

by Martin Harbury

Rena Krawagna was born in Yugoslavia and educated there and in Austria. Upon her arrival in Canada in 1952, she completed a degree at the University of Toronto.

Fluent in seven languages, her first job was a translator, but, fortunately for all of us, she abandoned that career in 1958 when she joined the CBC. She began as a script assistant on *Front Page Challenge* and a number of variety programs. She then worked in the research department before moving to children's TV. In 1965 she made what was to be her last move, into Program Purchasing. There, one of her early duties was the assembly of four-hour 'standby' packages for the Corporation's Northern Television Services. This was prophetic; she has been purchasing and assembling the work of independent Canadian filmmakers ever since.

Her current title is Program Purchasing Representative, but that in no way describes what she actually does. Typically, she has used the vagueness of title to her advantage. Since it really describes nothing, she has been able to get on with doing what she wants without the burden of a specific job description.

What Rena Krawagna wants is to buy and program the work of talented young filmmakers and to help them achieve the recognition that can benefit their careers. Her intelligence, humour, sensitivity and genuine concern are evident to all who meet her, but her self-imposed low profile obscures one particularly important fact: from her tiny office she has helped more young Canadian filmmakers than anyone else in the country. To quote Pen Densham, one of the founders of Toronto's Insight Productions and but one of many Krawagna admirers, "Without Rena and the CBC, there would have been no industry."

Rena Krawagna spoke with Cinema Canada recently. This is the first interview she has ever given.

photos: Sandy J. Singers



The godmother of Canadian independents

An interview with Rena Krawagna

Cinema Canada: Why did you move into program purchasing?

Rena Krawagna: Because I love film and I felt that I'd still be involved with some kind of production activity. I've always liked film and felt that this was something I really wanted to do.

Cinema Canada: So in the early days, say prior to 1970 or thereabouts, what was your job?

Rena Krawagna: In those days we had a lot of foreign films and a lot of people from Europe coming through.

Martin Harbury is an independent producer living in Toronto. His most recent television production, with co-producer Paul Shapiro, was *Clown White* (1981).

We would go to screenings. I attended the Nordic screenings for a number of years. I also went to other film festivals. We would evaluate these films and purchase them for standby programming. Then NTS came along and I was quite involved with that.

Cinema Canada: NTS?

Rena Krawagna: Northern Television Service. Really it was basically research, keeping up to date with what was happening internationally on the film scene.

Cinema Canada: At what point did you become really interested in Canadian film?

Rena Krawagna: Actually, I became interested almost immediately through short films, which was one of my man-

dates and it was exciting because it was new. Also, there was an opportunity to start working with Canadian filmmakers. In those days we were dealing with the real old timers like Jack Chisholm and then later a few young filmmakers like David Cronenberg made a few shorts...

DAVID CRONENBERG

"It was a three-year wait before *Shivers* and I was starving. The only money I made in those three years was from Rena's office at the CBC and the Canada Council. I did make eight or nine fillers and I kept on going back. I expected Rena's office to be empty. It was so hard to find someone who would say 'yes'."

Rena Krawagna: ... We found it necessary to make short films rather than anything more elaborate. Oh God, there were any number of people: Paul and Deepa Saltzman, Insight Productions...

PEN DENSHAM:

"I was on vacation from Moreland Latchford and John (Watson) was working somewhere else; we were both extremely fed up. Rena said, 'If you were to make a film on parks or sailing, I could probably buy it.' A week later, we brought her two films, and she bought them both. That's where Insight started."

Cinema Canada: Let me go back for a second. Merv Stone was the head of program purchasing at the time that you...

Rena Krawagna: He asked me to apply for the job.

Cinema Canada: And so how old would the Program Purchasing department have been by then?

Rena Krawagna: It was always there as far as I remember. Maybe 25-30 years. But it changed from one manager to the next. Merv Stone has been there maybe 19 years. In the early days it was very difficult to complete films. We were not

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really prepared to acquire footage from cameramen, camera people, because we didn't know them, whether or not they could complete the project, or whether or not they were capable of the post-production, so we sort of got together with Don Haig who was very helpful. He supervised the post-production and this was how it all started.

DON HAIG:

"I think my connection would start around the early '70s. Rena was the program purchaser and she had some wildlife film footage. The problem was that the filmmaker was a very good cameraman, but could not package the thing together with sound, etc., to her specifications, so she brought the footage over with the filmmaker. That's really how the connection started."

Cinema Canada: *It seems to me that there were a lot of people, other than the ones you mentioned. There were John & Pen, Nelvana, George Mendeluk, Paul and Deepa, Mark Irwin, Cronenberg. Any others?*

Rena Krawagna: Many - Gary Nichol in Ottawa, Phil Borsos with some of his shorts. I was not as involved with his work but certainly supported a couple of his projects before he went on to features. Julius Kohanyi...

MARK IRWIN:

"Had Rena not had the insight and the faith to take a risk on an unknown commodity such as me, three weeks out of film school, I would certainly not have had the credibility as a cameraman that I had by the time I started shooting features in 1975. Through her faith, and Rosalind Farber and Don Haig, I made 10 Journal films between 1973 and 1975."

Rena Krawagna: Well, I certainly don't want to take all the credit. I suppose the filmmakers feel that the door has always been open. Regardless of whether or not you could support their project, at least they could come and discuss it with you. Many a time when our budgets would be cut we couldn't do anything about it but at least the door was open. We could discuss it, you could encourage them: 'If, and when, things are better, we'll be able to deal with it.'

Cinema Canada: *About seven or eight years ago you did your first Ontario Arts Council jury. You and Don (Haig) both did it together at that time. Can you elaborate on the teamwork, what Don terms the "urban guerrilla warfare" that you have evolved?*

Rena Krawagna: I think the OAC called me for the jury because I complained a lot about the kind of voting that they supported and I believe as far as the OAC is concerned I used to get all the applicants. The successful and the unsuccessful ones would come in with their projects, either for completion or any kind of support. Now they have an Experimental section, and that's fine, and it's handled separately from the film jury. I strongly believe that the OAC should support projects that are still going to be in the business three years

down the road and film projects that otherwise would not be made. Because of the financial situation, not only today but even five years ago, it is much better if we all work together rather than each one of us apart. If you are on the jury and you can see all these projects coming in, I can see what is coming up, and I can also say: 'All these projects are going to be available, maybe some of them the CBC should support.' It is to the filmmaker's advantage because he can start a project and we can maybe finish it off.

Cinema Canada: *Apart from the fact that you are obviously working a minimum of 18 months ahead in terms of anything that is funded by the Arts Council, it seems to me that there must be an awful lot of heartache and potential real struggle for you in terms of some of the filmmakers that you want to help through your CBC position, that the Arts Council may not support, or they're supported through the Arts Council to the beginning stage... or they don't live up to their promise, or whatever.*

Rena Krawagna: Well, there are any number of them, for example, whom I couldn't support in the area where I function. I couldn't support something that is highly political or religious or anything that would normally be handled by any of our program areas - you can only support a certain number of projects. It's hard. It's always hard when you have to say no to somebody, but we would have to have 24 hours of broadcast time just for the Canadian filmmakers. We still wouldn't cover each and every one of them who feels that he or she has a production or program that they would like to see on the CBC.

Cinema Canada: *You're known throughout the industry as a person who dares to say "Yes," and I think that is possibly one of the characteristics that people most admire in you.*

Rena Krawagna: It's very simple when you see a good program. It's very easy to say "yes." If you know what you're looking for, and if it falls within the category that you're responsible for, you have no problem. The problem only comes if you have too many yeses. You have to gauge yourself, you have to know how many programs a year you will need for standby and Canadian Reflections and so on.

ROMAN MELNYK:

"It's very difficult to program a 12-minute film on Haida totem poles or the Cape Breton Trail or a 7-minute melodrama. There's just no way that a network can use that, so it's at that point that Canadian Reflections was invented. It was the opportunity, in fact, to give an umbrella to all of this production."

Rena Krawagna: It's been very interesting for the last few years since Roman Melnyk became the director of Independent Production. For example, in 1978 we began Canadian Reflections. We were looking for an outlet for Canadian filmmakers. As you know, I would buy films for standby and I used to program, in the good old days, 120-130 hours a year. This would be last-minute

programming, replacing something or because a baseball game runs over and so on and so forth. The problem was that we never really had a vehicle for the Canadian filmmakers. With Canadian Reflections we were able to expose these films on a regular schedule. The first most important thing for a filmmaker is that you buy his/her film. The next most important thing is: when is it going to be on the air? In 1978 we had 13 or 16 half-hours. In 1979 24 half-hours, in 1980 30 or something like that. Last year, and in 1981 we had 45 half-hours and this year we have 83 hours. It's so much easier to function now.

Cinema Canada: *Let's talk about your mandate and your budget.*

Rena Krawagna: Well, first of all I would like to say what my mandate was in the old days: to look after standby material. We used to program 120-130 hours a year. When we went strictly Canadian it became very clear that we needed to support the Canadian film industry, the small Canadian filmmakers.

Cinema Canada: *When did you go strictly Canadian?*

Rena Krawagna: Seven years ago. It was never really clearly established what the mandate is other than that I would not buy any more foreign films. I would just concentrate on Canadians and of course this was music to my ears because this was exactly what I wanted. I don't have a budget but, if you look into the past, you'd somehow arrive at the same figures year after year after year. You buy a number of films. You use a certain amount of money and that's it. I really don't know what the budget is.

Cinema Canada: *I understand that you keep incredibly accurate records both of the filmmakers and the films you've purchased and the runs they have. How is that cost control justified?*

Rena Krawagna: Every film that I buy is for unrestricted and unlimited rights for three years and I try to make as much use of each film as possible because the internal budget allocated for Canadian Reflections could never cover the films that I purchase. I have to offset the costs of the new films that are bought so when you buy for three years, you repeat the films maybe three times and then purchase new ones. Then in the third year the films expire and you buy new. You have a continuous flow of new films that have been in the library for two years.



Cinema Canada: *In terms of internal auditing, what should, say, \$10,000 buy you?*

Rena Krawagna: \$10,000, hopefully, will buy me a good half-hour film. Sometimes, not always, but it should. I would need to run that film at least three times if not more. There are any number of films that I run five, six times.

Cinema Canada: *And how did your association and working relationship with Roman develop?*

Rena Krawagna: When Roman became the director of Independent Production, because his was a newly created office, all the filmmakers wanted to meet him, wanted to see him, wanted to see what he could do for them and invariably it was, until now, "Rena do this and Rena do that." This is how Roman realized that there is an office in existence that is actually functioning or is a great deal of help to him because a certain clientele is taken care of. Of course I knew Roman when he was in the legal department. He was a legal counsellor.

Cinema Canada: *It appears to me that, over the years, Canadian Reflections is expanding to fill the gap between the arts councils and the point at which a filmmaker can qualify for support from the CFDC as a more established producer.*

Rena Krawagna: We started exclusively with Canadian programming six or seven years ago but I would say that of course it is better if you can get some money, to at least buy your stock and go out and shoot something, and money from Ontario Arts Council or private money or CFDC, or NFB might give you some stock. Once you have shot something you can see the rushes, then it's much easier and this is the only way you can do something. You have to risk something yourself. You can't just say, 'I'm a filmmaker, let's go and see Rena and see what she can do.' You could do it with more serious filmmakers with a track record but where do you get the track record? So you have to start from the beginning: it's very difficult and usually you start off with smaller projects, with a couple of shorts, a 10-minute film. It started out being this way.

LARRY MOORE:

"Even though she doesn't want anyone to know, she has taken chances on people and projects that would not and could not have been otherwise undertaken. In my particular case, she has been a key factor in providing opportunities that have helped me further my understanding of the craft of filmmaking."

Rena Krawagna: It's a sifting and self-eliminating process, really. There are not too many people. In 18 years I think there's only been one person who couldn't complete a half-hour film. It takes a great deal of work and I owe a great deal to Don Haig, who, if need be, bails the filmmaker out and helps salvage a production and so on. I think that it's very difficult in fact to go from this area into mainline TV production and always will be. Every year we have so many film graduates from York, from Ryerson, from all over Ontario and across the country and each one of them wants to be a Fellini...

Cinema Canada: In your ongoing decision-making about the support you give or can give to filmmakers, how much of this is in consultation with Merv Stone or Roman Melnyk? How does this all work now?

Rena Krawagna: Merv Stone has been excellent in as much as he would say, 'I have my experts and they know what they do.' He allowed us to go and for us it was just as much of a development stage as it was for the filmmakers to know how far we can go, what kind of films we can support and so on. So he played a very important role. With Roman on the scene, it is much easier now because he has a mandate to support the Canadian film industry. Now we can turn to him and say, 'Roman, so many films are available, so many filmmakers would like to make some films' and it is obvious by the sheer number, the increase of Canadian Reflections from 13 half-hours to 78 hours. On numerous occasions I have said to Roman, 'This is the direction in which I would like to go, to start concentrating more on these type of films rather than just documentaries or what have you.'

Cinema Canada: Throughout your career you've maintained a very low profile. Is this deliberate?

Rena Krawagna: Yes. I feel that part of the success is I enjoy what I'm doing. I enjoy working with the filmmakers. They are the creative people and they fill a need that the CBC has: in this instance, they provide the films we have to have on-hand to program.



Cinema Canada: What specifically about your low profile would you say affects your ability to achieve what you do? Are there disadvantages?

Rena Krawagna: The disadvantage is you never really know what your own mandate is. It would be advantageous if someone were to say, 'Okay, Rena's responsible for this grey area of the small Canadian filmmaker, the developmental stage,' and so on. If this were clearly established, you could be better prepared; no 'Should I?' or 'Should I not?' or to feel that perhaps somebody's going to say 'Why is she doing this?' Again with Roman, the director, he fully appreciates the work that has been done in the past so I find comfort in the fact that he is where he is.

Cinema Canada: Many of the best filmmakers are the ones that put a lot on the line with every film they make. You have a great reputation as a taker of chances in people, which gives you a very strong resonance with what the

filmmakers are going through. Is that part of your motivation for keeping a low profile?

Rena Krawagna: Well, I think the reason I keep a low profile is because I'm not the person who is making the film. I'm just the person who helps them to a certain extent create the film. I tell them what issues they cannot deal with. In other words it's a protection for themselves rather than having them just go ahead and do it and later on have to say, 'Well, I'm sorry, I just can't deal with this.' As far as the low profile is concerned I think it's necessary to keep a somewhat low profile. You have a program director. You have all kinds of people who are responsible for programming and if you try to keep a very high profile or if you insist on taking credit for something, it probably wouldn't work as well as it does. You can't always clearly define what a certain function is.

Cinema Canada: One thing that has occurred to me as the reason for the battle that you've taken on and waged for so many years has possibly to do with your European heritage and the fact that you seem to have always been, in one way or another, involved with people in the arts.

Rena Krawagna: I don't know. Maybe you're reading something into it. I am married to an artist - have been married for 30 years, but my motivation, really, is if I see lovely footage or a good film, I will fight for it and this is what motivates me. The first Monday of every month there should be an excellent film on my desk and this should keep me going for another month. This is really the motivation and the need for creating and developing filmmakers - that's the motivation... You're working with interesting people and if it were easy, anybody could do it. It's a challenge.

Cinema Canada: In terms of your future within the department with Canadian Reflections and with the talent pool of filmmakers that you've nurtured for a long time, what do you want to see happening in the future with those people and what you're able to do?

Rena Krawagna: I would like a more clearly defined policy. Naturally I would like to see more money. To be able to say every year, we are going to have this amount of air-time for these kind of films. This would keep me and the filmmakers very happy.

DON HAIG:

"... It's not as if they said, 'Okay, you've got this space, call it Canadian Reflections,' they just said, we want these half-hours filled for May, June, July and August. Then the last time, they said, 'We want 80 hours!' The joke has been... 'Well, sure, we'll just go into the supermarket... and pull this stuff off the rack.'"

Cinema Canada: How are you going to fill 80 hours?

Rena Krawagna: Well, it wasn't easy, but there are a number of films that we picked up and we had a certain amount in the library and it worked out all right.

Cinema Canada: Is there a sufficient talent pool and a sufficient production industry now to keep Canadian Reflections going at a level of 80 hours a year?

Rena Krawagna: Certainly not 80 original hours. It depends on two things: a) money, and b) if you have a monumental budget of course, you could do it, but you don't. So if you're talking about the same kind of level, not travelogues but profile films, films about crafts-people, dramas, etc., it's difficult because 80 one-hours is difficult to produce. I don't think that there are that many filmmakers around who would want to struggle financially to get the money from various sources - from Ontario Arts Council, from private and so forth. After you've made a few films like that you want to go on and say, 'My budget is so and so much and I should be able to get this money and do it.'

Cinema Canada: Do you foresee a bigger budget becoming available to you for your department?

Rena Krawagna: Not right away, no. For the last few years we've operated on the same internal budget and I can't see anything in today's economy that would make Roman say, 'Here, there's so many thousands of dollars for a film.' If the CBC gets a healthy budget for Canadian filmmakers, perhaps, I don't know. Only Roman can answer that.

PAUL SALTZMAN:

"Speaking personally, our 26-part series (*Spread Your Wings*, now seen in over 30 countries and having won 18 international awards) would never have gotten off the ground without Rena's support and Merv Stone's approval of the first two which became pilots for the series."

Cinema Canada: Tell me about saying "No."

Rena Krawagna: Saying no to a filmmaker? Well, you say no when you don't have any money left in the budget or you say no when the project is not good - if it can't be translated into your needs. It's not easy to say no but it has to be done. I would rather be honest and tell a filmmaker why a certain project wouldn't work than to say go out and do it and then we'll see if it works somehow.

Cinema Canada: Have there been occasions when you could have said "No," but what you've said is "If you take these directions, if you do this, and if you do that, I can say Yes"?

Rena Krawagna: I try not to influence people. I would tell them what wouldn't work for the area that I'm responsible for. Not: we must change this, we must change that - that's up to the filmmaker. If he is perceptive and if he has done his research, if he knows what kind of programs we can use, then one shouldn't have any difficulty. Occasionally the odd one wants to express himself in a certain way that does not comply with what you're programming. Then that's his problem and not mine.

Cinema Canada: Do you ever deal with work from students?

Rena Krawagna: Not too often. I see a lot of students, but once they've graduated they would come and we would try to guide them. We would try to help them along, once they became so-called professionals. In *Telefest* I was on the jury and there were a number of very, very good films from York and Ryerson. Some bright stars.

Cinema Canada: What have been the most satisfying moments in your career so far? Where do you get your kicks?

Rena Krawagna: Show me a good film. That's where I get my kicks. When you see a film through various stages, through Ontario Arts Council, rushes, fine-cut and then when it goes on the air it almost becomes your own film. That's the greatest satisfaction - when you see it being telecast. I suppose as long as I can shed a tear still, after all these years having seen so many films... Is something moves me I don't think I have to apologize for that.

ROMAN MELNYK:

"As we worked closer and closer, we began to realize that Rena was sort of the 'Godmother' of the filmmakers. She was supportive and nurturing for good talent and I suppose she was just as tough on people who had pretensions but no talent."

Cinema Canada: Are you exclusively involved in network programming rather than regional programming?

Rena Krawagna: Well, network in that if it's standby programming it can be anywhere from Toronto to the East or West. As far as Canadian Reflections is concerned, hopefully it will always be on the whole network.

Cinema Canada: Have there been any occasions that stand out as either memorable successes or memorable failures?

Rena Krawagna: Well, let's deal with successes first. There are any number of films on artists, for example, that through broadcasting the film, thereby promote the filmmaker and the artists; the artist has become quite well known and has sold work and so on. This is very gratifying when you see this happening. Failures? I dare say there was only one that was unable to complete a half-hour program. I mean there have been some mediocre films but unless you gamble and hope for the best, that the filmmaker produces the kind of a film he or she said they would... It doesn't always turn out that way. A lot of the films are too long or too dreary. They need to be recut and I usually screen them with scissors in my eyes. There is not very much you can do about that. Off and on you can suggest that it's too long and would run better if they would re-edit it or just remove themselves for a couple of months - they're too close to the production. Or let somebody else look at it, and have some input. This is when Don helps a lot too.

Cinema Canada: Is there any one film or production or moment that stands out possibly as the most satisfying thing you've been involved in?

Rena Krawagna: There are a lot of satisfying films but I don't think that I would like to say, 'This film was the most satisfying.' I don't have a favourite. I have any number that are my favourites.

Cinema Canada: You've been referred to more than once as the Godmother of young Canadian filmmakers.

Rena Krawagna: Oh God, Godmother!

Cinema Canada: If you could be granted a wish what would it be?

Rena Krawagna: More money and more airtime... and a lot of talent. That's three wishes.