

Toronto IMAX in wonderland

"I'm late. I'm late. I'm very, very late", I think as I frantically search for the elusive entrance to the Hikari Kinema studio. As a last resort, I head towards a piece of plywood spray-painted 'H.K.', that is leaning against the old factory's wall. Not sure of what lies ahead, I enter the tiny rabbit-hole of a door beside it, and suddenly feel very, very small. I'm confronted with a huge green grapes-vine that runs from ceiling to floor, with five-foot leaves, grapes the size of bowling balls, and a six-legged lady bug that would have sent Miss Muffit into cardiac arrest.

This truly is a wonderland.

"Hi, I'm Ellis Ketcham," says a voice. (or did she say Alice? For a moment I wasn't sure.) But the special events co-ordinator for Imax Systems Corporation assures me that I'm in the right place.

Ellis and I follow the delicate star of today's shooting (nicknamed Gigi by the crew) as she is whisked off to her semiprivate dressing room between set adjustments. (Those lights are murder on a bug's complexion). She shares her quarters with Glutton the Chameleon (named for his voracious appetite), and a rather sly-looking caterpillar who smiles broadly at me though we're never formally introduced.

The three larger-than-life characters, created by Richard Lacroix of the Théâtre de l'Oeil, will help create the opening segment to a spectacular 3-D film to be premiered at the International Garden and Greenery Exposition in Osaka, Japan in 1990.

"We thought originally that we would either work with Japanese puppeteers or go to Europe," says co-producer Sally Dundas. "I just

thought that's probably where the best classically interesting theatrical puppeteers would be." But after checking around, Dundas and co-producer Roman Kroiter became aware of the growing interest in the Canadian theatre company, went to a performance and "fell in love with Richard's characters".

From there, Kroiter and the puppeteers collaborated to develop the segment of the film that will introduce the theme of movement. A question is posed. "How do the puppets move?" The answer is seen as the huge set, grapes, puppets and all, rotates to reveal the Théâtre de l'Oeil puppeteers. "But what", continues the query, "moves the puppeteers?" This question is not so easily answered.

The story traces the movement of chemical energy through all stages from photosynthesis to muscle function. It's presented as sort of a "molecular ballet" that travels through plants and through our bodies.

Dundas finds the project an "interesting mixture of disciplines", citing artists, computer scientists, and molecular biologists as contributors. Using both computer graphics and live action, the 15-17-minute film will be the first to present ultra-high-quality full colour stereoscopic images in a wide field, wrap-around screen theatre.

"It's difficult to explain how extraordinary it is," says Dundas about the new system. "You really have to see it for yourself. You're in it. You're around it. In 3-D computer graphics the camera occupies no space. You're able to do absolutely perfect 3-D of passing through objects or of objects passing through you."

She describes the segment where the puppetry grapes become real, claiming that they are "the most luscious, glorious, heavenly, delicious grapes you've ever seen in your life."

Over 60 computer scientists, programmers, and systems engineers in Tokyo have been working for the past two years with state-of-the-art computers, to create the seven-minute

portion of the film that follows the energy transfer on the molecular level. Kroiter explains that the images are created by 'simulation'. "There's no designer saying 'we'll put this molecule here and that molecule there'. Essentially you put into the computer laws of physics and chemistry and say 'go to it'". The computers being used, two of the fastest in the world, are running 24 hours a day to complete the task.

"We've been incredibly lucky," says Dundas. "A number of pharmaceutical organizations and governments have given us confidential scientific information on the latest research into photosynthesis and the use of sugars."

Such statements may make the film sound a little intimidating. "Well", says Kroiter, "The film operates on two levels. Although the science is quite complex, what you see are these wonderful visual images which are just very exciting to look at."

After we see the energy make its way to the muscle, we leave the computer-generated segment and switch to a fast-paced live action portion that features Japanese Kodo drummers, jugglers and gymnasts. It essentially says, "You've seen how it all works; now this is what you can do with it."

"Hopefully", says Dundas, "children and non-scientists like myself will fundamentally understand something about photosynthesis and movement that they didn't know before. If you teach in this way, people really understand because it's right there. It's not just a bunch of dry words."

It sounds like quite an undertaking. Somehow I doubt that Gigi, resting comfortably in her dressing room, having touch-ups done to her makeup, understands the magnitude of her job. Although the highly confidential nature of the project doesn't allow me to confirm this statement, I'll wager that she'll be somebody's lunch today before we hear 'that's a wrap'.
Myrna Bell •

Saskatchewan The Great Electrical Revolution

Even considering that it's a period film set in 1938, the budget for *The Great Electrical Revolution* was large for a half-hour. Barbara J. Stewart, NFB producer, wanted an ambitious film. It would mean more money and work, but it would also ensure extensive practical experience for those involved in training and professional development components. (*The Great Electrical Revolution* was the first production of the Saskatchewan Film Development Project). For many of the trainees, myself included, it was a positive experience.

The script, by the renowned Saskatchewan writer, Ken Mitchell, also author of the short story of the same name, is a nostalgic tale of an Irish family who come to Saskatchewan with the intention of farming. Once on the prairie, the grandfather discovers that he is agoraphobic and the family moves to a rural town. The film centers around the grandson who watches in amazement the adventures and mishaps that result when his grandfather discovers a way to cheat the power company. It's a Saskatchewan story about real "characters" who survive the experience of the Depression through a sense of community, ingenuity and humour.

Director Larry Bauman, a Regina filmmaker who produced the official Saskatchewan film for Expo '86 and directed the award-winning drama *Heart and Soul*, wanted to focus attention on the humour and character of the film rather than period costumes or sets. Together with art director John Blackie, whose various credits include *Cowboy's Don't Cry*, he decided to create a cartoonish atmosphere rather than something nostalgic.

The film's opening street scene was designed to initiate Bauman's version of Mitchell's story. The storefronts were dressed colorfully with big, bold signage. The actors' movements and dialogue were larger than life and the street was packed with background action straight from the Depression: kids having snowball fights, a Bennett-buggy passing by, men working, and bums loitering in doorways. Together, these elements created a look that reflects Bauman's sense of the exaggerated and determines the importance of character and humour for the rest of the film.

Bauman found that the film's extra responsibilities often hindered his creativity and therefore the success of the production itself. Publicity, which had received much attention because of the training and development components of the film, raised people's expectations while the production's very real

The dual-camera IMAX 3D rig in action shooting trained raccoons Rocky, Missy and Critter



PHOTO: JOHN WILLIAMSON