

Frontline Producers

Inside CBC Drama

There is much to examine within our television industry, but part of the difficulty is the simple fact that its inner workings are not publicly exposed.

by John Kent Harrison

public whipping boy, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, seems especially appropriate. The following is a series of interviews with several key personalities behind programs being produced at the CBC Drama Department in Toronto, including: John Kennedy, Head, CBC Drama Department; Jean Roberts, Director of Program Development and Production (Drama Department); Sam Levene, Executive Producer, *For the Record* series; Larry Mirkin, Producer, *Coming Out Alive*, *Phoenix Team*; Robert Sherrin, Executive Producer, *Home Fires*. Though these individuals



● Head of CBC-TV Drama, John Kennedy photos: Fred Phipps

Imagine the scene a few hundred odd years from now when hungry, back-stabbing anthropologists root through the shameful debris of late twentieth century Canada in desperate search of the mythical southern border. Imagine the elation if, along the way, one of them scores various reels of 35mm film stashed in the seedy projection booth of some fossilized Rosedale mansion. The find would be hotter than the Boy Prince's tomb until the lights went down and the scientific community was assaulted by trailers from *Prom Night*, *Death Ship*, *Terror Train*, *Pinball Summer*, *Hot Dogs*, and that seminal Canadian opus, *Meatballs*. By the second reel change most would be gagging in agreement: the southern border was indeed mythical.

The fact is, our drearily non-Canadian film industry sheds very little light upon the life, values and concerns of the Canadian people in the 1980s. It produces few examples of what could be useful as a record of our culture, and little feature film drama of any permanent value.

On the other hand - strange as it may seem - Canadian drama produced for television is an entirely different matter. Programming in recent years has been watched, yes, actually viewed, and large percentages of these viewers have been increasingly impressed with both the sophisticated dramatic constructs and the degree to which programs attempt to reflect the specific cultural, moral and social tenor of our tremulous times.

But what is Canadian television drama? What is the role of the public sector (CBC), the private sector, the independent producer? Who decides what will be produced and/or aired? How does one break into this happily "Canadian" arena?

And then there are the myths, especially about the CBC. There's that old favorite: "CBC producers produce what they think the Canadian public should be watching." That is, CBC as guardian angel, watchdog against cultural depravity. Yet with one capricious flick of the wrist, snow-bound and entertainment-starved Canadians tune in to perverted gibberish. Faced with this kind of competition, "shoulds" go the way of bilingual street signs in Calgary. Or do they?

There is much to examine within the complex of our television industry but part of the difficulty in this pursuit is the simple fact that its inner workings are not publicly exposed. Its producers by and large are not part of the glamour and tinsel scene: the pay is so minimal that normally gregarious free-lance contributors are forced to work full-time all the time in shabby inner-city digs, with no time to blow a horn in defense of their medium.

At a time when the cultural content in feature films - or lack of it - is raising so many questions, an examination of the attitudes behind productions currently being broadcast by that convenient

were interviewed separately, their comments have been editorially juxtaposed by subject.

Cinema Canada: Who decides what program will go into production?

John Kennedy: Basically I decide on the individual piece within the drama schedule. But that springs from a series of offers that I make to the program office at the CBC each year. I offer them for example, a sitcom, a *Home Fires*, three or four movies for television, perhaps a specific series.

Cinema Canada: Do producers compete for these slots?

John Kennedy: In effect, yes. But we develop more than one proposal per slot. Things have a way of falling apart, or being delayed. We shoot either tape or film every week of the year and if you miss a date you get a blank on air which, of course, is immediately filled by buying something from somewhere. I don't want to see that happen because it is an opportunity lost for Canadian writers, directors, performers and musicians.

Cinema Canada: What is the evolution of a script at the CBC?

Jean Roberts: A producer brings it to either John Kennedy or myself. If the idea is interesting and if the story has an end then maybe we'll develop it. At that point the producer goes into cahoots with a writer, and possibly a story editor, to develop a story which has a beginning, middle and an end. And the beginning must be so created that you are going to hook your audience with the first 25 seconds. In a sense television is to theatre as variety or burlesque is to the stage: you no sooner get to center stage when you have to hook your audience.

Cinema Canada: How many drafts of a script are there?

Jean Roberts: Three official drafts but there can be more, maybe less; but it also depends on the make-up of the writer. A writer may have done ten drafts at his desk but will hand in the eleventh as his first draft due to his own standards and self-censorship. All three of the drafts come through this office (Kennedy and Roberts), so when you multiply all projects by three you have an idea of the volume of material which comes through here.

Cinema Canada: Do you cancel scripts when you see something not working?

Jean Roberts: That could be done but I cannot say that I've seen that happening often in the sense of it having been imposed from this office. I find that there is a healthy atmosphere on this floor which John (Kennedy) has engendered, and that is that producers themselves will tend to come along and say that there is no point going on with something.

Cinema Canada: Do you get much unsolicited material?

John Kennedy: Yes. For example, I get a lot of submissions from people to

do docu-dramas. I think there is a lot of confusion as to what a docu-drama is. To me, docu-drama is a dramatic recreation of an actual event. Specific as to time, locale, participants. Most of the (unsolicited) submissions I get lead me to think that there is an awful lot of thinking that leans toward a lot more docu than drama, and that doesn't interest me very much. I think you have to take steps to be sure the issue doesn't override the drama. It gets preachy for one thing, boring for another.

Cinema Canada: Is there a system whereby unsolicited material is screened at the CBC?

John Kennedy: Yes, it is all read, all responded to, but it is not all criticized. There's just too much of it. There are not too many unsolicited scripts which ever see the light of day (get produced). It often surprises me though that many people who want to write for television seldom watch it. For a writer not to analyze the people or kinds of things currently being done (on television) is a mistake.

There is much truth to Kennedy's comment. Too many writers see television as a bastard art, something to consider if one is in need of quick cash to grubstake the "important novel." There is a tendency to overlook the ground rules of the medium - the camera, the microphone, the station break, and that ephemeral audience teeter-tottering precariously between the "Canadian" show and... the alternative. A potential writer would be wise not to underestimate the remarkable degree of craft it takes to hook and hold an audience and yet still deliver something meaningful in the way of character, plot and socio-political relevance.

It is interesting to observe how producers approach this conundrum. Some are committed to message and relevance above all else: the issue, the problem, the cause. Who dares count the number of somnolent journalistic "dramas" we have been subjected to over the years: programs which were good for us, programs we should have watched. Then there are the producers who are slaves to form: make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait. Don't bore the audience, get to the point, keep it moving: entertainment as the primary vehicle of communication.

Cinema Canada: Is there a split at the CBC between the issue-oriented producers and the entertainers as to their lack of concern or overconcern for audience gratification?

Jean Roberts: I think what happens perhaps, from time to time, is that people get so involved in issues that they forget that a story is not a useful story on television unless it is dramatic. Truth is not necessarily dramatic.

Cinema Canada: What is the intention of making *For the Record* drama?
Sam Levene: As executive producer of *For the Record*, I have a particular bias. For me, the drama has to be

These producers are prepared to say that self-loathing, flag-waving and 5B-X are Canadian exercises of the past.

relevant; that is, drama on a public broadcasting system has a responsibility to do more than entertain. It must also challenge and provoke audiences. I'm talking about television drama on a public broadcasting system, the CBC. Part of its drama, and I'm not saying all of it, must be serious, must examine Canada today in a dramatic way and have something to say about issues.

Cinema Canada: *How do you approach a story? Do you begin with an issue or problem, or does someone come in with a story?*

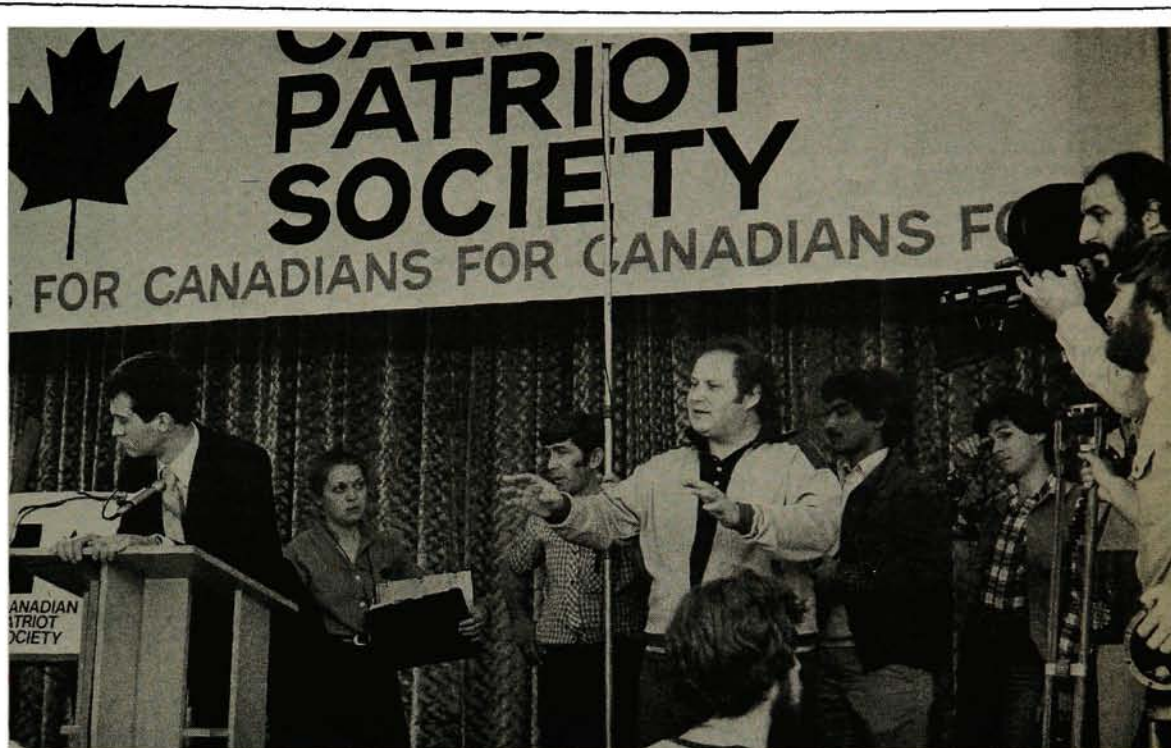
Sam Levene: More often than not, we begin with an issue. The first script I commissioned three years ago had to do with unemployment in Canada (*The Winnings of Frankie Walls* written by Rob Forsyth). But we didn't produce the program until over a year later, until we had a workable script that was not a tract, not a documentary, not a docu-drama, but a drama about a middle-aged worker who loses his job and can't get work because he hasn't the proper updated skills. That drama stands on its own, but it began with an issue.

Cinema Canada: *What precautions do you take to be sure that the issue does not dominate the story?*

Sam Levene: We've been accused of precisely what you've said. But partly it comes down to the quality of your writers, story editors and producers to make sure that doesn't happen. Sometimes we do let the issue get buried if a strong drama develops. It is a natural danger spot when you do issue-oriented social drama. We develop a script the same way anybody else develops a script: concern with dramatic values, with what happens to a character. We are not trying to impose a social message on a story we already have.

Cinema Canada: *What happens when the facts of the issue go one way and the character you have created wants to go the other? Does this happen?*

Sam Levene: Yes, that does happen. For example, in *A Far Cry From Home*, a study of a battered wife, it was incumbent upon us to be accurate in terms of what we learned about what women go through in that situation. In another kind of story the exact research might be less important. For example, the drama called *A Question of the Sixth* dealt to some extent with euthanasia, but it was also a love story. We went with the love story, with the two strong characters and what was happening between them.



● Final instructions from director Al Waxman as the crew prepares to shoot "Last Gambit" (*Phoenix Team* series)

Cinema Canada: *What in your mind is the distinction between what you are doing in For the Record and the concept known as docu-drama?*

Sam Levene: I can't get anybody who writes about television in this country to refer to this series without calling us the CBC's docu-drama series. What we are doing is total fiction, pure drama. The docu-drama is a dramatic recreation of a true story as it happened, using for the most part, real characters, and real names. What we do is simply contemporary, topical drama which is issue-oriented.

Cinema Canada: *What makes drama interesting for you?*

Larry Mirkin: The things which are most interesting for me, have always had to do with the moral center of the piece, the moral dilemmas the characters are put into, whether it is the strange moral universe of *Coming Out Alive*, where you end up rooting for people you wouldn't normally root for, or the *Phoenix Team* series where we had spies who, in terms of characters, tried to deal with a differing moral question in each episode. I don't think people are born with white hats and black hats: I think that people who do morally questionable deeds have to account for them - if not to others, then at least to themselves. And that interests me.

Cinema Canada: *Do you see a split within the drama department between issue-oriented producers and those who are more concerned with the entertainment value?*

Larry Mirkin: Yes, there's some truth to that. They shouldn't be mutually exclusive because there are two implications with such a polarity: the issue-oriented people are dull, the entertainment people are vacuous. I am a great lover of fiction, and the way fiction works is different from the way non-fiction works, or documentaries work.

In fiction, truth is expressed in a dramatic action. It goes all the way back to Aristotle. If your work is important and meaningful, it does not necessarily mean it must be dull and unentertaining. On the contrary, the most important thing is not to underestimate the audience. The audience is very smart but very impatient. The audience is willing to watch you if you play fair with them and you keep them interested. I think those are perfectly legitimate demands.

Cinema Canada: *What are the pitfalls of issue-oriented drama?*

Larry Mirkin: Mainly, the problem is that you can't get out of the reality, especially if you want to make a point about the issue; you can't deal with the people as people and let them drive the story. If you have to cover the issue, it often makes the story predictable, and predictability is boring to an audience. Fiction is an imaginative construct and the reality can make it more difficult by locking down the imagination by the confines of hard fact. It can be done, it has been done well, but it is very difficult.

Cinema Canada: *What are the problems of creating a period drama?*

Robert Sherrin: As this is a country where people have destroyed the past rather than preserved it, we don't have period locations. The thing I'm doing (*Home Fires*) is set in Toronto because we can't afford to go anywhere else. In *A Good Place to Come From* we looked at Sault Ste-Marie but it was devoid of nice period locations and we were much better off trying to reproduce the 1940's Sault in Toronto than we were going to the real place.

Cinema Canada: *What is your interest in this type of drama?*

Robert Sherrin: I happen to be interested in social history at this moment, and I think we have rarely done social

history in the way that the English, for instance, have. There is a huge area yet to be explored. As opposed to say, the *Great Detective* which is simply set in a period, we are exploring in *Home Fires* the social/historical background, and it becomes part of the thread of the narrative and it goes in chronological order through an historical period. The drama reflects and illuminates that time in much the same way as I suppose *Upstairs Downstairs* does: in that it (the social history) becomes part of the fabric of the story.

Cinema Canada: *How was the project conceived?*

Robert Sherrin: We started with the idea that we were going to explore the World War II period, and that we were going to explore it through a family situation. This enabled us to get personal over it, because I think the best historical drama is always done through individual personalities that the audience can enjoy and relate to. In this way the audience can begin to share the experience of the characters. So we invent characters and place them in a situation and in a particular environment, then we begin to look at historical events and what they suggest could happen to the family. Background research material is provided right off, a script is written, then further research is done for particular details - for example, to find out what prices, incomes, mortgages were at that time.

Cinema Canada: *Some say film is a director's medium, while TV is a producer's medium. Do you see TV as a producer's medium?*

John Kennedy: No, I see television as the quintessential collaborative medium. The successes we have on the screen are almost invariably a result of collaboration as opposed to being able to put your finger on one person who made the contribution to that project.

Cinema Canada: What is the responsibility of a producer?

Larry Mirkin: Everything. He is the custodian of the concept. He is the one person who has the creative and fiscal authority and responsibility. He can delegate some of it but he is a fool if he abrogates that responsibility. His challenge is to find the best way to create the atmosphere where the creative people can produce their best work. The budget is the least important part of producing, it is easy to learn. The main question should always be what do you want to do and why.

Cinema Canada: What do you mean by suggesting the budget is the least important part of producing?

Larry Mirkin: Well, it's the least important aspect as long as you're on budget. What I mean is that there is a logic to it, you can learn it. Here at the CBC we have what are called 'direct costs': cast, script, location rental - all money spent outside the CBC. Then we have the 'indirect' costs: money spent on facilities, personnel and services inside the CBC. We try to get 5 1/2 minutes of finished film a day by attempting 24 set-ups. This varies from 18 to 24 depending on how the master shots are staged. I try to have the master staged in such a way that all the close-ups have the same lighting set-up. So you see there is a logic to all of this, but in the end you are simply juggling time and money in order to protect the integrity of the piece.

Cinema Canada: What is the role of the producer within the context of the other creative contributors on a particular project?

Larry Mirkin: Let me give you an example of a producer's role. The writer, editor, director and producer are in the cutting room. A point comes up for discussion and the editor has fallen in love with the cut, the writer with the line, the director with the shot and the actor, if he is there, with the behavior. The producer is the only one who can protect the work. He is the who says, I'll live with the bad cut if the story works. The audience doesn't care about a minor technical matter as long as you are playing fair with the story.

Meanwhile, out on the street, what are crafts people talking about in terms of film or television drama? Ten years ago we were anticipating King and Shebib, admiring Jutra, looking for Don Owen, Eric Till and others: filmmakers, all. Today, with the arteries of our film industry hardening with coagulated screen gems, we are turning to television in search of some kind of artistic transfusion. Now the talk is of Vic Sarin's direction and shooting of *Katie*, Don Brittain's dramatic debut, why Margaret Atwood should or should not be writing teleplays.

Remember how we enjoyed the dynamism of the Ralph Thomas/R.H. Thompson combination in the production of *Tyler*, or Jutra's interpretation of B.A. Cameron's *Dreamspeaker*? Remember



● Finding authentic locations is often impossible. This W.W. II internment camp was specially built for the *Home Fires* series

how we all took a point of view after seeing Stan Colbert's prodigious and historically provocative production of *Riel*, or Robin Spry's direction of the turbulent *Drying Up the Streets*?

Today when conversation shifts to dramatic content, talk focuses on television programs, not films. Feature films are usually discussed in terms of financial investments - how so-and-so got burned on such-and-such a deal. In light of this, it would seem that television has begun to forge a significant connection with the Canadian viewing audience. How so?

Cinema Canada: How have you been able to measure the audience response to your programming?

John Kennedy: We send a document to a list of people very similar to the Nielsen system. In the case of our document, we will very often ask questions of the audience as to how the story is told. It is very good feedback. From this we have what is called inside the CBC, an enjoyment index (aka: appreciation index), which is a measure of how well the audience enjoyed the show. It is normally broken down into the major characters, the story, the humour if there is meant to be any, and the sense of reality. There have been factors which have left the audience less pleased than we would like them to be. We don't want a bad story on the screen - bad meaning boring, too complicated, not making any sense. Unhappy endings have often resulted in an audience reacting against a program. Unresolved endings also have a negative effect on an audience - they like things tied up. The confusion of mixed genre, like a mystery/comedy, will also cause an audience to back away.

Cinema Canada: Do you think Canadians are becoming more receptive to Canadian TV drama?

Jean Roberts: Yes, I do feel there are a lot of people who find satisfaction with Canadian TV drama. One reason for this is that we (CBC) are trying to relate better to the kind of audience that in fact there should be for TV, which is,

after all, an audience to which you broadcast. If you were to narrow cast you would be appealing to a very limited and distinct kind of audience.

Cinema Canada: Do you think the sense of drama at the CBC is more sophisticated now than it was a few years ago?

Jean Roberts: Yes I do, and also the CBC has moved much more into doing mainly contemporary work. From the money and facilities point of view it is a necessary step. Also we are not going to be able to find writers unless we force them to write. What we are saying is that all the airtime that drama has is going to be used up by whoever is writing today. I'm sure that that is gradually going to pay off with people who are expert at writing television drama.

Cinema Canada: Do you see trends emerging which might influence the future of TV drama?

John Kennedy: I think there is a trend toward anthology work, either in the 60 or 90 or even two-hour form. To a lesser extent the half-hour format. Whatever kind of programming we do, we are in competition with the Americans. Our series, however, have made particular connections with an audience: *Home Fires* and *A Gift to Last* are examples. I would suspect that sitcom may change. Different forms of comedy may be with us in five years. I'm not sure if I see sitcoms disappearing totally, but I could see it changing into comedy drama, perhaps taking on a longer form than the half-hour. There is certainly a lot of interest in that within the Canadian writing community. There are increasing numbers of proposals coming from people interested in comedy drama. You will also probably see an increasing connection with Canadian literature, although that is hard to forecast in any planned sense. I would think the movie for TV will continue to be a strong factor - it's interesting for writers, directors, producers, performers, and also entertaining for an audience.

Cinema Canada: Do you see CBC drama charting a specific course for the future?

Robert Sherrin: The kinds of things we are tending to do more and more are terribly important if the country is to be interested in who we are and our own particular identity. I think we are moving away from carbon copies of American kinds of programming. We don't for the moment have any more cop shows; now maybe that will happen again, but hopefully if it does, it would be in a new kind of genre which has more to do with who we are than with who we are not.

Cinema Canada: Isn't there a danger in flag-waving Canadian drama?

Robert Sherrin: I don't mean that the only thing that matters is that the identity of the background be physically Canada, but that simple stories of human relationships be about ourselves. Everything we do should come out of us; we should be talking about people we (the audience) recognize immediately.

Many of us who have watched CBC over the past few years see some paradox in this talk: not all the programs are as articulate as these producers who create them. We could examine a *Phoenix Team* episode and find examples of gratuitous camera movement, exaggerated composition, frenzied editing - all indicating an attempt to entertain an audience at the expense of character credibility, and a detailed socio-political fabric. And we could just as easily review *The Last Edition* (a recent *For the Record* episode), which had no human or psychological dimension, only the prosaic predictability of an issue following its predestined pattern, with characters as interesting as marionettes toting yesterday's news.

However, there is no shame in admitting that an individual show doesn't work as long as the overall attitude behind programming is on track. These producers are prepared to say that self-loathing, flag-waving and 5B-X are Canadian exercises of the past; that the archetypal Canadian hero no longer must struggle against all odds until he or she freezes to death in the snow. Now the CBC is looking for other stories, and be they light-weight adventure or issue-oriented melodrama, all must share a common denominator of being dramatically solid, respectful of audience, and unabashedly Canadian.

On sure, you can heave a cynical sigh and argue that it's simply the CBC's mandate. But is their attitude one which must be legislated to be legitimate? Is there not some merit in producing material for today which will endure for tomorrow, at the very least as a record of our time and culture?

Let's hope our film community keeps this in mind and once again starts producing a body of work which in a few hundred years will be well worth digging for. ●

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EXTRA

The GREAT MUPPET CAPER

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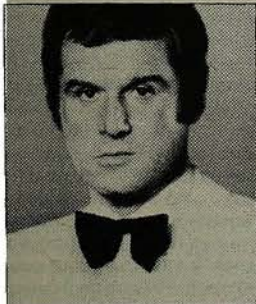
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—THE GREAT MUPPET CAPER PAPER—

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Muppet Performers Star!

JIM HENSON, FRANK OZ, DAVE GOELZ, JERRY NELSON, RICHARD HUNT, STEVE WHITMIRE in Gem Heist Epic!



Starring as Nicky Holiday

CHARLES GRODIN

Described as "Cute But Slippery"

The few people who will admit ever having actually met Mr. Nicky Holiday, brother of famous and bejeweled couturiere Lady Holiday, describe his variously as "a sneak," "slippery as an eel," and "some one

Late Breaking News:

JOE RAPOSO

Music and Lyrics
See "Sing Song," page 12

OSWALD MORRIS, B.S.C.

Director of Photography
See "Snap Snap," page 17

RALPH KEMPLEN

Editor
See "Snip, Snip," page 32

ANITA MANN

Choreographer
See "Happy Feet," page 73

MARTIN STARGER

Executive Producer
See "Big Bucks," page 3

THEFT OF JEWELRY CALLED "MERE EXCUSE TO MAKE A MOVIE"

Combined Services... Experts today were... statements attributed... the popular music group... The Electric Mayhem... new about that," wheezed... Miss Louise Gold, who... puzzling experts for... asked...

about... chip... same... an earl... "Kharm... Asked for... drug...

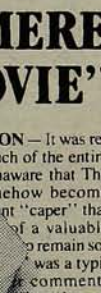
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ca... B... an expert... subject of driver... "Cloudy and mild with... barometer, but a pronounced... front. Hazy areas and patchy fog... ing way to gusty periods toward the... (see...)

the... ship... appear... ronds. A... honist... ment... lica... the... the... "Man, like... (see pag... 3)

the... he never... "Man, like... (see pag... 3)

the... he never... "Man, like... (see pag... 3)



"Caper" Producers Revealed! DAVID LAZER and FRANK OZ

Named by Citizens Group
EUREKA, KANSAS — "We know exactly who was to blame," exclaimed irate housewife and dental surgeon Mrs. Dr. Eva Mae Newberry of this community. "Used to be of a (see "Big Deal," page 112)

Film Directed by JIM HENSON
"Seems to Have Hand in Everything!" says Frog

Mr. Kermit the Frog, star of the film, was questioned by reporters in his dressing room today. "If there's one thing I can't seem to escape," he smiled in answer to an oft-posed (see "Henson," page 17)



Starring as Lady Holiday
DIANA RIGG

Queen of Haute Couture
Robbed of Fortune in Jewels

"Thank goodness they didn't get my fabulous 'Baseball' diamond," commented the seemingly unruffled world-famous Fashion Queen. Made by Kathryn Mullen for Czar Frog (cont. on page 2)


With Guest Stars

JOHN CLEESE

ROBERT MORLEY

PETER USTINOV

JACK WARDEN

 **DOLBY STEREO**
IN SELECTED THEATRES

Movie Writers Hailed

TOM PATCHETT & JAY TARSES and **JERRY JUHL & JACK ROSE**

Heads of State gathered today to pay tribute to the small, brave band of men who, armed with but a type-writer and a dream, changed the face (cont. on page 6)

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