor Jack Wetherall played opposite Maggie Smith in *As You Like It* four years ago, to rave reviews in Canada, England and the U.S. His performance made him a teenage heart-throb; fan clubs were formed for him in Michigan and Ohio. British and American agents offered to represent him, but in the two seasons that he played the role, of Orlando not a single Canadian agent showed any interest. "I would like to have been represented by a Canadian," says Wetherall, "but with five offers from some

Krystyna Hunt is a film/theatre critic and free-lance writer in Toronto. She has worked as an actress, designer and production co-ordinator for films and television.



"Promoting yourself is as necessary a skill as acting. You have to answer the question - why would anyone turn the TV on or go to a movie to see me when they have a hundred other things they could be doing?" Al Waxman

of the best agents in the business, I felt I should not have had to be the one to make the first move." He chose an American agent, went to New York, and six months later replaced Philip Anglim as the lead in *The Elephant Man* on Broadway.

Publicity itself is a strange new tool born of the film boom. Like fire to the caveman, people here are both in awe and fear of it. In most cases it comes as a second thought. Actors think that agents and producers should be responsible for it, agents think that their job is to suggest a client and negotiate a salary and that actors should hire their own publicists. Producers are too busy trying to sell a film to publicize a local actor.

Everyone accuses the press of drooling over American talent and ignoring good

local people. "Nonsense!" says Anne Moon, entertainment editor of the *Toronto Star*. "Reporting on Canadian talent is our mandate. We were the first to write about R. H. Thomson, Lenore Zann and Lally Cadeau. The trouble is Canadians don't act like stars. They are too self-effacing, too self-conscious. When they start acting like stars, they'll get treated like stars."

Michael Oscars, talent agent with G.K.O. agency, has been working hard to develop stars for years. Among his clients are Chris Makepeace, Kate Lynch and Lally Cadeau. Helen Shaver was also his discovery and client. He courted publicity for her, promoted, nurtured, encouraged her, took her to Cannes and lost her to Hollywood and the William Morris Agency, because the professional credi-

bility he had established for her had outgrown her opportunities in Canada.

Oscars is quick to emphasize that, "Canadian producers just don't fight for Canadians. We have potential stars here but they must be cultivated. That takes time and that takes responsibility, neither of which the producers are willing to risk. The best roles, the ones that are most designed to appeal to the public, are non-existent for Canadians."

Producer Stan Colbert (who had 25 years of experience in the States before he came to Canada), believes that many producers - those who had little or no film association before the CCA-inspired boom - cannot fight for Canadians because their lack of experience makes financing and distribution their major preoccupation. Colbert has produced CBC dramas like *Riel*, and has done his best to expose the largest number of Canadians possible "... in order to show the people here what a wealth of talent their country has. The trouble is, Canadians eat their young. I have had to push, fight, and argue for Canadian talent and it hasn't been easy." It was at Colbert's insistence that Sara Botsford was cast opposite Richard Chamberlain in *Bells* despite initial objections from others on the production. "Even an accomplished actor with proven credits is made to read again for the same kind of part. It's as if it doesn't occur to anyone that they've proven themselves. It's insulting to the actors, and it's insulting that the actors put up with it."

Chapelle Jaffe is one of those actresses with proven credits. She won an Etrog for Best Actress in *One Night Stand*, co-produced by Stan Colbert. "They'll ask me what I've done and I'll say, I've won an Etrog (re-named a 'Genie') for Best Actress, and they'll say, oh that's nice - just another credit on my résumé beside the last CBC job. The highest award in Canada means nothing. It has never gotten me another job. I don't know what I have to do to get respect - I don't know how to build a career in this country."

Kate Lynch won the Genie for Best Actress two years ago. She's done no film work since. A few days after the Genie Awards a group of film people were talking about the acceptance speech made by "that girl who won the Genie" - they did not even remember her name.

Jonathan Welsh played a lead in the CBC series *Sidestreet*, and still gets dozens of fan letters from across the country. Still, that wasn't enough for producer Harold Greenberg to allow Welsh to publicize *City on Fire* even though he was the only actor among a list of glittering "names" to get good reviews, and the only one willing to publicize the film. Welsh promoted it

out of his own pocket, and even had to pay to fly to Montreal for the premiere.

"Canadians will never have the kind of credibility Americans have in this country - ever! - because Canadian businessmen and audiences just aren't interested," says Stuart Aikins, whose company, Canadian Casting Associates, has profited from finding many major American stars for Canadian producers. "It is harder for me to get publicity for a Canadian than the commission I get for it is worth. My advice to Canadian actors is, fight like a dog, push your publicity, get your experience here, then go somewhere else to have it recognized. Making films is a business, so forget about truth, forget about integrity, forget about honour - that's just good business."

"Good business" vs. good sense

"Good business" is the mantra producers, investors, bankers, and distributors repeat constantly to justify the American look of a film, packaged - so they believe - to sound commercial specifications.

But in those eager efforts to carbon copy Hollywood and impress the world that we think like Americans, Canadian businessmen are repeating the patterns that have always kept the Canadian economy behind that of the United States. Business and creativity are being separated, and that is very bad business indeed. Americans have always known the value of creative skills and, consequently, they know how to commercialize art: Canadian business education emphasizes commercializing commerce.

Americans did not become great by selling 'international' products. They became great by 'selling America' first. They made people identify with the American dream, and thus established a perpetual motion machine fueled by those creative dreammakers - tin pan alley, Broadway musicals, movies - making what they produced that much easier to sell over and over again.

Norman Jewison understood the need for a strong creative base when he insisted on casting Alan Arkin, then an unknown, to play the lead in his first feature film, *The Russians are Coming*. "It takes a lot of confidence to present an unknown, a lot of positive thinking; but it can be done, if you understand the nature of your project and the value of the creative talent that is necessary to put it together, and how the two will work. Canadians in the last few years thought it was very easy; all you had to do was put together a couple of stars and you could make a successful film. But a film is successful because the creative piece is so talented that everyone will respond to it, and it has nothing to do with Canadians or Italians or Americans - it's a bona fide piece of art, and it doesn't matter who is in it. If you have a big star and the part isn't right, it's going to be a disaster. You would be better off having an unknown. The genius of Hollywood is that they are so totally motivated by profit that they will accept talented people from anywhere and they don't care about nationality at all."

This would indicate that Americans will not cringe at seeing good, talented Canadians headlining Canadian movies. They might even welcome them as grist for their mills. "My God, when the Australian film *My Brilliant Career* came out," continues Jewison, "everyone in Hollywood was on the phone to anyone who had anything to do with the

His name is Thomas Peacocke, Best Actor, 1980.
Despite this achievement he finds himself

Lost in Stardom

At 11pm on March 12, 1981, Thomas Peacocke became a star. Accepting his Genie award for best performance by an actor, he made a sad and prophetic statement: "What is the point of becoming a film star, if no one sees your films?"

There were many on that gala night who thought Peacocke was biting the hand that honoured him. One Toronto producer remarked, "He's an actor, for god's sake, and he's from Edmonton... what does he know?"

Like many other actors, Peacocke knows a lot.

At 48, Peacocke is in his prime, a tough, avuncular little man, as gregarious as a family of seals. He is a professor of drama at the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, where he has taught for the past twenty years. His academic career is well punctuated with numerous stage roles and bit parts in sponsored films.

The idea of being a star hasn't really hit home. "I don't believe we have a star system in Canadian film... I suppose you could call Donald Sutherland a star, but who made him one?"

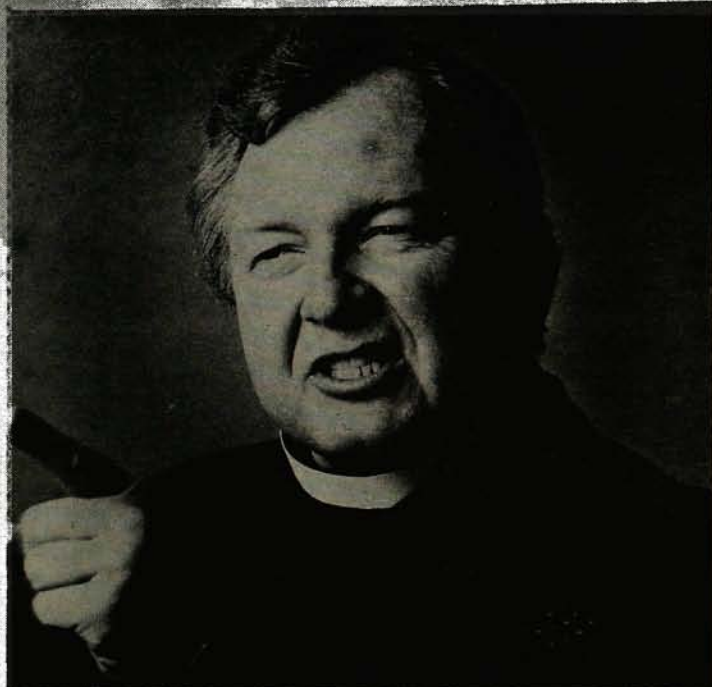
Peacocke was introduced to Canada in his role as Father Atholl Murray, the feisty founder of Notre Dame College in Wilcox, Saskatchewan. The film that gave Peacocke his first and, to date, only principal role in a feature, was Fil Fraser's production *The Hounds of Notre Dame*. He landed the part with typical lack of drama: Fil Fraser phoned him. Peacocke laughs when he recalls the incident. "I think it was between me and Ed Asner... I suppose I was cheaper."

The very thought that Edward Asner, albeit a gifted actor, could be cast as Father Murray is as chilling as the winters in Wilcox. Unfortunately this type of casting is often par for the course in Canadian features. Producer Fraser must be admired for his integrity in casting Peacocke. It was a bold gamble which paid off at the Genie awards, but unfortunately, not at the box office.

The Hounds of Notre Dame has achieved abysmal distribution, a fact that incenses Peacocke. "It's not only our film... look at the other films at the awards... they haven't been seen either. We have to put more emphasis on marketing and distribution; otherwise, what's the point?" Peacocke would like to see as such money spent on promotion as on production. This position may at first seem to be slightly overstated until one stops to realize that many American features have promotion budgets which are many times the negative cost of production.

Since winning his Genie, Peacocke's film career hasn't exactly

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rocketed. It would seem that the kudos on that special night was no more than the tip of an ice cube. "I've received stage offers from all over the country and a lot of television parts, but nothing as big or as good as *Hounds*."

Peacocke is basically a stage actor who has proven, with his mercurial performance in *Hounds*, that he is admirably suited to the screen. He is a thespian in a world of interim financing. Both worlds met, with pitiful irony, when, after receiving the Canadian film industry's premier award to an actor, Peacocke was graciously invited by Stafford to audition!

Being a Canadian film star is a bit like being an American hockey player - no one really takes you too seriously. Peacocke is aware of this and acts accordingly. He doesn't have an agent, but rather relies on the phone ringing to bring him work. His success in *Hounds* has prompted him to consider the more logical alternative. "I'm seriously thinking about an agent. To begin with, I hate negotiating. I find it distasteful. And besides, I don't know what I'm worth."

If an agent is the answer to continued stardom, then the answer lies in Toronto. It's a simple fact that there are no agents west of that city, so Peacocke's film career has an added problem of geographical proportions. Like birds of paradise and other exotic creatures, film stars do not live in Edmonton. The president of the Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association, Arvi Liimatainen, believes Peacocke to be one of the province's greatest assets and would hate to lose him. "I've used Tom a lot on my films and I've always been

impressed with his professionalism. He loves the camera and I think it's mutual."

As the incumbent "Best Actor in Canada", Peacocke is refreshingly unaffected. He admires skill more than reputation. "When they were filming *Desperado* here (in Alberta), Jim Defelice (Edmonton writer/actor) had a scene with a dog. The dog wasn't on set when he was rehearsing, so Bruce Dern got down on the ground and played the dog for him. Now, to me, that's what being a star is all about."

Whether Peacocke is a star or not is irrelevant. He is an intelligent actor with a definite future in features - if there is any future in Canadian features. He would love to continue as a principal performer, but this is something which will be decided in Toronto's trendy restaurants by producers who will consider him with the same enthusiasm that they apply to their selection of appetizers.

Peacocke's position is not unique - in fact, it is symptomatic of most Canadian film workers. Here, there are no popular magazines fanfaring the exploits, or alleged exploits, of our beloved stars. There is no studio system which hinges upon the continued overexposure of underdeveloped talent. Nor is there a history of excellence in feature film production. What we do have is a collection of crafts-people in search of a direction.

In a small room in Edmonton, Professor Peacocke interviews prospective drama students, potential film stars. To them, he is a passport to "the business." To others, he is the star of a film no one has seen.

Tom Crighton ●

film creatively, trying to get them to do their next picture. Nobody cared that they were Australians - they are just 'talent'."

Consciously or unconsciously Hollywood developed its star system and its pool of creative talent first; then, when that became strong enough, a system was built to package it. Canadians, thinking that business always comes first,

the second group judged his talent because someone in Hollywood had liked it.

When Canadians use American stars they feed the American perpetual motion machine and, ultimately, sell the American instead of the Canadian film industry. Consequently, the world does not look to Canada for more films - a response that could generate further

interest in Canadian product, and thus increase a producer's power. It keeps on buying American. In the end Canada remains enslaved, instead of becoming the master of its own house.

It is that age-old lure of Hollywood that continues to make Canadian filmmakers feel like poor relations. Alas, many Toronto filmmakers - newly sprouted during the film boom - have

been caught in the illusion of Hollywood's greener pastures of glamour and prestige. They want the stardust, starlets, parties and pizzazz... forgetting that Hollywood moguls invented the magic as a gimmick for getting people hooked on films. Canadian actors, it seems, will never look glamorous until they have passed through the Hollywood veil.



● Director Norman Jewison.

copied the external shell of the package system, then tried to ram the creativity in to fit. Whereas Hollywood tries hard to be conscious of audience communication, audience is the last consideration in Canada. The script and talent are taken apart to fit the illusions of investors and the insecurities of distributors. What's left is patched up for the audience.

But if the audience doesn't buy the patch-up, everyone down the line loses. Actors, writers, directors have very little power in the Canadian film industry; and the business people have too much, creating an unhealthy imbalance. A producer in total control of a project, concerned only with selling the picture for the highest possible profit, can easily substitute one actor for another if it makes a better deal. But a director with clout would fight for an actor - knowing full well why one actor is better for a role than another - regardless of "name", and in that way perhaps make a better picture.

"You've got hard-edged businessmen in Hollywood too," adds Jewison, "but they understand what making films is all about. They are people who know and love films. Here, investors, stockbrokers and bankers make creative decisions for directors, and they may not have seen a movie in years.

"I don't know why anyone would want to make films for the money. Most films don't make money. What you do is find the best talent in your own country, who aren't in it for the money. Go out of the country if you can't find them, allow them to give you the best they've got, exploit that, and then you will be in the best position to make money. That's how Hollywood works."

Password "Hollywood"

Canadian screenwriter Jim Henshaw, who could not sell a script in Canada to save his soul three years ago, came to the attention of a group in Hollywood who saw his film, *A Sweeter Song*. They liked it and invited him to Hollywood to write a film for them. Henshaw stayed there six weeks and wrote a script for a film that subsequently was never made; but upon his return to Toronto he was asked to write three scripts. The first group judged his talent by his work,



● A kiss for victory in *Meatballs*: Kate Lynch and Bill Murray.



● Actress Helen Shaver outgrew Canadian opportunities and headed south.

Hailing the hero-as-victim

When Canadian filmmakers say, "There is nothing interesting in Canada to represent," they are inadvertently commenting upon themselves; for they have come from the same uninteresting soil, breathed the same uninteresting air, and absorbed the same uninteresting influences. It is heartbreaking to consider that so many people regard themselves as victims, ever conscious of "others" making all the rules.

In his book, *Deference to Authority, The Case of Canada*, Prof. Edgar Z. Friedenberg of Dalhousie University says the main principles of Canadianism are "Peace, order, and good government." This principle is maintained by the government to cultivate docility and a sense of powerlessness. It gives the impression that Canadians are well taken care of, without having to know how - just like children. Friedenberg also claims that Canadians have achieved such world renown in classical ballet because it is the art that provides "the least opportunity for spontaneity and improvisation." In other words, we play it safe.

Actors want a star "system" to process them, producers want Hollywood to give them the okay, agents wait to see what happens in both arenas before they move, and the press wants the public to tell it what it wants to read, instead of telling the public what it should know. Everyone listens to the Americans because they think they really 'know' - and they do, insofar as they themselves are concerned. This helps to

explain why it is not only functionally difficult to become a star in Canada, but psychologically difficult as well. Stars, by definition, project an image of authority, of not being afraid to stand up and be counted. This may not be so in their private lives, but the fantasies they project are so strong, so full of life, that on screen they take on super-human qualities.

"The perfect Canadian star is a victim," says director John Trent. "Look at how Canadians lionized Terry Fox. Running on one leg and riddled with cancer. They have won some of the most spectacular military victories in history and look at the one they remember and talk about and know about most - Dieppe, where they got slaughtered. Give them a winner and they can't relate."

Self-apology, self-effacement, and wanting daddy to prop you up does not make for stardom - from star-to-be to star-maker to star-consumer. Recognizing star material, investing in it and developing it, takes absolute faith in your own judgement and the ability to differentiate between the fantasy of glamour, and the reality of it as simply a tool.

Knock, knock - nobody home

The need to create Canadian stars is basically a cultural one. Culture is the means by which a country reflects itself, to itself and to others. Its theatre demonstrates the changes and vibrations of everyday life, its music establishes the rhythms, its art reflects the concerns of its people. Via culture, people who listen, watch and perform, respond to and support each other because a common bond has been established. It becomes the emotional language of strangers who live in the same land.

In Canada, 74% of the television programming, 72% of the books, 84% of the recorded music, and 93% of the box-office take is American*. The little Canadian culture that filters through is almost regarded as the foreign culture, considering the degree to which we identify vicariously with the Americans. We are comfortable with trumbleweeds we've never seen, lust after California beach bunnies, and think of Florida as our spiritual home. Perhaps that is why we are such excellent documentary filmmakers - we've become good at observing without being involved.

"Ourselves" as a vital concept doesn't exist. That is why those film people forgot Kate Lynch's name, why actors must continue auditioning past the point of proven ability, and why producers lunge so desperately for the crown of acceptance from Hollywood.

Alas, no matter how much we are told that movies are a product, like automobile parts, the fact is that a movie is a form of communication and therefore culture. It is an aspect of culture even in the form of *Prom Night*, and it says something about each person who contributed to it. *Tribute* is the ultimate example of The Successful Canadian Movie. It tells the world who we think we are. It is about an American press agent; it has American stars and American settings. Although the supporting cast is Canadian, and it was made by the Canadian film industry, it was entered in the Berlin Film Festival as the official

American entry. It is a film that quite simply says we have no sense of 'self' - something we've been telling each other for years; now we're shouting it out to the world.

Which brings us to the next stumbling block in the development of Canadian stars: internationalism. Implications are that if we make anything obviously Canadian it will not be 'international.'



● Saul Rubinek in *Ticket to Heaven*.

Perhaps it's this lack of a sense of 'self' that causes us to believe that the world is made up of everybody *but* us; that our only hope for acceptance is to appear American. We forget that Italian films are *Italian*, German films are *German*, and American films are *American* - all identifiably so - and that what makes them 'international' is not the identity, or non-identity, of their locale and performers, but their ability to reach the hearts of most human beings to depict the conflicts and aspirations common to mankind. To be human is to be international. But it is each country's unique expression of its humanity that makes for good films - films that spark the imagination.

Canada's desperate attempts to white-wash its products with American paint does not make it international. It makes it a colourless entity in the world mosaic. Besides, with the 85% average foreign cultural product available in Canada, surely we must be the most internationally generous of all nations: we can afford to cut back a little to make room for our own, without being accused of being self-absorbed xenophobic chauvinists.

Ironically, those filmmakers who insist on internationalism as their excuse for excluding things Canadian are the most nationally conscious of all. For they presume that American lifestyles are more desirable to world viewers than Canadian. Americans themselves, as Norman Jewison pointed out, do not distinguish between nationalities as long as they can be useful. Still, Hollywood prevents foreign cultures from becoming

dominant, as we have not. It absorbs foreign cultures and makes them American - a simple case of wanting the exploitable best.

A good example is that of Canadian actor Saul Rubinek, who recently finished shooting *Soup for One*, a Warner Bros. Production in New York. After the director saw a reel of Rubinek's Canadian work - mostly CBC dramas, and clips

actors must learn to respect certain business factors. It's not enough to be talented and to wait to be discovered. "My advice to Canadian actors," says Michael Oscars, "is to be prepared to do it all by yourself. Don't expect anyone to meet you half way. Don't expect a helping hand. When you have the confidence to know you can do it all by yourself, you'll have a chance." Actors must find out who they are, what they can do, where they fit into the marketplace, and how to sell themselves. Only then will they understand the businessman's priorities and be able to speak a common language.

Al Waxman has projected his *King of Kensington* into a starring vehicle for himself with a simple down-to-earth philosophy: "Promoting yourself is as necessary a skill as acting. You have to answer the question - why would anyone turn the TV on or go to a movie to see me when they have a hundred other things they could be doing?" Discover the blocks in the financial structure and learn to surmount them. Be prepared to engage in all kinds of arguments that have little to do with how good you are - just how that 'good' is marketable.

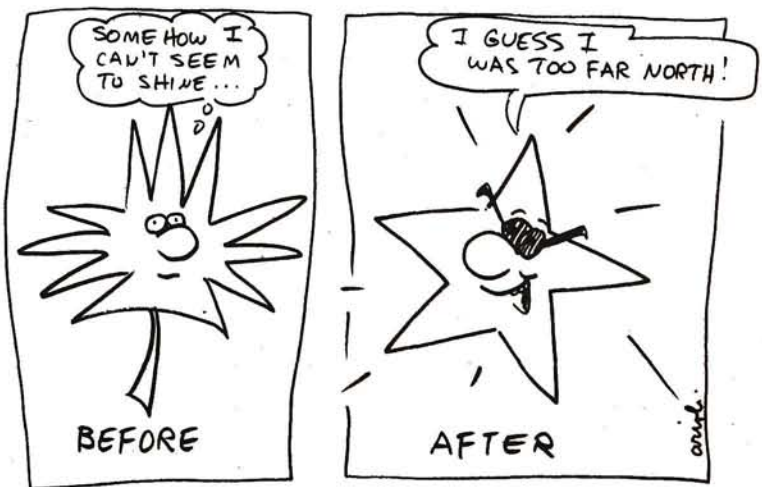
Instead of talking about *becoming* a star, it is important to start *being* a star.

As a writer, I have been exposed to numerous press conferences and press releases where an agent or publicist presents some hopeful as the next star-to-be. At the press conference the hopeful smiles, grins, nods, maybe says a few words, and then is quickly forgotten. Why? Because it is not enough to be *told* that someone is a star. The star quality must be evident. It would be far more useful if the agent or publicist staged the hopeful in such a way that the magic spoke for itself - so that writers could walk in and say "Hey who's that?" The image is what the public wants, and if writers believe the image they will sell it to the public.

Just look at Howie Mandel. He does not tell people he is funny, or that he is a comedian or a star. He simply *acts* out his image - hanging from trees, making faces, being loony in interview after interview, photo after photo. Instantly you know where he's at and what he's got to offer. It's that excellent promotion campaign and the magic of make-believe that show business is all about. Bonne chance. ●

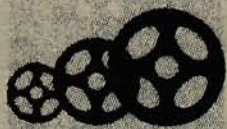
Tricks of the trade

Just as businessmen must come to respect the creative contribution more,



THE MAKING OF A STAR!

* Statistics from the Canadian Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, the Canadian Booksellers Association, the Ministry of Culture for Ontario, and the CBC.



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