

• Man with a mission: R.H. Thomson as Samuel Lount

Samuel Lount Rebel with a cause

Myth, identity and politics of Canadian film

by **Eric Green**

Talking to Samuel Lount producer Elvira Lount and director Laurence Keane, one becomes rapidly aware of a critical connection between the values of the filmmakers and the values that drove Samuel Lount to become an activist and participate in one of the more interesting uprisings in Canadian history.

While 1985 has been celebrated as

a date in which figures such as Louis Riel rose up against the oppressive character of central Canadian colonialism, it might well also be celebrated for an unusual event: the completion of Samuel Lount, which, in a remarkable way, evokes a range of issues related to possession and power, and the choices of people who find themselves working for the new series of compacts that command our major institutions even now.

It is doubly ironic that the most

interesting historical feature ever produced in Canada about Ontario was done by this particular producer-director duo. They consciously espouse New Age values and incorporated them into the creative direction and the management of the production. And they are conscious of being western Canadians.

What makes this new feature film evocative is that the conflicts in Samuel Lount's life are not dissimilar from conflicts facing us today. Reaching for universality (in vision

and action) is, of course, a religious act, and it is significant that Samuel Lount was a devoted member of a sect called the Children of Peace.

The question of not merely identifying evil, but acting against it, is at the heart of the film. While our generation is dubious about the concept of evil, the evils that threaten the planet in a nuclear age are being responded to in ways that may be reawakening a sense of the linkages between New Age and Old Age value systems.

When new feature film producers and directors appear on the scene in Canada, you can be sure that the story of their emergence carries with it two dramas.

One of those dramas has to do with the story to be put onto the screen. The other has to do with the struggle to achieve recognition from the institutions which have been established for film promotion, and to get adequate financial and human resources to deliver a professional film.

Elvira Lount (producer) and Laurence Keane (director) say that the choice of a story is the first and ultimately most important part of the range of decision-making which lies at the heart of filmmaking.

"The fact that we chose the Lount story had nothing to do with the fact that he was Elvira's distant ancestor," says Keane.

"I was and am convinced that there are problems with feature dramas in Canada: we have no mythology which drives us forward, which is progressive in the good sense. That kind of mythology requires a heroic sensibility.

"We have to recognize that the act of creating identity — it is as true of the filmmaker as it is of the citizen of a nation — requires a mythology. It may require an act of rebellion.

"Lount's choice of participating in the Rebellion of the 1830's had that central mythic power. Identity is always about choices."

Samuel Lount is Elvira Lount's and Laurence Keane's first major feature. Its \$1.7 million budget is modest by international standards.

"When I first met Elvira and we began discussing potential projects, I was immediately attracted to the story", says Keane. "But at that time I knew I needed a film that was 'do-able'.

"Getting \$10 million to make another kind of film might take five years and might never come about. I knew I wanted to make *Samuel Lount* some day, and when the financing became available, I realized it was a good choice for a first film.

"Lount's values were ours. The story speaks to modern audiences. And it is the kind of film which, because it is historical, was more appealing to funding agencies."

Keane believes the Canadian filmmaking 'system' has a kind of roulette at the middle of its character. Younger directors are given one or two opportunities to demonstrate achievement. If they fail to deliver quickly, regardless of how limited and limiting production opportunities are with Canada, they will probably never get serious chances at making feature film again.

Keane sees the filmmaker as being up against a pattern of choices which force trade-offs. "*Samuel Lount* lost some things because of this surrounding reality, but it also gained things because of our enthusiasm and because we care deeply about the integrity of the story itself."

Before starting work on *Samuel Lount*, Keane had produced and co-scripted a very low-budget feature called *Big Meat Eater*. He describes the 1982 film (not without some obvious

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humour) as a "new wave horror ethnic musical science fiction comedy." *Variety* described it as a "crisp and highly amusing farce." The film has developed a small cult following in North America and England.

"Before you ask the question — no, it really didn't prepare me for *Samuel Lount*. Except in a technical way. Let's just say the difference between the two films suggests I'm flexible," Keane says.

The choice of *Samuel Lount* was, he says, both a critical career choice and it also reflected his own sense of dramatic value. "With Elvira and the writer, Phil Savath, there was a common issue, the interest in laying a foundation for future dramatic structures. That may sound too grand a scheme, but we really did think like that."

Time, cash and patience

Both Keane and Lount believe that the hard question of choices gets too little attention in filmmaking. From vision to

event... the time it takes to get a film from idea to fact can occupy a major part of a lifetime, and especially of a career.

"If you make poor choices more than a few times, you won't have a career," Lount says. She points out the consequences of her ancestor's choices — he was hanged. One thinks of several promising young Canadian directors who made choices, gloried in the blaze of media typically accorded these events, and then promptly died.

For Keane, "Whether or not one has a premeditated sense of career development, or merely responds to a theme" can amount to the same thing.

The major realization once funds become available, Lount explains, is that you suddenly are in the driver's seat. The fact of control encompasses every microscopic detail and every macroscopic decision and choice.

"There are so many elements you can't control up-front. No matter how

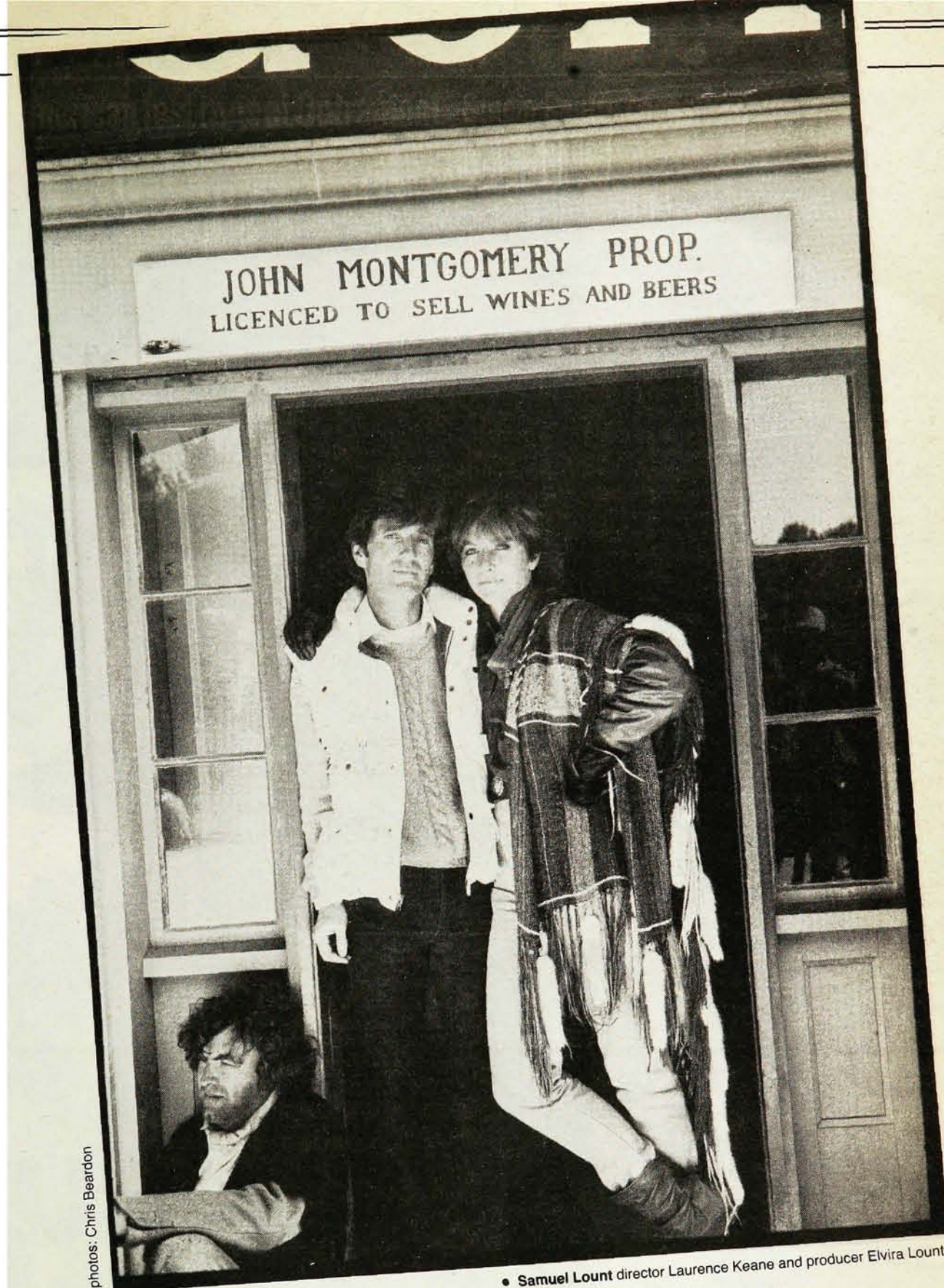
carefully pre-conceived and pre-imagined the event is. And the other realization we came to quickly is that everything takes at least twice as long as you imagine it will," says Lount.

Keane is also convinced there is no 'apolitical' human condition. His sense of the values in the *Samuel Lount* story relates to that awareness. Because neither the filmmaker or political activist — even the reluctant ones such as Lount — can escape choice, and because they have restricted control, politics is a constant.

"I find that when I respond to a story it is because it speaks to my condition, to my time. When that happens I know the dramatic values are there."

The cultural matrix

Keane and Lount both believe the ultimate issue is one of *authenticity*. Some producers and directors pick stories because they believe they are marketable; they appear less than interested in the value of the story.



photos: Chris Beardson

• *Samuel Lount* director Laurence Keane and producer Elvira Lount

They agree that every cultural 'product' enters a marketplace, where too many young filmmakers think demand is infinitely elastic. But that isn't the case. Choosing a story is only the beginning.

The prelude to script-development reflected the same awareness of a richness of material, hence conflicts and political choices about what to emphasize, what to let remain as a diminished chord in the film's dramatic form. Says Keane:

"Elvira's brother had been collecting material on this story for years. We began systematically looting the history books and archives for additional material. We looked at everything, and began writing.

"I suppose professional politicians face the same issue. There is a fantastic array of material; which facts, which trends are meaningful? Which events most clearly speak about the central, most vital issues?

"Anyone who has tried to wrest a dramatic feature from historical material recognizes the basic issue. The true historical time frame is different than the dramatic line."

Keane says there was pain in throwing out remarkable material, including scenes in which Samuel Lount was marched back to Toronto in bare feet. There were a series of petitions by rather surprising people (thirty thousand of them) trying to save him. His wife wrote a historically fascinating series of passionate letters to authorities appealing for clemency. Even native Indians petitioned the Compact authorities for clemency.

"Samuel Lount was a remarkable and authentic Christian. He was so kind and generous — he carted grain on his back to farmers and Indians starving in winter — that squaring that character with the one who participated in an active rebellion became a real challenge," Keane says.

Character, in this case, really was fate. The power of the Family Compact ruling Canada a half-century before Confederation reflected the inevitable connection between the self-interest of a few and the power of the gun.

Whose story?

One of the problems Lount and Keane, with writer Savath and others, faced was the fact that our history books still reflect the problem of validation. Who provides the original stories? Who describes someone for all time as 'rebel'?

Lount and Keane found that the stories available were validated by the people who won, the Compact. Hence both the genuine story — received by the Lount family through legend and original sources — and the need to understand how history really works needed to be sorted out. What has been created should interest professional historians, and, hopefully, provoke some questions about why our Riels and Lount are not honoured in the same way the American revolutionaries were.

"It suited our values as producers that the process was collaborative. We learned by what we were doing", Lount says.

Keane adds, "Even though the story had triggered a very powerful creative response, we were as conditioned to the received, conventional wisdom... to get at the dramatic values we had to revise our own vision first."



• Thomson and Griffiths



• Keane directing Thomson



• A moment in history: Keane instructs Sir Francis Bond Head (Andrew Gillies), left, and Bishop Strachan (Donald Davis)



• Forging the future: R.H. Thomson in Samuel Lount

But they admit they could not have approached the subject *tabula rasa*, with no preconceptions. "We had no intention of doing that. This is a highly personal story about personal choices. He believed in what he did; we believed in it. I suppose, if I happen to turn reactionary in the future, I might see Sir Francis Bond Head as the hero," Keane says.

The simple truth about Canadian history, they say, is that little has really changed. A tiny percentage of wealthy Canadians own 85 percent of the country's assets. In that sense, the Family Compact is still operative and still validating a particular view of history.

"That's what we mean by the issue of mythology in Canada and the 'heroic sensibility' we don't have. We kept coming back time and again to the image of the forge. In those days the forge was more than a technology. It was a symbol of transformations.

"Samuel Lount's wife Elizabeth in one of her letters talks about the issue of freedom. The price we pay for freedom is eternal vigilance. She said individuals could be destroyed but not what they valued."

The mere fact that a major feature film will now elevate the story of this obscure Canadian figure says something about the resiliency of the idea in history.

Elvira Lount, who grew up and went to school in Ontario, says Ontario history is a motherlode of stories of equal merit or better. She finds it curious that Ontario, with all its resources, has not responded by evoking its own history in feature films.

Creative values

Keane and Lount are acutely aware of the paradox of film production and direction. They say that most people don't appreciate the complexity of the management challenges within filmmaking.

"We were aware – and are more intensely aware today – that after the shoot is over, and before it began, there is the vacuum in which you are in total control. In the process of shooting you operate in flux.

"It's all a question of pushing everyone to a limit and then catching it, freezing it," Keane says.

Asked if he operate with a sense of what would happen if he failed, Keane said Canada is unusual among filmmaking countries in that the rewards for success are limited, but "you don't get crushed that badly if you fail. At least, not the first time."

Lount and Keane attempted to draw together people in the production who responded to the values they identified in Samuel Lount's story. They looked for a sense of commitment and generally found people who knew everyone would benefit if they gave "150 per cent."

"Even if you have a production crew and cast with 'sympathetic vision' there is a major problem: how do you focus on what you started out to do? How do you get everyone to be involved in making the same film?" asks Lount.

"Most films fail because people are making different films."

Keane points out that every novice politician – and each new government – face the same difficulty.



● On location on *Samuel Lount* at King's Landing, N.B.

"If people are focused on common values, it is obviously easier to get at what you set out to do in the first place," Keane says.

But even if half the people involved are on the same wavelength, he says, you have a chance of getting what you originally wanted. The creative chaos in this philosophy of direction – creating the blueprint but letting the players involved shape the film – isn't necessarily a negative. "What you create will always be removed from the original vision, but it shouldn't suffer for that."

Keane explains that Canadian budgets typically mean inadequate rehearsal time (*Samuel Lount's* principal actors rehearsed main scenes for three days), the need to be able to change call times to adjust to weather and other circumstances, and to attempt to get peak performances without extended actor-director discussion on set.

Visual quality

The visual qualities of *Samuel Lount* are remarked upon by people who have seen the film, both in fine-cut form and in the rushes.

Although Canadian film commentary has not explored the visual aesthetics of Canadian films intensively (perhaps because attention has been paid to the role of dramatic form and narrative over strictly visual elements), a new generation of filmmakers here (and elsewhere) are consciously exploring the contribution it makes to the whole film.

"We were very deliberate in this area. Long before we even discussed the visual qualities with Marc Champion and Kim Steer (respectively Director of Photography and Art Director), we were going to galleries and museums everywhere. I collected postcard reproductions of images which capture something I was looking for.

"When I did have the critical discussions with Marc and Kim, and others who contributed, it made it easier to

shortcut the process of choosing," Keane says.

Samuel Lount was filmed at King's Landing Historical Settlement, in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Some shooting was done at the military compound there. Other locations included Sharon Temple (the actual temple built by the Children of Peace) at Holland Landing, Dundurn Castle and Queenston.

Another western Canadian film, Phil Borsos' *The Grey Fox*, was shot with that same attention to the visual qualities. Keane says the critical comment on *Grey Fox's* visual qualities has set a standard that other filmmakers will have to pay attention to.

"Once again, the visual elements was a very serious challenge from the point of view of choices. Because we view this as a film in which a very distinct 'person' makes a very clear choice, we tried to heighten the clarity of the human elements and soften the locations," Keane says.

Keane describes the impact by referring to a value of simplicity, which he says probably comes from his own appreciation for Vermeer. He visited a wide range of Canadian galleries seeking imagery associated with Canada in the 1830's. Resources from this period of Canadian history include many etchings done at the time of the Rebellion.

"Marc Champion absorbed all this and I believe that he has captured the quality we were seeking," says Keane.

Awareness included the choice of colours. Even the Sharon Temple's colors were carried over into the photography, costumes and sets. Keane says he doesn't believe this kind of attention to the visual elements is effete or superfluous. "There is a tendency to believe everything in history was grey and drab. Perhaps we are captivated by black-and-white or sepia photographs. I'm sure the settings were as colourful as they are today," Keane says.

Keane says his view of directing

requires that the director build a completely believable universe within the film. Everything within that universe has to fit, must reflect the integrity of the story.

"It isn't like making a film that is contemporary, which can be set in a familiar, existing environment. You have to go back and reconstruct to serve the fiction in the heart of the film."

Many of the actors involved in *Samuel Lount* were associated with Theatre Passe Muraille, which made it easier for them to quickly and organically involve themselves in Samuel Lount's story.

Interestingly, writer Phil Savath worked for several seasons with the Caravan Theatre in British Columbia. This unique group travels in the summer season through B.C.'s Interior towns and cities in horse-drawn wagons, playing in outdoor settings.

"We even had Phil do some horseback stunt riding," Keane says.

Burden of conscientiousness

Elvira Lount says her ancestor has interested her as far back as she can recollect.

"This whole experience for me has been even more of a curious circle. It's almost like living a kind of tautology.

"My values were formed with an awareness of Samuel Lount. By being part of this film, it's much like coming full circle... I'm putting the values I see in that story back out there for others to know about and appreciate."

Both Keane and Lount feel that artistic choices are personal choices. Like a growing number of others within the film- and related industries in Canada, they know there is a burden in having a sense of the way things should be. Although they didn't mention it, that might serve as an explanation for Samuel Lount's choice as well.