

The case of Picture Plant

by Fran Gallagher-Shuebrook

Among private Atlantic film entities, the Atlantic Filmmakers' Co-op has clearly held its own place for the past nine years as an alternative to the sponsored necessities of both commercial and government service production (see box). At the Co-op, despite limited production funds, individuals are given the opportunity to develop their independent filmmaking skills, while retaining full artistic autonomy over their work. Being a co-operative, the main demand made on members in return for this privileged work-environment is that they carry their own weight: i.e., pay their yearly dues (at present \$75); cooperate with other members in facilitating their work (no salaries are paid on co-op shoots); and share the skills acquired in the process.

By and large, this co-operative way of life has proven effective, bringing members through an average production of two or three short films, and spawning activity in the wider film community, where Co-op and ex-Co-op members have surfaced in not-so-surprising numbers. AFCCOOP member Pat Kipping has become Nova Scotia's first film and sound archivist; former member Barrie Burley co-manages Video Theatre in Halifax (a community-access video production and distribution centre). As well, Ramona MacDonald, owner and

executive producer of Doomsday Studios, developed her filmmaking and business skills as a long-time AFCCOOP member. Doomsday continues to draw on the resources of Co-op filmmakers for much of their more "distributable product," as well as for skilled production personnel.

A significant number of Co-op technicians manage to freelance their services to the commercial studios, as well as to the National Film Board and CBC; but the local pie is so small that they also find themselves waiting on the inevitable tables, and driving the inevitable taxis, in order to support their survival habit.

In terms of feature filmmaking, the most unique and culturally-important film presence to have sprung from the Co-op system is Picture Plant Productions, incorporated in 1979 by Bill MacGillivray, Lionel Simmons, and Gordon Parsons. The company was formed in response to the urgings of a filmic vision which could no longer be accommodated by AFCCOOP production funds.

Aside from the Donovan brothers at Surfacing (who are making feature films which reflect their reading of the theatrical marketplace), Picture Plant is the first resident feature film company to set up in Halifax since Canadian Bioscope closed its Barrington St. doors to run off to the First World War. What immediately separated Picture Plant from the pack of other producers in the city, was the partners' expressed intention to remain true to their cultural vision at all costs.

MacGillivray (who makes his living as an art teacher); Simmons (who makes his as a freelance cinematographer); and Parsons (who owns and operates Wormwood's Dog and Monkey Repertory Cinema) went into business together in order to secure completion money for their first feature, *Aerial View*. This project had one foot in, and one foot out of the Co-op, in that it made use of Co-op facilities and unsalaried crews; but then it grew beyond the resources of the Co-op in mid-production, moving into a relatively "high" low-budget range (out of a context in which production grants had rarely exceeded \$1500). This 59-minute drama, about the clash of values between a man's goals and the lifestyle in which he finds himself, was brought in for a mere \$20,000.

In the end, Picture Plant combined Co-op resources with NFB private sector assistance, as well as donated services from a plethora of individual sources (the credits at the end of *Aerial View* read like the longest litany in the Catholic calendar).

Aerial View was met with enthusiasm by most critics, other filmmakers, and audiences in general wherever it was screened. All seemed to be refreshed by this example of a Canadian feature made in an authentic manner, in the face of recent and prolonged abuses under the capital cost allowance.

Peter Harcourt called it a "mini-masterpiece" of "quiet tone" which is "original, sensitive, beautifully-crafted, and totally

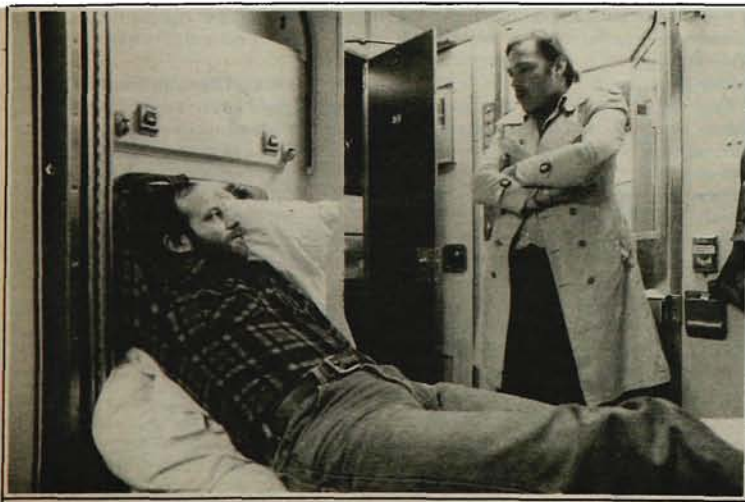
Canadian." Jean-Pierre Lefebvre claimed that *Aerial View* is a film of "simplicity and sincerity" which "has more to say and says it better than the big 'money movies' of Toronto and Montreal."

As a first feature, it also had its understandable share of criticism (for certain of its dialogue, and some of its acting; but, as Duart Snow pointed out in *The Ottawa Journal*, "these quibbles are quite overshadowed by the film's cinematic originality and precision... It risks and wins more than any half-dozen big budget movies one can think of - and that, surely, is what art is all about."

Jennifer Henderson called Lionel Simmons' cinematography "imaginative and skillful, transforming the local and ordinary to new and surprising proportions." Another local critic, Mary Jolli-more, lauded Simmons' camerawork as revealing information "in an ingenious and original manner" ... (the film) presents "real people and their problems in probable situations."

Aerial View won a Certificate of Merit at the '79 Chicago Film Festival; and, on the basis of its excellent first showing, the Canada Council awarded Picture Plant a \$40,000 film grant toward their second project, *Stations*, which began shooting in the Fall of '81. By that time, Picture Plant had become a knowledgeable corporate entity (albeit an artistic one), with the sophistication to secure Canadian Film Development Corp. up-front equity investment (the first project to do so in the Atlantic Region). It also

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● Searching for the typical Canadian...



● Mike Jones and Joel Sapp in *Stations*

photo: Chuck Clark

issued units for public sale, and developed contracts with pay-TV and other markets both in Canada and abroad. Picture Plant's methods of combining public and private monies with myriad donated services offer a successful model for other low-budget independents, who are likewise facing prohibitively tight financial situations.

Although Picture Plant still hasn't gleaned any profits from the two projects, there are signs of financial stability in recent sales of *Aerial View* to Britain's Channel 4, as well as to the Atlantic regional pay-TV Star Channel.

Stations carries forward the theme of a man's clash with the values surrounding him. The main character is a prize-winning investigative journalist Tom Murphy, who takes his on-air probing too far in the case of an old friend, with whom he had once been in the Brotherhood. Unable to face public exposure of his failures, the friend commits suicide. The journalist is sent on a trumped-up assignment to find and interview the typical Canadian on a train trip across the country. Of course, Tom finds himself looking for himself in the process.

In artistic terms, this current film promises to be even more finely-attuned to its authentic impulse than was *Aerial View*. In the second-cut stage at the moment, *Stations* appears to be more tightly acted; and the dialogue rings true to every situation the characters encounter.

The filmmakers have given themselves an added challenge in setting *Stations* in a nationwide context. The action takes place largely on the train travelling from Vancouver to St. John's, and Canadian audiences will get to look at themselves as well as the characters along the way. Lionel Simmons' camera takes as fresh and rich a view of the Canadian landscape and its people as any you're likely to see anywhere.

One of the intriguing things to follow when *Stations* is released early in 1983 will be the viewer's debate over who is and who is not an "actor" among the film's characters. Although the principal cast was pulled from a pool of experienced Atlantic Region actors (Mike Jones, Joel Sapp, Rick Boland, Maisie Rillie), a great many more characters were "picked-up" as the production moved across from Vancouver to St. John's. MacGillivray operates largely on instinct, and chooses his cast more on the basis of their personal presence and chemical possibilities than on any professional credits they may have acquired.

Likewise, Picture Plant's crews are assembled on a similarly "chemical" basis. As an outgrowth of the producers' co-op experience, they choose to work with friends whose abilities they trust, and whose social and artistic sensibilities are compatible with their own. Trusting their combined intuitions, and their ability to guide their personnel for the sake of the film, collaborators MacGillivray and Simmons have been consistently fortunate in bringing together an efficient, yet easy-going ensemble, who work with dedication equal to their own. This easy tone can be accounted for more specifically by MacGillivray's approach as a director. He has a calm, articulate manner, and treats his cast and crew with respect, looking to evoke the qualities necessary to the film's progress. As director, he considers himself a channel through which the film's ideas are filtered, and he feels responsible for protecting the integrity of the film, as well as the welfare of all personnel. For their part, the actors and



● Mike Jones clashing with the values surrounding him

crew trust MacGillivray and Simmons, and seem to feel that working with them is an honour.

In discussing the process by which they make films, MacGillivray, as scriptwriter, explains that specific ideas and feelings come to him in a series of sounds and images, for which the narrative must become a structure on which to hang these elements.

Because these thoughts and feelings are "personal" to him (in the best sense of the word), they communicate personal statements to others who can understand them, and respond in the basis of a shared humanity. For MacGillivray, the film is a "precipitant," whose images and sounds precipitate certain

reactions in other human beings.

MacGillivray claims that Picture Plant's films are not "aimed at Canada" as such. Rather, they are seeking a much wider audience. When they do reach this audience, it is because MacGillivray and Simmons have such a clearness of vision, and integrity of depiction, that both *Aerial View* and *Stations* are rife with the basic cultural threads common to all of humankind.

When questioned about why the company chooses to work in Halifax, rather than in one of the country's film "centres", MacGillivray says Picture Plant finds it necessary to remain outside the "slipstream of competition" found in those centres. Such pressure can

make it possible to hold on to the purity of the original idea. The Picture Plant partners all have their roots in the Maritimes, and they decry the centralist myth that, if it's made in the "regions," it can't be taken seriously. Since incorporation, they have rigorously defended their creative and co-operative working process; though they would like to be able to make a living making film here.

Over the several years of working together, Picture Plant has sustained ideals, values, and attitudes, formed at the Co-op, that have carried them through all their artistic and business dealings. Their idealism has been infectious in the community, as evident in the creation of a new professional producers' association.

Picture Plant was the driving force behind the organization of the Atlantic Independent Film and Video Association, which was incorporated last summer in order to "promote and represent the best interests of the independent film and video production industry with respect to public policy on the development and regulation of the industry in the Atlantic Region." Within this broad mandate, the association intends to work on the further development of the "art and craft" of independent production, as well as to protect the professional interests of industry personnel.

The corporate membership, so far, includes most of the producers involved in the other six companies mentioned (see box), and the associate members' ranks are filled out with a cross-section of film and video freelance producers, craftspeople, and technicians.

Projections are that the organization will expand in the next little while to incorporate members from the other Atlantic provinces. Long-time observers of the Halifax film/video scene have commented on the remarkable achievement inherent in the formation of AIFVA from such a disparate group of individuals.

It's still too early to tell what impact the Producers' Association will have on government media policy, or on the film/video industry, but there's no question of its potential for having an impact on individual level. It has created a support structure for long-isolated producers, enabling them to work together on policies and practices of common interest.

The existence of AIFVA is yet another feather in Picture Plant's cap. The artistic integrity of their films, and the constructive impulse to form this association for the enrichment of the local industry, are both informed by the same cultural ideals developed in their early days.

Picture Plant's approach to its work is sober, clear, and uncompromising, and it means to be taken seriously. Fortunately for all of us, the work is being taken more and more seriously these days, with the above-mentioned sales of *Aerial View* to Channel 4 and Star Channel, and with the potential of selling both films to universal and regional pay-TV and their "splinter" markets.

How these films have come to be made in Halifax still seems nothing short of a miracle. Historically and certainly with the exception of our beloved *Evangeline*, Canadian features with any kind of cultural significance have tended to be made "somewhere else." MacGillivray, Simmons, and Parsons have defied the odds since 1979, and their prospects (both artistically and financially) appear to be better than ever. Keep an eye out for *Stations* in the new year; and, of course, keep the Faith. ●

Photo: Chuck Clark

Making movies in a one-lab town

Films have been produced in Nova Scotia for almost as long as films have been produced anywhere in North America. From the long-lost indigenous drama, *Evangeline* (released by Canadian Bioscope in 1914), to the recently-completed, unabashedly exploitative feature, *Siege*, by Surfacing Productions, filmmaking activity in the province has been of a surprising variety, and of an even more surprising volume. Numerous companies were hired by the provincial government in the 'teens and '20s to produce agricultural training and general education films; and Nova Scotia locations were often used by a visiting industry for entertainment features requiring breathtaking land or sea scapes.

Unique in those days was the Canadian Bioscope Company, incorporated in Halifax in 1912 by H.H.B. Holland and H.T. Oliver, which was the first feature film production company to set up permanent residence in Halifax. Canadian Bioscope shot the ambitious three-reeler, *Evangeline*, in the summer of 1913, and released it to an admiring public the following year. Canadian and American critics praised it as a "work of art": a "good picture" which was "well-acted," with a "strict adherence to historical detail." It was apparently "intensely dramatic, appealing, and moving."

Canadian Bioscope's other work,

unfortunately, seems to have fallen farther and farther away from the ideal of indigenous cultural drama established by *Evangeline*, but its commitment to making feature films in a seeming outpost was nonetheless commendable. The outbreak of World War I put an end to Canadian Bioscope: "personnel dispersed, the company went out of business, and the films were auctioned off..." (From Peter Morris' *Embattled Shadows: A History of the Canadian Cinema*.)

From that time until 1945, when Margaret Perry established a one-woman production unit within the Nova Scotia Communications and Information Centre, there was no indigenous filmmaking activity whatsoever in the province. At present, there still exists the provincial government in-house film service (NSCIS); and, since 1973, there has also been the National Film Board Atlantic Region Studio. Aside from these government film institutions, there are currently at least seven private production companies resident in the Halifax Metro Area (ABS Productions; Skerrett Communications; Doodsday Studios; Les Krizsan; Nimbus Films; Surfacing Productions; and Picture Plant). The only services available locally are one film lab (Eastern), which process only one type of stock (VNF), and one sound studio (ABS).