

# IN PROGRESS

The Wars

## Fighting mud and mist

It seems ludicrous, getting lost in a round stage, but that's exactly what happens during the shooting of Scene 05, Take 2 of *The Wars*, the \$3.8 million screen adaptation of Timothy Findley's award-winning novel. The confounding element is a dense fog which has been so artfully contrived by the special effects crew (headed by Colin Chilvers, who won an Academy Award for *Superman*), that 15 actors and six horses on the other side of the Kleinburg studio have vanished into the thick of it.

What with the dry ice, the fog-sticks, the oil-based smoke and gallons of oozing mud on the floor, the stage has become an eerie no-man's land. When a horse somewhere lets out a snort, the sound is more than a touch unnerving. Suddenly, there's a muffled cry from Brent Carver, the Canadian star of the film, who has lost his bearings and can't find the camera.

Ironically, the scene itself is about 'being lost.' Carver plays Robert Ross, a young Canadian officer in World War 1, who, like the proverbial blind man, is unwittingly leading his men across a



photos: Shin Sugino

● "The Wars may well be Canada's answer to *Breaker Morant*".

foggy, crumbling dike in Flanders, littered with the corpses of soldiers who took a wrong step and drowned in the mud.

Finally, the camera starts to roll, but Carver's horse won't budge. There is a long silence, followed by the wet sound of horses' hooves being sucked into the oozing ground. Then, out of obscurity come the pale figures of six officers on horseback. They ride wearily toward the camera, followed by nine foot soldiers weighed down by woolen great-coats, guns and the fear of death.

After the scene has been shot, director Robin Phillips, former head of the Stratford Ontario Shakespearean Festival, talks about its lyricism, of all things. "There is something extraordinary about fog," he says. "That was probably the most horrific shot of the whole film, but with the fog even the gruesome becomes lyrical."

Though bloody spectacle is usually the foundation of war films, *The Wars* defies the standard devices of the genre. There are bodies in the film, but they don't blow up on camera. ("Or on the camera," points out D.O.P. John Coquilron who is enjoying a respite after two Sam Peckinpah war films.) There are no slaughter scenes and no battle scenes with the enemy. The closest the film gets to actual fighting is a single incident with a lone German soldier.

And yet, *The Wars* is filled with violence, the kind that is found among a legion of enemies, on a multitude of battlefields. "The film is about the wars we have inside us, and between each

other," says Phillips. "It deals with personal violence, especially the kind within families."

Timothy Findley's story focuses on the war's effect on an upper-class Toronto family. Although Canadians (especially late-Victorian, Rosedale types), are usually seen as cool and repressed, the Rosses seethe with rage. Mrs. Ross, sophisticated in furs and blowing veils, is actually "driven by fury," according to Findley. "Her fury comes from the fact that we celebrate the death of our children in war, and that it's us they go to war for." Robert Ross, the son, is also driven by anger. He might have been a hero in the war, and perhaps is a hero - depending on how you interpret the deed he commits. Ross's passion does him in, finally, though his passion only mirrors the larger violence between nations. "These men are trained and forced to kill," says Brent Carver. "Yet when they go beyond the bounds set by the military law, they are considered criminals."

The *Wars* may well be Canada's answer to *Breaker Morant*. Both screenplays share some common thematic ground, and like the Australian film, *The Wars* has integrity - which is hardly surprising, considering that it's based on a novel that won the Governor General's award for outstanding Canadian fiction. As one crew member puts it, "This is the first film I've been on that the actors aren't apologising for."

Given the arid investment climate of late, *The Wars* was one of the only films being made in and around Toronto this past summer. It is also the first feature film Nielsen Ferns International has ever produced. Still, the film's financing is virtually secured. Polyphon Film (a subsidiary of the Polygram recording company) is a partner in the project, while the National Film Board, as part of a new policy of investing in privately-produced films, is also contributing - their involvement marking the first time the English unit has ever co-produced with a private company. The Canadian Film Development Corp. is similarly a contributor. Perhaps most significant is the film's pre-sale to both the CBC and the BBC, and Nielsen is currently in the process of negotiating theatrical release here and abroad.

No doubt *The Wars* has attracted such hefty backing partially because of director Robin Phillips' involvement. Though this is the first time Phillips has ever directed a film he is, at 38, Canada's pre-eminent stage director. Considered a big name in his native England - where he has worked with such luminaries as John Schlesinger, Peter Hall, John Gielgud, Edith Evans, Richard Chamberlain and Maggie Smith - Phillips virtually controlled the Stratford Festival for six years. Depending on who you talk to, he is considered to be either a Machiavellian or a Messianic figure. Because of his tremendously charismatic personality many of the cast members, as well as several key production people, left Stratford to work with Phillips on *The Wars*. None of the leading actors - Carver, Martha Henry, Elizabeth Bergner, and William Hutt - are box office names in Canada, though all are accomplished stage performers. In fact, many of the 56 speaking roles are being played by distinguished theatre people.

Phillips' lack of film experience seems to have had no adverse effect on the atmosphere on set, or on the people involved in the film. "Phillips knows what he wants to see," says John Coquillon. "He leaves the technical end of

things to the crew, but that's what a lot of experienced film directors do." One of the things Phillips wants to see is a lot of close-ups. "The war is suggested by the looks on peoples' faces," says Coquillon, "and by noises. There's also a good deal of contrast in the scenes between the Canadians at home and those at war. The film cuts back and forth between the hell in the trenches and the elegance and comfort of the Ross family home."

After his work on the two *Superman* films, Colin Chilvers says *The Wars* has "fairly routine effects. The only thing special about them is that they're being done on a sound stage." Still, Chilvers does do some explosion scenes in the Kleinberg studio which involve more than a little calculating, "because there are people in the dugout when it blows up and the fire has to be controlled." The really big explosions were done on location in Terra Cotta, Ontario, where sand bags (filled with sawdust, to be less dangerous) and balls of fire shot up 100 feet in the air, and pieces of the store houses landed 500 feet away. A burning barn scene also proved to be tough because not only were there actors inside, but also a number of horses who were on the verge of panic. Chilvers used two, 1000-gallon propane tanks so that he could control the fire by turning the gas off. (Now a resident of Canada, he has just started his own production company called Niagara Films Productions. He hopes to eventually put together a huge studio at Toronto's Harbourfront so that films the size of *Star Wars* can be shot here.)

After eight weeks of filming in Calgary, and in studios in Montreal, Hamilton, Toronto and Kleinburg, the cast and crew left for London, England, in early July for another eight days of shooting. The production is aiming for a Christmas release.

Richard Nielson believes the film will have enormous popular appeal. "It's just such a great adventure film. Other movies put the hero into outer space, but in *The Wars* he's been transported to the most traumatic experience of this century."

Thérèse Beaupré ●

**THE WARS** p.c. Nielsen-Ferns International (1981) p. Dick Nielsen d. Robin Phillips d.o.p. John Coquillon N.F.I. superv. of p. Samuel Jephcott assoc. p/p. man. Bob Linnell cam. op. Jimmy Turrell asst. cam. Zolt Martin (1st), Zolt Dirs (2nd) loc. man. Richard Flower, John Scott (Alberta) asst. d. Tony Lucibello (1st), David Macleod (2nd), Kim Winther (3rd) p. acct. Rosemary McCarty, Penny Royce (asst.), Lynn Lucibello (asst.) p. coord. Alice Ferrier office asst. Angela Gruenthal p. asst. Elizabeth Halko p. asst./craft serv. Val Stefoff mus. Berthold Carriere art d. Daphne Dale, Charles Dunlop (asst.), Ariene Smith (research), Judy Koonar (p.a.) ward. Ann Curtis (design), Sharon Purdy (mistress), Ursula Brooks (asst.) make-up Shonagh Jabour, Anne Brodie, Patricia Greene hair James Keeler, Carmen Dodaro (asst.) cont. Blanche McDermaid gal. Guy Remillard best boy Walter Klymkiv elec. trainee Claude Derasp genny op. Cliff West key grip Steve Sheridan best boy grip Bob McRae ed. mix. Joe Champagne boom. Bev Davidson 2nd cam. Kent Mason, Michael Mahoney (asst.) prop. master Hilton Rosemarin, Dan Wadlyka (2nd prop) sp. efx. Colin Chilvers driver capt. Jim Kennedy head driver Craig Kohne ed. Tony Lower, Denise Beaudoin (asst.) stills Shin Sugino wranglers Paul Kimbell, Rauler McGuire body maker Gordon Smith casting Walker-Bowen Lp. Brent Carver, Martha Henry, Elizabeth Bergner, Regine Vergeen, Jackie Burroughs, William Hutt, Jean LeClerc, Domini Blythe, Ann Marie Macdonald, Kirsten Bishopric, Heather Summerhayes, Robin McKenzie, Roger Barton, Claire Coulter, Jeff Hyalop, Rick McMillan, Alan Scarfe, Rod Beattie, Graham Gibson, Hardee Lineham, Tim Webber, Barbara Budd, David Dunbar, Leo Leyden, Matt Macky, Stephen Russell, Maurice Goode, Craig Gardiner, William Merton Malmo, Richard Curnock, Annette Vyge, Mervyn Blake.



● "... all things go to balancing the Equation." Peter Brickmanis, Jacques Couture and Anne Dansereau in *Music of the Spheres*.

## Music of the Spheres

# Melody and the beast

The premise of Phil Jackson's sci-fi feature, *The Music of the Spheres*, is intriguing. The music of the spheres as it was formulated by the ancients, and later in the Medieval world-view, was the celestial music of an earth-centered universe, the perfect music of the gods. Jackson's aliens are, essentially, those supreme beings which exist for and in the music. A space project involving solar energy deflectors in orbit around the sun is the cause of friction between 'us' and 'them,' because it threatens to disturb the music.

Sometime in the 21st century a highly evolved technocracy has grown out of the ruins of our present military-industrial order, nurtured by the surviving scientific elite of the world. There hasn't been a nuclear cataclysm, but all cities have stopped dead, and social and economic structure as we know it has disintegrated. What is left is administered by The System, a network of computers housed in Centres around the world.

A key logistical communications Centre is located in what was once Toronto. Everything that happens on the planet is accounted for by an Equation. As long as it is balanced, the System works, and all things go to balancing the Equation. The alien beings are the one element the System cannot integrate.

*Music* is a highly ambitious, experimental gamble, limited by a budget of \$140,000. Shooting in 16mm, Jackson sees no difficulty for later blowup. The production is an example of the imaginative use of minimal resources by a committed group of professionals.

The principle character, Melody, played by the remarkable actress from Quebec, Anne Dansereau, is the other half of a 'human link' computer, called the Beast. Her brain is tied into the massive computer; she is highly sensitive, but only in relation to the Beast. Paul, one of the Beast's creators, was born under the old order and is one of the leaders of the new (played by Jacques Couture). Andrew, the psychiatrist who

monitors the functional relationship between Melody and the Beast, is played by Peter Brickmanis. The drama is based on the conflict which arises among three characters and the Beast when the aliens start to affect its mind. Like Kubrick's Hal, the Beast has a will of its own, albeit tied to Melody during the telepathic collaboration known as 'interlock.'

The Beast will be an extremely strong presence in the film, although we will never see it; video monitors will display information from its omniscient 'brain.'

The film's dialogue will be bilingual, with appropriate English and French subtitles. The concept of language is critical, in that the logic of the System is implied in words and sentence structure. However, when Melody starts to have intuitive feelings about the aliens - feelings which are not accounted for within the System - she lacks the words, and is driven by a tremendous need to express herself, to explode and get it out. The cinematography will enhance this claustrophobic mood.

Jackson hopes the film will challenge audiences to deal with complex ideas about the limitations of rational thinking, bureaucracy, and words. Although the film will emphasize character and psychology over special effects, the effects will attempt to visualize - primarily in Melody's dream sequences - subjective perception. Jackson envisions extremely theatrical effects in childlike landscapes, side by side with sophisticated, crisp, space realism.

In June the crew was shooting in the Eaton Centre and the production value of the location was superb. The vaulted ceiling of the Centre's gallery provided a vast, austere backdrop for the emotionally charged scenes. Proof that 'necessity is the mother of invention,' the constant splash of fountains in the background will be softened to a whisper in the final soundtrack - the breath of the Beast, perhaps.

Christopher Lowry ●

## THE MUSIC OF THE SPHERES

p.c. Lightscape Motion Picture Co. Ltd. (1981) p./d. G. Philip Jackson d.o.p. Nadine Humenick ed. Ross Redfern acting p. man. Gabrielle de Montmolin dialog. coach. Yseult Buxel cont. Doris Lapierre sc. G. Philip Jackson, Gabrielle de Montmolin miniatures Michael M. Sloan, Jeff Bertram, Grand Illusions asst. cam. Peter McAdan Lp. Anne Dansereau, Peter Brickmanis, Jacques Couture, Sandra Kyser, Ken Lemaire, Kenneth Gordon.