

Loyalties: Anne Wheeler's film family

Sometimes it seems there are two worlds of filmmaking. The one world schemes for megabucks, dreams of megafame, tosses off scripts during a coffeebreak, wheels and deals, cuts corners everywhere (except for those glorious trips to MIFED and FILM-EX), then crabs about having to pay the actors. The inhabitants of the other world work quietly from a (hold on to your hat) creative sensibility, often venturing into multi-syllabic and literate realms such as "feminist," "regionalist" and "cross-cultural."

Anne Wheeler lives in this second world, but is not necessarily excluded from the commercial success of the former; that is, not as long as she continues to use "common sense" as her credo. That common sense has led Wheeler from her early days of documentaries to recently helming her first feature, *Loyalties*.

Loyalties, \$2.5 million contemporary feature about the unlikely friendship between a transplanted Englishwoman and a tough Métis barmaid, was shot on location in Lac La Biche, Alberta, from July 8 to Aug. 9. The Canada/U.K. co-venture was produced by Lauron International Inc. (Toronto) in association with Dumbarton Films of England and Wheeler-Hendren Enterprises Inc., with the participation of Telefilm Canada, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation.

Kenneth Welsh (*Empire*), Susan Wooldridge (*Jewel in the Crown*) and Tantoo Cardinal played the leading roles in the screenplay by Sharon Riis (*Latitude 55*) who also lives in Lac La Biche, a farming community of about 2,000 people, 219 kilometres northeast of Edmonton. The townsfolk were reportedly impressed with the accessibility of the film which shot on locations ranging from local houses and farms to the main street and bar. Wheeler describes the joys of the "short, intense shoot" as "wonderful performances, wonderful skies, a great art department and DOP" (Vic Sarin), and the difficulties of compressed time (25 days), the environmental demands of the script (nights and rain in abundance) and the number of children (nine wee ones as key characters).

Wheeler, 39, has come a long way since her early days at the University of Alberta, along the way acquiring a number of talents, including most of a Master of Education in Music Composition. Her beginning work on short dramas for the Alberta Department of Education and CBC led to a stint at the NFB, where she produced, directed and

wrote award-winning documentaries and docudramas, including *Great Grandmother*, *Augusta*, *Priory: the Only Home I've Got*, and *Teach Me to Dance. A War Story*, a feature-length docudrama based on her father's diaries, won awards in Europe, the U.S. and Canada. Since leaving the NFB, she has directed drama exclusively, most recently, two half-hours for that company with the charmed touch, Atlantis Films.

Change of Heart, a one-hour drama for the CBC series, *For the Record*, teamed her with writer Sharon Riis. The result was a moving film which won Wheeler best director award at the Alberta Film and Television Awards, and Riis an ACTRA Award nomination. *Change of Heart* confirmed that they worked well together.

"When I found a writer who thought very closely like I thought, and who lived in the same world as I do, in west-

ern Canada, and in the domestic world of raising children," says Wheeler, "I felt the time was right for me to initiate a project." (Both Wheeler and Riis are married, with two children each, and husbands who work in education in Alberta.)

"I started to find the money for the project, and hired Sharon as a writer. We got together and talked very loosely about what we wanted to say," Wheeler continues.

"I am not into films for the sake of making films. And I feel very strongly that if you are going to make a two-and-a-half-million dollar film that you should be saying something."

A genuine enjoyment of each other and great rounds of easy laughter appear to be an important factor in the success of this team, the wisecracking Riis dressed punkish in a black jumpsuit with neon pink socks and yellow shoes, and a shock of electrified hair, while Wheeler,

the calmer of the two, usually garbed in casual smocks and pants, responds with great, deep guffaws.

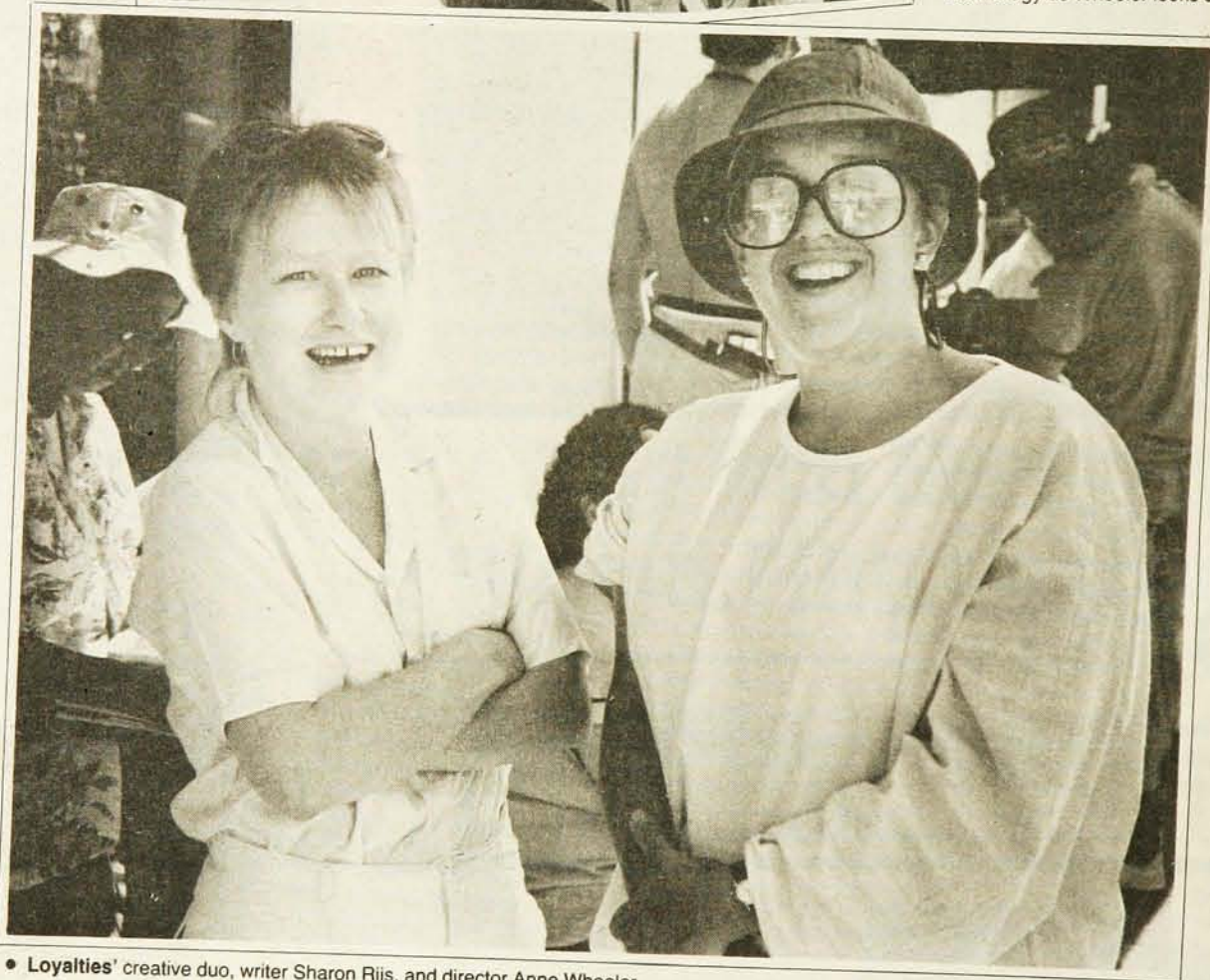
"I wanted to make some sort of statement on the history of women in the west, on the interdependence of women living in remote areas," says Wheeler.

The *Loyalties* script evolved from these discussions, and, in fact, both Riis and Wheeler claim it was still evolving 10 minutes before the shoot. But they both say they do not intentionally label it a feminist film. Wheeler, pointing to the anger evident in much of feminist work, observes, "At some point you have to celebrate being women and recognize our strength and relationships, and make very positive films. I hope this film will do that, besides telling a wonderful story."

Despite their approach, Wheeler and Riis scoff at the view of *Loyalties* as exclusively a women's film. Wheeler, hav-



• *Loyalties*' d.o.p. Vic Sarin mans the technology as Wheeler looks on



• *Loyalties*' creative duo, writer Sharon Riis, and director Anne Wheeler

ing just seen *Cocoon* points out that all the major characters were men, yet "I didn't come out of *Cocoon* saying, 'this is a great man's film!'" That 26 of the 56 crew positions on *Loyalties* were worked by women is also coincidental, and Wheeler's function as co-producer was a natural result of her mining Telefilm and the AMPDC for funds, as well as putting in her own money. Nevertheless, the awareness that women are underrepresented or misrepresented in current cinema was certainly an underlying factor.

Asked if she encounters difficulties as a woman in a power position, Wheeler says the strong background she developed in the '60s doing camera and sound gave her the confidence to ignore any sniping. "I'm too busy to be angry about it if people want to sit in the bar and wag their tongues about me wanting real babies in scenes," she laughs. (In fact, in *Loyalties*, the real babies were a blessing; the twins used were considerably opposite in personality so that Wheeler could switch them according to the 'happy' or 'tense' needs of the scenes.)

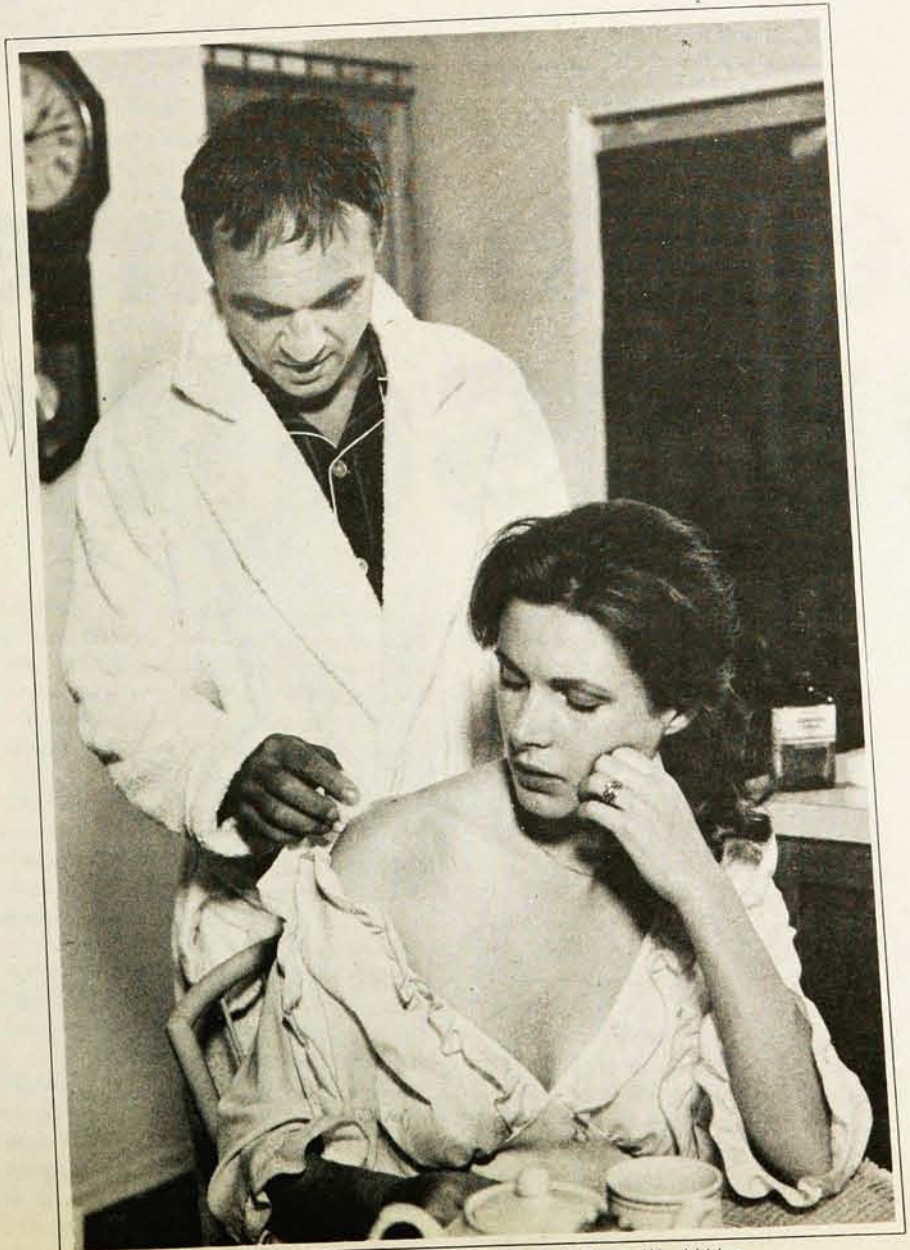
"I am not a big authoritative voice on the set," says Wheeler. "I have heard film-directing equated to a large army with the director as colonel, but I see it as a large family with the director as mother." Of Wheeler, Riis says: "She has a style of direction that is fluid and easy, with no hard edges." Wheeler must be doing something right, because the long chain of awards and critical praise for her work is almost unbroken, and leading to increasing recognition beyond Alberta's borders.

"Both sides of my family settled in Alberta, so my roots are here," explains Wheeler. "I've had lots of invitations to leave. But I think it is important for filmmakers to make films about things they know very well. I can direct things from here with some authority, and with confidence. The support I have had from AMPDC is very important. The background in filmmaking here has given me a good foundation. I like living in a community where I know a complete cross-section of people, where I am connected to every person in society. I know truckdrivers and teachers and doctors and construction workers." Riis too feels strongly about utilizing personal experience: "I didn't set *Loyalties* in Alberta on principle, but the story came out of where I live. For writing, you use stuff out of yourself."

Loyalties, as Wheeler puts it, is "unabashedly set in Alberta." Once she had the initial support from Telefilm and AMPDC, and a saleable script, she "went shopping" for producers. William Johnston and Ronald Lillie of Lauron Productions, who had liked working in Alberta with *Isaac Littlefeathers*, were at that time looking for something to twin with Dumbarton Films in England. Dumbarton read the script and liked it, particularly the key English character, which was attractive to their British investors. Wheeler, in turn, liked the Lauron team, and the deal fell into place. Dumbarton and Lauron have an arrangement in which Dumbarton will distribute *Loyalties* outside of North and South America, and Lauron will distribute Dumbarton's *No Surrender* in Canada, South America and some areas of the U.S. Norstar Releasing Inc. will handle the distribution of *Loyalties* in



• Métis barmaid meets Brit aristocrat: Tantoo Cardinal and Susan Wooldridge in *Loyalties*



• *Loyalties*' leads Canada's Kenneth Welsh and Britain's Susan Wooldridge

Canada while the CBC has first television rights.

Wheeler went to England for a week to cast Susan Wooldridge, while casting directors Gail Carr and Bette Chadwick toured northern Alberta, searching for a Métis family, and auditioning over 1,000 children along the way. Another quirk in the casting is Vera Martin, a respected native healer, who plays the grandmother.

Wheeler's approach to actors is distinctive. "I think performance is foremost. I rehearse with my actors before I decide where my camera is going to be, so that the actors and me are the ones that set the scene, not the cameras. I give the actors top priority. For this film, I had a week of rehearsals. We went through the dialogue, making sure that the script flowed for everybody right down to the five-year-old kids. When I get on-set, I tell everyone to get off set, except me and the actors. I tell them how I have thought it out, and if anything feels unnatural, we change it. Then we invite the heads of departments in. We show them how we want to do it, and I tell the DOP how I want to shoot it.

"I try to keep as many ideas as I can for the take, so that I can always send the actors in with new information and new feelings."

Riis confirms this, saying that many of the actors, including Wooldridge, commented on how Wheeler's insights had illuminated or enriched a scene for them, as she sidled up to whisper a few well-chosen words just before a take.

Wheeler's early experience in acting shows. "I never talk to actors over the noise of the set," she says. "I speak to each actor individually so that the others can't hear, so that all the actors are coming into scenes with new information and new delivery, which will keep each other fresh." At the locations, Wheeler took the actresses to the houses they would inhabit and asked them for input. Wooldridge asked for vases for flowers, in keeping with her English background. Vera Martin asked for children's drawings on the fridge door.

All of which, says Wheeler, is "just common sense." But insight and taste have a lot to do with it, too. By the time Wheeler finishes editing in February, the proof will be on the screen.

In the meantime, Riis is script-consultant on the NFB mini-series, *Daughters of the Country* (also writing one episode) and planning her second novel. Wheeler will direct one of the episodes.

Wheeler says "overwhelming curiosity" keeps her involved with film. And Riis enriches that thought with her comment, "I write things that I have not yet read or seen, that I would like to read or see."

But, ultimately, Wheeler says filmmaking is like having a family: "You hate it while you do it. But it's like going through a pregnancy, and though, sometimes the delivery can be hell," she laughs joyously, "then you have a little baby!"

Linda Kupecek •

Linda Kupecek is an actress based in Calgary.