

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

budget and time constraints rushed it. This, combined with freak cold weather, often made the primary effort just "getting the thing done."

The result was some compromise as shown by the film's last scene shot on the final day of principal production. It was to have been a spectacular finale of special effects: a tug-of-war between the family and the lineman that results in total chaos - plaster falling, appliances flying through the air, sparks everywhere and a "zombie shot" of the surprised residents. But money couldn't be found for the extras needed and lack of time meant that Bauman couldn't get the coverage he wanted. A disappointing way to end production.

Even so, Bauman believes that the final product is essentially good. The characters and their relationships are developed fully and the story is well told. Ironically, he senses that its subtle humour, although not what he intended, is much like that of Mitchell's more nostalgic story.

Bauman feels positive about the opportunity that the film gave him to work with professionals. The Saskatchewan way often requires that filmmakers do it all on their own. Bauman appreciated the full team of professional support on *The Great Electrical Revolution*. Each department brought a wealth of talent and ideas that added to

the film's production values. Working with professional actors the calibre of Lewis Gordon, an Ontario actor who has spent 22 years with the Stratford Festival and whose credits include a guest lead in *The Campbells*, was the most positive aspect for Bauman. He quickly learned to value the input of the actors and often he found himself doing more supervising than directing.

For the trainees, it was an opportunity to work with professionals in a professional environment and to make valuable contacts. This practical experience allowed the Project to place four trainees on *The Last Winter*, a feature film being shot in Winnipeg. The Project's intent is to use fewer out-of-province professionals and to be able to rely on the growing pool of Saskatchewan talent.

With a series in the planning stage, there really seems to be hope for more work within the province. This is the heart of the Project and for that reason *The Great Electrical Revolution* is a success. As Kay Nouch, an 80-year-old actress from Saskatoon who has been acting, directing, and writing plays for over 50 years, said: "Acting in *The Great Electrical Revolution* was a childhood dream come true - and none too soon!"

Karen Henders •



Director Izidore Musallam

PHOTO: MICHAEL MCDERMOTT

Toronto Foreign Nights

A dark-haired girl wearing a leather jacket, too much make-up and a sullen pout sashays up to the window of a butchershop. Mournfully, she gazes up at two freshly slaughtered lambs dangling from meathooks. The blood from their slit throats coagulates in their curly hides. Her bottom lip trembles. The self-indulgence of this reverie is interrupted by a forceful attack from behind by a tall youth. He pins her arm in the "uncle" position, speaks to her in threatening tones and bangs her head against the glass of the butcher shop window. A motley crew of similarity attired youths who just happen to be passing by pull the oppressor (who happens to be her brother) off the girl who flees hand in hand with one of her rescuers down the street.

Director Izidore Musallam yells "Cut!". The entire crew is crying. It is from the blistering cold. It is one of the coldest days so far in February (a high of -3 and a low of -17), and today all they are shooting is exteriors. A production assistant throws a heavy coat over the shoulders of actress Terri Hawkes (of *Prom Night II* fame) and most of the crew and cast retires inside the butcher shop on Danforth Avenue to thaw out. The day is far from over, especially for this crowd who have almost three pages of script left to shoot before "it's a wrap".

The cheerful determination of this crew (many of whom worked with Musallam when he was first a. d. on David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*) is made all the more poignant by the idea that they are all working on deferral; doing

it either for the love or credit (not so ironically Mahabba, the name of Musallam's production company means "love" in Arabic).

A low-budget feature film whose total deferred budget is \$1.3 million, *Foreign Nights* (formerly *Daughter of Jerusalem*) was shot over a period of three weeks on \$170,000 cash with the aid of an \$80,000 distribution deal from Norstar. The script, which was turned down for development money, was written for free by Musallam and co-writer Alan Zweig (*Where's Howie*, *Adderly*) in between well-paying jobs on U. S. productions. Says Musallam about the lack of government support for this project: "I don't understand it. I don't know if they work against or with indigenous Canadian filmmaking. These organizations are a separate entity which has its own censorship and ideas about what's good and what's bad. I don't think they are very complimentary to first-time filmmakers. They look at the script but it is my feeling that you cannot criticize a script because that is not a film. The script is 50 per cent. They lack the ability to see where the potential is."

Undeterred by a lack of government funding, *Foreign Nights* went into pre-production late last fall with Justine Estee, Allan Goluboff and Fred Kamping (producers) and Shawky Joe Fahel and David Semple (executive producers).

A sort of extended ethnic version of *Father Knows Best*, *Foreign Nights* details the adventures of an aspiring young dancer named Leila who runs into conflict with her immigrant father (played with a sober intensity by Toronto actor Youssef Abed-Alnour) who threatens to send her back to the Middle East to marry an Arab. Her trials and tribulations - as in the scene described above where she is harassed by her brother - are the result of Musallam's own observations: "The idea came from my own



Director Larry Bauman (right) with (l. to r.) a. d. Elizabeth Scherberger, art director John Blackie and gaffer Bruno Bittner on the set of *The Great Electrical Revolution*

PHOTO: JACKIE DEUBA

See "Production Guide",
page 59
for other productions on location