

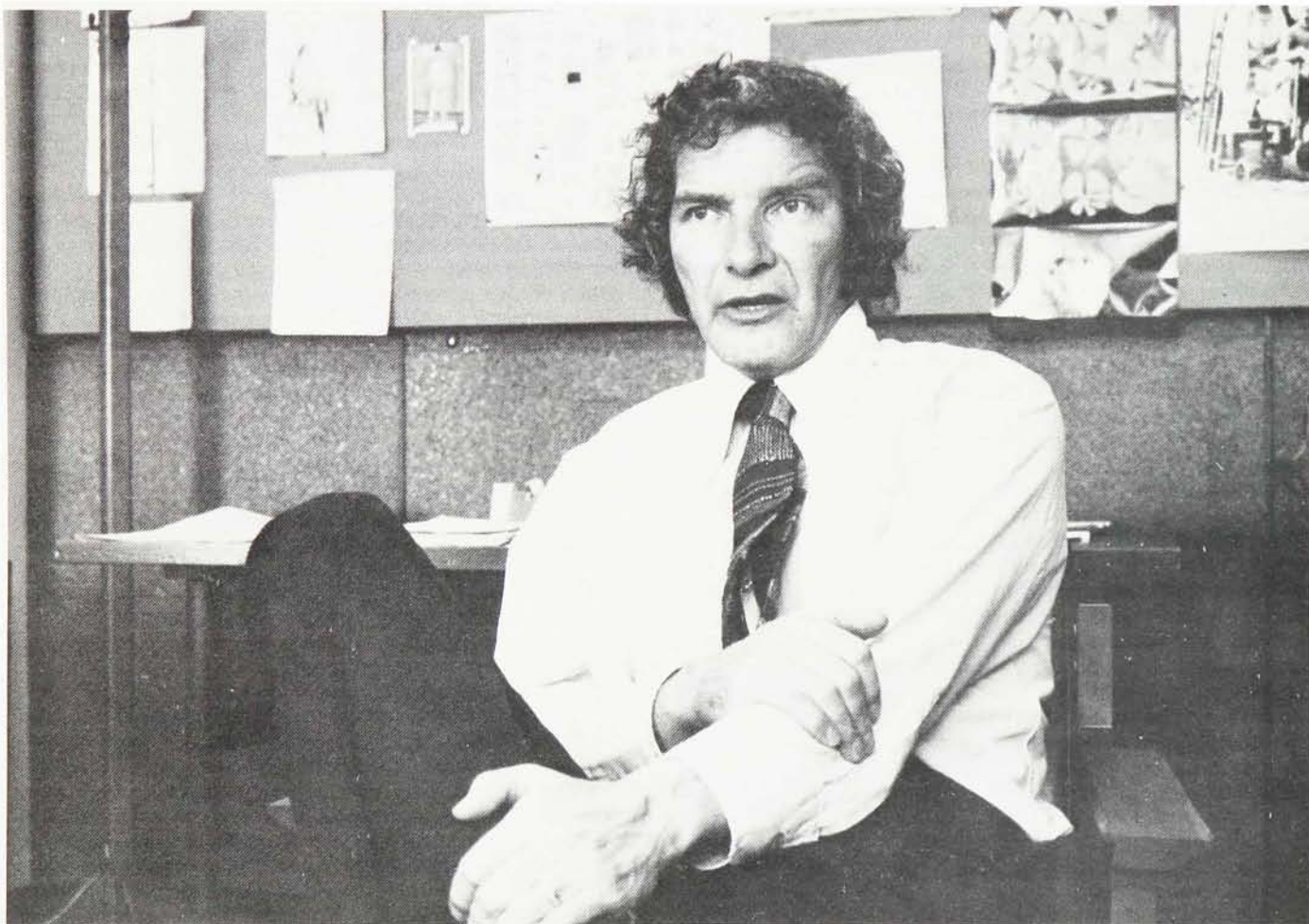


ROBERT VERRALL

Laurinda Hartt

English Production

Photo: Baltazar



An original member of the National Film Board's animation department established in 1941, and a former head of English production's animation department, Bob Verrall is now Director of English Production at the Film Board. When interviewed in May by *Cinema Canada's* George Csaba Koller, Verrall sighted two areas of primary concern: the wise expenditure of newly voted funds (available since April) in planning for the next two years of film production; and the Board's five-year regionalization plan.

In the process of preparing a general position paper on regional production for Assistant Commissioner André Lamy's office, Verrall was particularly conversant with the NFB's five-year regionalization program. He characterized the program as being "already well underway" with regional offices established and active in Vancouver and Halifax. The Vancouver jurisdictional area includes the whole of British Columbia, with some production presently underway in the Yukon and some "dealings" in progress with Alberta filmmakers. The Halifax office is concerned with the entire Atlantic region consisting of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island. In Winnipeg, an office is being established to deal with Canada's mid-west, an area which includes Ontario's Thunder Bay region along with the prairie

provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Edmonton is favoured as a possible future office location because it is situated in a corridor leading to the North and the Mackenzie region. In the Far North, experimental workshops are active in Cape Dorset with a comparable workshop proposed for Frobisher Bay. And Toronto, previously a low priority in any plans for regionalization, will see the establishment of a regional production office.

Verrall believes that people in the Montreal-based NFB are realizing that there have been no connections at all with the "concentration of filmmaking expertise" present within Toronto's dynamic filmmaking community. The low-priority given to regional development in Toronto was a result of the mistaken supposition that Toronto, with a "multi-million-dollar" film industry as well as CBC's headquarters, would not need the Board's assistance. In other regions, it was felt, a small amount of money could accomplish a great deal but in Toronto such small assistance would be lost. According to Verrall, this thinking has changed, "Toronto is a depressed area, but in a different sense. Even if it's a modest Toronto-based program I think it would have very beneficial results in that the NFB would become connected with all those people who, at the moment, are voices on the telephone or who send

in often excellent ideas. We haven't been organized to take advantage of that milieu which is real and there, and I think we should be contributing to that milieu. You should be hearing more concrete plans for the Toronto and Ontario region in the months ahead."

Since that May interview, Verrall has informed Cinema Canada that by spring of 1975, there will be a man chosen (no names yet, but they have strong candidates and an outside chance that someone from Toronto might get the job) who will reside in Toronto and co-ordinate planning to set up an extensive regional production facility. Toronto's office will be of "significant size" compared to other regional offices, but when questioned about the rumour that this office will handle 50 to 75 per cent of English production, Verrall said, "That's just a gleam in somebody's eye." This office will, however, include some French production and make extensive use of freelancers since only the core will be composed of staff. . . . Ed.

Verrall described several inter-related objectives of the regionalization plan. One of these is to reconnect the Board to a vast country inhabited by people who are less inclined than they once were to move to major metropolitan centres. "Talented filmmakers and technicians are increasingly reluctant to move from their regions; they're prepared to be unemployed rather than move into Montreal or Toronto." He noted that unemployment even in these major centres is somewhat responsible for such reluctance. "But", he added, "what is different is a determination to stay put because there's some value in staying put — it's a wish not to move from an environment you know and that you're in love with. So an element in this regional plan is to take advantage of that determination."

A second objective is to assist the establishment of "non-NFB production centres" that are burgeoning everywhere in Canada. "We're convinced that we could play a useful role in helping to establish such centres which may be located within a university program, a provincial program or a citizen's group program. The undertaking of this kind of activity may be a decision at headquarters, but we really have to have people in position in the regions who are sensitive to the regions and to the preoccupations of the people of those regions. This kind of activity is not film production in the traditional sense of Film Board work, but assistance to non-professional or non-NFB groups to produce film whether they use video-tape, Super 8 or 16mm. We're convinced that videotape and Super 8 are the exciting technologies for regional activity, certainly if you're talking about groups other than professional having access to the technology of film production and what we call access to the media."

To explain the specifics of the "non-NFB production centre" concept, Verrall cited the 1967 Fogo Island project. The film program was established as part of Memorial University's Extension Service and was concerned with problems the Extension people were very much engaged in studying: community development on the island, and the turmoil being caused by the federal government relocation program affecting the people of the Newfoundland and Labrador region. The newly created government/NFB Challenge for Change program was looking for a place to test out its theories of using film as an agent of social change, and Newfoundland's Memorial University welcomed the program into its midst. "Some 20 films were made and, in a way, they weren't films but records of meetings etc. held by a number of fishing communities, then played back double system to those same groups and to other groups in other villages.

"The result was the articulation, for the first time, of the problems of people who really hadn't been heard from. The government hadn't heard from them and had not expected to hear from them. These people were having their lives planned for them with perhaps the best intentions in the world but there had been no effective means by which the affected people could talk back. One idea of the program was to

provide a means by which the government would listen to the concerns and ideas of the Fogo Island people. From the outset, it was not seen as an NFB undertaking but as part of our Challenge for Change program in association with Memorial. We trained people in the use of film, sound and video equipment and then, after two years, we withdrew. That program is still going on, funded by their own resources. It didn't become part of the Film Board's establishment and therefore it's what we call a 'non-NFB production centre', to identify a program that the Board had some role in establishing. . . . For us, the Fogo Island Project is an example of what could be done in a poor region without spectacular production resources. It's a program now studied throughout the world, a touchstone for people interested in the use of media for social change."

When asked how this concept relates to an area like Toronto — would the NFB hire someone like Don Shebib to work with a community group in Cabbagetown? — his reply was "Why not? Or it may be that there are . . . in fact I'm sure there are many willing and capable people who, with a little assist from the Board, would be up and going. We're convinced of it."

"This non-NFB production centre idea is part and parcel of the Challenge for Change program, but Challenge for Change has been helping the Board rediscover a purpose, in that the regional offices that exist — in Vancouver and Halifax — are doing a considerable amount of work with the schools and regions — at Simon Fraser, Bathurst College, Memorial. Even in the holding of workshops and seminars for students and teachers, we can play a useful role."

A third objective of regionalization is to provide bases of operations from which crews going out from Montreal could work on a regional film program, whether on a sponsored film or a film being produced as part of the Board's own program. "We see it as a way of resisting the temptation to become locked into concerns within the Montreal region. It's a temptation — shared by English and French production — that you shoot everything in Montreal, that the people who do your research are based in Montreal, that the freelance directors, editors and cameramen and so on, are all based in Montreal. Without saying there is something wrong with that, we're saying that some of this kind of activity should be going on outside of the Montreal region."

French production will join with English in a regionalization program. "In Winnipeg," Verrall said, "they've already excited the interest of French-speaking filmmakers living in the region. And there are a number of proposals from the Atlantic region for French-language programs, proposals which have been routed to French production through the Halifax office."

About possible administrative difficulties in establishing and co-ordinating regional concerns, he admitted, "Administratively it's a bit mind boggling — how to regionalize and still remain well managed and organized. But it's important that we do so and we'll find the structure to make it work."

A total of 124 films were produced at the Board last year in French and English production combined. The total rises to 165 if English-language versions of French originals and French-language versions of English originals are included. "And given our present plant and staff, I don't think we could go higher than that in terms of production. If we had more money we'd probably expand our use of freelance talent and expand the regional activity. But unlimited funds is not a problem we've had to cope with yet."

Does English production plan to increase its involvement in feature production? "The Board has been producing features for many years and I don't think they've produced them all that well. Although, in recent years, French production has had considerable success in their feature film program. The French feature film program has grown up at the same time as it was growing up outside; the two were linked and there was a kind of chemistry which favoured this in Quebec.

"For the Board, it's finally a question of what we are going to do with what feels like a small amount of money, given all

the ideas that are stock-piled in the place.

Feature film production will continue but only as a modest part of total production activity. "We could wipe ourselves out if we got going into too many features at any one time." Three features are presently in varying stages of completion, "but the brake is kept on quite strictly."

The three features to be completed by English production this year are **Why Rock the Boat?**, **Cold Journey** and **Conflict Comedy**. At the time of this interview, Verrall stated that Mort Ransen's controversial **Conflict Comedy** would be completed despite delays due to major rewriting and re-editing but it was close to a final cutting copy. He then discussed the motivation behind the Board's selection of feature film subject matter. "It was the concern of the Film Commissioner that if we get into feature film production it should be because the theme was of a particular nature. . . . **Cold Journey** is a very good example of a story which attempts to recreate what it feels like to be a teenage Indian in a remote part of the country, trying to make a connection with the outside world. Although it would be our hope that the film would be of such wide interest that it might gain an international audience, it was nevertheless felt that it was important for a Canadian audience. It should be done, and if it weren't done by the Board, it might not get done at all."

Another facet of this past year's English film production was the making of a series of "language dramas" originally planned as packages of four 20-minute films, "each tied together as a continuous story because it was believed that it was a good way of packaging films useful in the teaching of a second language. Sure, every director and writer involved in this had in mind the *possible* use of segments joined together as a continuous story. In fact, it's been agreed that two of the films, (**Heatwave** and **A Star is Lost**) should be versioned as continuous dramatic films but not as features. We've shown them both to the CBC and there's interest in them being used as television dramas. . . . Maybe more of them will be."

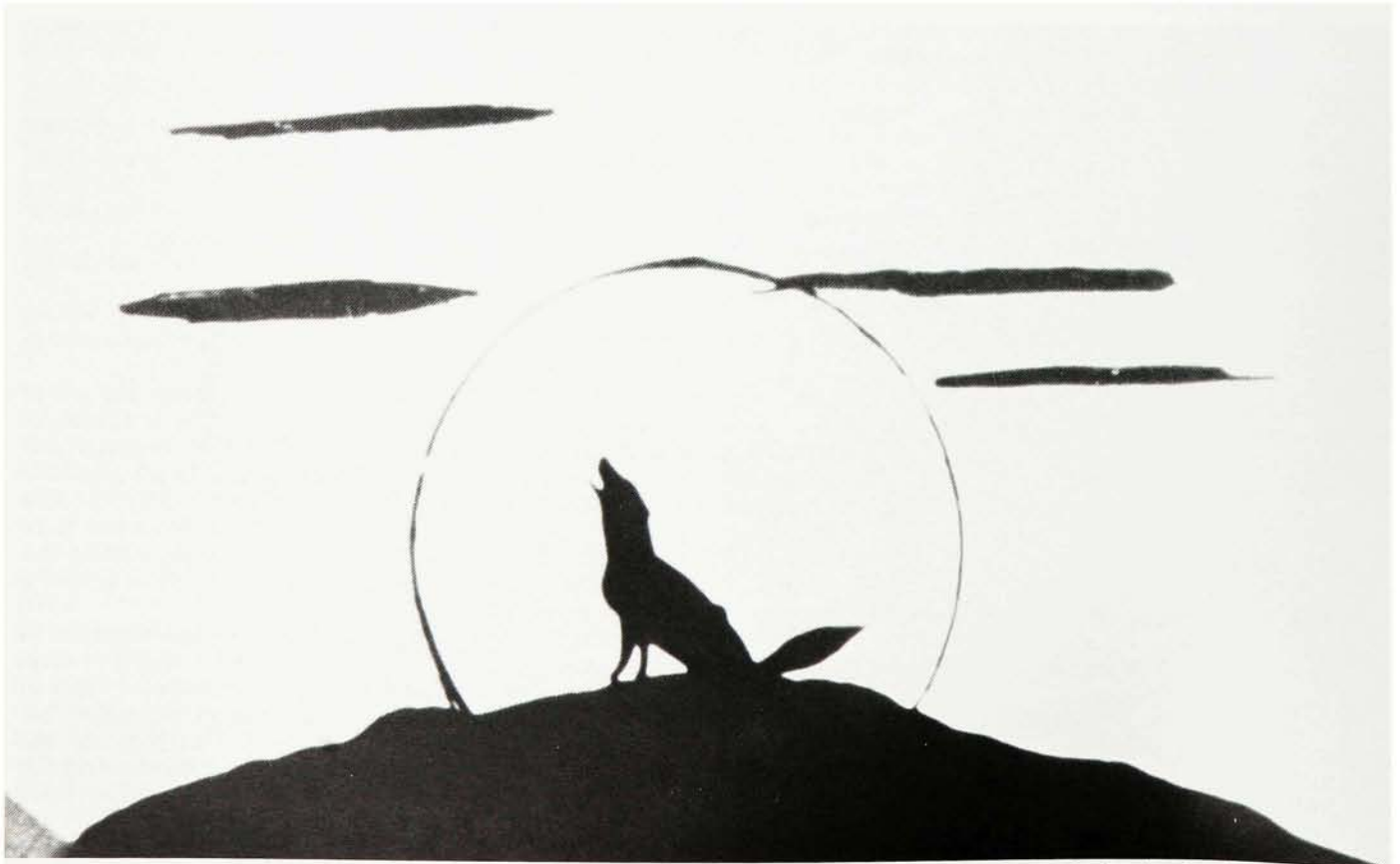
"Everyone connected with the program agreed that it's

uneven if you apply the criteria that you should apply for television drama or feature film. The purpose was to work with limited vocabulary structured in such a way that there would be core scenes which relate to teaching-aid materials being prepared at the same time. Those were very real limitations placed on the writers and directors. Therefore it was uncertain whether *any* of those programs would work as continuous dramatic films. But we learned a lot about what's involved in producing a number of dramatic films all at once and for relatively low budgets.

Based on this, Verrall believes that with some guarantee of revenue from a distributor or from a co-partner such as the CBC, NFB English production could make about three dramatic films annually without making an inroad into money reserved for all other priorities such as regional production, Challenge for Change, the non-theatrical and classroom film programs, and the television program.

"I think it's important for the Film Board to develop its capability in dramatic filmmaking, just as it was important for us to develop our capability in animation. Over the years, some outstanding animated films have resulted from this determination. It's only a small part of what goes on at the Board, but it's an important part. For one thing, we've trained a lot of animators you can now find working in Toronto, in downtown Montreal, and in Vancouver. So the Board's feature filmmaking program could be seen as an important element in the total picture of film development in Canada, but I don't think we'll ever be in the business in a big way."

Immediate future film production within English production includes plans for a two-and-a-half hour CBC-TV special on the Atlantic region (already underway in May) with a tentative air date set for the end of March, 1975. There are plans for eight half-hour films about British Columbia and the West Coast under the present series title, **The Coastal Regions**. The films will run on CBC on consecutive Wednesday evenings in the same time slot as the previous NFB-produced series **West and Adieu Alouette**, and are scheduled to run from January to the end of March, 1975.



Inuit animation from Cape Dorset