

John Blanchard's
Codco

They keep rolling out in Newfoundland like there's no tomorrow – that special brand of down-home, raucous, irreverent, sometimes raunchy humour that never lets anyone or anything off the hook. Like fish and brewis or seal flippers and cod's tongues it seems to be a special North Atlantic elixir that the people of the rock can't live without. Whether it's the wild antics of the Muffers, or Codco, or the outrageous social parody of **Faustus Bidgood** or **Dolly Cake** there seems to be no end in sight to the wellspring of Newfoundland wit.

Celebrating this peculiar form of east coast lunacy, Michael Donovan of Halifax-based Salter Street Films put together a package to bring some of the humour of the Codco company to the rest of Canada. I visited the set of this production, which has the working title of **Codco**, in November as it was shooting in the studios of CBC, Halifax. It began production on October 14 and wrapped on November 8 and is a co-production of CBC and Salter Street Films. Starring the lunatic crew of the Codco Company – Andy Jones, Kathy Jones, Greg Malone, Tommy Sexton and Mary Walsh – the production was an ambitious one. In over 20 shooting days they produced 55 set-ups which are ultimately destined for a television series of six half-hour shows. Each show will consist of some 10 separate sketches under a general variety format.

One of the most interesting aspects of this production is how it was put together and what it may represent in



• Andy Jones, Cathy Jones, Greg Malore, Tommy Sexton and Mary Walsh in **Codco**

photo: Jeannette Hanning

terms of future Maritime programming. According to Jack Kellum, the CBC producer attached to the shoot, in this region of Canada, as well as in most others, regional variety programming has died a quiet death. Gone are the heady days of **Don Messer's Jubilee** and the **Wonderful Grand Band Show**. These days the regional CBC stations count themselves lucky if they can maintain their news and current affairs programming at present levels. The budgets for variety programming are simply not there. Nor has there been, I suspect, the administrative will to undertake projects of this nature.

Onto this comparatively dormant scene stepped Salter Street which acted as a kind of broker to bring together CBC, Telefilm, and some private investment to make the project possible. From talking with CBC personnel it's safe to say that they are quite excited about the project, hoping that private initiative combined with some Telefilm funding will bring more projects of this kind rolling up to their doorstep. Salter Street, in fact, would like to see this

mini-series turn into a full-fledged series. It is scheduled for delivery to the CBC on March 31 and will be broadcast in the fall. If it is well received, Salter Street will press its case.

Given the current financial climate in Canada, producing variety programming in this fashion may be the only way in which regions will have an opportunity to develop their ideas. Certainly for the Atlantic area this production is an important step in this direction, both in terms of regional programming and in helping to support people and groups which would like to develop such material.

Despite the logistical difficulties of some 55 set-ups shot both in the studio and on location in various parts of the city – and despite the difficulties of coordinating a crew of over 30 which included both a CBC in-house crew of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and National Association of Broadcast Employees & Technicians (NABET) members, as well as freelancers brought in for the production and the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Tele-

vision and Radio Artists (ACTRA) cast – everyone seemed to agree that the production had gone remarkably well. Production manager Andrea Shaw agreed that working on this production involved quite a mind-shift for many involved; both for the in-house members who worked with outsiders and vice versa. The greatest problems of the production seem to have been technical ones. According to producer Michael Donovan, much of the in-house equipment which was available at CBC studios in Halifax was 'State of the Ark' in vintage. This created certain difficulties and some equipment, such as all the broadcast Beta equipment, had to be rented in central Canada.

The producers did not eschew bringing in people from outside when the production values of the show dictated it. The director of the show was John Blanchard from Vancouver. His past experience with SCTV gave him the kind of comedy experience necessary to bring out the humour of the script which was jointly written by the Codco members. The art director was former Maritimer Bruce McKenna who took time off from various assignments in Toronto to come and work on the **Codco** show.

One evening, in a departure from the normal format, a studio audience was brought in to see, amongst other things, Andy Jones as a Johnny Carson style talk show host interviewing Debbie Christ (Kathy Jones) and Sheila O'Nazareth (Mary Walsh), two female authors who had just published their bestselling novel *We Were There* describing their experiences in the Holy Land during the time of Christ. Although the Catholic Church in Newfoundland may not be amused, the studio audience was doubled over in laughter at the description of the disciples as "they was party boys". Look forward to more of this madness when **Codco** takes to the airwaves next fall.

Christopher Majka •

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