

The Wish

Roll camera,  
wheelchair

**J**ericho Beach is one of those places that make Vancouver the only sensible place in Canada to spend summer. To the north lies English Bay and, beyond its steel-blue waters, the mountains of West Vancouver. To either side are hills and valleys of human flesh gloriously disregarding recent warnings about the dangers of too many UV rays. And, approaching from the diving dock, a group of wheelchairs, their silver spokes glinting in the midday sun.

It's lunchtime on the set of *The Wish*, a half-hour drama destined for '88-89 broadcast on the CBC *Family Pictures* series. Many of the people on the beach blankets turn to look at the passing brigade of wheelchair consultants and extras. Some glance up and then look away, not sure what to make of the procession. Somehow people who can't walk in the sand seem a little out of place at the beach.

That's partly what *The Wish* is about, our able-bodied attitudes and reactions to those who 'walk' with their arms or, in the case of more severe handicaps, with electric motors. It's the story of 16-year-old Allison Bates (Candace Ratcliffe, *Cowboys Don't Cry*) and her relationship with her parents (Merrilyn Gann & Grey Rogers). Allison has been in a wheelchair for a year and a half following a skiing accident. The story, by first-timer Leigh L. Wilks, begins on Allison's 16th birthday. With the gift of scuba lessons and equipment, her mother challenges her to start using her body again.

The show is a production of Christian Bruyere's Face to Face Films Ltd. (*Rape; Face to Face, Dads and Kids, Walls and Shelley*) and is directed by Roy Hayter (*Our Last Saturday* and *Lies from Lotusland*). Bruyere found the story while teaching a writing course at the University of British Columbia. He guided Leigh L. Wilks through a breakneck schedule of rewrites so that shooting and post-production would be completed for a fall broadcast date. Wilks says the idea came from both personal experience and research.

"I'd never known anyone who was disabled before," she told *Cinema Canada* while sitting on the dock watching her first screenplay being turned into celluloid. "I think Rick Hansen's tour made me more aware of some of the problems and then meeting (a new friend who is in a wheelchair) made me even more aware.

"I'm a university student and I did a paper this last term on doctors and their attitudes toward disability, both in their patients and in their colleagues. One of the things I learned was that the media does present disabled people with a hook; a person who is so good, or so plucky, they're always a bit larger than life, either



PHOTO: BOB ANHESTER  
**Director Roy Hayter, Candace Ratcliffe (Allison Bates) and Peter Yunker on location for *The Wish***

incredibly positive or incredibly negative but they are just people who happen to have some kind of physical problem."

Chris Bruyere says that's one of the reasons CBC picked up the script so quickly, taking the risk that some viewers might be put-off by the story about a handicapped girl.

"I don't think its going to make anyone uncomfortable," he argues, "It's more of an awareness type of program. Rather than having a negative, heavy point of view it's treating the subject quite lightly. Yet there are some real problems that are overcome in the half-hour. It gives people a real feel for paraplegics and for hope in their own lives."

Pamela Gerow is on-set both as a tennis-playing extra and as a consultant. She's been in a wheelchair since a "car crash, SFU field trip, Biology, on The Island, and I broke my back". Like Allison, she spent some time withdrawing from life before "I got fed up." She's now co-ordinator of volunteers at Vancouver's G.F. Strong Rehabilitation Centre and an enthusiastic member of Theatre Terrific, a company specifically for the disabled. She's Candace Ratcliffe's coach on *The Wish*.

"People imagine what you can't do," she says, wheeling her way across a bumpy parking lot to the catering table, "they don't know what you can do. And a lot of times you don't know yourself until you get on with it. I think it's wonderful at the end of the script when she says 'I'm normal as long as I feel that way'. The idea of scuba diving is that you don't even need a wheelchair, you're in the water, you're on your own and it's a wonderful feeling of complete freedom."

Candace didn't have 18 months or even 18 days to get used to wheeling her way through life. Cast just a few days before shooting began, the Vancouver Youth Theatre graduate took a crash course.

"I got a big old rickety chair and went out at first for a few minutes at a time. My arms got so sore. After the first day I had big blisters on my hands, they popped, I have callouses, raw thumbs and sunburnt knees.

"There's a lot of different reactions," she says, admitting that handicaps weren't a subject she'd given a lot of thought to prior to *The Wish*, "For example, guys my own age don't look at you no matter what. Older people talk to you and help you the most. Young girls are kinda scared and mothers sometimes warn their kids to 'get out of the way'."

The cast and crew would be optimistic to hope that one half-hour CBC drama is going to do as much for the handicapped as, say, Rick Hansen's awe-inspiring marathon. But they feel it's part of an ongoing process of education which could lead to disabled actors being cast in everyday parts, even if the script doesn't specifically call for a wheelchair. Pamela Gerow speculates on Alexis Carrington suffering a spinal cord injury in some future episode of *Dynasty*.

"It would have to be a long process," she suggests, rolling back from lunch to continue shooting on the dock, "She'd be injured and go through rehab. But he'd still be the same personality. She dresses very sexily but she could dress that way in a wheelchair. Forget the chair, put her in a couch and put some wheels on that!

"Maybe not start with such a big role. Start a new series off where someone like myself plays psychologist. Or in *Danger Bay* maybe I'm a marine biologist. Show this person with a regular social life, a boyfriend, a regular life. It's not that farfetched. People are people whether they walk or roll." *The Wish* wrapped up shooting on July 28th.

Mark O'Neill ●

No Blame

Suissa, Shaver  
and Martin

**I**n the corridor of a new office tower in downtown Montreal, Danièle J. Suissa, dressed in white for the current heat wave, sits in the director's chair and speaks in French to her calm crew.

Cameras and sound roll, elevator doors open and close as extras walk in and out, here and there, then tiptoe off the edges of the small, crowded set. Helen Shaver, in the lead role of Amy Donaldson, a successful city-magazine fashion editor, sobs deeply. Amy has just learned from her doctor (played by Jan Rubes) that she is a carrier of the HIV virus. She sinks to the floor. She is seven months pregnant.

*No Blame*, budgeted at \$1.7 million, being shot on 16mm and edited on video, is a co-production of Suissa's 3 Themes Inc. (Canada) and Hamster Productions (France) in association with the Venture Entertainment Group. It is billed as the first made-for-television movie on the subject of a woman with the AIDS virus. Suissa, Shaver and Donald Martin, on whose story the film is based and who co-wrote the screenplay with Suissa, deem the film to be, above all, about 'fear'. Martin placed the scenario amidst the lives of the affluent, white North Americans in order to punctuate the fact that AIDS can affect anyone... and does.

*No Blame* is a project which got off the ground quickly. Martin, working as a publicist (formerly for Helen Shaver), novelist and screenwriter in Toronto, was having dinner with Helen Shaver's agent Michael Oscars when the subject of AIDS came up in conversation.

They discussed the true story of a woman who had wanted to become pregnant but tested positive to the HIV virus. The story became the starting point for the screenplay *No Blame*. Martin allowed himself three days locked away in a room with a word processor to write the first draft.

Accomplishing what he'd set out to do, Martin then asked his agent to send the script to Suissa with whom he'd become acquainted through his work as a publicist and journalist. Coincidentally, on that same day, Martin bumped into Suissa at the corner of Yonge and Bloor in downtown Toronto, told her about the script he'd written, and personally sparked her interest. She promised to read it as soon as she got back to her office in Montreal. One and a half weeks later, Suissa purchased the option on the screenplay and *No Blame* was set in motion towards production. Within the four days that followed, Suissa made a deal with producer Nicole Godin of Hamster Productions (France) which became the first twinning of Canadian and French productions. *No Blame* was to be the first of two projects. Hamster Productions, prior

to the deal with Suissa's 3 Themes Inc. (Canada), had been in the process of producing *Sentiments*, a series of nine made-for-television movies co-produced with nine other countries. Just as the Australian contingent's project fell through, Suissa swooped in with *No Blame*.

The screenplay of *No Blame* went through 'seven or eight' rewrites before it was deemed ready to shoot. Suissa respectfully refers to Martin as "not a jukebox writer." Her definition of the term: "You put money in and they write." Forming a tightly knit creative team, Suissa and Martin evolved as co-writers, 'enjoying' 6:00 a. m. script conference calls and sharing views during production. On the set, Martin as writer, stands near Suissa with headphones on, available at all times for consultation with her and the actors. Martin makes a point of never offering advice to the actors unless he is asked to give it, so as not to interfere with Suissa's direction.

Suissa seeks strong and lasting collaborations. Martin is set to co-write the second of the twinning projects. With *No Blame*, director of photography René Verzier marks his seventh project with Suissa. Interestingly, Suissa makes use of a video-assist for every shot, something which does not sit well with all d. o. p. s. Explaining, Suissa refers to the mutual trust that she and Verzier have that allows them to move past the nuts and bolts of devising a shot and on to an advanced creative interplay.

Helen Shaver agreed to play the role of Amy Donaldson early in her current pregnancy but she was almost seven months pregnant when the cameras began to roll this summer. In light of her advanced pregnancy, the screenplay was revised, substantially changing the dramatic import of the scenario as a result. Helen, on set having her hair put up and watching the work of the hairdresser for continuity, looks healthy and vibrant and says she does not feel any exceptional strain working so far into her pregnancy. She talks about her energy being lower than usual (and adds that it is usually higher than most people's), the fact that she has to eat more and eat more carefully, and that her body temperature is higher so that under the hot lights there are times when she feels some discomfort; nevertheless, she has encountered no real difficulties with the situation. Shaver states that she'd always intended to work through the entire term of her pregnancy if there was work to be done.

Shaver, with a hint of incredulity, says that the shoot of *No Blame* has gone well. She refers to herself and Suissa as both "strong and opinionated" women and that, somehow, out of their creative disagreements, they have arrived at mutually agreeable decisions without having to compromise. Shaver speaks of being "challenged" by Suissa's direction. Asked what differences there are for her as an actress in working on a made-for-television movie versus a feature, Shaver points to her hair and asks that it



Danièle Suissa is down on her knees while Marie-Christine Barrault is rather laid back about things

be redone as it had been done the day before.

Suissa, an admitted workaholic, is scheduled to fly to Morocco four days after the wrap of *No Blame* to begin work on a project she first conceived of over 20 years ago. *Kame Yama Kane* (meaning 'once upon a time' in Moroccan) is a meandering adventure tale for children; a project to which Suissa seems quite endeared. Also in the works, a production with Henry Jaglom of the script Suissa wrote for Anais Ninn while the author was still alive, and a production with Pat Ferns of Linda Griffiths' adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man*.

Suissa thrives on her work because she "loves" what she does. "I am so happy. I just turned 48. It feels great!" Ironically, two years ago, while slightly disillusioned by producing, she thought she would only direct. "It was the waiting by the phone that I couldn't take." With energy to burn, the situation didn't last long. Now, Suissa and her company 3 Themes Inc. are more active than ever before. Suissa recently hired a business administrator to handle the reams of paperwork which any producer must shuffle through. Although Suissa prides herself on her business acumen, she was quite relieved to have this administrative aspect of producing taken out of her hands. On *No Blame*, Suissa

functions as executive producer, producer, co-writer, director, and will distribute the project in association with Gordon Guiry Enterprises. Needless to say, Suissa does what she wants. Kudos for bravado.

Toby Zeldin •

## The Unspoken Unspeakable acts

The last time I interviewed Bill Sorochan, he was promoting his repertory cinema The Screening Room. The room was located in downtown Edmonton, in an avant-garde theatre company's venue. Every Saturday night, Sorochan would present offbeat film fare. The building was old and somewhat decrepit; audiences sat on a motley collection of couches and chairs, and when they were fully occupied, there was an old mattress to recline on. During the interview, he was specifically promoting his latest choice in films, which he had dubbed Edmonton's First Annual Distorted Film Festival. Sorochan didn't have a great deal to work with. He had virtually no

budget, and yet he was managing to attract a fair amount of publicity. The resulting festival was a success (the mattress was always crowded). The Distorted line-up was a cult classic extravaganza, which included *Homicidal*, *The Corpse Grinders*, *Shock Corridor*, *The Mysterians*, and *W. R. Mysteries of the Organism*.

This time around, Sorochan is making the film; it's entitled *The Unspoken*, and his influences are a bit more, shall we say, 'sophisticated'. Orson Welles' *Magnificent Ambersons*, Douglas Sirk's *Tarnished Angels*, Raoul Walsh's *Strawberry Blonde*, and Fritz Lang's *Moonfleet* are the four major influences on Sorochan's present project, a film he wrote and is directing in Edmonton.

*The Unspoken* revolves around a 40-year-old car salesman who learns he is dying of cancer. He feels that his life has never amounted to much, but then he meets a teenager who is dying of the same illness. The script focuses on the development of their relationship. Sorochan describes the film as "a comedy-drama, with the accent on the comedy."

Wait a minute. A film shot entirely in black and white about a dying used car salesman - a comedy? "Yes," explains Sorochan, "A subject like this can become very maudlin in its presentation, so I want to accent the comedy. It's a film about dignity, but also hopefully, a very funny film."

Sorochan is working with a limited budget: \$150,000. He is managing, he says, through deferrals, a lot of hard work, and "a very understanding cast and crew."

"Shooting has been very hectic, but I'm very proud of the way everyone is working. Technically, things are a bit rough, but we seem to be overcoming that with our enthusiasm, dedication, and energy." More succinctly, he adds, "Everyone is working their butt off. With a lower budget, says Sorochan, "You must shoot a lot quicker than usual. You have less rehearsal time. However, this can be positive - it can create a sense of spontaneity. It is extremely important for a film to have this freshness, this vitality."

Sorochan is also dealing with what he calls the "Isolation Factor." "In Toronto, Vancouver, or Montreal, there's far more energy and activity. There are far more individuals doing what you're doing, it's far easier to get work on a shoot. Thus it's easier to make a living. Sometimes, when you make a film away from the major centres, your work is overlooked because of that. The film *Crimewave* (by John Paizs) was overlooked, I feel, because of where it was made (Winnipeg)."

"Then again there are many pros to working here. In Toronto, there are hundreds of people trying to do what I'm doing. Here, there are only three or four. This means less competition. I believe Alberta gives more money per artist than any other province in the country. If you really are committed, you can do things here. And of