

## Northern comfort

**F**ilm a cold prairie winter in balmy southern Ontario? It might sound absurd, but that's what the producers of *Cold Comfort* are trying to do in a suburban warehouse in Toronto. Not only that, but shooting a winter film during an early summer heat wave is only one of the many obstacles making director Vic Sarin's feature film debut unduly difficult.

The film, originally scheduled to start shooting in February/March, was first delayed due to the problems with Telefilm financing, then the exterior location in Winnipeg fell through, and finally, just as the cameras began rolling in mid-May, the lead actress, Cyndy Preston, was involved in a car accident and had to withdraw from the production. She was replaced by Margaret Langrick, the award-winning young star of Sandy Wilson's *My American Cousin*.

All this might have deterred lesser producers, but Ilana Frank and Ray Sager are cautiously optimistic that they have something special on their hands, despite the many setbacks. *Cold Comfort* is an unusual departure for Norstar Entertainment, more noted for its successful commercial hits like *Prom Night* and *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II*. It's based on a play by Jim Garrard, godfather of the Toronto underground theatrical movement, and is part of a trilogy he calls "bondage plays for my country."

*Cold Comfort* is essentially a black comedy set against the isolation and loneliness of the Canadian prairies. The action revolves around an intense triangle formed by the play's three characters. Delores (played by Langrick) a 15-year-old who wants to know more about the world beyond her kitchen window; Floyd (played by Maury Chaykin, *Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks*), her father, with whom

she lives in an abandoned service station; and Stephen (Paul Gross, recently seen in CBC's *Chasing Rainbows*), the proverbial travelling salesman, who unwittingly stumbles into this complex relationship.

In many ways, *Cold Comfort* is a special project for Ilana Frank. And old friend of Garrard's (she worked with him at Theatre Passe Muraille and Toronto Free Theatre in the early '70s) she has wanted to make this film for many years.

"Jim's an incredible writer," comments Frank. "When I first saw the play at the Toronto Theatre Festival in 1981 I felt it should be made into a film. It had moments in it that were so powerful, so emotional - there was tension, humour, suspense - that I thought it could be captured on film. At the time I had a company called Stratton/Frank Associates. When we split up, Anna (Stratton) went to Moses Znaimer. They optioned the property and Moses held the rights for a couple of years, originally intending it to be filmed for pay-TV."

In the meantime, Frank joined Simcom and worked her way up to vice-president in charge of development and production for Norstar Entertainment. Her credits with the company include associate producer on *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* and *Blindside*, with Harvey Keitel. When the rights to *Cold Comfort* became available, she moved quickly to convince her boss, Peter Simpson, that the project was worth doing. Joining forces with Ray Sager, who was the co-producer on *Hello Mary Lou* and *Blindside*, they hired Richard Beattie (*Blindside*) and Lee Siegel (*Hoover Vs. The Kennedys*) to write the script.

In choosing the screenwriters, they were looking for speed. "We optioned the play in October and we were supposed to shoot in the winter, so we needed it done quickly," says Frank. "I felt that I wanted to get on with the project and I felt that Jim might need a lot more time. He's not adept yet at scriptwriting, which is not to say that he won't be in the future."

The choice of Vic Sarin as director was Ray's.

"I was at the Cannes film festival when they screened *Dancing in the Dark*," says Sager, "and the buzz about the photography was extraordinary. When I saw it, I said I got to work with this guy. Here's a guy with such an incredible style and a real perception. In *Family Reunion* (which Vic directed for the CBC) he kept the actor's performances very delicate and not over the top."

Sarin has directed a great deal for television, including the multi-award winning *You've Come a Long Way Katie* in 1981, and he is not too happy with the label of "first-time director." He says, "Over the years, the one thing that I've felt strongly about is that you get labelled in this business - that you're a director, a producer, a cameraman, whatever - and I think it's wrong, simply because if you like to make films, you like to make films. You have a certain function to perform, and in a case like mine, I've spent 25 years looking through the lens and there are certain stories that I understand. I've directed in television for six or seven years. Each story has its own life and you have to make the life work for you, no matter what story you do. There are no rules. The one rule is to tell the story effectively."

He does admit, however, that *Cold Comfort* has been a difficult challenge. This is much more difficult than I first thought. There are layers within layers. I knew quite a bit from the beginning, and I wanted to take a cinematic approach. The strength of this piece is that you're not looking for that so-called commercialism or Hollywood style. So, if I can get a good marriage between the three characters and cinematic style, I might make something simple and nice. That's the challenge, how to make it work despite its limitations. It's a very intense film, but that's the joy as well."

When *Cold Comfort* wraps in Toronto the production will take a five to six-month hiatus, until once again there is snow on the Canadian prairies, and exteriors will be completed.

Wyndham Paul Wise •

## Inside Ottawa

**A**n elegant chandelier hangs from the high ceiling in the Government House ballroom. Deep red velour curtains frame the beige lace draped over large windows. Dusty pink walls are adorned with decorative fixtures and carved columns. On a plush stage, the "Theatre Royal", The Governor General's Footguards band plays military marches for the government "court" against the backdrop of an ostentatiously displayed British flag. This is the imperial Ottawa of Wilfrid Laurier and the setting for *The Private Capital*, a CBC drama currently in production.

Based on the book by Sandra Gwyn, winner of the Governor General's Award for Literature in 1984, *The Private Capital* is an elaborate, three-hour re-creation of Ottawa society at the turn of the century. The driving force behind the production is screen-writer/producer Jeannine Locke (*Chautauqua Girl*, *Island Love Song*). She so enjoyed reading Sandra Gwyn's book, that she sent the author a fan letter. Upon receiving the letter, Gwyn contacted Locke and suggested adapting the book. In 1986, one year later, Locke began the research which has resulted in the TV version of Ottawa's transitional past.

"The great strength of the book and, I hope, the strength of my script, is that it's about private lives in Ottawa," says Locke. "There are no speeches in the Commons to advance the action. It's not Ottawa behind closed doors but its private lives and how those lives converged because of the Boer War and were changed by it."

Efforts to create authenticity have been exhaustive. Each department has its own tales of the extensive research and labour required. Locke notes, "One of things we do want to emphasize is that for us this is really the most ambitious production in this season—a brute."

Ross Clyde, second assistant director, remarked on the amount of time and preparation involved: "It's a period piece in 1900. It's a horror story trying to make the streets look period. All the costume time and hair time. Half the moustaches you see are phony. Almost all of the women's hair is phony. That's a big time consumer. Plus there's so much music in the show and trying to prerecord and playback is very time-consuming."

Michael Harris, costume designer, researched for over two months before he put pen to paper. "You're dealing with the upper echelons of society, the show revolves around what is a 'court'. And you see them all over the place. You don't just see them at work, you see them skating... I think we must have built for the principals about 125 or so different outfits."

Paul Gross arm-wrestles Maury Chaykin for the right to wear a silly hat as Margaret Langrick looks on



PHOTO: MICHAEL MCDERMOTT