

Why Rock The Boat?

Why Rock The Boat? A Columbia Pictures presentation of a National Film Board feature production. Directed by John Howe. Produced by William Weintraub. Executive Producer: James de B. Domville. Screenplay by William Weintraub. Director of Photography: Savas Kalogeras. Music and Lyrics by John Howe. Production Designer: Earl Preston. Film Editor: Marie-Hélène Guillemin. Recording by Jacques Drouin. Sound Editor: Vic Merrill. Costume Designer: Philippa Wingfield.

It was the closest a Canadian film had ever come to a mass, extravaganza opening for a feature: several cities – and in good theatres – were to premier the National Film Board feature *Why Rock the Boat?* The entire country would be blanketed through October and November. And in town to talk about the film were stars Ken James and Tiitu Leek, and director John Howe.

Assembled in a hotel room, they were lined up in chairs. But if anyone leaned forward slightly it was Howe. A veteran Film Board director, he made it clear it was his film, and he was proud of it, while at the same time emphasising the invaluable hard work, effort, talent and success of his co-workers.

"The film was made from the novel by my producer and co-writer William Weintraub. But, and it may sound egoistic for me to say it, this isn't William Weintraub's *Why Rock the Boat?*, it's John Howe's *Why Rock the Boat?* The film is not the book, it has a life of its own. Bill is a very big part in it, don't get me wrong, we worked well and long to achieve what we did. But in this instance you're not just working with words, you're working with images and attitudes."

Howe went on to explain the evolution of novel into film. "My problem with the novel, when Weintraub brought me his first draft screenplay, which wasn't a film, was that the novel is picaresque, it's anarchistic. Weintraub's a marvellously brilliant farcical writer but it's mostly narrative, and you have to find a way to translate that narrative thing in a way that the audience doesn't know you're doing it. The character of Ronny is an instrument, through which I can communicate all of Harry's inner thoughts and feelings, and at the same time he's the leash on Harry's sentimentality, idealism, and knocks down everything Harry's set up. So his character grew to a great extent from what it was in the book.

"I never asked Weintraub what they looked like visually. He was very surprised at what some of the people looked like. I

cast Ken James in my mind while I was working on the screenplay. I spent a great deal of time in casting, and obviously I was bringing some of the writing to bear on this man's abilities as an actor. I think eighty per cent of a director's job in terms of acting is casting. What happens between the actor and the role is a third thing which is the character. There is a great deal of space for the performer to create. He must be right for the role and right in relation to the others. They create a world, and when they're in that world, that world begins to emerge and my job is simple: I say go this way. If I mention a scene, they can almost write it for you. They shouldn't; I don't believe in that improvisation shit."

Ken James added, "If you notice in the shooting, John very rarely nails his camera to the floor. He choreographs it around the action, he paints the action. That's why it's great to work with him as an actor, because instead of a ten second take you get three or four minutes for a scene. That's tremendous for the actor, especially if like myself, you're from the stage."

Actors, script, and so on may be instruments, but what about the final result? What should it be? Howe says, "First of all we were attempting to make an entertaining film, so that when people pay three bucks they can come out and say it was well spent. But you don't just tell a film on one level because that's just Wayne and Shuster on TV. All kinds of things should be happening in the background, all kinds of undercurrents that are overlapping." Two of those undercurrents are unionism and a certain attitude towards nostalgia. It's inevitable from my union background that even the barest smell of the progression towards unionism would take on strength and flavour. In many ways Harry's growth reflects a kind of growth in Canadian union politics in that era. The forties were an innocent time, and we were an innocent people, believing in the rightness of the Queen and the strength of the British Empire. Our growth was very rightist and it comes from the



English tradition of keeping your place. When the great Call for World War Two went out, we went off to fight. The growth of any kind of social awareness was only happening at that time. The part Tiiu plays is really far out. She's a very unusual character for the era. I mean, the Montreal Gazette is still not unionised. At the same time in the film, she's ambiguous as a person, because she also is seen from Harry's viewpoint, as ideal, romantic love.

"In the last scene, what I wanted to leave in the audience's mind is what happened next week or next month. Did he step out of the frying pan into the fire? Because that's what happened: we made it Bam into the sixties. He is as unsettled in his mind as we were in the forties.

"But I was very disappointed to read in a recent Maclean's-Canadians remembering the war years as a marvellous time and as a good thing for Canada."

There was no thought of cashing in on a nostalgia boom, mainly because a first try at making the film took place in 1971. But Howe sees the film as an added bonus in getting the audience into the theatre. "More people will see the film, and if eighty per cent of the audience pays to see nostalgia, and keeps the film running, that won't upset me either. For one thing, I've been in this business long enough to know that if only two or three people hear what you care about, then it's worthwhile.

"But there's more involved. Why *Rock The Boat?* needs support to keep running. I feel a commercial pressure because we're in a commercial business. Those managers out there have a living to make, and they don't care about nationality. If the film brings in money, they'll run it for years. Feature making in Canada is a card game in which the cards are stacked against us. My competition out there in those cinemas is *The Sting*. Big movies with big production budgets and big stars and big advance hype. Our market is too small for big budgets, so the film has to be better than its competition. That means every

nickel has to look like ten. I don't want my budget published because I want people to think it cost double.

"We have to increase our output to keep people working and keep them here. A quota is not the problem. We need money for production, and we get it when we have a market that can return it in an economic way. I'm sick and tired of handouts. We should apply muscle and a little reciprocity. American films take a hell of a lot of money out of our box office. An Eady-type plan to pour the money back in as well as some percentage of films shown on the American circuits. Otherwise it's charity, and I'm sick and tired of that. Like the Canada Council, it's applying a band-aid instead of getting at the diagnosis and curing the illness. And the CFDC, as much as it's been a great help, is the same thing, unless it can get actively involved in distribution. It's the old Canadian way of ducking out. We don't have any trouble with wheat reciprocity or oil; why can't we do it with this product?"

John Howe is tired. He's just completed two films back to back (*Boat* and the TV musical in the Language series, *A Star is Lost*) and all he wants to do is retire for a while and write music at his country place. In fact, it was writing the forties-style music for the film that he enjoyed most. As the conversation closes, however, he reiterates his purpose.

"What I was at pains to create was a Canadian thing in the Forties, with universal messages or whatever. We see ourselves. Harry could not be anything but a Canadian boy, couldn't exist anywhere but here. Our people can see it and say 'Wow' and still say I enjoyed paying three bucks to see it." □

Stephen Chesley