

On Location

Lantern Hill

A journey of the heart

On a damp, overcast November day, director Kevin Sullivan puts in another long day on set. He wears a bright red bomber jacket against the cold, with a matching peaked cap, and moves with determined efficiency. During a take he will stand stark still beside his d.o.p., Brian Thomson, keenly observing the detail of the action before the camera. Then it's a few quick words to his young actress before he orders a retake. The small crew moves around him, trying to avoid the rain under the dripping canopies.

There is a subdued tension in the air. The morning is running late and the second unit is waiting impatiently for the prop car, a beautiful, English racing green, 1935 Peerless. Two hours late, they head downtown to shoot the Peerless passing through the magnificent gates of Spadina House.

Sullivan appears unflappable, but he is tired. It's been a busy year. He shot *Looking For Miracles* this summer, and now he's in the midst of a second feature that he has written, produced and is now directing, *Lantern Hill*. Meanwhile, his wife, Trudy, who negotiates all the contracts and runs their company, Sullivan Films, while Kevin is directing, is expecting their first child in five weeks.

Budgeted at \$4.3 million, and set, like *Looking For Miracles*, during the Depression, *Lantern Hill* is the story of a young girl's journey of the heart as she sets out against overwhelming odds to reunite her estranged parents. Aided by a mysterious seer and a young friend whom she meets along the way, the girl, Jane, finally achieves her fondest wish.

"The thing that appeals to me about this story," says Sullivan, "is the journey, the search. It's a very modern story in many ways, because it is about two parents who have been estranged for 10 years. There are supernatural elements in it and Jane goes from someone who is really quite timid and retiring to someone who is very strong and determined, who ultimately brings her parents together. It's a different story, rather moody, like *Wuthering Heights*."

Lantern Hill is part of a three-picture deal that Sullivan Films has with Disney and the CBC, with the participation of Telefilm, which, according to Sullivan, could turn into a six-picture deal with the possibility of a television series as well. All these things are negotiable given the high quality of Sullivan's work and the success he has had with *Anne Of Green Gables* and *The Sequel*. "In a way," he says, "these films are follow-ups to *Anne*, but the production values are much higher than on



Kevin Sullivan directs Marion Bennett in *Lantern Hill*

Anne. There's been considerably more money to work with."

Lantern Hill stars Sam Waterston, from *The Killing Fields* and numerous Woody Allen films, as Jane's father; Colleen Dewhurst, Marilla from *Anne* and *The Sequel*, as Hepzibah, the mysterious seer, and veteran Zoe Caldwell as Jane's rich and domineering grandmother. Sarah Polley who, at only nine, has been nominated for a Gemini this year for her work in the popular *Ramona* series, plays the part of the waif who befriends Jane, and 12-year-old Marion Bennett plays the lead.

Today, on set, it is a brief departure scene as Jane pulls away in the chauffeur-driven Peerless as her grandmother sternly looks on. Ms. Caldwell stands firm and erect even while waiting for the crew to set the scene in the steady drizzle. On cue she says her lines; then disappears inside out of the damp and cold. The house is a beautiful 1866 mansion that once looked out over the forested Don Valley north of Toronto in what is now the sprawling suburb of Don Mills.

In the spacious basement the caterer has set up a splendid lunch and Marion passes the time "interviewing" Ms. Caldwell, who goodnaturedly responds with kind words and smiles. For Marion, this is all pretty new and exciting, sitting with a real star. However, she is not entirely without experience. She recently completed the Touchstone Film *The Good Mother*, starring Diane Keaton. Marion played the Keaton character as a young girl, and she has done a movie-of-the-week for NBC. Her mother, Mary, has encouraged all three of her children in the profession, and indeed, it was

her brother Zachary who starred in *Looking For Miracles*. Her older brother, Gareth, appeared in *One Magic Christmas*, and is currently working on stage in Toronto. Marion says she is very comfortable working with Kevin, "because he is wonderful and he really knows what he is doing."

Meanwhile, Kevin is consulting with his art director on the placement of various *objets d'art* for the scene to be shot in the entranceway after lunch. Again, it is his attention to detail that becomes immediately obvious. His eye moves quickly over the various objects, choosing one over another, placing the flowers just right, and deciding that a rather ugly art deco lamp has to go.

Over lunch he talks about the success of Sullivan Films and his need to continually challenge himself, but not necessarily always as a director. "I'm more interested in producing this kind of film and being involved in the initial stages of writing than I am in directing 'X' number of films per year," he says. "The third one (in the Disney/CBC package) is *Night Of The Comet* and will be shot in '89. I'll just produce that one.

"It's all my own choice. If I wanted to continue directing these kinds of films, I probably could make a career of it, but I'm not really interested in doing that. There are other stories that I want to tell. I think my strengths are finding the heart of the story, getting it from the page to the screen and getting the right performers. I feel very fortunate in being able to find child performers who are really good at what they have to do. Zach Bennett in *Looking For Miracles* and Marion in *Lantern Hill*. These

kids are just good."

Kevin has had offers to work elsewhere and direct other films, but so far he is content to stay and work in Toronto. "I'm project-motivated rather than location-motivated," he says. "Everyone wants you to do *Anne Of Green Gables* all over again. That's something you have to be careful of. By directing my own films, I have a strong sense of control over what I do. Film really is a director's medium for the simple, practical reason that it allows you to make decisions on how much money will be allocated and how much time you can spend on a certain scene. It allows you the flexibility to get what you really need to make the film work in the end.

"It's something like an *auteur* sense and something that I have been able to negotiate over the number of films that I have done. It's something, also, I feel strongly about in going forward to the next level, which is creating films for the theatrical market. I'm not interested in directing other people's films unless I think it's a superb script that I would kill for. Otherwise, my time is much more profitably spent on my own ends, on things I do myself."

Lunch is over and it's back to work. Kevin has had more success with *Anne Of Green Gables* and *The Sequel* than most other Canadian directors have in a lifetime. But, it is the work at hand, not his past laurels, that consumes him most. He is modest about his accomplishments; success is only relative to the film at hand and getting the next shot in the can on time. Fortunately, the rain has stopped, but the sky is still overcast, and there is a long way to go before he can call it a wrap for the day.

Wyndham Paul Wise •