

# Chasing Rainbows

Time turns back sixty years and location travels south-west from Montreal to Toronto for CBC's current 13-hour drama mega-project, **Chasing Rainbows**, produced in conjunction with Northernlight and Picture and starring Paul Gross, Michael Riley, and Julie Stewart. This production has already received a dose of media-blitz for its use of the High Definition Television System (HDTV) from Japan, an electronic cinematic system that is touted to match the crisp look of 35mm, while lending itself to the production capabilities of the computer age.

But what is interesting about **Chasing Rainbows** and its use of HDTV is its effect on a 'period' piece and the sets and props. Mark Blandford, executive producer, was prepared to tackle this period piece after his experience in the same capacity on **Empire Inc.** He and writer Douglas Bowie isolated the period between the two world wars of this century as being rife with dramatic potential for this script.

"It's impossible not to be ambivalent about the period," Mark Blandford reflects in a telephone interview. "On the one hand, you've got all kinds of stories that are waiting to be told." He rhymes off a series of characters and incidents that have been integrated into the body of the script. "But there is also the freedom that you have with the period, though. And I don't mean license, I mean freedom to talk about people who were real people."

One of the characters he refers to is Reg Steffenson, who is based on the real, long-ignored Canadian pioneer of wireless broadcasting, Reginald Fessenden. Set decorator Armando Sgrignuoli originally intended to visit the Edison Museum in Michigan to find the necessary gadgetry to equip this character's attic and rooftop. But when he visited Toronto's Vintage Radio Store, radio buff Mike Batsch invited him into his home where he found a treasure trove of early radio equipment. Batsch was also a storehouse of information on Fessenden. From him, Sgrignuoli discovered that one of the inventor's eccentricities included his habit of serving his



• **Chasing Rainbows'** Roaring '20s look: from left to right, Alison MacLeod, Kim Cayer, Michael Riley, Louise Laparé, and Malika Mendez

cat Mikums sips of brandy from a wicker-encased thermos bottle.

"But the other advantage of a period piece is that people love it," says Blandford. "It's more expensive of course. You've got costumes...the Montreal of 1919 no longer exists, so you've got to matte it. So every second scene, somebody's saying, 'Wait a minute, did it look like this? What *did* the street look like across from the Windsor Hotel in 1919?'"

But he is also contending with working out the bugs of applying HDTV on this shoot. He is tight-lipped about any problems in working with the new system, but he likes the pioneering aspect of it all. "Certainly, you're on a new learning curve, and therefore it takes a little longer for everybody to know what the strengths and limitations of a new thing are. But the quality of the picture and the quality of the matting that we can do is beyond belief. And the quality of excitement that is generated on the production is astonishing."

With HDTV's increased number of lines - 1,125 instead of the usual 525 - veracity takes on a whole new dimension. Indeed, the constant thread of tension that is generated by the creation of illusion for the camera while maintaining reality is being somewhat redefined on this production.

Consider the case of the flask: props master Ron Ror was challenged to come up with one that an upper-class but spunky twenties darling such as Paula Ashley (played by Julie Stewart) might carry discreetly tucked away in her stocking (with a suitable restorative, of course). An imitation won't cut it here - any reproduction using cheap metal would show its base nature for HDTV to catch. What Ror eventually found in his antique store ramblings was the genuine item cast in elegant, sterling silver. A quick look at the in-truck monitor confirms the luminous colour and a richness of tone not generally seen on video.

The money of the age was not easy to come by either. Police and the R.C.M.P. were reluctant to allow the antique though still legal tender to be reproduced (read counterfeited), and the CBC legal department finally had to guarantee that its movie money wouldn't be used anywhere than on set. The bills were colour-Xeroxed on a slightly thicker kind of paper than the original so they wouldn't crackle on tape. Ror is now keeper of the money - he carefully doles out the oversized notes and locks them up at the end of each shooting day.

On this particular night, one of the shabbier warehouse districts that skirts

the downtown Toronto core is the locale for one in a series of week-long night locations. A huge spotlight at the mouth of a gaping alley lights up the ubiquitous Winnebago and blue CBC panel trucks. Dense rolling fog drifts quietly from the heart of the warehouse enclave onto the busy Friday night street.

On set a vintage 1921 Dodge is demanding obeisance from actor Booth Savage. It sputters and dies every time he tries to reverse it. Finally, his companion played by Claire Rodger (chummily referred to as 'Dollface') starts and warms the engine before he throws himself into the driver's seat and drives off. Never underestimate a woman's touch...

Mark Blandford is sharing directorial duties with William Fruet in order to gain first-hand information about working with HDTV, directing episodes three and four. "There are those who think that I'm out of my mind," he notes wryly. But in living on the cutting edge of this new technology, he is also able to deal with its new demands and work the lessons of that experience into upcoming production scheduling.

Audiences will have a chance to look at the results of this gamble in 1988.

Patricia Michael •

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