



# JOHN SMITH

Stephen Chesley

## T.V. PRODUCTION

There is a discussion about filmmaking that constantly makes the rounds of the Film Board halls, and basically it is a premise that the best interpreter of a scene is the outsider; he comes in fresh and without prejudice, and hence sees more and sees more accurately than someone from inside. Whether this is true or not is beside my point, but there are benefits from such a view, even if the opposite method is also fruitful. So let's apply the premise to the Board itself, and listen to John Smith, a producer who came from the private sector only a year and a half ago. His comments are about anything and everything that occurs at the Board, or are part of the Board's philosophy.

Smith himself is a producer. For the past year he has been executive producer of Studio F, from which has emerged the **Language Drama Series** and **West**. His experience at the Board has given him access to most of the complaints and compliments that emerge from discussions about the Film Board. He describes the Board as "a remarkable place in many ways. It's also a tired old bureaucracy.

"At a certain time it was a place with a sense of purpose, with a group of young people who knew what they wanted to do, which was to make films, any films. It was a different time in the world when there was no stigma attached to doing propaganda work and that's what the Film Board was and remains, basically a propaganda organisation. Whenever you do anything that is implicitly in any way critical of the government, questions are raised all over the place. There isn't even the institutional separation like at the CBC between the government and the CBC.

"The Board has become a fortress. The attitude toward outsiders is hostile and defensive, more so with filmmakers than with management. For many here the Board has become a place that must provide work for those who, by hook or by crook, have gained a permanent foothold. The Board does not, therefore, attract the best filmmaking talent in the country, nor does it seek it out because there are enormous hassles over the fact that they're freelance, and the idea is that every film must be made by staff. It's a factory mentality.

"Job security is good, but there is the question of the influence of organised labour as progressive or conservative in our society. Not that the union is the cause of dead wood. The union has its place – and certainly I'm a beneficiary of it in that I get paid a decent salary – but the fact is that the union situation has created a kind of fortress attitude between organised and unorganised labour and I, as a producer having productions to staff, felt myself under tremendous constraints to staff those productions with permanent staff. I didn't have the leeway to think, 'Who's the best person in the country to make that film?' To the extent that I gave in to those pressures, I did the National Film Board's viewing public and everyone a disservice.

"And there is a whole institutional set-up here where you have to go through committees which operate in a kind of producer function in saying, 'Yes you may do that.' I would take projects to them and the important question they would ask is, 'Is the director you have chosen a member of the staff?'

If yes, the entire atmosphere would be different. If no, the question is not, 'Is it a great film? Will it do the country good?', the question is 'Why can't you find a staff member to do it?'

"On the freelance side, freelance discriminates against the very inexperienced and those middle aged and older – the whole film industry discriminates against the older – because forty-five-year-olds are considered old-fashioned. At the Film Board there is a wider range of age and experience than in private industry. I think that's a healthy thing, and it's an advantage of security.

"The problem of English and French is another matter. The Film Board is not in its proper milieu, except for the French section. The centre of French filmmaking is Montreal. There's a healthy interplay between the Board and the private industry. No such interplay takes place between the Board and the English industry, because its centre is in Toronto. There should be two Film Boards, one in Montreal and one in Toronto, and I think a Toronto production centre will come. The farce of the Board – and of this country – is that it's one thing to be bilingual in Montreal and another to be bilingual in Victoria.

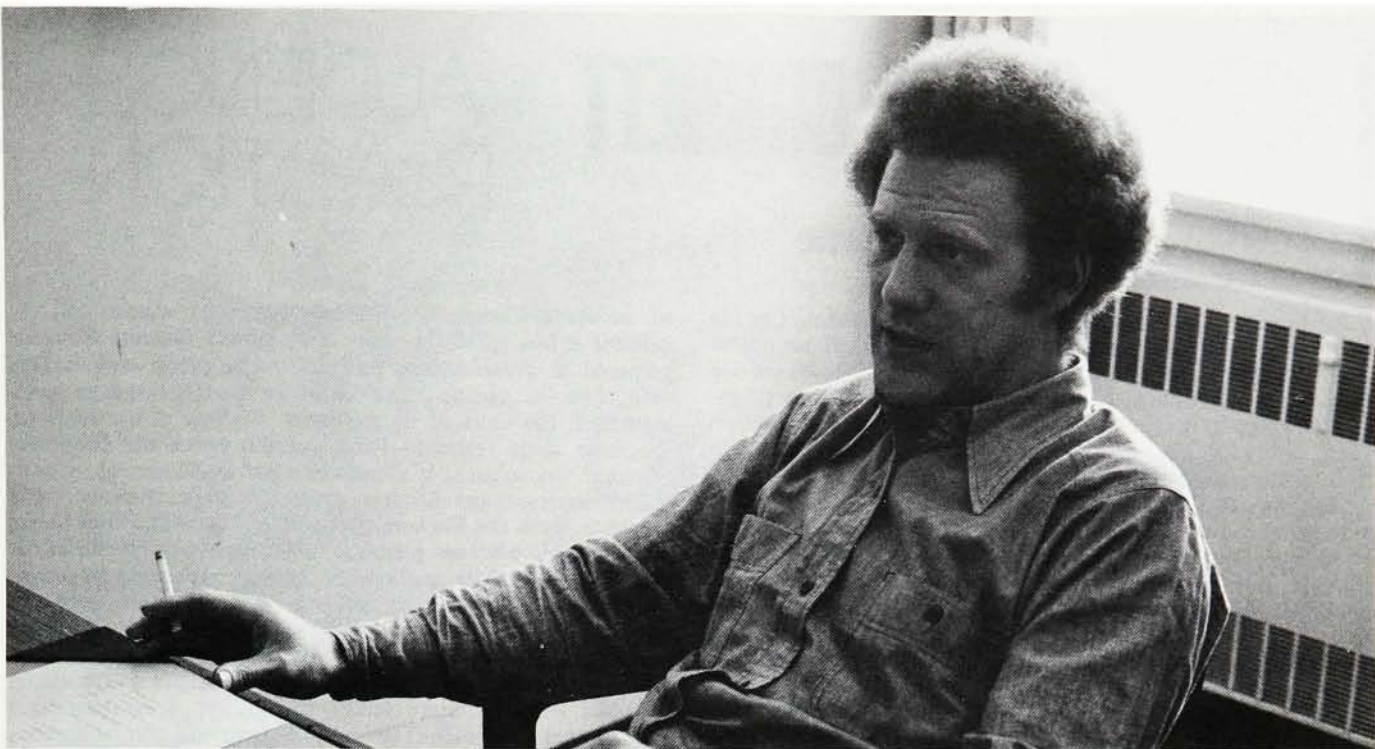
"Halifax and B.C. production centres have taken the attitude that they don't want the same kind of staff relationships that exist here. They have very little staff and much more freelance involvement.

"Regional production is a difficult problem when you ask, 'Who should make a film about B.C.? The regional office in B.C. or the central production office?' You find that kind of attitude growing here, and it's part of a growing regionalism that I'm very much opposed to. There is a natural centralisation of talent. Talent is drawn to a magnet of a centre, and in English Canada that centre is Toronto. The development of culture there is national in a way, like New York or Los Angeles.

"There's professionalism and creativity, that is, art raised to a higher level. Natives with port-a-packs are essential, but so are Toronto films, because Toronto people are full-time professionals. A cameraman doesn't spend half his time being a resident of somewhere, he is a cameraman. Also you have a community of people in the film business who create sparks off one another, and that's important, film being fundamentally a group activity."

Pausing for a minute, Smith emphasises that he is speaking from his unique vantage point. "As with any big organisation, the right hand doesn't know what the left is doing. Three quarters of what happens at the Board I don't know about, so when I criticise the Board, it's very much from the aspect of the Board that I happen to see in my activity."

Smith's activity has been basically as producer overseeing the **Language Series** and the **West** series. His role was different in each. "There was a point in the Language Series where I took over one production. The production had already been scripted, the director chosen, and I just did co-ordinating work. Mainly I put together teams of people as well as riding the financial side.



"One of the interesting aspects I discovered when I came here was that the Board had an incredible tendency to go way over budget on many projects, which caused periodic crises of lack of money. So we were under pretty tight strictures, to stay within budget, and in terms of the Board's usual way of producing things and in terms of drama, they were fairly tight budgets. So a lot of time was spent keeping things on the rails financially. Everything did come in under budget.

"The actual amount spent is not easy to calculate. \$200,000 is the sum given, but it's very hard to figure out what the real cost is because so much is built into the internal budget. The Board is an overhead cost which is now up to twenty per cent. The studio doesn't cost anything in the budget, that is no rental, but personnel for set construction, lighting are charged. Money is a very complicated thing around here. Inside costs are fixed expenses and outside costs are cash – that's the distinction."

Smith described the **Language Series** in more detail. "They are aimed mainly at the classroom. They were designed as twenty twenty-minute films to teach English as a second language and to entertain. A package of support materials has been developed for teaching teachers how to use the films, consisting of slides, tapes, booklets and pictures. Each is one feature-length story broken up into twenty-minute segments. We made **A Moving Experience**, **Heatwave**, **A Star is Lost**, **The Winner**, and **The Egg Story**.

"The French unit took a different tack. It's not aimed at language levels but at age levels: a ten-minute series for kids, twenty-minute for teenagers, and forty-minute for adults. Also, they want to present Quebec culture, whereas we, being a sort of bastardised English group sitting in the middle of French Quebec, have no culture to reflect. Our series doesn't intend to reflect Canadian culture. There are no Canadian references in particular, except location.

"We're at the point now where we're testing out the marketing of the films. I don't know how many will be released in the language form. The feature version may subsequently find some general release on TV, possibly."

Bringing up the subject of the Film Board and making features, or anything, for television, draws a very direct summary comment from Smith: "I think it would be fantastic for the Board to make features for TV." But he is careful in his elaboration to point out the pitfalls as well as the reasons

why the Board should become more active in TV production.

"I think you'll find in the English unit is a lot of criticism of TV and a lot of questioning about whether the Film Board should be working for TV. Part of it is the fear of being swallowed up by the giant CBC and of becoming a production house for the CBC. And part of the hesitation is a kind of blind stupidity that I don't understand. You see, the Film Board has lost its audience. Traditionally it had one – in theatres. I mean, Sydney Newman produced a series of weekly fifteen-minute films.

"But the Film Board is not producing for theatres except the shorts, which are a very small part of its production. So the Film Board has been consigned to a secondary audience, not a mass audience any more. Everyone in this place would love to have their stuff on TV. In one fell swoop they get a million or two million people seeing what they do. People do make films to be seen."

Smith's attitude toward the Board and features is also one of Let's get going already! "It's a great shame that the Film Board feels as tender as it does about drama and features. There is a feeling that the government has the CFDC which is supposed to foster feature production, and so the English unit concentrates on documentary. French production makes features all the time, partly because they're less under the gaze of the commissioner.

"I think there should be a film industry in Canada, and I think the Film Board should be a cornerstone of that industry. The Film Board is a unique opportunity for Canada to make features that don't fall completely under the terrible crunch of the commercial demands which are that you've got to make films for the American market. These demands have a terrible effect on developing a Canadian identity.

"But if you get involved, you must have a respect toward the art. There can be no committee effect trying to say whether a project truly represents Canada, and therefore no sex, swearing, putting down institutions, so that you end up with a typically constipated government bureaucracy propaganda piece of garbage.

"The **Language Series** proved to everyone in this place that one can make feature-length films fairly cheaply. And you need the continuity of drama to be successful when you do it. Now a director gets one dramatic work every five years."