



# WILLIAM WEINTRAUB

Stephen Chesley

## PRODUCER, "WHY ROCK THE BOAT?"



Photo: Baltazar

William Weintraub



Photo: Baltazar

Chief Recording Engineer/Mixer

Writer-producer Bill Weintraub described the scene to be shot on the sound stage in front. Big band music drifted out of corners, and the cast took their positions. "A young reporter applies for his first regular job. The stern, patriarchal editor demolishes one applicant after another. Finally our boy is accepted."

It may sound like something out of Hollywood in its prime, but it's really happening this past spring, and at the National Film Board! The production is *Why Rock the Boat?*, and it is one of the features in English Production made during the past year. On a budget of around four hundred thousand dollars, it's on a smaller scale, however, than good old Lotus Land extravaganza.

But it's lively and, as Weintraub describes it, undidactic. Based on his 1961 novel of the same name, it is not, Weintraub emphatically states, nostalgia. "Filmmakers now thirty-five to fifty years old can look back and examine and relive the forties — that's not nostalgia. The director, John Howe, and I are the same age. I wrote the first draft and then he worked with me. We had fun comparing adventures.

"That's why so many films are being made about the forties. Experiences are vivid, new and exciting when you're just starting out, as we were then. I look back with affection, but I like the times more in retrospect than I did then. From now on films about the past will become very routine, like mysteries, westerns, a genre."

This one in particular is a comedy about a young reporter. Weintraub says it isn't autobiography. "The characters and events are take-offs of things that did happen. They're exaggerations and composites and thereby rendered fictional.

"The hero is a bit biographical. But he has a lot of the characteristics of people of that era. Young people starting out were very different then, less self-assured, more afraid of losing jobs. Bosses were more autocratic. There was more tension in a job. The world was a little more Victorian.

"My attitude to the material hasn't changed much, I don't think. The basic things are the same. Maybe I've become more generous in that in the film I've let the guy get the girl."

The project was adapted from Weintraub's novel, first published in 1961. But the Board wasn't the first to try to film it. "The Film Board actually saw the idea first, and it started off as a Board project. Then they decided not to do it and we got permission to take it outside. In 1971 Potterton got private backing and the CFDC voted the money. Then, just before the Potterton start, things took a turn for the worst in the tax situation, and the project was shelved. The Board accepted it as part of the Language series. Acting as producer, I and John Howe sold it to them."

But that doesn't mean a line-by-line reproduction on celluloid of the printed page. "The film can accommodate one third of the book's action because of running time. Therefore

you have to select, and once you start selecting, things take on a different importance, a thing takes on a different life of its own. After I started writing the script I never glanced at the book. All the dialogue in the film is different from the book — all I've kept are some of the characters and some of the incidents. Also, they speak differently for the ear than for the eye."

Weintraub is conscious of both means of communication, because he's been involved in both. He started as a reporter and editor for a daily newspaper, and went from there to filmmaker. He was a freelancer for the Board and joined the permanent staff in 1965. His films have included the *Between Two Wars* series, *Celebration*, *Challenge for the Church*, *A Matter of Fat*, *Turn of the Century*, and *Aviators of Hudson Strait*, recently seen on the CBC-NFB Arctic evening. He's also produced *Nahanni*, a very popular theatrical short in the sixties.

All of which experience leads him to some theories about filmmaking, and some comments are prompted by *Why Rock the Boat*. "It's a comedy," says Weintraub, "but you have to be careful in adapting the book. One thing I've found is that there's greater opportunity for fantasy on the written page than on the screen. There are episodes in the book that couldn't happen, they're exaggerated to the point where they're satirically saturated, they sort of defy gravity. Silent films went in for fantasy, and sometimes the Marx Brothers could do it. In modern times it just doesn't seem to work, with the possible exception of Woody Allen. But his stuff is all fantasy.

"Film comedy is much more realistic, more like social comedy. Film really brings you down to earth in a sense, and it is most effective in that way. Real people in real surroundings demand more naturalism."

Bill Weintraub moves on to a related topic, his avowed preference for a journalistic approach in film. He wants a cautious, questioning eye trained on a subject, be it a fictional adventure or a true examination. And he's very positive about who should do the viewing.

"I believe in the journalistic principle: If I want to have a good film about Saskatchewan, the last thing I would want is to have anybody from Saskatchewan make it. He can't see the forest through the trees. He doesn't know what we want to know about that place. But the journalist is the representative of the ignorant public."

Reminded of the French filmmakers who became upset when informed that *Adieu Alouette*, the NFB series on Quebec, was assigned to an English unit, Weintraub agreed with the decision. "My principle applies there too. They do make films about and for their own culture and audience. But what the French Canadian wants to know about Quebec culture is quite different than what English Canadians want to know.

"There are many things the French would not show because they take for granted that everyone knows them, but the rest of us are ignorant about them. If the French network needed films about Toronto, we would suggest French filmmakers go to Toronto. This doesn't happen because Quebec filmmakers are profoundly uninterested in Toronto."

Then there is the problem of location of filmmaking, in fact centralisation of it in one or two production centres. The regional vs central question, debated constantly among filmmakers as well as anyone else in the media. Weintraub accepts it, even while noting the recent effort by the Film Board to establish regional production centres. "It's not a Canadian invention, the location of one or two production centres. It's a world-wide phenomenon. Look at London, Tokyo, L.A. and New York. The best people gravitate to the centre. If you want to make it in the big time, that's the condition.

"If you want to stay home, there's nothing morally wrong with that, it's just that you must reconcile yourself to doing local things. If we could overcome this and have all programming spread out, we would be the first country in history to do it. All arts historically have had centres."

The conversation has continued into the sound studio, where John Howe's original 1940's style musical compositions are being recorded. Weintraub changes the topic back to *Why Rock the Boat*, and comments that the rushes look really good. It's reassuring, because although he has had much experience, he finds the audience's reaction more difficult to predict in a comedy. He says, "I sometimes sit there and really worry about whether people will laugh."



Photo: Baltazar

Director John Howe

Photo: Baltazar



Composer John Howe recreating the Big Band Era