

The Overlanders

Joanna Moss
interviews
Don Eccelston

With over fifty films to his credit, Don Eccelston is, at 39, one of the most prolific television directors in Canada. Since his late teens he has been involved with Theatre, Radio, Television and Films. He spent five years with CTV and for the past six years has been a producer-director with the C.B.C. in Vancouver. Of the fifty films he has made, twenty were documentaries written by himself, and these have won him several awards such as an Italia award, the Vancouver International Film Festival award and a Wilderness award (a C.B.C. internal documentary prize).

He has written and directed three dramas, one for "Where The Action Is", one for "The Manipulators" and his most recent and controversial 90 min. drama "The Overlanders". He is at present working on a new script tentatively titled, "Tiger, Tiger Burn'g Bright". He has an honest and realistic view of the C.B.C. and how the Corporation relates to young film makers.

The following interview was taped in Don Eccelston's small office at the C.B.C. in Vancouver.

JM: What is the history of your projected series "The Overlanders"?

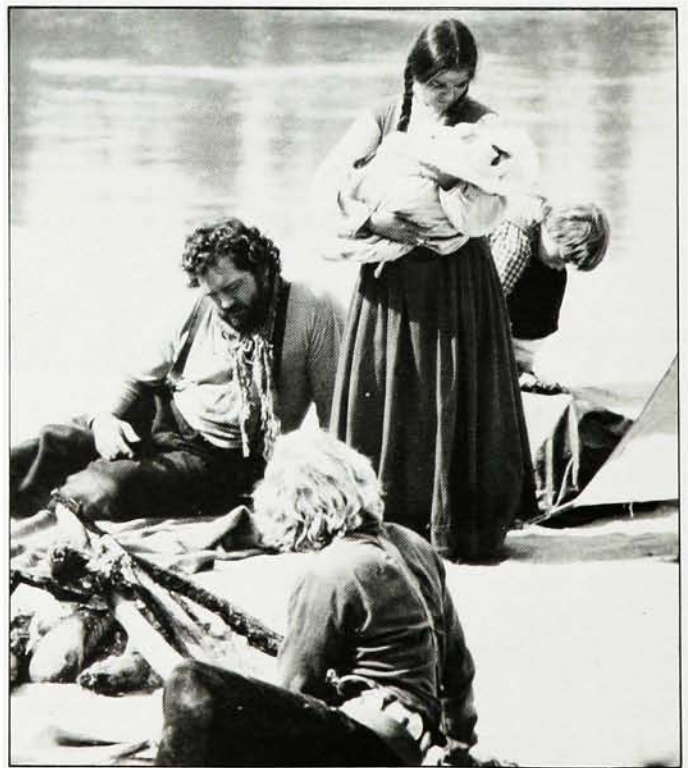
DE: That's a long story that goes back over ten years. I've always been fascinated by history, Western Canadian history in particular – not so much the history of politics but the history of people. I've always gotten the impression from Canadian television and history books that this country is uninhabited. If people are ever mentioned, they're reduced to statistics. If I have one criticism of *The National Dream*, it's what happened to the people that really built the railroad – we don't see them. Not that the politics of CPR are not interesting or important, they are; but it's the lopsided view of this country that is constantly being portrayed in strictly academic terms that needs to be pulled into balance.

Anyway, I was always on the search for historical material that could be translated into film. As usually happens, while you're looking for material on one subject, you accidentally discover something totally unrelated about another subject. In my case, it was a diary kept by one of the Overlanders of 1861, a part of our history that has hardly been touched. The diary revealed a story that was filled with heroics of the best kind, yet revealed by a writer who was unaware of his own heroics. He had one goal in mind, and that was to cross a country that was certainly inhospitable to the protected traveller, hardly mapped in most areas, not mapped in others – to a place called Cariboo in the interior of British Columbia.

To him, it was a dream of El Dorado, of gold, of instant wealth. Because of this, he was willing to put up with anything to get there. But the real story for me was hidden between the lines of the diary – the changes he went through as he crossed the country, climbed the mountains, rode large rafts down the Fraser River, and as he witnessed the deaths of many of his comrades. By the time he got to Cariboo, to Barkerville, the

gold was all gone, but he had found something far more important, he had found himself.

It was a journey of self-discovery. This started me on an immediate search for more diaries, and any written, published or unpublished material about this journey. I found other diaries – in the British Columbia archives, in private collections of descendants of the Overlanders, and written accounts in newspapers of the 1860's – and ended up with a room full of research material. At that time I was thinking of *The Overlanders* as being a documentary, and it evolved from that to a documentary drama, to straight drama to commercial drama to commercial series drama and, as demanded by the



Toronto CBC brass, to a drama that would sell outside the country . . . to Europe, the Commonwealth, and perhaps the United States. And so the mind went through a lot of changes as each new demand from the East came through on the shape of *The Overlanders*.

JM: Did you always plan to do a pilot?

DE: No. At first there was no talk of a pilot. The emphasis was placed on script development. It was at this point that Len Peterson became involved not only as a contributing writer but as a script consultant. There were two other writers from the Toronto area, and the rest, including myself, were from the West. We delivered, on schedule, what was asked of us – ten draft scripts and three outlines – to make up a series of thirteen one hour dramas. Then we waited for some kind of decision. It was the kind of waiting that we'd become accustomed to, but it was still agonizing. The answer, when it came finally, was, they wanted a pilot. We were told to deliver a two hour script – which we did. Then a one hour. The production of the pilot then went through a series of on-again, off-again decisions. By this time, it became very important to the Vancouver region that this production should go ahead, if only for morale. Finally, with a reduced budget and a script that seemed to me a long way from the original idea, we went into production. Len and I were cutting characters from the pilot script to make it fit the budget.

JM: What was going on in Toronto to cause these on-again, off-again decisions?

DE: Well, during the course of *The Overlanders* saga, the CBC went through three heads of Drama: Fletcher Markle, then Thom Benson as acting head and finally John Hirsch. Each had different ideas as to what the CBC should be, so consequently we were getting different directions. When the pilot went on the air, it got excellent press reaction, telephone reaction – audience evaluation showed it had huge viewership and appreciation index. As far as television audiences go, it was a success. But apparently not in the eyes of the CBC decision-makers, because we're not doing the series. I think it showed all the potential energy to make a good series. It showed us where the strengths were, and where the weaknesses were – but isn't that what a pilot is for?

JM: Is there still a possibility that the *Overlanders* will continue?

DE: I don't know. That's up to John Hirsch. I've learned not to hold my breath and stop living until something happens. If it does go, it will be a pleasant surprise. There is a possibility of one part becoming a theatrical feature. There's high interest from two sources – one Canadian and American money, the other strictly American. As far as the CBC goes, I really don't know. What usually happens to political footballs?

JM: Did it leave you feeling very bitter?

DE: *TV Guide* quoted me as saying that I felt bitter. They asked me: "I suppose you feel bitter?". And I answered, "I guess I should feel bitter, but I don't." They left off the "but I don't". No, I don't feel bitter. In a way I feel like *The Overlanders*. Trying to get the production going was, in many ways, like an inhospitable journey – our *gold* at the end of the trip would be doing the series. And like the *Overlanders*, there was no gold at the end of the trail, but at least I learned one hell of a lot. A lot about writing, about films and about the politics of film and the CBC. When you're in a region, you get used to *off again, on again*. One moment you're swimming in production the next moment there's a drought. What I really felt and still feel, is the disappointment of this region. It was a real downer for everyone.

JM: Should the CBC get into making features?

DE: Why not? I think the CBC should be as variable as possible. They haven't because features cost too much. There is also a way of thinking that goes like this: a feature film is a **FILM**, and it belongs in the theatre whereas television programs belong on the television screen, and they come in neat little packages of half an hour, one hour or ninety minutes, each with so many commercials scattered throughout the body of the program. And yet, it's features, full length movies that are getting the largest audience. Viewing habits are such that people would rather sit down and watch a two-hour

drama for the evening than a whole bunch of half-hours. It's too much hassle to remember what time it starts and plan your evening around it.

JM: But doesn't the CBC use the half hour to train writers and directors?

DE: Yes, but to my way of thinking that's a good and a bad thing. Good because it at least offers opportunity, but bad because it trains the writer or director only in the half hour form, or the short story. To do a film longer than half an hour requires re-training – like a novelist attempting his first full scale novel. I have a friend who makes superb one-minute commercials but his mind boggles at the thought of having to create something outside of 60 seconds. He conceptualizes ideas in very fast action images and to slow them down and increase the content is outside of his realm. So it is possible to have someone very good at the half hour drama, while others would show their best skills at either hour, ninety or two hour dramas.

JM: I have always felt that the reason we don't have a booming film industry is that we don't have the writers.

DE: Well, there aren't enough writers who are trained or even have the chance to train themselves or gain the experience for writing for film. There are, I think, some excellent signs among the young writers that show potential as screenplay writers but when they confront the executives in TV or film they also confront the problem of the ability of the executive to read a real film script. I find decision makers are looking for a theatre piece, with the same script structure as a stage play. And that won't make a film. It's an error to equate film with theatre – that you can take a playwright and get a good screenplay from him. Film is not an extension of the play. If you take someone who is thoroughly steeped in theatre and ask him to write a screenplay you usually end up with theatre structure and in film that means a succession of talking heads and little, if any, cinematic narrative. I am oversimplifying all of this but I think you understand what I am saying. In television, where the use of the medium can be so varied, there is a place for 'theatre' – where the camera is merely recording a good drama and extending the stage into the living room. It's rather like a sports or public affairs actuality – the television system is merely a transmitting device. It's not being used creatively.

JM: You once told me there were no good directors under 40.

DE: I don't know of any consistently good film makers who are under forty. There are exceptions, yes, and flukes. The odd film maker will produce a spectacular film, and he may even repeat his success one more time but he rarely repeats for a third time because he hasn't got either the life background or the skills necessary to keep on making good films. Each film presents its own problems and it takes a lot of film to give a director a background in problem-solving and to get a chance to learn his skills. Enough years to put him over forty. □