



MARC DEVLIN

Stephen Chesley

PERSONNEL

Photo: Baltazar



The Film Board has been referred to, not affectionately, as a factory. And if you think about it, there is that monolithic building and the incredible range of cameras, equipment, editing rooms, labs, offices, files, storage areas, and doors that open and close, sealing off the multitude of rooms. But, like any factory, The Board is material on the outside; what operates it is people. Special people, very often, because art is the main, not ancillary, purpose of all that physical stuff.

It's a large group of people, too. Now numbering around one thousand, including everyone from Sydney Newman to freelancers to clerks and typists. To co-ordinate a staff that size means people assigned specifically to that task, and it is Personnel Director Mark Devlin and his own group of twenty that oversee the other thousand.

One thousand people, with the probability of an increase in the near future. It breaks down, continues Devlin, to 240 in production, 210 in technical services, 150 in administration, 250 in distribution, thirty-five in the Ottawa offices, forty-five in the government photo centre in Ottawa which services all government departments, and the rest freelancers. The annual turnover is about seventy or eighty, either through retirement or leaving for another position. Most who leave are involved in

clerical work; very few are filmmakers. In fact, there is a waiting list for openings in production. That's because, says Devlin, the working conditions are fantastic. "You can't duplicate this type of job anywhere in Canada. There's a great degree of creative freedom here that doesn't exist anywhere else. Personal freedom, too. Length of hair or wearing jeans – the Film Board has always been progressive in this kind of area. As for me, well, if you don't have an affinity for this type of creativity, usually you don't work here in administration very long. I mean, you couldn't enforce those rules anyway."

The main point is that, like every other area of the existence of the Film Board, Devlin's responsibility is not that honey-flavoured. But neither is the scene a picture in black and white. As Devlin illustrates, there are problem areas but there is understanding and an attempt at communication from both sides.

One of the sore areas is the position of freelancers. The Board is not a closed shop, so you don't have to join the union, but it is the bargaining unit with administration. Just who is eligible to join is the main bone of contention. "The union feels the Film Board staff should grow in proportion to budget increases. Then you have the freelancers, and the legal complications set in because government collective bargaining excludes freelancers. That's unfair because two work forces operate side by side, one covered by a union agreement and one not covered. We spend \$1.8 million annually on freelancers, and use a total of 175 different ones a year. Many are hired for extremely short periods of time or because of a particular expertise. The union wants part of the freelance help incorporated into staff.

"Either all work is done by staff or you contract out. We feel we should follow the middle of the road. We should increase our staff slightly, by about fifty or seventy-five, and use freelancers to have access to diverse body of talent from across the country. We must renew our staff. Many of the creative personnel have been with the Film Board since its inception, and they're getting close to retirement. We must figure out a long term program.

"You can't just replace people like Tom Daly or Guy Glover. We may have to overstaff so we can continue to operate efficiently as they retire. We need apprenticeship periods. It has to be thought out in terms of a balance in creative staff. Everyone wants to be a director – that's *the* job here. A few years ago we had a desperate need for executive producers. Some directors become executive producers but they don't like the work because it's partly administration and not as creative. So they take on these jobs on a temporary basis with the understanding that they'll be allowed to go back to directing.

"We always seem to have an overstaffing situation in directors – seventy-five are usually around – and we have a lot of trouble keeping good editors or cameramen at their jobs.

"When the people get older another problem arises. You can't send them up to the Arctic, so we use them in some

other specialised way, for example writing commentary or assisting another director. But many of them are not prepared for administration work. And these men are, after all, the ones who made the Film Board.

"There's no point in taking a person and putting him in a job where he's going to be unhappy. Then his productivity and creativity will suffer. Applied to young or old, it's a problem in having a permanent staff.

"Not having a permanent staff — survival of the fittest — is not a good solution. It seems to go against the trend in society. People who want to devote their creative lives to the Film Board are entitled to as much security as someone doing administration work. The security makes them more productive because they don't have to worry about paying bills.

"Of course freelancers are more efficient financially. A lot of time is wasted between projects because of budget or slow approval and permanent staff might be idle for a time. Administration, by the way, can be just as unproductive, but it's less noticeable. And we seem to do all our work between May and October. If our production was better planned we could keep people busy all year round.

"Layoffs and firing are so hard to discuss because of the complications. I mean, most people have talents, but they're either ignored or not utilised properly. It's very hard to tell who is the dead wood. If a person's been with an organisation for fifteen or twenty years, how can you argue that they're incompetent? — and it certainly doesn't reflect well on management if they are! We've had situations here where a filmmaker has been unproductive for several years then all of a sudden they become very productive.

As a government agency, and a federal one at that, the Film Board is subject to another personnel variable: both French and English are on staff, and bilingualism is compulsory. In production there are two separate units, with 80 in the French and 160 in the English. The lower number in the French is because the unit was established only ten years ago, and the turnover of staff is greater. "Many go into feature production in Montreal, because there are more outlets. That's healthy. The English situation is different: not overstaffed, but tight. The ideal is having ten filmmakers come and ten go each year. Then we'd get access to all the best talent in Canada. We'll probably increase the number in the French unit — the union thinks we should.

"Our policy on bilingualism is government policy: up to a year to become bilingual. We mainly use government schools. If they can't become bilingual, we have to make other arrangements. Learning a second language is a problem. We haven't had too much success in making people bilingual. Some just haven't got the talent to learn a second language.

It's very disruptive to work and to your personal life because you almost have to forget English for a couple of years to be effective. This transforms your personality because your style of delivery and everything else changes. It's very exhausting. I don't think people appreciate this.

"Overall it's a cultural enrichment. I have my doubts as to whether it will work, but it's worth the experiment."

Devlin himself is bilingual, having grown up in Quebec City in a family that came from both language groups. He came to the Board after some years with the CBC, and it's his job to plan the manpower, recruit people for vacant jobs, administer a salary program, handle collective bargaining, carry out training programs, administer staff benefit programs, and so on. He's a firm believer in The Peter Principle, too. "I believe in it, especially in government, where it's the greatest problem. A good technician makes a lousy supervisor very often. I'd rather go outside the organisation for administration."

Which brings up the logical question: how does one get a job with the Film Board?

"Jobs are posted and advertised nationally. There is a problem for people who don't live in Montreal. It's a natural tendency to favour local people. That goes for any government agency. We're trying to get away from that. Besides, the filmmaking community is not that great. There's a grapevine, especially in Toronto. And we do hire on location, plus hiring people in our regional production centres.

"There's always a long line-up for the jobs. Applicants are judged by personnel and production people. Ad hoc committees are formed for each job. Now I'm not a filmmaker, nor do I pretend to be, but if I want to hire a filmmaker, I know what a filmmaker does. I don't think I'm qualified to judge talent, but there are certain things in personnel and administration that help you identify what constitutes talent — background, references, track record.

"The way to break in to the Board is to get a little freelance contract, maybe for a week. If you do a good job, you'll get other things. Then a vacancy is posted and they apply and they get the job and they're in the Film Board.

"For students just starting it's very tough. The competition is very great, and very seldom do we take anyone right from graduation. We like them to be trained. We do maintain close contact with universities, and many of our staff teach at them. If our budget is increased, we should have a formal apprenticeship program. We had that practise once before — ten people a year were hired to work for a five year period, but there was no formal program.

"I think the next five years will see a big turnover. Many will retire. There are a lot of new vistas for young people making films."



Scene from "On est loin du soleil".