

Manitoba

The Last Winter

The small, relatively unknown towns of Oak Lake, Virden and Lenore might seem unlikely places to film Manitoba's latest \$3 million feature, but the producers wouldn't have it any other way.

*The Last Winter*, a warm family drama, penned and directed by Winnipegger Aaron Kim Johnston, is creating employment for a crew of nearly 100 adults, children and animals.

The largely autobiographical screenplay stems from Johnston's childhood memories of growing up in the same rural areas where the film is being shot. It chronicles the poignant relationship of Will, a dreamy 12-year-old farmboy and his colorful old Granpa Jack – and the changes in their lives when the youngster's family decides to move to the city.

As part of a six-member documentary crew, I made the three-hour trek from Winnipeg to the sub-zero climes of *The Last Winter* set near Oak Lake twice recently. The crew came together at the Winnipeg Film Group's documentary filmmaking workshop with the one-and-only Janis Cole as our guru and mentor. Using the knowledge she implanted in our brains from the two previous shorts we produced with her (*When Worlds Collide* and *Death: The Impossible Escape*), our plan was to film the kids on the set of the feature for a documentary on child actors under fledgling director Hans ter Horst.

But on both occasions, once in March and again in April, we encountered well below normal temperatures and high windchill factors. Temperatures aside, we still managed to steal some beautiful footage and heavy duty mugging from the little ones thanks to the cooperation of Johnston, co-producers Jack Clement and Ken Rodeck and the crew.

Our initial visit encompassed only the second day of shooting for *The Last Winter*, so things started off a little hairy and few crew members seemed aware of our plans. Though they were hoping to shoot two scenes – one with dozens of kids playing the children's game Fox and Goose in the snow and another featuring a hockey game on a tiny little rink – things were already running behind schedule when we arrived at 9:30 a.m. (a little worse for the wear and haggard from the long drive and rising at five a.m.).

Both scenes were to be done beside the same tiny, uninsulated woodframe schoolhouse where Johnston went to school as a young'un, which also



The grownups: Gerard Parkes, Wanda Cannon, and David Ferry; the kids: Joshua Murray, Nathaniel Moreau and Katie Murray.

doubled as the wardrobe department. It turned out the Fox and Geese game is all the crew got on film while we were there, the result of freezing little feet and hands, blustery conditions and severe windburnt cheeks wreaking havoc with continuity.

After a few false starts and a whole lot of waiting for the kids between takes, unit publicist Jennifer Young finally rounded us up some of the cuter specimens by the honeywagon, up the road from the filming. We talked to chubby, Virden resident Dallas Miller (Bert) and young Port Erie-based actor, Nathaniel Moreau (John).

Film rookie Miller was visibly nervous as he told me how much fun it was to work with kids from all over Canada and of his friend's jealousies when he got one of the coveted parts in the first movie ever shot in Virden. On the other hand, acting veteran Moreau, obviously used to interviews, was relaxed, articulated and verbose in describing his previous parts in movies and the long days his mother put in for her two child-actor kids.

Next up was wide-eyed, seven-year-old Katie Murray down behind the schoolhouse, but just as she prepared to melt our hearts with her tale of working on *Cousins* with Ted Danson, our

cameras froze up in the cold. End of shoot number one.

The second trip, three weeks later, went considerably smoother, with the crew seemingly more accustomed to our presence on set. But weather screwups were once again plaguing their scheduling. They were preparing to shoot a couple of scenes that were supposedly taking place in the late autumn of 1954 (y'know, the birds are chirping and the leaves are turning orange) with only one difficulty – it was at least – 10 degrees below zero celcius. With the frigid northwesterly winds, the kids, clad in the usual fall garb of sweaters and corduroys, were downright freezing.

The big chill was alleviated somewhat by huge, downfilled jackets and blankets that were heaped on them during rehearsals and a nice warm van within reach, but conditions were far from favourable. As the art department kept busy scattering green straw on the snow in the immediate vicinity, the winds kept everyone, including our crew, on their toes.

The van became our set for interviewing some of the principal child actors – Josh Murray (Will), his little sister Katie (Winnie, who did turn out to be adorable). It was particularly interesting to

catch director Johnston at work with Josh, as he described how Will's flights of fancy should be acted out.

Later on in the day, we corralled Nathaniel's excited and charming sister Marsha (Kate) and Adilyn, the pair's mother, in their Winnebago. Marsha couldn't have been happier to finally get her mom in front of a camera, though Adi definitely did have her reservations before consenting (after Marsha begged her).

In the end, however, it was Adilyn who gave us the most understanding about the motivations of the kids. There's something to be said about any mom who gives up her own homelife to travel thousands of miles with her kids to "exotic" locations like Virden and Oak Lake. She spends long days on the set with them, goes to bed at 11:30 at night after going over her kids' lines with them, only to get up six hours later to work on the expense sheets.

Although she tried to convince us that it's really no big deal – that Marsha and Nathaniel simply needed her around for a moral support system – we found her to be one special mom. Heck, we'd take her any day.

Gaylene K. Dempsey •

See "Production Guide", pages 35-38, for other productions on location

# TELESCENE FILMS INC.

March 15, 1989

Mr. René Malo  
Malofilm Group  
1207 St. Andre Street  
4th Floor  
Montreal, Quebec  
H2L 3S8

Re: The distribution of **MALAREK - A street kid who make it**

Dear René,


On behalf of everyone at Telescene we would like to thank you profoundly for the extraordinary job you did promoting **MALAREK** across Canada earlier this month. We were delighted with the quality of your campaign, the quantity of advertising of all sorts, and the intelligence and dedication with which you and everybody at Malofilm worked on this launch. Again and again we were told by other filmmakers and other people in the film business what a pleasure it was that for once a Canadian film was being launched fully and properly by a Canadian distributor.

We all thank you for doing such a fine, thorough and professional job.

With best wishes,



Jamie Brown  
Producer



Robin Spry  
Producer



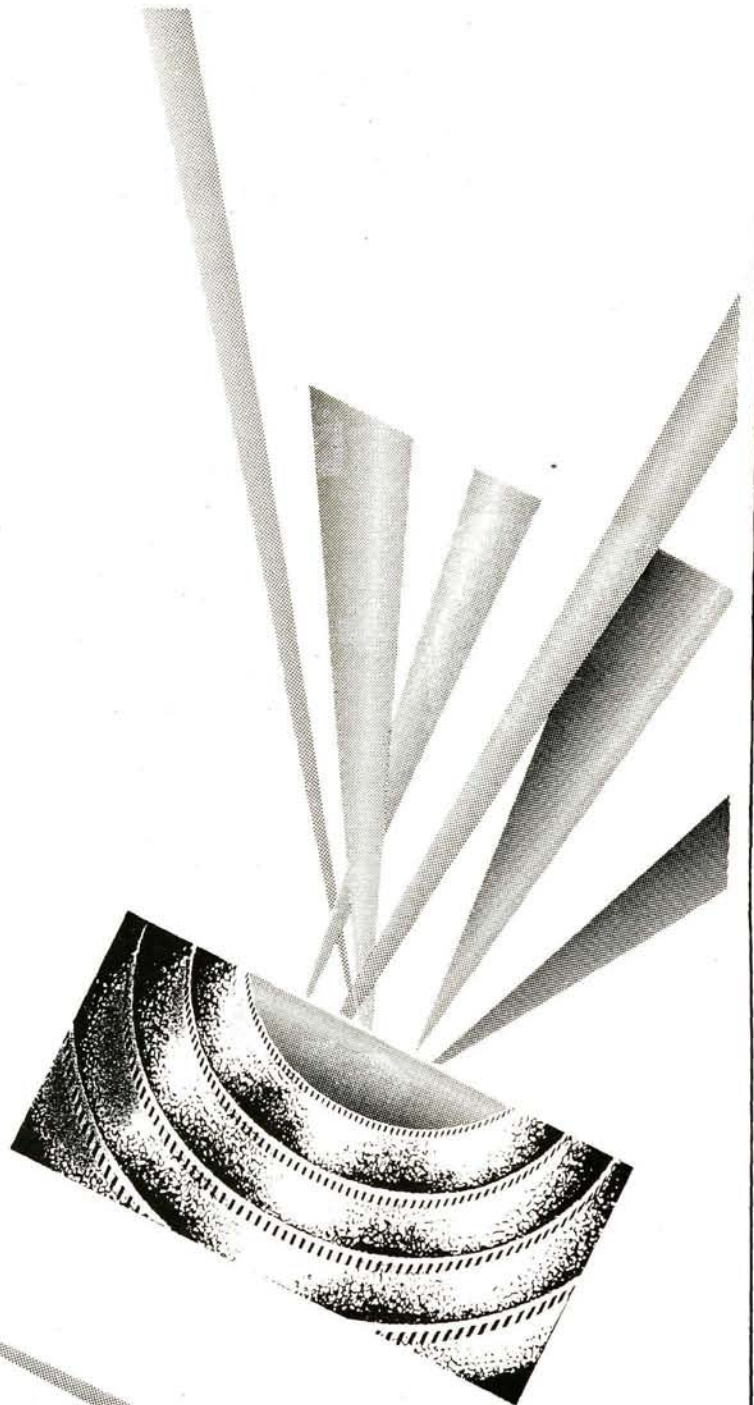
Roger Cardinal  
Director

JB;RS;RC/pm

TELESCENE FILMS INC. 5510, RUE FERRIER, MONTRÉAL, QUÉBEC H4P 1M2

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