

Children's programming and CBC show renewed market vigor

TORONTO – Whether the topics are science or 'about growing up, the current fall season on CBC-TV is home to a slate of entertaining children's series, three in particular being *Owl/TV*, *The Edison Twins*, and *The Kids of Degrassi Street*. The newest of the three is *Owl/TV*, a nature and science TV series co-produced by Toronto's *Owl Magazine* and the National Audubon Society that began its 10-week run Nov. 5 on CBC and Nov. 3 on PBS. Funded by both networks and Telefilm Canada, *Owl/TV's* calibre has led to its selection as a finalist in the International Film & TV Festival of New York Awards on Nov. 15 and in the instructional/educational series category of the Canadian Film and Television Awards held Nov. 21.

Entering its third season on CBC-TV Dec. 1 in the 5:30 p.m. timeslot and its fifth season (and 65 episodes by the end of 1985) overall, *The Edison Twins* star Andrew Sabiston and Marnie McPhail as the curious, problem-solving Tom and Annie Edison. Investigating topics as diverse as primate intelligence and how snowflakes are formed (and with animated endings explaining the scientific principles involved), the half-hour series is produced by Canada's largest animation house, Nelvana. Nelvana, producers of the recent half-hour films *Droids* and *Ewoks* for Lucasfilms, captured

the Gold Plaque in TV Production at the 19th Chicago International Film Festival in 1983 for the second of the 13 original episodes of *The Edison Twins*. Currently, the series is carried on the Disney Channel in the U.S., on TVOntario and Télémetropole (in addition to the CBC), and, through distribution by Viacom International, has been sold to 29 markets.

No less successful abroad and with a new, six-part mini-series also airing as of Dec. 1 is *The Kids of Degrassi Street*. Firmly rooted in an east-end Toronto neighborhood and featuring non-professional, schoolchildren from Dundas Street School (a block away from the real Degrassi Street, an ethnically varied mix of blue-collar and professional workers), *Kids* started out as a single film and will number 26 episodes at the mini-series' end. In that five-year span, *Kids* has become the "first love" for *Playing With Time* producers Linda Schuyler and Kit Hood – as well as for the 50 youngsters who've gone through the series (some, starting in Grade 4, are still acting in the series) and such episode themes as family separation, stereotypical attitudes, commitment, and starting a business.

While the intent is to present those universal themes to youngsters in a real way, the unique aspects of *Kids* remain its youthful actors and its in-

nercity setting. Schuyler, who admits to having both fun "and a lot of heartache" working with the kids who are now growing up on her, notes the series has "the comfortable-ness of an old shoe" about it. As much themselves on screen as they are off, many of the actors have single, working parents – parents from whom Schuyler's received compliments for the confidence the series has given their children. And just as there's a 'family affair' about *Playing With Time*, so is there in the Queen Street East locale in which local shopkeepers and residents appear, much to their delight, in bit parts (one corner store-owner even leaves Schuyler the keys in case she needs to do some weekend shooting). Taken together, the end effect is a series from a children's point of view, one in which their dilemmas and experiences are not, says Schuyler, "being dismissed in a series of one-liners and glib solutions."

Commenting on the success enjoyed by *Kids*, now seen by viewers from Turkey to Britain (where it's attracted upwards of five million viewers per episode), Schuyler attributes it to its very Canadian feel and its truthful rendering of a small part of Toronto. "When you speak in a very small way, you often have the power to speak universally," she says. As proof that people are listening there is, as well as the adults that

number among *Kids* viewers, critical acclaim. The episode "Griff Makes A Date" won a blue ribbon at the American Film Festival (the Children's Broadcast Institute's biannual award) last May in New York and was one of five foreign films chosen for the Best From Abroad presentation at the American Children's Television Festival on Oct. 23. Further favorable reaction is the pending publication of the series in book form by James Lorimer and Company.

Faced with its own dilemma of where to go once the six-part mini-series finishes with the series' kids finishing Grade 6, *Playing With Time* is planning a follow-up series *Degrassi Junior High* (an in-house joke, says Schuyler, has the company stretching out to

work on The Degrassi Geriatrics). Perceived as a "Hill Street Blues for kids," Schuyler says work won't begin until financing's in place for 13 episodes. The hope is, with her actors that much older, that the same approach can be taken to explore "much raunchier" issues. While that agenda will look at sex, drugs, drinking, etc., the series' producers have one foundation to build on. Says Schuyler, "Degrassi Street is also a very moral place where everybody eventually does the right thing." To the extent that the new series has attracted development money from Telefilm and PBS, it would appear *Playing With Time* is doing just that.

Feature Task Force to report

TORONTO – Slightly delayed by what Film Task Force co-chairman Stephen Roth, chairman of RSL Entertainment Corp., terms "the logistics of translation," the Task Force's report and recommendations should have been in the hands of acting minister of Communications Benoit Bouchard during the last week of November.

"We had our consensus, our

work chiefly done on time," Roth told Cinema Canada, noting that the Task Force had submitted to the Department of Communications in Ottawa an outline of the report's «basic structure» by Nov. 1, the original deadline.

"It's a question of getting final draft agreement," Roth told Cinema Canada, citing problems of translation and the difficulties of a word-for-word match between the report's English and French versions.

Of the report's conclusions, Roth said that "Anyone familiar with the industry will come to roughly the same conclusions." According to Roth, the report identifies four key structural problems in the Canadian film industry: 1) the lack of Canadian control of distribution in Canada, 2) the lack of "economically viable" ways of producing films in Canada, 3) the lack of access to box-office returns, and 4) chronic under-capitalization which has left film financing on a project-by-project basis as opposed to ongoing capitalization of production companies.

Roth said he expected the report to have "impact." "We're trying to create an atmosphere and climate that will allow for the production and distribution of Canadian films in a competitive way," Roth said.

The Task Force, announced early in September by former Communications minister Marcel Masse, was co-chaired by Quebec producer Marie-Josée Raymond and included Telefilm executive director Peter Pearson and NFB president François Macerola.

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