

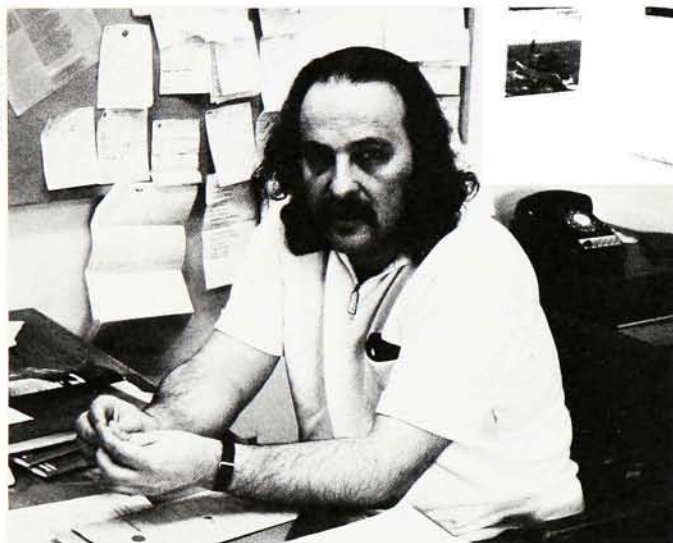


# MARTIN DEFALCO

Stephen Chesley

## "THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LEDGER"

Photo: Baltazar



"The values of the Film Board," says director Martin Defalco, "are sort of a microcosm of Canada." Defalco has made several films in his years at the Board, but he was also President of the creative personnel's union (SGCT) last year and he's one of the most articulate members of a profession that usually cherishes words very little. He sees the Board as a social force, ideally, and realises that discussing the situation there in terms of politics is very appropriate.

He continues by commenting further on the French-English relationship. "The English and French do have a tolerance for each other, even though they don't move back and forth and communicate. Generally if there's a problem they solidify, but other than that they're quite willing to live in their own milieu. An indication of what Canada is about is that when they made *Adieu Alouette* they didn't bring it to the French unit.

"Certain things can work but it depends on the time. Maybe the French will say they don't want any looking. Right now there's a political reality about what's going on here and we've got to sort it out. In opposition the pressure's on us to sort out our own thinking and also to see in a creative sense if we still are together in any way. Over a period of time that's what Canada is all about.

"The French unit was asked to do *West* and refused. No Québécois wants to do a film about English Canada, even though there are French Canadians who would. But don't expect visions of big, growing, waving wheat fields of materialistic Canada. It would be an entirely new perception which is interesting and worthwhile even if in a sense it's not what we want to hear. *L'Acadie, l'Acadie* was Québécois in New Brunswick, and it so happens that that is something that has to be said and understood.

"In some way the Film Board every so often does do that, which is much to its credit."

Defalco has this view of the Board as in the continual throes of a dilemma, and he expanded on what he sees as the horns. "We go through periods. Management seems so fucked up, and then films come out and they're good — *Corporation*, *Action and Reaction*, mine — and we say management can't be so bad. Of course these come out simultaneously with a lot of junk.

"Deomcratisation and its effects really comes and goes. We're trying to work in that area, but what we find is that we really don't have the structures and we don't understand what we're asking for, so we get screwed. A good example is the programming committee. You discuss ideas, allocations, areas. It's a magnificent idea. But what happens at some of those meetings is that it's really hard to make them work. A lot of us are filmmakers and in a sense we really hate the bureaucratic thing, but that's bad because the bureaucrats we have to deal with are bureaucrats all day long, it's their job.

"I had a union problem recently with the Film Board, and to reconstruct what I went through, I suddenly realised that I don't have any paper, I don't send memos out and I'm not that concerned about it. I was really snowed under by all their paper.

"Management tries to reflect what's going on but it's hard for them. They believe in an authoritarian system, most of them, and to try and develop democratic processes under those circumstances is difficult. But I think that slowly we are. What I find discouraging is that as film people and as kind of leaders, we always want to see what other people see and reflect. We're never really ahead.

"I think it's true of our programming concepts too. We really aren't at the gut issues — we're near but not at them. So even though Sydney (Newman) said he'd like to do a series about American/Canadian relations, everyone said, Oh no. We're never going to be able to say anything about that, especially after Gilles Groulx' film gets censored. *Adieu Alouette* is acceptable, but an independent project in the Challenge for Change on syndicalism is not, because anything that deals with syndicalism brings in nationalism, which is probably true, and that's no combination for the Film Board. I could go and shoot Chartrand and say Hey, isn't he great . . . and you should hear him speak English, too!

Defalco laughs at the thought, and it should be noted that Defalco, a tall, heavyset person, laughs often. It's part of his charm, and his ability to see potential satire undoubtedly makes him a stronger filmmaker, even when his attitude in the film is deadly serious. He's made films on everything from Don Messer to trawler fisherman to the Armed Forces to Japanese-Canadians reminiscing about internment during World War Two, but his enthusiasm and his conviction and his filmmaking philosophy are most noticeable in his two most recent efforts: *The Other Side of the Ledger*, a film about the Hudson's Bay Company made with Willie Dunn and from the Indian point of

view; and *Cold Journey*, a feature about a young Indian boy, which, going against tradition, uses real Indians as participants.

And despite much talk about content in his films, which is evident in discussions about *Ledger* or *Cold Journey*, Defalco does have definite ideas about one topic under much discussion at the Board: who films what. "I think there's something good about an outsider coming in and getting first impressions. Really good journalism can show you something that by being involved in it you can't quite see. There seems to be a middle ground. You're there and you don't come in with a great deal of expertise, so you sort of observe the obvious. The obvious is important. But if you stay a bit longer, you start questioning the obvious. You have to come in at that second level to do investigative journalism. You're now into areas of personal prejudice, and you've really committed yourself to doing it right.

"But that's only one facet of information. And journalism is not the highest form of information or investigation."

Obviously Defalco feels that his two recent efforts fit into some other facet. And, as he explains, they also reveal much about what he describes as the tensions and dilemma in the Board. "*The Other Side of the Ledger* was a co-production between myself and Willie Dunn, an Indian, and it's the Indian view of the Hudson's Bay Company, a white company. Willie is a filmmaker but it's the biggest film he's done. We just collaborated. Willie knew the people; I had worked up there and I knew basically what we would expect. We had to get the important spokesmen to say it, we both knew what it was. In a sense I would do the technical thing. We would discuss it and say Now who do we talk to? and Willie would say we need this person and that person.

"We did have Indians in the crew but overall there aren't enough Indian filmmakers. We have an Indian film crew at the Board that's developing and slowly there's some good people coming along. You would wonder why it's taken so long. Four or five years ago there were none, then all of a sudden there's a rush to catch up, and that has a terrible sense of tokenism. That's exactly what it is. But then all the liberals say, 'Well we can't have tokenism.' Well, shit, it's the first step! I mean you might as well declare it, we've got some catching up to do."

*The Other Side of the Ledger* moves along in the catching up direction very well. It's a moving statement by the Indians about their view of the Hudson's Bay, done in a form of visuals backed up by Indian narrators. But Defalco also sees a need for a fictional form to tell his story. Hence *Cold Journey*, a film as yet uncompleted but again showing the dilemma.

"I got into shit over *Cold Journey*. It's a strange film, in a sense one of the truthful films about Indians, at least the Indians say it is. But what happens is you get these strange reactions. People have preconceptions of stereotypes. You know they really think all Indians are Jewish actors in Hollywood. First off, to make the film it was hard to think, you know, Do you cast Indians as Indians? My feeling was if we're the Film Board we cast Indians as Indians, not like *Little Big Man* where they went through people like Richard Boone and Olivier to play the chief until someone said Dan George. That was a remarkable breakthrough, Dan George playing an Indian. I mean, goddammit, Penn used an Indian!

"The Indians are aware of it. But the first reaction you get when you're making a film about Indians is Well, you can't get an Indian to play it. You run into these crazy clashes. People say they talk too slowly or you've got to pace up the scene. But the Indians recognise it as a very good portrayal - I mean it's not a portrayal, they live it so they don't portray it - of Indians.

"I think that considering that we're not in it to make money, and since the Film Board gets social funds to make socially important things, we have to take chances. I think even if we screw up we've got to use Indians, it's too late in the day not to, even if we make a mistake.

"Now the dispute comes. I don't think we made a mistake. I think they're magnificent."

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