

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.

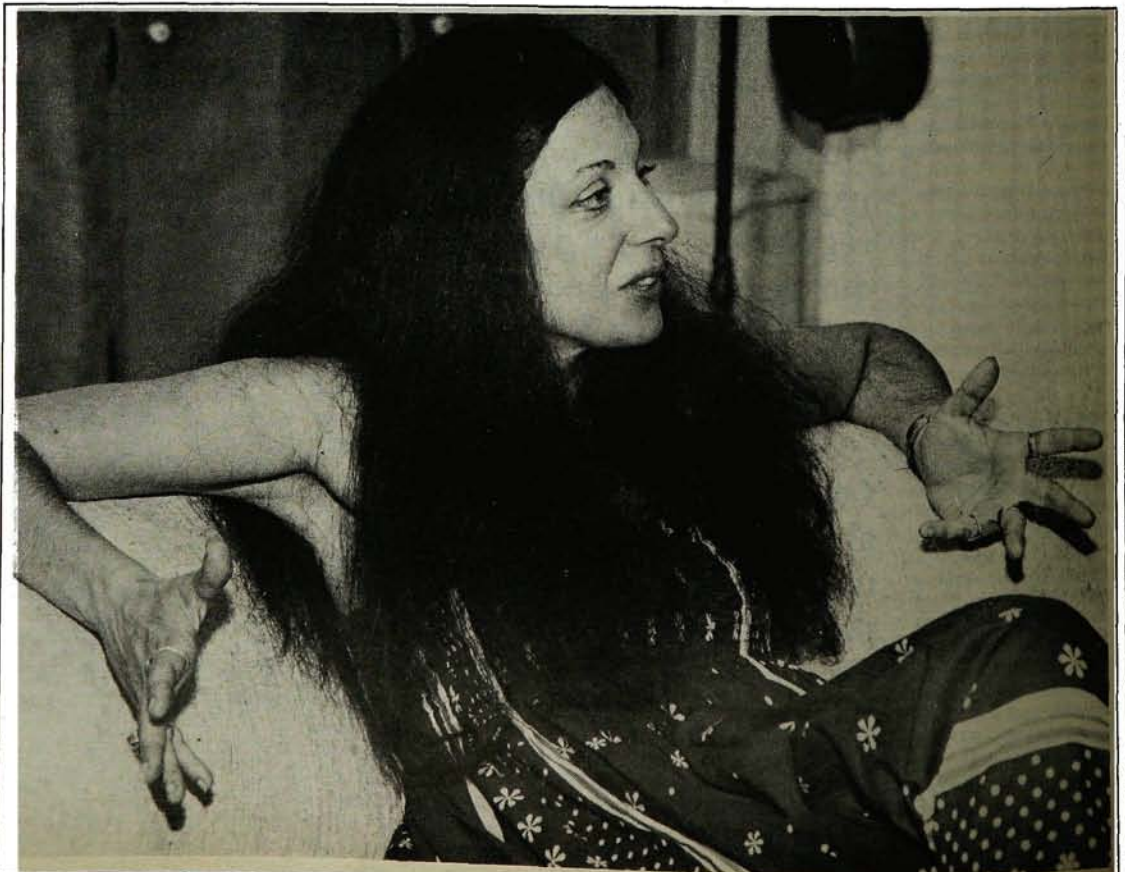
Cinema Canada: How did *Ticket To Heaven* originate? Wasn't it initially called *Moonstalkers*?

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.

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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'.*



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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.

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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.

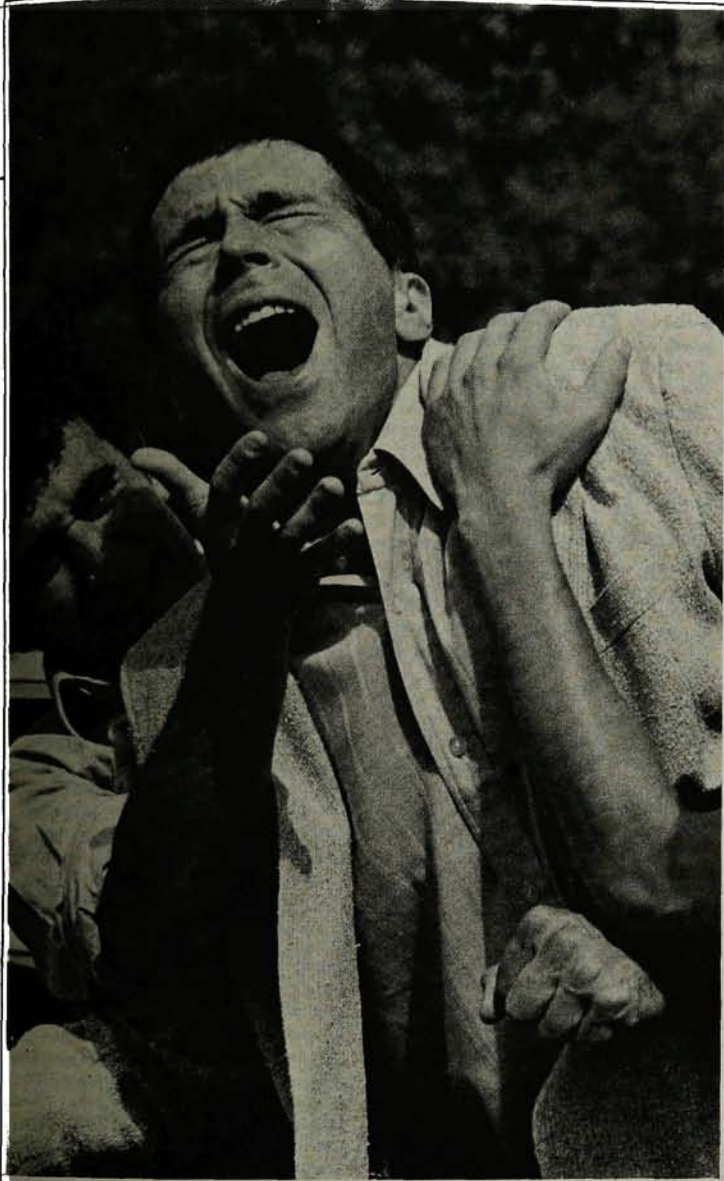
Cinema Canada: They do have a 40-year head start on us.

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

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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. ●

Proparms: Calling it quits

by Howard Goldberg

Proparms' budgeting problems were seriously compounded by the various producers' habit of exceeding the customary 30-day limit for payment. Said Rust, "No industry is infallible. Most production companies, in other countries at least, have the courtesy of informing suppliers of a cash flow shortage. Here the buzz words are 'We're waiting for a signature on that one.'"

In addition to chasing for payment, Rust found herself repeatedly having to fight production companies in order to secure compensation for lost, damaged, or stolen rental equipment. "The most dangerous time for our rented equipment," said Rust, "is that short period between the wrap-up party and the actual return of the equipment." On *A Man Called Intrepid*, the security service guarding all props and costumes was released one day prior to the scheduled return of equipment. During the wrap \$5,000 worth of Proparms weaponry was stolen. Five months later, only after repeated attempts to secure compensation, Astral Bellevue Pathé paid for the guns. In the meantime however, Proparms was forced to buy replacement weapons in order to honour contractual obligations.

In another instance a gun was returned with a clean crack down its antique wooden barrel. An accompanying note read: "We can't imagine how this could

have happened, your gun seems to have disintegrated." In short, the demoralizing pursuit of debtors was to be a nine-to-five activity for Rust as long as she hoped to regulate Proparms' own cash flow difficulties.

The personnel of Proparms was ultimately discouraged by what it considered to be a shameful absence of professional ethics in most Canadian productions. Elsener and Rust cite cases where inadequate consultation at pre-production resulted in lower quality work and panic calls in the middle of the night from production managers who realized, at the last minute, that a certain shot already in progress required a prop or a special effect. Ultimately, inadequate safety measures and communication problems endangered both Proparms personnel and crew members.

In *City on Fire* for example, an assistant director who wanted to "consult" with Elsener while the latter was completing the wiring for a gas explosion, fell over a trip wire. Had the wire been connected to the power supply, a lethal explosion would have resulted. In general, said Elsener, the mass confusion which prevails on most sets, and the know-it-all attitude of everyone from the production assistant right up to the producer, impeded him from doing his work quickly and safely.

On another occasion Cinepix hired Elsener to help on an arms-related special effect but then failed to include him in pre-production meetings. Currently, the production manager learned that a municipal SWAT team would supervise the effect for nothing. Proparms was dismissed. Yet on the eve of the shoot, Elsener was awoken at 2 a.m. by a phone call from Cinepix. The SWAT team, although qualified to handle

the arms, did not fully understand the visual problems inherent in the effect - would Elsener please bail them out?

The production of *Oh Heavenly Dog* required three separate pre-production meetings before a shooting schedule was finally agreed upon. Yet after all that planning, a last-minute phone call from a production assistant informed Elsener that work would begin the next day.

Elsener offered David Cronenberg's *Scanners* and Gilles Carle's *Les Plouffes* as examples of well-managed shoots. In these films, careful pre-production set the stage for an on-set atmosphere of cooperation rather than conflict. If films such as these were the rule rather than the exception, Proparms would have been more inclined to put up with late-night phone calls, last-minute diversions and the reality of perpetually late payment.

Much of the energy which Rust and Elsener could have used to survive the hardships of the industry was soon wasted in an ongoing red-tape battle with provincial and federal governments, following the toughening of federal gun control laws (Bill C-83) in 1978. The resulting debate was the straw that finally broke the camel's back.

At first the new laws, which required the extensive licensing of any user of an automatic weapon (machine gun, etc.), did not alarm Proparms; until it learned that the laws did not distinguish between a live weapon and a de-activated prop weapon for theatrical use.

Rust immediately informed federal officials that the law could seriously reduce filmmaking activity unless some legal allowance was made for the safe de-activated prop weapon. (See box.)

Finally, unable to obtain a ruling on

"If there was a great deal more honesty and less bullshit in the Canadian film industry, and a greater degree of respect for quality craftsmanship, we could rise out of the shadow of the American industry and face a confident future."

Lesley Rust 1979

"The Canadian film industry is dominated by so many charlatans and crooks, it deserves whatever it gets."

Lesley Rust 1981

Who is Rust and why has her guarded optimism been replaced by bitterness and contempt?

Lesley Rust was a partner with Josef Elsener in the now disbanded theatrical and movie prop special effects company Proparms. The company specialized in weapons - time bombs, custom-made swords, bayonets, machine guns, etc.

Proparms began supplying effects and props to Canadian films in 1975; six years and 36 features later, tired of an eternal chase for unpaid accounts, weary of a quixotic red-tape battle with the governments of Ontario, Quebec and Canada, and fed-up with the disrespect of the majority of Canadian crews towards them and their equipment, they are leaving the film industry.

So what? you may ask. The issue here is that Proparms, a quality company which met a demand in the Canadian entertainment industry (ask almost any production house that's made a film since 1978), was plowed under by inconsistent, if not incomprehensible government regulations, and the callousness of an industry which apparently does not reward quality suppliers with quality treatment. The details of this case study not only illustrate problem areas in Canadian production, but also the government's inability to deal effectively with industry-related problems in its domain.

Josef Elsener, part-owner and chief design engineer of Proparms, is recognized as one of Canada's leading ballistics experts. He received his training in a small weapons manufacturing shop where he designed his own guns before becoming a prop arm supplier for theatrical productions in 1963. Elsener used his talents to construct the ideal prop weapons - authentic arms which looked and behaved like the real thing when fired, but which could not be loaded with live ammunition of any sort.

Before renting out these converted weapons, Elsener had them approved by the ballistics division of the Quebec Provincial Police (QPP). When film companies approached the QPP in 1975, inquiring about prop weapons, the QPP referred them to Proparms. Soon, film-related work became the mainstay of its business. And soon also, film-related headaches occupied front row center of Rust's business mind.

In an industry which may boom for four months, and lie dormant for the next eight, budgeting to maintain a year-round overhead becomes a tricky task.

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Lesley Rust and Joseph Elsener.

the constitution of a converted weapon suitable for theatrical use, Elsener ceased his gun conversion work to concentrate more heavily on the special effects aspects of his job (lightning, rain, explosions, etc.). Meanwhile, Rust continued to press the federal government for a blanket ruling on converted weapons. By day she was a collection agency, by night a political lobbyist.

After fighting government bureaucracy, working odd hours under conditions which were not always creatively satisfying if not downright dangerous, Lesley Rust and Josef Elsener decided to find a new line. They will be selling their inventory of special effects machines and converted weapons and entering the international defence market, primarily outside the country. It is the industry's loss. ●

Laws under fire — but best shot fails

Among other things, Bill C-83 stipulated that anyone wishing to use an automatic firearm had to first obtain a FAC (Firearms Acquisition Certificate). Yet the new federal law did not adequately define "firearm". Interpretation of the new law was in the hands of provincial courts. In Quebec, the QPP was familiar with Elsener and his converted guns. It did not consider the props to be firearms and allowed operations to continue as before.

In 1979 when the production of *Starmania* inquired into the legal technicalities of taking six Proparms converted automatic weapons into Ontario, it was told that the guns were legally considered "firearms" because they still had moving parts. As firearms, their operators would require FAC papers.

Elsener had been trying to get a ruling from the federal government as to the exact definition of a converted gun for stage and film use

since 1978, but had never received any reply. He had even worked (free-of-charge) at the request of the federal Working Group on Gun Controls, to complete a working paper which defined a safe de-activated firearm, and outlined film/theatre needs for weapon-related props. Still, in 1981, a letter from the Honourable Bob Kaplan to Lesley Rust revealed that there was no agreement between the provinces as to what constituted a de-activated "prop" weapon. "... The issue in the view of Ontario officials is the level of de-activation required so that a part of a fully automatic weapon is no longer a part." For Proparms, this means that it was futile for Elsener to convert weapons unless he could dream up a way of making "parts which were not parts." Productions wishing to use guns would have to comply with provincial interpretations of federal law. In Ontario, this means that a production may only use fully auto-

matic weapons if the owner of the weapons is in possession of a bona fide collector's permit and is present on set whenever the guns are in use, and if the weapons fire blanks only.

This interpretation results in higher costs for the producer and a lower degree of safety for the cast and crew because there is no guarantee that the "bona fide" collector knows anything about the safe maintenance of his weapons under the continuous firing of blank cartridges.

According to Elsener, his company lost about \$15,000 in props contracts because Ontario prohibited the fully automatic guns he had legally converted in Quebec. Furthermore, he cites an example of one producer in Ontario who has resorted to renting active (i.e. live ammunition) weapons from a mercenary who evidently prefers filmmaking to combat in South Africa.

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The NFB: Inventing Canada— Again?

by Lyn Martin

NFB has proven to be less the "eyes of Canada" than it is a reflection of the Canadian condition: tentative, self-critical, self-conscious and well-intentioned.

Bob Verrall, executive producer of English Production at the NFB, zeroed in on it when he said recently: "There has been too much nonsense talked about the so-called National Unity crisis in Canada. People working in cultural agencies know quite well this is not the real issue; but National Identity is. And there's a profound distinction to be made between the two. At the Board we know this, and I wish we had been more daring in stating it, and doing something about it."

In view of this "cultural crisis" and visibility problem, we can hardly expect the NFB to "see Canada, and see it whole" when there are so many disparate parts that the whole becomes elusive. Nor can we expect the NFB to propagate Canadian culture when we lie cheek-to-jowl to the most powerful film and television industries in the world.

In terms of the national images we do have, the majority of them have come from public sector institutions like the CBC and the NFB. They have not come from the CTV or the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC), and probably never will. Under the Capital Cost Allowance (CCA), the commercial sector's rather checkered and less-than-noble performance has resulted in films which have little to say about this country. As NFB filmmaker Albert Kish says, "If you took away the NFB and the CBC there would be nothing. How would you know that you are in Canada?"

The demise of documentary tradition

Last year, Albert Kish was commissioned to make a film on the 41-year history of the NFB. *The Imagemakers* suggest that the NFB invented Canada, both as a political and cultural entity. As a stream-of-consciousness mosaic of clips from 60 NFB films (laboriously selected out of 600), the film traces the evolution and consolidation of a national consciousness in Canada.

Through the eye of the NFB documentary, Kish believes that Canada's changing perceptions of itself were as much invented as they were document-

ed, and that this was accomplished in a subtly cumulative manner. "In the beginning they had to sell the war, and in order to do this they had to create a country with an ideological base." Consequently, the birth of a national consciousness was as much a projection of the NFB's eye, as it was the object of it.

The NFB documentary evolved over the years out of a primitive but effective propagandist style into the more complex, essayist style which has now become popular with television tabloids like *The Fifth Estate* and *60 Minutes*. There was always something recognizably NFB about an NFB documentary: quietly competent, unassumingly hard-hitting but usually "safe", with an eye for the unusual, slightly humorous detail. Kish calls the NFB style "lyrical realism."

The documentary tradition in Canada traces its beginnings to the Canadian Pacific Railroad film unit. Kish maintains that documentary film is Canada's only folklore. But he detects a gradual disenchantment with the medium as it loses its audience to feature films. "At the NFB we have tried every style and every subject, and we are beginning to realize that even the worst feature film now gets better results. Take for example an average classroom film on menstruation. If we were to put it in a dramatic form and call it, say, 'The First Accident,' it would surely have a much greater impact that a dry documentary with the 'voice of God' explaining what happened."

Kish's colleagues at the Board have privately admitted to him that they would like to get out of documentary and into dramatic feature films. Robin Spry was one NFB filmmaker who did just that, leaving the Board in 1977. And although Spry has enjoyed a certain commercial success since then, he realizes that the Board is still the only film production outfit in Canada, aside from the CBC, where a filmmaker can

make "socially oriented films of specific value to Canadians, without having to worry about the film's international commercial value."

Because of this, he would like to see a freer exchange of talent both within and outside of the Board. More input from outside free-lancers and more ventures into the commercial milieu from NFB staffers would ideally benefit the Canadian film industry as a whole, while at the same time safeguarding against a ghetto mentality within the Board. However, at this time, the Board is in a financial straitjacket enforced by Ottawa, and does not as a consequence contract out much work to the private sector. Spry blames the government for allowing an institution to exist — which is there to serve a definite need — without the necessary funds to support its goals.

A question of visibility

At 42 years of age, the Board has, perhaps unkindly, been compared to a "Grande Dame" suffering from institutional if not constitutional middle age. And like that middle-aged lady who can recall a more vital youth, it still wants to run on the steam of a past era, a time in which principles, priorities and directions were more clearly defined. But the Board no longer has the potent forces of John Grierson or the war to fuel it. It no longer enjoys the freedom of a more affluent and idealistic time which was the '60s. Like so many of our other institutions, it has fallen the graceless victim of more stringent and cynical times. If it is to survive its mid-life crisis, it must revitalize itself, its priorities, and re-align itself with the new realities in media technology. It must also make a concerted effort to seek increased exposure of its product.

Domville stated in his Commissioner's Report: "The fundamental purpose of making films... is to provide the individual Canadian with a sense of his or her own cultural identity. And that challenge is greater than ever. The cultural environment has changed and is changing radically. We are experiencing a veritable explosion in the cultural industries with almost exponential growth in the number and impact of new communications technologies. The danger is that communications growth and technical innovation become ends in themselves, divorced from the content they are meant to provide."

Jacques Bobet, executive producer of the *French Drama Program*, agrees. "There is a great deal of what I call 'video Muzak' in the communications market today... Film Board films are just one little part, and we strive desperately to rise above the level of this muzak." He fears that the NFB product risks being lost in an "enormous cloud" of audiovisual material, and to gain visibility it must be just that cut above the rest.

Bobet maintains the primacy of the NFB as a cultural agency rather than a straight information agency, stressing the cultural value of film above the informational value. "That cultural value can become a motivation which will change what you learn into what you can live with. There is no culture

As Canadians we've become accustomed to much rhetorical speculation on the subject of our National Film Board. The same redundant, almost clichéd statements are circulated time and again. So often we've heard that the NFB put Canada on the map, that it is our best known export and most effective public-relations tool. We hear NFB officials such as government film commissioner James de B. Domville lament that the Board enjoys a wider recognition internationally than it does within the borders of Canada. And when we complain about the Board, which we often do, the same tired litany arises every time. It is a waste of government funds and the tax-payers' money. It is an ivory tower, effete and inefficient. Its distribution system must be ineffective because the films do not have sufficient visibility. It is full of "deadwood" (it used to be full of "Commies"). It is an unfair competition to the independent filmmaker and private producer in Canada. And on it goes...

Granted, some of these claims contain substantial truth. But by repeatedly identifying certain catch issues, we run the risk of taking the Board for granted, as if its story has already been told, and as if it is no longer necessary for the Board to tell Canada's story. In the thick of the rhetoric we lose sight of the larger, more complex and crucial issues — the very same gut-level issues which are tearing this country apart today: political, economic and cultural.

If the NFB is unsure of what it is, or what it should be, it is only because Canada is unsure. And Canada is unsure because we do not know, and have never had, clear, consistent and above all visible images of who we are as Canadians. To a large extent the country remains invisible to itself. In this, the

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without emotions, and what is needed with information is a little bit of emotion."

Whereas it is true there can be no culture without emotions, it is even more obvious that there can be no valid cultural process without sufficient access to the cultural product. And this is where the NFB's visibility problem translates itself into a distribution problem. For the most part, the theatrical distribution channel in Canada has locked out the NFB and the independent Canadian producer in favor of the American product. The economics of the situation now dictate that the NFB must explore the distribution channels offered by the new technologies in the electronic media.

Distribution through the electronic media

Sandra Gathercole, former chairperson of the Council of Canadian Film-makers, and CRTC consultant, said at a recent symposium on the NFB held at the University of Toronto, that the future of the NFB lies in television, or more generally, in electronic distribution systems. "To trace the decline of the social influence of the NFB," claims Gathercole, "would be to trace the rise of the influence of TV... But we should not confuse this fact with not needing the NFB. We need the Film Board, the Film Board needs TV, the Film Board needs the country, but the country and TV need the Film Board even more."

So far there has been some conflict of interest between the NFB and the CBC, due more perhaps to a series of anomalies and petty jealousies than to anything else. The Board complains that the CBC does not give sufficient exposure to the NFB product, that it is poorly promoted beforehand, that it rarely receives prime-time coverage, and that some of the NFB's best films are even rejected outright. One such film, according to Kish, was Mike Rubbo's *Waiting for*

At 42 years of age, the Board has, perhaps unkindly, been compared to a "Grande Dame" suffering from institutional suffering from institutional middle age.

Fidel (1974), which the CBC rejected on the grounds that it was "amateurish." "Next week the *New York Times* gave the film half a page, calling it the best film ever made on Cuba; and after seven years it is still going strong," claims Kish.

Donald Brittain admits that since he left the Board to work for the CBC twelve years ago, his films have always been assured of prime-time coverage, with enormous publicity behind them. But he understands the CBC's exasperations with the Board, citing the NFB's disrespect for sticking to air-date deadlines, or its bad track record in adhering to film running-time limits.

The relationship of the French Production section of the NFB to Radio-Canada is much more amicable. Director of French Production, Jean-Marc Garand, estimates that over the last three years the French unit has co-produced 35-40 films, which Radio-Canada agreed to pay for sight unseen. Currently they are in co-production on two features and a docu-drama series. Still, Garand would like to see a better access to Radio-Canada's grid in terms of getting the films televised on a pre-ordained dates, in particular time slots.

Despite the fundamental differences between the mediums of television and film, NFB distribution people are nevertheless well aware of the writing on the wall, and have finally begun to make some headway in the television market.

Director of distribution Bill Litwak talked enthusiastically about Videotron, "the most interesting of the on-going experimental distribution projects." Videotron is a Montreal-based, on-demand video service with approximately 30 channels at the present moment. The Videotron library holds about 600 NFB titles. Subscribers phone in and ask to see any given film which appears in the catalogue at a certain time. They are in turn told to switch on to a selected channel at a prescribed time. According to Litwak, NFB films are proving to be extremely popular.

As we move into the era of TV "narrowcasting" with increased channel capacity on the vertical as well as horizontal bands, it will be possible to have more and more special channels devoted to certain subjects.

Naturally there was great optimism

that the CBC-2 and Télé-2 channels, originally scheduled for Fall 1982, would have been potentially significant for the exposure of NFB and other Canadian films. Theoretically, the CBC would have had the support of the government and the CRTC to tap those presently underexposed and fallow cultural resources. And a user-pay service could have conceivably generated considerable revenues - which in turn could have been implemented to commission work from independent Canadian producers.

Litwak still envisions the second networks - when and if they are approved - as scheduling regular series of NFB films each week, programmed around specific themes. At this point, he sees CBC-2 and Télé-2 as much more realistic ways of getting NFB and Canadian films to the public than pay-TV.

Canada is presently the most 'cable-ized' country in the world, and as such, the NFB knows that it is in its best interest to explore this potential market. According to Litwak, cable TV is now utilizing NFB films on an ad hoc basis, primarily as filler material. But he would like to see NFB films on cable in a much more concerted fashion.

One of the things distribution is looking into for the next fiscal year is to select an area of the country for a pilot study, and with the cooperation of a cable company in that area, to start programming NFB films on a regular basis. A lot more money will be invested in promoting this project because one of the factors restricting the viewing of cable is adequate prior information of what's to be televised, and the fact that the competing major networks put a lot of money behind promotion. Built into this pilot study would be a feedback mechanism to identify the viewers and measure the impact of the films.

Says Sandra Gathercole: "The fundamental problem in this country is that we have a very sophisticated distribu-

tion capacity to carry imported images of another country. We do not have now and have never had, the capacity to produce and distribute the kind of product that speaks to ourselves. We have managed to sit with the NFB, one of the greatest film resources in the world and not use it. The fact that 1% of prime time of the national network is devoted to the national film agency is ridiculous. If we are serious about maintaining a presence in the North American media market that is coming at us, we just cannot afford not to use the resource which is the NFB."

Theatrical distribution

If it's a question of how to best utilize the NFB product, should the film purist cringe in horror as the deathknell is sounded for theatrical screenings of NFB films? Are we to mutely accept that in future the NFB will discharge its mandate primarily through television?

"Personally I think a mechanism has to be found to create incentives for the distribution in Canadian cinemas of Canadian films," says Bob Verrall. "Quotas and levies on the box office have been talked about for years. We appear to be the only country in the world that doesn't consider we should be doing something like this. We watch hundreds of millions of dollars cross the border southward each year, and we go on pretending we can be an equal partner without some regulation which will create the necessary (Canadian) market."

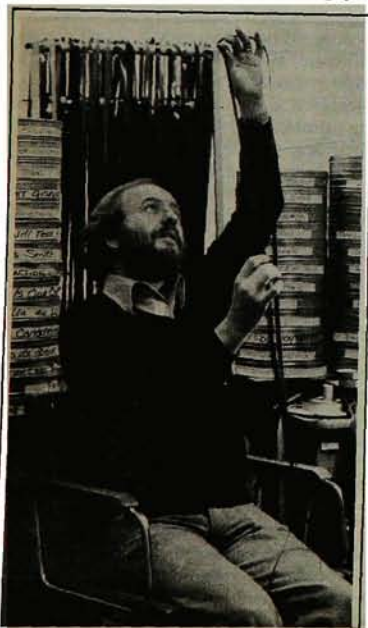
Many lobby groups such as the Council of Canadian Film Makers, the Canadian Conference of the Arts, and past Secretaries of State, have put a lot of thought into how legislation in favour of Canadian films could be worked out. But somehow it never gets past the talk stage.

Says Verrall: "We know there are people in provincial governments who are ready (to table legislation) but somehow it never gets looked at as a priority of the first reign. Whether the Applebaum-Hébert Commission (The Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee) will be the instrument remains to be seen."

Indeed the situation for Canadian film is as adverse today as it has always been, with the distribution system totally dominated by the Americans. But as Jacques Bobet predicts, "When you try to reverse patterns of cultural domination (through government legislation), it translates very quickly into money, and then you will see the resistance you are met with."

Bill Litwak notes that this type of cultural legislation would not be final because it comes under provincial rather than federal jurisdiction. "So if this legislation for creating incentive measures does happen, it would happen in a few provinces but not necessarily across the country. It is by no means an easy area, but we have been trying to increase an awareness of the problem."

The theatrical distribution issue is at best thorny and sensitive. But let us not deceive ourselves. The Canadian product, even if it was given the extra push it needs to make the commercial screen



Albert Kish



William Litwak

- be it through quotas, levies on the box office, incentives or the like - would still be competing with the American product. To be competitive we must produce quality films that Canadians are going to want to watch. And to produce quality films, we need a massive infusion of funds into the production industry. Without funding we are not going to get the talent in this country working often enough to produce the kind of quality we need to be competitive. As Verrall emphasizes, a good director is not going to develop the skills he needs to compete in the marketplace if he only makes a film every five years. There must be continuity of work, and this requires a constant source of funds. "Without this infusion of funds, the film industry in this country is a dead duck."

The NFB and the private sector

For NFB features co-produced with the private sector, the capital cost allowance will continue to be important. Some of the partners the Board will be co-producing with will be using the tax shelters as a way of raising their share of the money. Thus the Board has officially, through the Film Commissioner, declared its support for the continuation of the CCA. Although the tax shelter succeeded in creating a massive infusion of funds into the film industry in 1978/79, cultural objectives were lost sight of. It became an industry of dealmaking over filmmaking.

"To guarantee the money in the first place," explains Verrall, "we had to guarantee that we were making international movies - whatever they are - which would sell in the American marketplace. It's now doubtful that many of them will even do that. So we, the collective 'we' being the filmmakers, have made some mistakes. We have been guilty of a failure of imagination, and the investors will be much more cautious now. But the tax shelter could

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still be an important instrument with which to raise enough money to sustain a volume of work which will keep the talent in this country busy."

The CFDC was originally established as a complement to the NFB. The NFB was to be primarily responsible for documentaries and/or non-feature films, while the CFDC was to stimulate the making of feature films in the private sector. Gathercole would like to see this guiding line changed in the future so that it reads: "The CFDC makes commercial films aimed at making money, if that is possible in this market, and the NFB makes those films for us and about us, independent of the marketplace and independent of whether or not they're going to make money."

The distinction between the NFB and the private sector, however, is not likely to be as clearly defined as all that. Their interrelationship is growing increasingly contentious and complex.

When the NFB was created 42 years ago, there was no commercial film industry capable of producing the films the country needed, so there was no question of the Board posing any direct threat to the private sector. Today the picture is different, with a viable commercial industry legitimately complaining that it cannot compete with a government-funded production agency which undersells the private sector product, and which coordinates the film requirements of government departments.

There is some question as to whether or not the NFB *should* continue to coordinate the films sponsored by government departments and agencies. With the proliferation of these departments today, previously clear lines of responsibility have become blurred in overlapping authorities.

Assistant film commissioner François Macerola admits that the commercial sector is now capable of producing 95% of sponsored films. He believes that the Board should retain the role of executive producer of these sponsored films, but that their execution should be increasingly left up to the commercial producers.

"We didn't wait for the private sector to get in touch with us. We contacted them to say we'd like a new agreement concerning the Sponsored Program,

which won't be based on the financial volume of production... What I would like to find is a kind of cinematographic *raison d'être* for the NFB's involvement in the execution of films from the Sponsored Program, rather than a financial, mathematical solution," states Macerola.

This "cinematographic *raison d'être*" infers a kind of artistic value judgement which would be left up to the discretion of the NFB. Straightforward information films, such as shorts on the metric system or fire prevention, would be delegated to the private sector, whereas the Board would continue to involve itself with the more noble, developmental or cultural undertakings such as the *Santé Africaine* or *Challenge for Change* series.

In any event, it appears obvious that for financial reasons, and in the pursuit of Canada's cultural goals, there must be a closer collaboration between private and public sector film production in Canada. And this collaboration is likely to be catalyzed by an increasing awareness of a commonality of interest be-

tween private and public sector. There must be a continuity of a certain volume of production to ensure the viability of a Canadian film industry. As Macerola predicts: "The price we will have to pay in order to have a real Canadian film industry is that we will have to join forces. We can no longer rely on the private investors."

The NFB: A Crown Corporation?

For the past two years there has been some talk about the possibility of the NFB being reorganized as a crown corporation. Macerola believes that the Federal Cultural Review Committee will make a recommendation to that effect. The Board's funds now stand at a composite ratio of 75% government subsidies to 25% revenues from sales and rentals. Federal government agencies like the Board operate under fixed budgetary constraints; the Board, for example, has always had difficulty convincing Ottawa that 85% of its budget is spent during the summer - which is usual in the film industry.

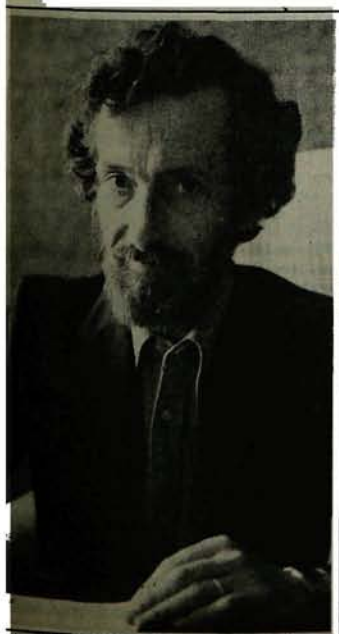
As a crown corporation, the Board would have greater administrative flexibility over the disbursement of funds, and the freedom to transfer funds from one year to the next.

Says Macerola: "With crown corporation status it would be easier to adjust ourselves to the production of films. Our first goal in becoming a crown corporation would be to better answer the needs of our filmmakers and our distributors, instead of answering the bureaucratic needs of the various government ministries and departments."

The NFB is currently undergoing a renovation, and the changes promise to be more than just cosmetic. Structurally the Board is less than sound. Like any institution which has grown too big, it has become over-bureaucratized, wasteful, and inefficient. Hopefully, measures taken in such directions as the regionalization program, co-production with the private sector, crown corporation status, or a more wholly-integrated cooperation between production and distribution, will render it more responsive to its mandate.

The institution still exists for quasi-moral reasons of public interest, but the moral emphasis seems to be shifting in reflection of the times. The previously-prescribed documentary film with a social conscience is evolving into a prescription which promotes film as more of a cultural product. Whether or not this is the magic formula remains to be seen.

The fact is that 42 years and 4000 films later, the Board is, like the country, still waging a battle for credibility. Clearly, more effective ways of improving access to Canadian culture must be found, if only to improve the nation's capacity to know itself as distinct from its southern counterpart. Until then, no cultural institution will be free from serious scrutiny. ●



Jean-Marc Garand



Bob Verrall