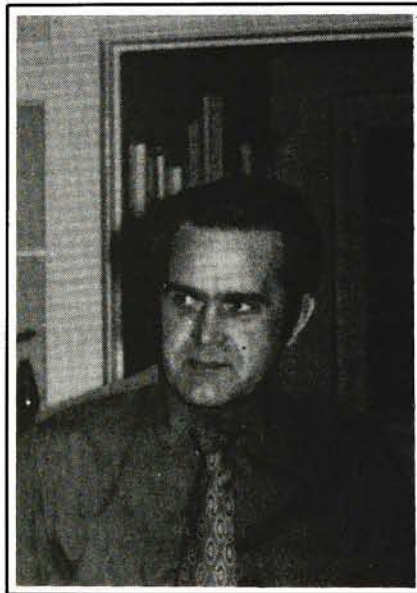

maido silm

master of make-believe

by teri coburn

'Seeing is believing' could easily be Maido Silm's motto. He and his crew are in the risky business of building sets for feature films and commercials — "not a job for the meek". In the following article, Teri Coburn takes us, literally, behind the scenes... to discover that sometimes what we *don't* see is a story in itself.



You'd swear it was the real thing: a split-level Manhattan penthouse with all the trimmings — including a spectacular view of the Empire State building from the spacious sundeck, except that the skyline is really just a mural-size photo blow up, convincingly tinted smog-yellow; and the ritzy deck is made out of plywood. "You should have seen it yesterday," boasts Maido, "when we had the spotlights on it." But the crew is gone, the studio echoes vacantly and the 'sunlight' has been unplugged.

It took Maido's boys five days to build it — for a mere one day shoot. Now, the obsolete penthouse will be

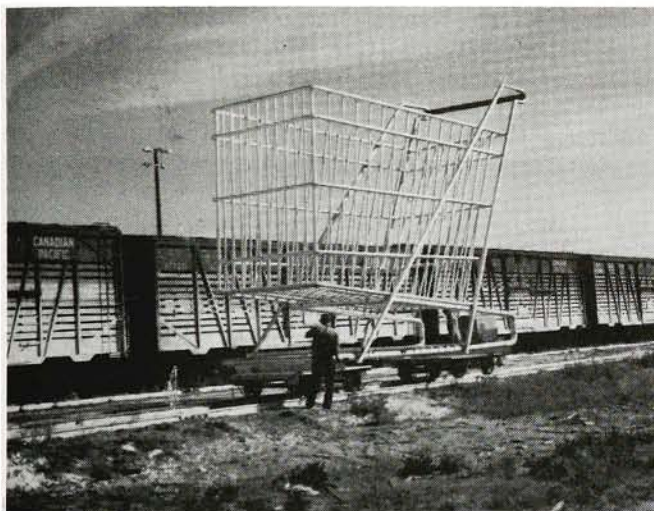
dismantled and removed from Toronto's Lakeshore Studios. Some of it will go to scrap, some of it will be stored — along with the radar antenna, Honeywell computer, and other odds and ends of wire, wood, steel, styrofoam, fiberglass and sawdust in Maido's six-floor warehouse downtown.

And what will become of the helicopter? Outside, Jimmy is frantically improvising a patch-up job on their latest scrapyard specimen — one of those last minute, "Oh-by-the-way"

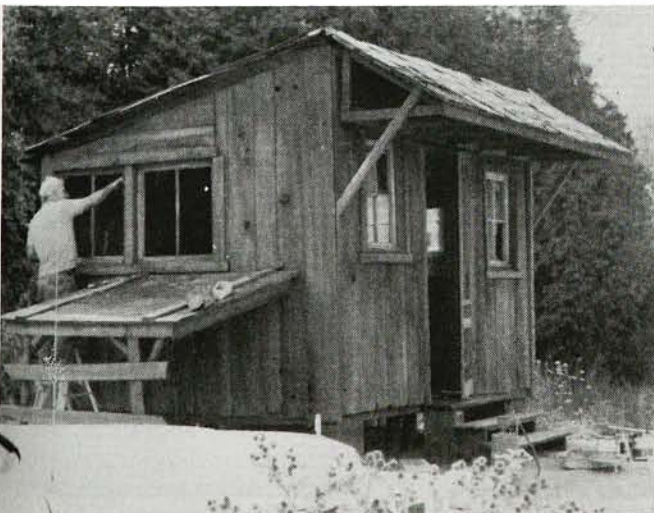
Teri Coburn is a free-lance writer, and assistant to the editor at Cinema Canada in Montreal.



For CBC's *Bethune*, this S.P.S. set was one of twenty-six constructed in twenty-eight days
(photo: Bill Barker)



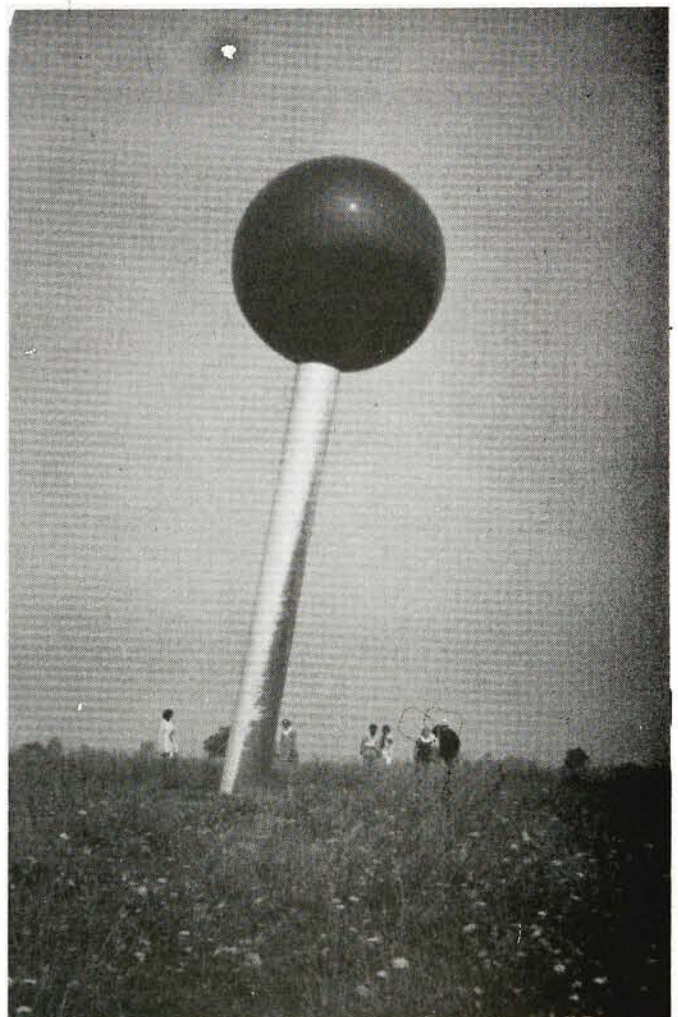
A twenty-seven foot shopping cart built for a CP Rail commercial. Talk about a spending spree!
(photo: Bill Barker)



A shack built in Georgetown for the film *Never Trust An Honest Thief*
(photo: Bill Barker)

affairs the art director dreamt up: his sketchy blueprint with the attached note, "It must look like this, but it doesn't have to fly!" It's a costly business. Helicopter parts aren't cheap. When it's finished, \$7,200. later, a huge crane will drop the whirlybird onto a building north of Toronto in a spectacular crash scene. "Take one!" And only one. But picture the poor carpenter standing by to repair and repaint the saloon doors of a brawl scene on its sixth take. (Take it easy!!) For there are no short cuts. The repairs must be perfect, as flaws are magnified on screen. Is it really worth it?

Most of the time, Maido Silm, owner of Scenic Productions Services (S.P.S.) thinks it is. But there are moments . . . Constructing feature film sets is "not a job for the meek." To complicate matters, he is often short-staffed. In a boom year like this one, the IATSE union cannot always meet his demands for set builders. So he must find them himself. Recently, two of his best regulars, men who have worked with him for years, have had to take time off due to nervous exhaustion. "It's the deadlines," Maido explains. "In this business even acts of God are no excuse . . . When a whole film crew depends on you, it's got to get done, so you do it."



A thirty-foot pin stuck in a farmer's field, also built for a CP Rail commercial. A nasty prick that!
(photo: Bill Barker)

"Doing it" includes jobs like building a false roof above the CN Tower's restaurant, for the film **Highpoint**. (They're not kidding.) The view is spectacular, but the breaks could be fatal. The wind whips Maido's prematurely gray hair as he confers with his special team of highrise workers. Their easy camaraderie is deceiving, considering that nothing but a safety wire encircles the ledge they are working on. But the sun is shining, their shirts are off, the wind is gentle, and they're ahead of schedule.

Back at the office Maido phones a Hydro engineer buddy of his concerning the aerodynamics of the Tower set. Behind the blueprint-cluttered desk his truck driver's physique appears incongruous. Only his quiet-spoken voice and generous manner denote his self-confessed weakness: "I'm a softy. I give in to a lot of people." He does. You can tell. So he relies on Charlie, his general manager, for that hard-and-fast Big Business approach. If a destitute theatre company calls Maido, he lends them what they need. If an old friend begs him to build a set when he's already involved in four features, he says, "Just this once" — for the tenth time. With virtually no competitors, if *he* doesn't do it, who will? In an understatement he comments, "I've built this business up on a very personal level." He has a lot of friends. And a lot of business.

By the end of this year S.P.S. will have completed over thirteen feature film sets, including: **Klondike Fever**, **Nothing Personal**, **Surfacing**, **Title Shot**, **Double Negative**, **Never Trust An Honest Thief**, and numerous commercials: close to two million dollars worth of business. ("Unfortunately, not all of it profit.")

But Maido doesn't fear much future competition, because

not many people want a business like his. They can earn more elsewhere — with fewer headaches. Merely quoting on a job is a gamble. You tell a production manager how much a set will cost, but if you don't happen to get experienced workers from IATSE the job drags, overtime adds up, weather delays may occur, last minute requests crop up, tools break, nerves shatter. . . . You never know the *real* cost until the job is done. Hoping to make a profit, you end up praying to break even.

"I've written off about three-hundred thousand dollars since I started this business," he admits. "Collecting payments" rivals "meeting deadlines" as his greatest concern. His "Gentlemen's Agreement" tradition of doing business (instead of insisting upon signed contracts) hardly endears him to his lawyer. "But he's a good friend of mine," Maido grins sheepishly, explaining that it's really a question of expediency. He and the film companies that contract him don't have time to brood over lengthy documents. Consequently, he's "been burned a few times." Luckily, the industry has its fair share of gentlemen.

And gentlemen. For years his wife has been doing the books — on top of her full-time job! But things are easing up now that Maido's hiring new staff. "I come in late now," he confesses: at eight-thirty a.m., usually finishing about ten or eleven p.m., most weekends included. And he's getting an unlisted phone number so they don't call him up at three a.m. to open the shop, as some film crews on a night shoot have been known to do. "Just part of the business," he philosophizes. But how does he sustain his miraculous composure? "Basically, all problems can be solved. So there's no reason to get excited. You just take them one by one." He doesn't raise his voice, he doesn't smoke. But he's not quite as invincible as he seems. "During the day when I'm here, I have it under control. But sometimes at four a.m. you wake up in a cold sweat thinking that there's no way you can finish that job. You're a bundle of nerves, can't go to sleep, so you get up in the middle of the night, sit down, work it out and say, 'O.K. It's gonna' work.' Simple as that!" Not quite. He admits, "I've often wondered how long I'll last in this business. You age very quickly." But he's covered a lot of ground.

When Maido was four years old, he and his family fled their native Estonia in 1942 bound for Finland, then Sweden. In 1950, the family settled in Canada. Seven years later Maido first encountered the film industry working as a stagehand for CBC, followed by jobs with Meridian Films, Video Design, and eventually, Robert Lawrence, where he became a production manager. In 1967, with a four-thousand dollar investment and his father's blessing, he established S.P.S. Ltd. Now, he's addicted. "Over the years I've built up something worthwhile. I'd like to keep it." And he likes Canada. "It's a great country with a lot of potential." Despite opportunities south of the border he has no intentions of leaving home. Besides, there are thirty-six features being shot in Toronto next year. He's looking for larger facilities.

For Maido, it all boils down to the challenge. "I hate routine." One of his characteristic descriptions sums it up.

"Two days ago we finished the CN Tower set. The false roof was on and we were climbing on it. What a sensation it was when we started sliding and all we had was that safety wire below us. It was fantastic! It really was!"

And Maido makes you believe it. □



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