

## Ralph Thomas

by Gary Lamphier

"You're lucky you caught me on a good day," Ralph Thomas chuckles. "If you had tried to interview me yesterday, I wouldn't have said three words."

My good fortune this warm July evening in Toronto is owing to Ralph's progress at the typewriter earlier in the day. As the writing goes, so goes the writer. And since this happened to be an ace day (four solid pages of script), the writer finds himself in an accommodating mood.

Ralph Thomas looks like a schoolteacher. His producer-wife, Vivienne Leebosh, could be a painter.

In fact, Thomas is a writer/director/producer of some accomplishment. His credits read like a list of the best Canadian television dramas of the past several years: *Tyler* (which he produced and directed), *Drying Up The Streets* (producer), *The Tar Sands* (producer, co-writer), *The Insurance Man From Ingersoll* (producer), *Dreamspeaker* (producer), and *Every Person is Guilty* (written by Thomas, produced by Leebosh), to name but a few.

As executive producer of CBC-TV's "For The Record" series in 1976-77, Thomas, a former *Toronto Star* reporter and editor, was instrumental in establishing the reputation for gutsiness and quality the series still enjoys today.

Thomas' low-key, contemplative demeanor is misleading: it masks the obsessive drive of a man with a fire in his belly. "I don't know why I care," he once told an interviewer, when asked about his desire to effect social change through his films. "But I do."

*Ticket To Heaven*, Thomas' and Leebosh's first theatrical feature, is not unlike most of Thomas' earlier films. It deals with a hot, controversial subject - religious cults - and it does so from a definite point of view. The film's lead - Nick Mancuso - plays David, a Toronto schoolteacher. Fresh from a split-up with his girlfriend, he seeks diversion in the company of friends in California. His friends, it becomes apparent, are members of a cult called the Heavenly Children.

A weekend jaunt to the cult's isolated camp becomes an indefinite stay. David's very human self-doubts and insecurities provide the keyhole through which a repressive and frightening dogma pours in. Within days David is on the streets peddling flowers for some unnamed "messiah." He renounces his family and friends, who, back in Toronto, begin to worry about his well-being.

A friend (Saul Rubinek) comes after him. A visit to the camp confirms his concerns about David, and a kidnapping is planned. Though David's parents wind up in jail, the kidnapping is successful, thus setting the stage for a long and anguished deprogramming process at the hands of ex-cultist Linc Strunk (R.H. Thompson).

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## Vivienne Leebosh



production, we knew that wasn't going to be a permanent title.

**Ralph Thomas:** Any film goes through a lot of titles. Vivienne eventually came up with *Ticket To Heaven*. At first, I didn't like it. But I've come around.

**Cinema Canada:** Were you considering casting Howie Mandel earlier on?

**Ralph Thomas:** I'd gone to Yuk Yuk's and seen Howie when I was looking for someone to play Larry (later played by Saul Rubinek). I didn't want a guy who was in any way similar to the central character. Also, I once read that the one thing that can save you in a brainwashing situation is a sense of humour. So I went to see Howie with this character in mind: The character is an amateur comedian at night and an accountant - Mister Straight - during the day. I spent an afternoon with Howie playing opposite R.H. Thompson in the lead role. But he was too young for the part.

**Cinema Canada:** Did you consider R.H. for the lead?

**Ralph Thomas:** We did consider R.H. for the lead, with Nick Mancuso playing the deprogrammer. But we flipped that for several reasons. Nick and Saul play together much better as friends. R.H. comes in at the end as somebody totally foreign, totally WASP. He provides a totally different foil.

It is a powerful story, told by a writer/director who has had first-hand experience with fundamentalist religion: Ralph Thomas was born in Brazil, the son of a fundamentalist missionary. It is also a good story that is well told by a writer/director and producer who know the craft of filmmaking.

*Ticket To Heaven* represents what Canadian cinema can be. At the end of this long, dry summer, that comes as particularly welcome news.

**Cinema Canada:** How did *Ticket To Heaven* originate? Wasn't it initially called *Moonstalkers*?

**Vivienne Leebosh:** The film is adapted from a series of articles by Josh Freed that appeared in the *Montreal Star*, entitled *Moonstalkers*. Once we got into

**Cinema Canada:** Was there any doubt about the viability of having R.H. as the lead in a commercial film with a budget of \$4 million?

**Vivienne Leebosh:** Not much different than Nick Mancuso. The fact is, R.H. has done a number of films - probably more than Nick, though Nick has worked in L.A. and is known from *Scruples*. But we have a no-name picture, as far as Hollywood is concerned. Whether we used R.H. or Nick as the lead wouldn't have made one bit of difference. As for our investors, they'd never heard of Nick or R.H.

**Ralph Thomas:** I think the investors and all the financial types would have preferred a big American name. At the moment, though, I can't imagine anyone but Nick playing the lead. To me, the



Thomas/Leebosh photos by Frank Shefman, Plum Studios.



# INTERVIEW

evidence is right there on film. It was the right thing to do.

**Cinema Canada:** *For what it's worth, I thought it worked well. I was impressed with Mancuso.*

**Ralph Thomas:** He's an extraordinary actor. And I'm not saying R.H. couldn't have carried the role. But it would have been different. You have to go with the best mix. When you cast a film, you're casting personalities as much as you are actors. It's a lot different than casting a stage play.

**Cinema Canada:** *What role did Ron Cohen have as executive producer?*

**Vivienne Leebosh:** As his partner, I had total creative control. It was in the contract. But it never came down to that. He's a bright man with a lot of creative ideas. I did a lot of the financing. We overlapped many times and never got into who had control over what.

**Cinema Canada:** *It was a good working relationship?*

**Vivienne Leebosh:** Yes.

**Cinema Canada:** *You touched on financing and I'd like to pursue it for a moment. How did you do with the sale of units?*

**Vivienne Leebosh:** We didn't sell out. Many films didn't sell out last year.

**Cinema Canada:** *Is there an extended offering this year?*

**Vivienne Leebosh:** Yes.

**Cinema Canada:** *Has that closed yet?*

**Vivienne Leebosh:** No. It's not very active. Nobody is buying anything this year. The brokers aren't even selling.

**Cinema Canada:** *Like R.H. Thompson, Anne Cameron is someone else you've worked with all along. Did you plan to co-script with her from the start, or did she jump in at some point down the road?*

**Ralph Thomas:** I couldn't get started on *Ticket* early enough to get the script ready by the time Vivienne figured she needed it. So Anne came in and wrote the preliminary draft while I finished what I was working on at the time.

**Cinema Canada:** *There seemed to be a change of tone about halfway into the film, when Rubinek launched into his comedy routine and started spouting one-liners at the camp. Did it also change at that point for you in the writing or shooting of it?*

**Ralph Thomas:** How about the conception of it? In making a film, what you do is push everything to the point where you're not quite sure if it's ridiculous or really worth it. But you always have to push. It's easy to do something everybody else has done by developing a little craft. All of us can turn out a copy of *The Maltese Falcon*. But in this film, I was dealing with two story lines: that of the central character, and that of the cavalry who are going to come and grab him. What you want in that situation is as much contrast as possible between him and his world, and the world of those

people who are coming to get him.

When I decided to go with a comedian as the second main character, that conditioned a lot of things from then on. The other thing I wanted was to make a kidnapping scene that didn't look like *Mission Impossible*. I didn't want it to have that look of the television professionals. That's not how life is.

When we were in Paris, we met this guy who is editorial page editor of the *International Herald Tribune*. His daughter had been in the Unification Church, and when he kidnapped her, absolutely everything went wrong. It was a comedy of errors.

He had to drive with her in the back seat of his car, handcuffed and gagged, for 24 hours non-stop to Chicago. He only had 60 dollars in his pockets so he couldn't afford to get a hotel room, and his 'safe' house was in Chicago. He had just enough money to cover gas. Eventually, he had to bum money from the strong-arm guys he had brought along.

All the while, the state police, the FBI and the Unification Church – the Moonies – were chasing him. Twelve hundred miles!

She was deprogrammed one hour before the cops came through the door. That is not the kidnapping of a professional. If you were to shoot that, there would be people screaming and falling all over each other. I wanted to capture that feeling.

**Vivienne Leebosh:** The other key thing here – and our research bears this out – is that the normal person is the easiest to brainwash. Comedy is mostly a

defence mechanism. Someone unusual enough to have that comedic 'other self' – someone able to work with it – goes into the camp and knows what it is all about. Larry is able to do that, and it's really important to his character.

**Ralph Thomas:** We still wanted him to be vulnerable, which he is. He starts to succumb.

The man with a much greater sense of humour – a very secure sense of humour – is Eric (Guy Boyd). He doesn't need to parade it. It's just there. When he looks at the world, it's all funny. And it's very hard to convince somebody who looks at everything as if it's monstrously funny that he should sell flowers for a messiah.

I also felt very strongly, on an intuitive level, that the film should have a sort of slapstick quality. I felt an audience would welcome a release after all the tension. Besides, the comedy is followed by the deprogramming segment, and that's 23 hard and heavy minutes long. So I have to give the audience a bit of a rest.

The other reason is that I thought it was an interesting counterpoint to the madness David (Nick Mancuso) was involved in.

**Cinema Canada:** *You've alluded to the Moonies. Is this film about them specifically?*

**Vivienne Leebosh:** In fact, our research covered a lot of different cults. There is no mention of Reverend Sun Myung Moon in our film, nor of any guru. We feel the subject is broader than that.

**Ralph Thomas:** When you make a

dramatic film, it's obvious that the characters are invented – by the writer, the director and the actors. Linc Strunk was invented by Anne Cameron, myself and R.H. Thompson. R.H. had a helluva lot to do with the way Linc slammed David back on the bed during the deprogramming.

I hadn't decided – nobody had decided – what kind of dramatic gesture we'd have at that point. It started with R.H. saying: 'Maybe I'll burn a picture of father.' When we started rehearsing, the idea of pushing David to the bed came. R.H. says it was Nick's idea, and Nick attributes it to R.H. But there it is.

For people to analyze the film and say 'That's so-and-so and that's so-and-so' – well, I'm sorry to disappoint them, but it ain't. I wouldn't have the goddamn guts to go and hire an actor and say: 'Let's do an absolutely perfect representation of John F. Kennedy.' Portrayals of real people are invariably failures. Your viewer sees right through it. He will not suspend disbelief.

He will suspend disbelief if I have, in all freedom, created a character who is as separate and different as his own life. That's what we've tried to do.

When I shoot a scene, and those characters are in motion, I suspend disbelief. They become real to me. And when it's really working well, all I'm worried about is making sure I get the camera in the right place to cover.

**Cinema Canada:** *Variety described Ticket as a 'social thriller'; somebody else called it a 'psychological thriller'.*





# INTERVIEW

Another called it 'the ultimate journalistic drama.' How would you describe it?

**Vivienne Leebosh**: I always refer to it as a psychological thriller. How do you see it?

**Cinema Canada**: I would call it a 'family' film.

**Vivienne Leebosh**: I agree with you there.

**Ralph Thomas**: It's a lot of things. It will affect everyone who sees it in a slightly different way. Everyone brings their own preconceptions, prejudices, and personality to a film. I don't expect any two people to agree. It depends on your viewpoint. John Donne was a great poet in the 17th century, a lousy one in the 18th and 19th, and great again in the 20th. Donne's words didn't change during that time. Bach was once dismissed as a hack. Now he's the father of music. He might disappear again, or be forgotten in 100 years...

**Cinema Canada**: Do you think the issues raised by the film actually beg a larger question - the question of forfeiting your own critical judgement in favour of selling a line, whether it's a corporate line, a cult line or whatever?

**Ralph Thomas**: You know, the 'normal' person is called 'normal' because he accepts society's norms. He is the easiest to brainwash because he is already a brainwashed individual. He is already towing a line. Consequently, he is easier to mold into something else.

The so-called 'abnormal' person is very hard to brainwash. He may be with you for one or two days, but then he's on to something else. Which is why cults are so dangerous. They key on certain people. They're not interested in dopers and rubbies. They want successful, middle-class achievers, preferably with money.

**Cinema Canada**: Could you be brainwashed?

**Ralph Thomas**: I think it would be harder with me because I come from a fundamentalist background, though I never went through a conversion. I was born into it. I was definitely brainwashed, no question about that. It took me a good seven or eight years to deprogram myself.

**Vivienne Leebosh**: (to Ralph) Do you think I could be brainwashed?

**Ralph Thomas**: Ah, you... I don't know. One can only speak for oneself. Why don't you ask Josh Freed if he thinks he could be brainwashed? He went into a camp, and he came out scared.

**Cinema Canada**: Didn't you think Kim Cattrall (who plays Ruthie, the camp leader) looks a little too healthy, considering that everyone at the camp was supposed to be undernourished?

**Vivienne Leebosh**: When you reach a certain status within the cult, you eat better.

**Ralph Thomas**: It's a process - until such time as the inner person is, in effect, totally expunged. Since Ruthie has been with the family (i.e. the cult) for

five years, she is 'dead.' She is no longer what she was before. She has become the professional camp leader. She is well-fed and kept very healthy because she has to control and run 80 people.

**Cinema Canada**: A change of subject. Why did you decide to leave the CBC?

**Ralph Thomas**: Essentially, I wanted to work with a bigger canvas - which isn't to say that I wanted to work on a bigger canvas for the rest of my life. In future, I may want to return to a smaller one. But basically, it was a matter of size.

Also, the relationship with the audience is different. With television, you're addressing people who sit in a room, converse with each other, leave, come back, whatever. You have to hold them, affect them.

With film, the audience makes a commitment. They've paid their bucks to see your film. And when they're sitting there in the theatre, it becomes a one-to-one relationship. When the lights go down, the crowd disappears. In a sense, that gives you a certain freedom.

**The 'normal' person is called 'normal' because he accepts society's norms. He is the easiest to brainwash because he is already a brainwashed individual. The so-called 'abnormal' person is very hard to brainwash...**

**Cinema Canada**: When you decided to get into features, did you have any insecurities or doubts about the long-term viability of the Canadian feature film industry? Did that concern you?

**Ralph Thomas**: It is no surprise to us that there has been a collapse.

**Vivienne Leebosh**: Last year, we told each other that if we didn't do this film we'd never do a film because there wouldn't be an industry.

When things were on the upswing, it was a low point for us. No one was interested in hiring the creative people. Nobody wanted to hear what we had to say. That was the time for lawyers and accountants to make their movies and get theirs.

There are a lot of reasons for the industry's collapse this year. A prime reason is that investors have not had their money returned. But the high interest rates have certainly contributed.

**Ralph Thomas**: Yeah. That came along on top of things. But there were an awful lot of bad movies made.

**Vivienne Leebosh**: I was calling investors, and they'd say: Listen, I've been screwed so many times I'd rather throw my money out the window than put it in a movie. I've had it. How many times can I be ripped off? Still, last year, people made movies.

This year, it's very serious. More

serious than investors not getting their money back. With interest rates where they are, people aren't buying real estate; they're not buying oils; they're not buying gas. And they're not buying tax shelters.

The Italian stock market closed for the first time in 64 years recently. Closed dead. Why? Because the bottom was falling out. Things are very tough. The tax shelter doesn't do anything anymore.

**Ralph Thomas**: It was exacerbated by the CFDC, which was the real agent of the boom. It was as if the city of Toronto said: 'We will no longer require architects and engineers to show credentials before putting up their buildings. Anyone can design and build if they have the money.'

If the city did that, no one would be surprised if virtually all of those buildings fell down.

In the movie business, we had guys who were real estate operators one day and film directors the next. I'm sorry. I spent a lot of time learning how to make a film and how to write. I've been writing since I was five years old. So have a lot of other people.

**Vivienne Leebosh**: Many people have asked: 'Where did you find those people in the camp?' Well, the key is that we put a lot of time into this. We didn't do three movies in one year. We did one movie in two years.

**Ralph Thomas**: The point is, all of those people were available. They're there to be found and used. Eighty people sat in that room (at the camp), and they're 80 marvelous actors.

And when I talk to them as a director, I know what the hell I'm talking about. I make it my business to know how to talk to an actor. It's insane to think that someone can be a real estate operator today and a film director or producer tomorrow. Even worse is when he walks on set and tells the director who does know what he's doing, to sit aside because he wants the scene a different way. Or he thinks the script is unimportant, which is the main mistake producers make.

Most producers thought putting the deal together was most important - put together a deal and start shooting in three weeks' time. The fact that there was no script was beside the point. Well, it is on the point. With no script, it's like trying to put up Toronto City Hall with no blueprint. It doesn't happen.

**Cinema Canada**: That's the amazing thing. Despite this polarization between the creative people on one hand, and the financial people on the other, the industry has, this year, managed to produce a few fine films. And they're by filmmakers - the same creative people who were around five years before the boom.

**Ralph Thomas**: We've come back. We've reasserted ourselves.

The fact is, the biggest disasters have been by well-known directors. What Canadian producers have managed to prove is that they can take major international directors and have them make bad films. That is the singular 'success' of the majority of Canadian producers.

They have proven to the world that they can even take a John Huston and turn out a turkey.

So obviously, the key here is not just the development of writers and directors, but the development of what I call the creative producer. David O. Selznick is the archetypal creative producer. He's a writer and a money-man. He can write a six-page memo criticizing one shot of Hitchcock's, and convince Hitchcock that he should re-do it. That's going some. We don't have many of those.

This isn't just a plug for my wife, but I happen to work with a producer like that. She is involved in every aspect of the film. It was her decision to make the film. Originally, I wasn't that hot on it.

**Vivienne Leebosh**: Because of Ralph's fundamentalist background, he didn't want to re-live that whole thing.

**Cinema Canada**: At this stage of the game, that's history, isn't it?

**Vivienne Leebosh**: When you've been through a heavy experience, you don't want to re-live it.

**Ralph Thomas**: It was a very, very heavy experience. No question.

If you had spent two or three hours per night, and sometimes many hours during the day on your knees as a child, pleading with God to let you into heaven, all because there's this strange little verse in the Bible that says: you can take God's name in vain, but you cannot invoke the name of the Holy Ghost... I mean, there I am, an eight-year-old kid. And I read this verse in the Bible. It's automatic - not that I mouthed the words, but that in my mind I would. Just as an experiment.

So I spent four years with God, after that, pleading with him to give me a break. If you'd been through an experience like that, I don't think you'd want to re-live it...

Anyway, to get back to the subject of producers - because that's what is really important - we have to develop producers who can develop a script. In effect, super story editors.

**Cinema Canada**: Are there such producers out there, and is the CFDC, in your opinion, doing anything to nurture them?

**Ralph Thomas**: The CFDC still thinks a producer is a basically a financial person, a kind of glorified accountant.

In the (American) studios, the system is quite different. The Ray Starks, Grant Tinkers, Norman Lear - all of the successful U.S. producers - are creative people. In the American film industry, they're more important than the money-raisers. The money-raisers work for them.

In this country, it doesn't function that way, and I doubt that it will for a while.

**Cinema Canada**: They do have a 40-year head start on us.

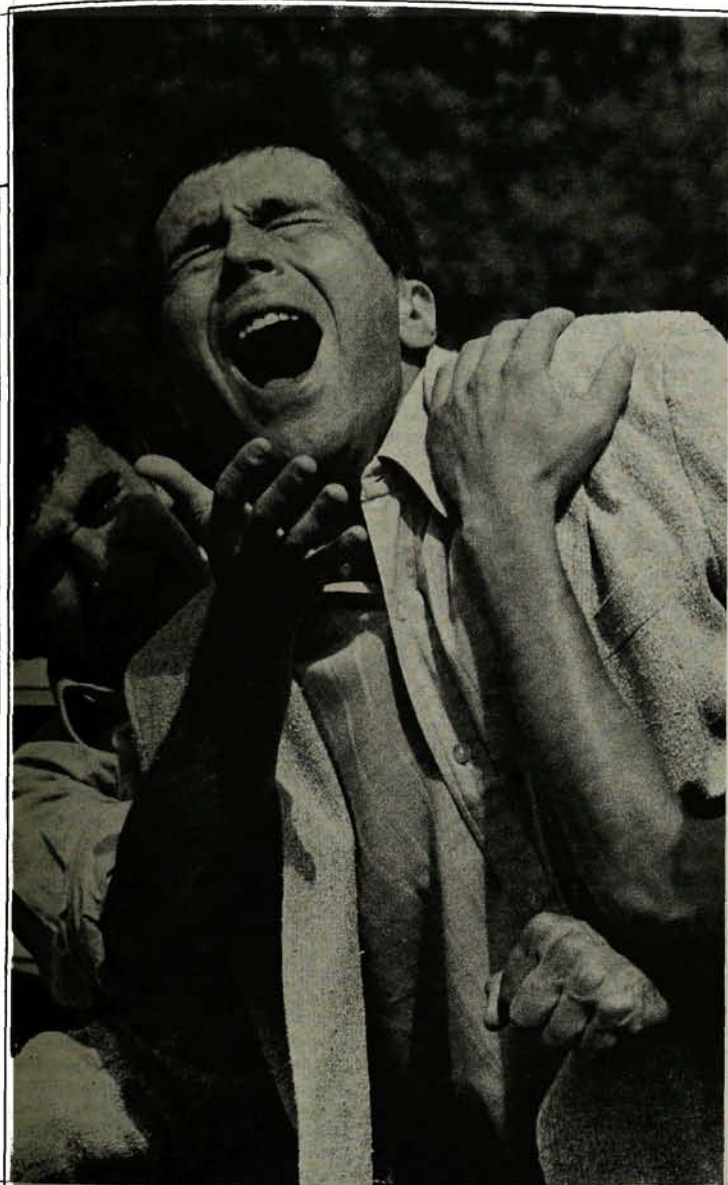
**Ralph Thomas**: Yeah...

**Vivienne Leebosh**: A big problem too is that I can only make one quality movie every one or two years. It takes a lot of energy and time.

But it's hard to market anywhere



# INTERVIEW



The painful price of a *Ticket to Heaven*: here, David (Nick Mancuso) and Saul Rubinek company photo: Lawrie Raskin.

## Ralph Thomas' filmography

1980-81

**Ticket To Heaven**, feature film, director/co-writer (producer: Vivienne Leebosh)

1978-79

"For The Record" CBC-TV drama series: **Cementhead**, director/co-writer, 60 min. **Every Person Is Guilty**, director/scriptwriter (producer: Vivienne Leebosh), 60 min. Genie Awards for Best Director, Best Screenplay

**Ambush At Iroquois Point**, feature for CBC, director, 90 min.

1977

"For The Record" CBC-TV drama series: **Seer Was Here**, executive producer, 72 min. (directed by Claude Jutra), **A Matter of Choice**, exec. p., 55 min. (directed by Francis Mankiewicz) **Dying Hard**, exec. p., 42 min. (directed by Don Haldane)

**Drying Up The Streets**, exec. p./producer, 86 min. (directed by Robin Spry)

**Tyler**, exec. p./director, 82 min.

1976

"For The Record" CBC-TV drama series: **Dreamspeaker**, producer 75 min. (directed by Claude Jutra) Winner of six Canadian Film Awards, including Best TV drama. **Someday Soon**, producer, 52 min. (directed by Don Haldane) **Ada**, producer, 57 min. (directed by Claude Jutra)

**The Tar Sands**, producer/co-writer, 57 min. (directed by Peter Pearson)

**Hank**, producer/co-writer, 52 min. (directed by Don Haldane)

1975

"Performance" CBC-TV drama series: **The Insurance Man from Ingersoll**, producer, 52 min. (directed by Peter Pearson) Winner of one Canadian Film Award and one ACTRA award **What we have here is a people problem**, producer, 52 min. (directed by Francis Mankiewicz) **Nest of Shadows**, producer, 52 min. (directed by Peter Carter)

**Kathy Karuks is a Grizzly Bear**, producer/writer, 52 min. (directed by Peter Pearson)

(Plus numerous other credits, too extensive to list here, dating back to 1968.)

**Vivienne Leebosh**: We weren't a part of it anyway. We were broke. Meanwhile, peer pressure was saying: 'Ralph, you'd better do a feature. You've got to do one...' But the scripts were so bad he couldn't.

**Ralph Thomas**: But I didn't think it was *smart*, either. And I was right. If I'd made a bad film then, I wouldn't have made another.

**Cinema Canada**: Did the scripts you were offered turn out to be dogs in the end?

**Ralph Thomas**: Oh yeah. Not a single one was ever released. The scripts were dreadful.

I'll tell you a story - and this is typical of the Canadian film industry: I got this call from a producer, asking me if I'd be free to shoot a film in three weeks' time. I told him I was working on a script, so he says: 'Well, could you come to my office to discuss it?'

I say: 'Well, I'd like to read it first.' So he says: 'There's no time for that.' No bullshit - that's what he said! I told him I didn't see any point in visiting his office if I hadn't read the script.

'Well, how do I get the script to you?' he asks. And I say: 'Put it in a cab.' He says: 'Who pays?' And I say: 'Well, obviously, you do! You're the one approaching me.'

So he says: 'Will you read it right away?' I say: 'Yes, as soon as it arrives.'

Well, I read it. Then I call him up and ask: 'This is shooting in three weeks' time?' He says: 'Uh huh.'

'First of all,' I say, 'there's one major problem with this. By my reckoning, it's only about 50 minutes long. How are you going to make up the other 40 minutes?' He says: 'We'll look after that as we're shooting.'

Well, the film was shot by another director, and the rough cut was 60 minutes long. They're still trying to figure out how to stretch it.

**Cinema Canada**: Did this producer go on to make another film?

**Vivienne Leebosh**: He likely will this year. He's a big-money producer.

Another film we know of that hasn't been released is only 72 minutes long - 10 minutes short of anything you could distribute as a feature.

**Ralph Thomas**: The guy I just referred to - the one who eventually directed this film - has been blackballed throughout the entire industry. He's paying the price.

**Cinema Canada**: Could that happen again?

**Ralph Thomas**: There are countless stupid people out there. I have never encountered so many dumb, stupid businessmen - and they keep coming into the film industry. They keep blowing money. And they blow money for one simple reason: they don't know anything about making films. They think it's all irrelevant.

**Cinema Canada**: So you would term what has happened in the past two years a business failure, as opposed to

unless you have three or four films packaged. So it's very complicated for the kind of producer I am to work, unless I align myself with somebody who is making two or three films per year.

The buyers aren't interested in people who make one film every couple of years. They're not even interested in quality. But you give them a package of five, and you can sell them any kind of crap.

**Cinema Canada**: Would you be willing to do television between films?

**Vivienne Leebosh**: No. I don't have time. I'm still working full-time on *Ticket To Heaven*. And as soon as we close, there's overseeing the campaign, doing the trailer... I'm not going to let a distributor just dump the film on the public without knowing what kind of promotion it will get. We've put too much of our lives into this to let it fall into the hands of some moron.

**Cinema Canada**: Have you negotiated seriously with any American distributors?

**Vivienne Leebosh**: There are distributors who have seen it twice or three times and liked it. We will have American

distribution - but we're still working on it.

**Cinema Canada**: Will it precede Canadian distribution?

**Vivienne Leebosh**: I don't think so. Canadian will likely precede American because we're opening the Festival of Festivals and we'd like to take advantage of that.

**Cinema Canada**: Do you think you would remain husband and wife if you weren't immersed in the same field?

**Ralph Thomas**: Probably not.

**Vivienne Leebosh**: There's no way of knowing. When Ralph and I were working on different projects, it was harder. We're both so compulsive that I'd be talking about my project and he'd be talking about his, and neither of us would hear a word.

**Ralph Thomas**: We're so obsessive. As a consequence of that, the frictions were worse. That's why I say: probably not.

Yesterday, for instance, I felt it was Sunday - all day. (It was Wednesday.) I felt it was Sunday because the scene I was writing occurred on Sunday. So every time I went downstairs, I was kind

of surprised it wasn't Sunday. Now, that's somebody who is pretty obsessed.

**Vivienne Leebosh**: That's the kind of people we are.

**Ralph Thomas**: When I'm writing, I get totally obsessed with my characters.

**Vivienne Leebosh**: My biggest problem is pressure - the pressure of being a mother. I don't have time to shop and buy food as much as I'd like. So I feel terribly guilty, and I get freaked when the fridge is empty - which it is now and has been for three days. And I feel like a terrible failure when there's no food in the house. That's my biggest problem. My kids don't feel badly. It's my trip. I feel guilty.

**Ralph Thomas**: To go back to one of the questions you first asked, I think there will be three or four Canadian producers still alive in the American system, who will produce mostly trash: horror movies, 'B' movies, the kind of stuff the majors will throw into 1,000 theatres for one week, and pull before anybody discovers it. Along the way, some others will emerge.

But we're in a period of retrenchment. The boom will probably never be repeated. I don't expect in my lifetime to again see a year in which 77 feature films are made in Canada.



# Support systems go

Ticket to Heaven's executive producer Ron Cohen describes how his company (Ronald I. Cohen Productions) was instrumental in the making of the film. His comments shed light on the delicate balance between, and the complexities of, the creative and commercial elements of filmmaking.

The easiest way to understand my role would be to envisage filmmaking as a pretty extensive process. With *Ticket to Heaven* I provided the field in which Ralph was able to sow his seed as the screenwriter and the director. We have a background in feature filmmaking - by "we" I'm referring to our company (Ronald I. Cohen Productions) and all the people involved in it. We had a record. We had deals with the majors on the last couple of films and had been very involved in the financing of them. We were equally involved in their distribution, not only domestically but also in the foreign area. What that meant was that we had an administration already set up to deal with all aspects of the creation of a film. It's very difficult to create a film in a vacuum. It's not impossible, but a track record is important when it comes to giving confidence to the bankers who provide the interim financing, and to the investors who are prepared to put up the equity dollars to make the film... Then there are the distributors, who want to have some insurance that they are going to have a film of superior quality, that will get completed...

All of these critical aspects of the process - that kind of administrative capacity which has an obvious creative side to it - I think, are essential; and it really works very, very well in combination. There's no question that the idea for the film, in this case, was Ralph's and Vivienne's. It was an idea that came out of a series of articles in the *Montreal Star*, based on a very bizarre situation. It was really quite surprising that no one had made a film in this area before.

Vivienne and Ralph had a long background in television. I didn't actually know them, but Vivienne's kid brother and I had gone to school together many years before. There was that little association which in the end, I guess, was meaningless - although that sort of thing always helps to bring people closer together. When they brought the project to me I had already heard about it, and was very encouraged by Michael Prupas who was my attorney and good friend. Michael had a long association with Josh Freed, who had written the series of articles on which the book and the screenplay were based. Josh was therefore very influential in the motion picture itself. In addition to that there was a lot of encouragement from the CFDC - which has played a very important role in all of the films I have been involved in.

At the time they came to me I already had a moral commitment to do *Harry Tracy*. ...It was a very heady time for the industry at the beginning of last year, and it seemed to me that there was good sense in trying to

proceed with two pictures: one was a lower budget picture, one was higher. The subjects were quite diverse and, I thought, quite important in their own ways. It seemed to make a very good kind of package, both from a financial and a distribution point of view. I think it really did prove to be both, although, as we know, by the end of the year the attitude of the investing community had changed substantially.

At the time, I was - and still am - interested in being involved with good pictures which were good entertainment. To me, whether or not the formula looks 'American' to some people is not a factor.

Take *Middle Age Crazy*, for example. The interesting irony was that it was the Krofts's first feature film and our third at that point; but there's no doubt that because of their experience in doing hundreds of television shows, they had a major role to play in terms of contacts in L.A., in terms of getting Bruce Dern and Ann-Margret for prices which were very good. Those kinds of things. Their contacts were very useful from that point of view. Even so, we did play a kind of leading role there.

At that point, Vivienne and Ralph were arriving with their feature, and it was going to be our fourth - with another one already planned, which, of course, went ahead... We had people to deal with all the marketing, creative, legal, accounting and book-keeping aspects; people to deal with the general support systems in terms of publicity, arranging for distribution, and arousing some confidence on the part of investors, who could then look and say, "Well, there is someone with a track record, someone who has done something in the past that has resulted in something feasible."

Whatever my title, I've always done pretty much the same thing on the films in which I've been involved - except, obviously, on the first one... With no experience at all, my job was limited to legal and financial questions. My involvement in the creative aspect increased thereafter to the point where, after Bob Cooper and I split, that area in our organization, as well as the responsibility for the financial, business/administrative and distribution aspects all fell basically on my shoulders. Although my credit was 'executive producer' on *Ticket to Heaven* and 'producer' on *Harry Tracy*, the functions weren't basically any different. It's being involved, without any doubt, in all the aspects of filmmaking - more or less in some areas, in terms of the creative (cont. on p. 38)

a creative failure?

**Vivienne Leebosh:** That's true. The brokers are still deciding what is to be made, in fact.

**Ralph Thomas:** They'll read the script and say yes or no.

**Cinema Canada:** So what do you do? It seems the film industry has traditionally been plagued with the 'two solitudes' syndrome: the financial people and the creative people don't communicate with each other. Should the creative people be talking to the investors directly?

**Ralph Thomas:** Vivienne has spent a lot of time in the past two years talking to business people. We wouldn't have made *Ticket* without them; obviously, we owe them a return on their investment.

Once that investment is returned, we want those people to become part of our filmmaking for years to come. That's why we're so concerned about promotion. You have to return their investment if you want their confidence. Besides, you don't want your film to sit on a shelf.

If you review the last 15 years of Canadian filmmaking, people still talk about *Goin' Down The Road* and *Wedding In White* as two of our best films ever. They didn't do well at the box office because they lacked the kind of budgets that allowed Hollywood-level production values.

Suddenly, we had the opportunity to put those production values on screen, but the money went elsewhere. What we need to be competitive is to develop and encourage the talent, and find the writers.

**Cinema Canada:** Do they exist?

**Vivienne Leebosh:** The CFDC says it develops writers, but it only does so when the writer is affiliated with a producer. Therefore, the producer retains control, and the writer only does what he wants.

**Cinema Canada:** So the writer is the lackey?

**Vivienne Leebosh:** That's right.

**Cinema Canada:** Vivienne, you're on the CAMPP (Canadian Association of Motion Picture Producers) executive. Ralph, you're on the DGC (Directors Guild of Canada) board. You now have a track record. The so-called commercial filmmakers have failed...

**Ralph Thomas:** For failing to be commercial - that's the important thing.

**Cinema Canada:** Okay. So now you're in a position to have some input into the decisions your respective organizations will make. Is an institute or organization that shares filmmaking knowledge possible?

**Vivienne Leebosh:** It's a fight. A power struggle. I'm fighting my end of it, and the 'Group of Nine' (the Association of Canadian Movie Production Companies, or ACMPC) are fighting theirs'. They've got a lot of power and a lot of government connections. They say the tax shelter should only be for corpora-

tions that make two or three films per year: cut out the small guys. So it's a fight.

**Ralph Thomas:** The government will never buy that, though.

**Vivienne Leebosh:** They might not, but that's what they're going after. They're looking to finance the 'minimajors.'

**Cinema Canada:** Would you consider going back to television?

**Ralph Thomas:** I've never ruled out going back to the CBC. In some ways, I don't feel I've really left the CBC. But I've had no sense that they want me there. In fact, I've had a strong sense they don't want me there. (Laughs.)

One of the ironies of this film is that when Vivienne first decided to do it she thought of it as a movie for CBC television. They turned it down.

**Vivienne Leebosh:** They said it had been done, that documentaries had been done on it.

**Ralph Thomas:** Whereas we've been running into distributors who aren't even aware that this situation with religious cults exists. And here, the CBC was telling us it was passé.

It's like the word 'commercial.' It means nothing; it's a lever, a way of saying no. And CBC's reasons for saying no are God-knows-what. It's just that they've managed to say no to just about every idea we've thrown at them for three years.

**Vivienne Leebosh:** The first film I produced at the CBC is called *Every Person is Guilty*. Ralph wrote and directed it. It was nominated for seven Genie Awards. Ralph won for best screenplay and direction. It was nominated for various ACTRA awards.

Afterward, one of the network's senior executives told me: 'Vivienne, that is a very fine film, the best that has come out of this department all year. And it was done on budget. But,' he says, 'I have a bone to pick with you. We don't need aggressive young producers here. You walked right over me. You didn't confer with me about anything. You walked over me like I didn't exist. You made all your own decisions.'

I was shocked. I couldn't believe it. Here was a guy saying: 'We don't need aggressive young producers.' That's what working at the CBC is all about.

**Cinema Canada:** Are you interested in working in the United States?

**Ralph Thomas:** We're bidding our time. But we'll definitely have a Hollywood agent. Right now, we have two L.A. agents pushing this film. Our decision will depend on how well they do - how successful they are will determine which one we go with.

But I'm not interested in working in the States. I'd rather live and work here. More than anything, I'm interested in working. That is my first loyalty.

**Cinema Canada:** Are you optimistic that you will still be here next year?

**Ralph Thomas:** A lot will depend on whether or not we can get a film off the ground this year. If we can't, we'll have some hard decisions to make. ●