

Empire Inc. Telling an Anglo tale

With the down-turn of the Canadian film industry, the CBC is once again the only game in town. While the news department in Toronto — with its expanded *The National - The Journal* format estimated to cost between \$7 - \$10 million — gambles on the Now, the Montreal-based TV drama department is taking a risk on re-interpreting the Then.

Hailed as "one of the biggest" dramatic series ever made in this land, the \$3 million, six-part *Empire Inc.* slated for viewing early in 1983, hopes to do for the memory of Anglophone Montreal what the hugely successful *Duplessis* series did for Quebec's pre-1960 politics: consecrate its official demise.

Fittingly, this six-hour requiem to past glories is being brought to you in a never-before-seen spirit of amicable collaboration between TV's own two solitudes, CBC and Radio-Canada, with slightly less prominent (though credited) help from the National Film Board. Verily, the Canadian TV producer's dream come true!

And it is largely, at least in key respects, the same *équipe* that created *Duplessis* (the tandem Mark Blandford producer - Denys Arcand scriptwriter) who are behind this chronicle of the boom-to-bust saga of (fictional) Montreal financier James Monroe's rise from Scottish immigrant's rags to the pinnacles of pre-Quiet Revolution high finance.

With Mark Blandford as executive producer and director of two hour-long episodes, screenwriters Douglas Bowie, Denys Arcand (who will also direct two episodes) and Jacques Benoit, with Douglas Jackson directing the other two segments, *Empire Inc.* is the triple story of a man and his family, that of the times (the Great Depression, the rise of Nazism and the Second World War), as well as that of a city: Montreal from 1929, when it was the financial capital of the country, to 1960.

Location shoots include such former bastions of the Anglo establishment as the Mount Royal Club and the Mount Stephen Club — once the home of CPR magnate and robber baron George Stephen: the House of Commons in Ottawa (thrown back to the days of MacKenzie King dullness); and, sure sign of these times, the Chateau Laurier's new Golden Room ("a penthouse suite for visiting Arab Sheiks" according to someone close to the project). Studio work will be done at the Film Board's Côte de Liesse headquarters.

"The series comes in the wake of a very slow production year," says *Empire* publicist Lana Iny. "The film industry is very slow. Most dramas in the past were out of Toronto. It was very rare from here. It's thanks to Blandford, head of TV drama here, that it got underway."

"The Montreal Anglophone community is dying," says Blandford, a True Brit, "and the English have less and less influence. Even if bastions like the Mount Royal Club and the Mount Stephen Club are still here, the great days of Anglo Montreal are things of the past.



● The Mount Stephen Club never looked so good.

"But the past illuminates the present. The advantage of a historical drama is that there have been 25-30 years to think about the subject, to really understand it." According to Blandford, "it's not been an easy production" to get underway, primarily because of budget restrictions.

The first episode has been shot. Throughout February, the second episode will be shot, mainly in the lavishly wood-paneled Mount Stephen Club in the heart of what was once called Montreal's Golden Mile. Because *Empire* is a period piece, and historical periods change times in the course of one day's shooting, the schedules are gruelling.

One of *Empire's* stories within the story — which the publicity department goes so far as to call a "career change" — concerns Quebecois political documentarist Denys Arcand's (*On est au coton; Québec: Duplessis et après;* and the forthcoming *Le confort et l'indifférence* on the 1980 Quebec referendum) presence as hired director not working on his own script for the first time in his professional life.

"Me, I'm the project's token French-Canadian," says Arcand with a laugh, who admits his collaboration is something of a holiday for him after a decade

of political films. "Blandford likes to have a gang working around him. He asked me along."

Arcand has scripted the fourth *Empire* episode (about the Quebec labor question in the aftermath of the war). But the two segments he will direct are not political and deliberately so: "more of a love story," he says, though the setting is a brothel.

Arcand's interest in the series (passion as opposed to work) was predominantly on the level of the historical research involved.

"It's a subject that has never been touched, either in film, in theatre or in books. No one's really looked at Anglo financial power here. In terms of little facts and things, I learned a lot about these colossal fortunes. It was truly a savage capitalism.

"The French and English universes were completely separate. We didn't see each other, we didn't talk to each other. On the level of the series' dramaturgy, there's no French-English confrontation: it's the history of Anglophones re-interpreted for Anglophones. The Francophone is here solely as a spectator."

Arcand says he's greatly looking forward to working with Anglophone ac-

tors: the on-camera talent hails mostly from Toronto often via Los Angeles or off-Broadway. "It's been eight years since I've worked directly with actors," since *Gina* (1974), his last dramatic film. Arcand has nothing but praise for the work of his Anglo colleagues, especially for the high quality of scripts.

"Those scripts that come out of English Canada are really first-rate. I've gotten a lot of pleasure reading them. They're really very good. High calibre, well-put together, good punch-lines. It's very pleasant."

Arcand does have one worry, though: the \$3 million budget which he says is "very small."

"To do a period piece like this costs a fortune. Everything — from a car to a desk to a watch — has to be gotten hold of. We've got 15 days' shooting for each episode. This is really the limit. But we have to live with that. Will I have the talent to pull it off? I hope so. I'm keeping my fingers crossed.

Empire hopes to set a precedent for future co-productions. Arcand is not the only one who's got his fingers crossed.

Michael Dorland ●

EMPIRE INC. for credits, please see Production Guide, On Location, p. 35.

● The National Assembly never looked so bad.



Scandale

Porno for fun and profit

They were doing alterations on one of Quebec's more noisome skeletons the other day, down at R.S.L. Films.

Lately, you see, a number of Quebec's skeletons have jumped out of the family closet and come clanking into the parlour. The folks down at R.S.L. have seized the opportunity to take one of them — the Pornobec scandal — and parade it around the countryside, with the hope that the yokels will fill R.S.L.'s coffers in order to see it.

The Pornobec scandal involved some