

## Manitoba The Challenge

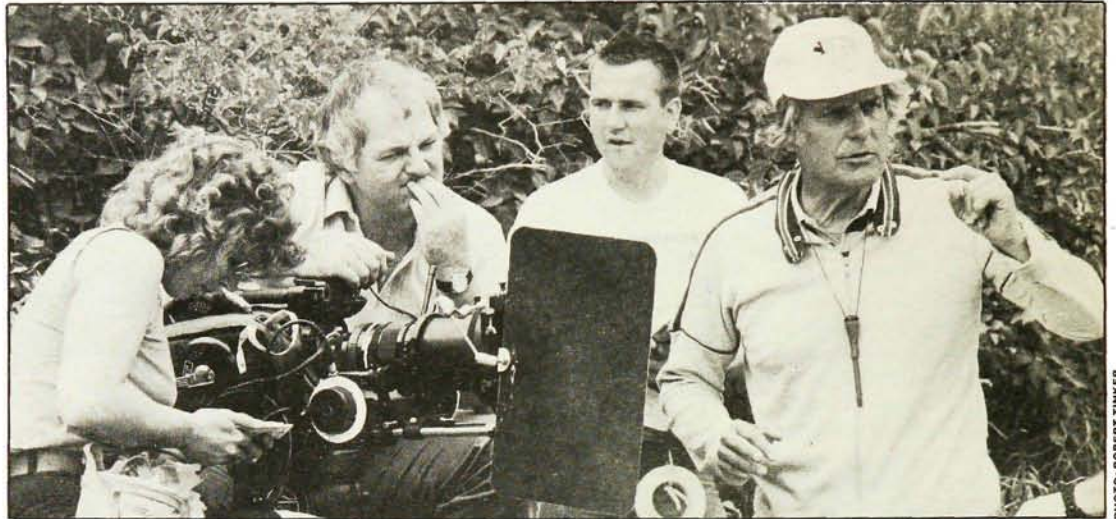
It's another challenging day on the set of *The Challenge*, Lauron Television's latest movie, being filmed in the small bedroom community of Stonewall, Manitoba, 20 minutes north of Winnipeg city limits.

The cast and crew of the family-oriented, two-hour drama, developed with CBC Children's Television, are attempting to shoot the finale, a musical scene, and the weather is acting typically unpredictable – first raining, then cloudy, then sunny, then cloudy.

The Prairie climate, however, has been one of the only problems on what has been described by almost everyone as a "happy, effortless shoot." In fact associate producer Connie Bortnick jokes that, at times, there might have been some kind of divine intervention. "One day there was driving rain all around Stonewall, except right where we were shooting," she recalls. "It was amazing; it passed nearby and missed us."

But like any film in progress, *The Challenge* hasn't been completely devoid of difficulties. The crew still struggle to keep a straight face as they tell of the generator truck catching fire late one day. Luckily, for Lauron's producer Ralph Endersby, nary a minute was lost from an already tight schedule – even after having a replacement truck driven 24 hours from Toronto.

Respected Toronto-based director Eric Till (*Gentle Sinners*, *Improper Channels*, *An American Christmas Carol*) is the reason for the even keel on the set. No matter what the obstacle, he rarely looks worried – and after almost 20 years in business, it's no wonder. It appears, (to outsiders at least), that he's acquired a composure under pressure that brings out everyone's confidence and unflappability.



Camera assistant Holly Gregory, DOP Brian Hebb, camera assistant Tim Bewyck, and director Eric Till on the set of *The Challenge*.

*The Challenge*, which Endersby and Lauron Television are hoping to eventually develop as a weekly series, revolves around Mackie (Gema Zamprogna), a talented young musician who involves herself in a complex charade after moving with her mom (Gwyneth Walsh) to a small prairie town. She discovers an all-boys club, *The Challengers*, who are also in a rock band. Despite the fact they have one strict regulation – no girls allowed – the stubborn youngster is determined to join the band and masquerades as a boy to do so.

Under Till's learned direction, life as a boy becomes not only complicated, but funny and touching too. And when Mackie's eccentric old landlord (veteran actor Eric Christmas) learns of her secret, the plot thickens.

Angela Bruce, CBC's head of children television, says although the theatrical concept of a girl disguised as a boy has been done many times before (as far back as *As You Like It*), *The Challenge's* storyline is nevertheless appealing.

"It took further the psychological discovery that boys don't have more fun" explains Bruce.

She is also quick to add that Till's sensitivity while directing the kids is particularly appropriate for this film. And the crew is responding to his lead.

"It sounds kind of Polyanna-esque," explains Bruce. "But we often find in children's television productions that if a script doesn't have sex and doesn't have violence and doesn't have swearing, there is a tendency to not have tension on the set. So the director and the crew get softer and gentler."

*The Challenge's* finale culminates with an outdoor concert of *The Challengers'* new and improved band complete with two girls – Mackie (Zamprogna is a virtual musical prodigy who sang and played keyboards on the rather sappy, Vangelis-penned *Find My Way Home*) and her friend.

Absolutely crucial to the success of this movie, the scene takes place on a specially-constructed stage in the midst of a breathtaking limestone quarry before a cast of more than 50 extras from the town. And just as the extras were warned by the assistant director, they learned how tedious

and repetitive the process of filmmaking really is – looking as if you're enjoying yourself after hearing a song for the umpteenth time is no small feat. (One crewmember was heard moaning goodnaturedly, "I've heard this at least 5,000 times over the past few days.")

And though musical scenes in limestone quarries aren't too commonplace in movies these days, Endersby (who celebrated his birthday at the quarry with the children singing to him in between takes) is confident that it is the locations in and around Stonewall that will set *The Challenge* apart, and make it a more unique experience for the audience when it's aired on primetime around Christmas.

"I think the area itself will help us turn out a more spectacular-looking movie," he asserts.

Bruce added that, although the universal storyline aimed at adolescents "could have been done in outer Mongolia," the shimmering landscape is genuinely perfect for *The Challenge*.

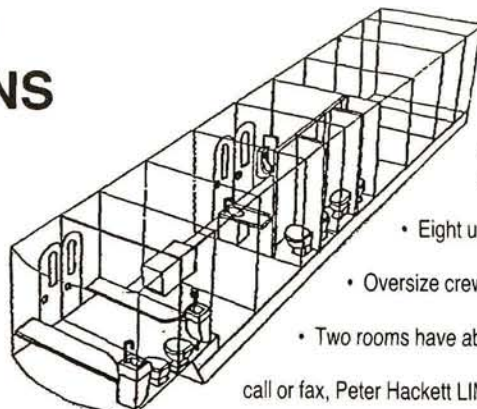
"They found us a pearl in the middle of the Prairies."

Gaylene K. Dempsey •

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