

# New kids on the block



## Playing With Time heads Canadian TV Brat Pack

by Susan Devins

In 1985 4,900,000 BBC viewers were enchanted with a children's series that took place on one street in one neighbourhood in one city in Canada. *The Kids of Degrassi Street*, seen from Singapore to Saskatoon, has garnered national and international acclaim for its 26 episodes filmed in Toronto's East End. It's often witty, sometimes disturbing, frequently instructional, and always warm. The series is so true to the tiny neighbourhood of Degrassi Street that it creates quiet tremors of recognition in neighbourhoods all over the world. Not only is the series

exemplary of what children's programming should be, its production company, Playing With Time, Inc., is in the forefront of a new breed of Canadian independent producers. Buoyed but not initially dependent on Telefilm Canada's Broadcast Development Fund, PWT, throughout its seven-year history, has maintained one consistent vision of starting with kids programming and staying with kids programming. And PWT founders Linda Schuyler and Kit Hood represent what's dynamic and vital about Canada's own children's production Brat Pack.

On Queen Street in Toronto's East End, Playing With Time's office — just three blocks from Degrassi Street — is as charming and unconventional as the "Kids" series itself. It's an old house that was a former real estate office during two generations of the Ferron family-

run business and before that, a butcher shop.

Schuyler and Hood, the ebullient producer-director team, attribute most of the factors leading to their partnership to serendipity, including the building, which they used to gaze at longingly from their former cockroach-ridden offices across the street. It's not surprising, considering their quirky style, that the office is now inhabited by two ghosts. "There's Marietta Ferron, the mother of eight kids of the real estate family, and Wade, the one-legged butcher," Schuyler explains with a smile, "but they're a benevolent presence."

These days the office is hopping with production preparations. The picture window in front of the house boasts a dizzy array of plants, a "Degrassi Street" road sign, a school crossing guard jack-

et, and clapsticks from the production. There's a reception area and a main, cozy living room where the actors congregate for script readings and brainstorming sessions. Strewn throughout the premises are an old copper washing machine (a gift from Hood to Schuyler, who are off-screen partners as well), a tricycle, and pink flamingos.

Schuyler, 37, a former schoolteacher who had made a couple of her own 16mm films while teaching, and Hood, 42, a former commercial editor, got together in 1976 on a "disastrous" film that Schuyler was working on which needed, she recalls, a "brilliant editor." Schuyler got into making her own films because of the dearth of spirited audiovisual aids. "There was so little appropriate material for kids in the classroom," she laments. "I used to use three

*Susan Devins is a freelance writer in Toronto.*

or four films all the time. But when you got a film that was entertaining and interesting, the kids would open up and talk about the screen characters and the way they related to them."

One of her first films as a class project, **Between Two Worlds**, zoomed in on how immigrant kids dealt with living one life at home and another life in the real world. "I got honest, open interviews and was knocked out with the power of it and how you could reach kids through film."

She proceeded to do another docu, **Blue Mountain Crude**, about a summer music camp (this is the one she dismisses as a failure). But Hood, who left his native England in 1969 and had been doing commercial editing on advertising accounts in Canada such as Dristan and Hush Puppies, was called upon to salvage the footage. The film never gelled, but their partnership did.

Their first project together was a documentary about a 76-year-old man, Jimmy Montecito, who was trying to break a record by playing marathon piano. With \$7,000 from the Canada Council, Schuyler and Hood filmed Jimmy at the Canadian National Exhibition for seven days and seven nights. "He played with time in order to keep going over those seven days," says Schuyler, who then called the film **Jimmy: Playing With Time**. It was sold to the CBC and made the educational circuit as well. "It dawned on us that that's what any film is, playing with time," she notes, and that became the name for their newly formed company.

Both Schuyler and Hood knew they wanted to make children's films: Hood, a former child actor in England, had always wanted to direct, while Schuyler, after making three or four documentaries for the classroom, had found that form quite limiting. "We weren't reaching people in the way we wanted," says Schuyler, and they both thought they could get the same points across by putting them in a dramatic context.

At that point Schuyler got the option on a Canadian children's book, *Ida Makes a Movie*, by Kay Charo. It was written for five-year-olds about an inner-city single parent family. "It intrigued me," recalls Schuyler, "because a kid was faced with a moral dilemma." In the book the judge gave Ida an award for a movie that she made about garbage, but the jury felt the movie was about war. The message of the film was misconstrued, and there was a lot of heartache involved as to how Ida would decide about telling the truth and accepting the award.

So Schuyler and Hood got \$7,000 in Ontario Arts Council money and decided to make a movie. Schuyler did a lot of research in distribution. They had some money saved and the company had begun to have a solid base. "We were just surviving," says Schuyler, "but we were determined to make this drama." Hood notes, "We wanted to get

away with being subtle. We wanted to be whimsical and still make a film that had a meaning."

The team spent a long time in preproduction on the \$11,000 film. They put out the word in the neighbourhood for auditions and used local kids as actors. They began to develop workshops with the young thespians. But the most fortuitous hookup was with CBC, the ideal place for their style of drama.

Their link at CBC was Nada Harcourt, then head of children's drama (and now executive in charge of Independent Production, Family Drama), and it was a relationship that was based on mutual agendas for children's programming which has continued and thrives today

as PWT works with Angela Bruce, the new area head of children's. Schuyler and Hood cannot stress enough the importance of working with Harcourt in those early days as they found a niche in CBC's quest for live-action drama for children.

Harcourt remembers that five years ago, "Kids weren't really seeing themselves on the screen. I thought, there's a huge vacuum here. But the kind of money CBC had only allowed us to do cheaper kinds of programming. It was becoming virtually impossible to do in-house productions on our budget, so it was the beginning of using independent producers. There was a new generation of filmmakers looking for work who felt

the Canadian cultural imperative."

Harcourt considered *Playing With Time* "an aggressive company that wanted to make their mark and were in tune with the sound and content of the generation they were producing programs for." She wanted to do shows in which children were the protagonists and programs that "really depict the true lives of children, not TV children. I wanted shows with children defining adults and the world as opposed to the other way around."

PWT had a CBC presale for **Ida Makes a Movie** for \$7,000 at a 4:30 p.m. time slot. The film was a one-shot, aired on the network, and got a very good response. PWT showed it to dis-

## Vid Kids fills music-variety vacuum

**F**ive hundred kids — short, chunky, lanky, white, black, green — are gyrating and jumping in a disco to Wham's "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go," wearing outlandish costumes and wide smiles. They're the nuts and bolts of a new CBC afternoon show, **Vid Kids**, co-produced by John Muller of M&M Productions and Tom Reynolds of Avenue Television, that is charming, fun, and high-spirited. Its optimistic philosophy is that "anyone can be a Vid Kid," and so, like the cast in **The Kids of Degrossi Street**, the troupe is not a sanitized, upscale group but more like the local gang.

But the packaging here is completely different. While **Degrossi Street** is slow and steady, **Vid Kids** is frenetic and commercial, almost in the style of its older sibling, **MuchMusic**. "I know today's audiences are exposed to rock videos," explains producer John Muller, 44, president of the newly formed Vid Kids Productions, "and they're used to fast edited, highly creative, right hemisphere storytelling. And I wanted to make them aware of all the kinds of music available, from a capella to rapping, from jazz to Famous People Players." Muller's aim is to make a music video library for kids.

The seeds for **Vid Kids** were planted in 1980 when Muller, a Dutch TV director who came to Canada in 1977 to work on a project with media guru Marshall McLuhan, started paying attention to the music his own kids loved — Raffi, Sharon Lois and Bram, Fred Penner, and Bob Schneider. As an imagemaker, he thought, why not take that music and combine it with interesting images? He felt there was a vacuum in music-variety shows for kids in Canada. "I wanted to create a platform for much more musical talent to explore their creativity for younger audiences," he says.

The format of the 13-episode

series, which premiered in January 1986 on CBC, is about seven videos per half hour. In the first year Bob Schneider appears most frequently as a performer, and mime Peter Jarvis pops in as various other characters, including Computerman, Elvis Presley, and Tarzan. The show uses film animation, digital video effects, and ultimate to give it a contemporary feel and to increase its commercial potential.

But Muller has a full dance card for future shows' talent, ranging from Anne Murray to New York City street rappers, from the Boston Pops to Chris and Ken Whiteley. There are "event videos," with kids on location skiing, tobogganing, or at the Caribana festival, and there's a Vid Kid Dance Club, where all 500 kids bump and grind to the latest rock tunes. There are also specific dramatic forays acted out with Schneider.

Muller put out an open call through newspaper ads and general word of mouth for the huge singing and dancing cast that acts as the support hoofers in the dance club scenes, and got 375 kids answering in one day. "Toronto is full of kids from all ethnic groups — you just have to go out and get them," he says. Some of the kids in the special videos were cast through dance schools and agents. But the overall spirit of the show is one of celebration, of experiencing the natural joy of dance and music, aimed at the 7-11-year-old audience.

While Muller is enthusiastic about his project, he's more somber about the state of financing a series in Canada that he hopes to sell internationally. As an independent distributor he tapped into Telefilm Canada's Broadcast Fund, which he stresses is "crucial for financing." The budget for **Vid Kids** is \$102,000 per episode. "I got 49% of my financing from Telefilm [when these figures still applied last year], 16% from CBC, and the rest from tax shel-

ter people," he recalls. "But you have to guarantee investors that you'll bring back more than 50%. To do that I presold the show to Pan-Canadian Home Video and to CBC-Enterprises. I also sold it to other stations, such as Toronto's CITY-TV and Ottawa's CJOH-TV for a second run after two windows on CBC."

But the major snag, according to Muller, is that "CBC should be able to give us longer than one-year commitments. To satisfy a foreign market I need more episodes. So far I have 13, and we're going into the second year. But a station like the Disney Channel, for example, wants 65 episodes." How can he sell the show if he doesn't have volume and if CBC is only willing to commit to his show one year at a time? He's frustrated, too, at the thought of negotiating with the network each year.

"That is a major problem in Canada. I'd be reluctant to give so much time and effort to a kids' show as a CBC independent producer if there was no stability," he says. Nevertheless giving credit where credit is due, he concludes, "**Vid Kids** would not be a reality if it wasn't for the belief in the potential of the series shown by Children's Programming at the CBC, and the well coordinated work of the Distribution Arm and the department for Independent Productions. They made it all come together."

Meanwhile, he's carrying on negotiations with U.S. and foreign markets and is looking forward to his next year of production. "**Vid Kids** is warm, but it's slick and fast because we have to sell it to other places," he says.

And, like its producer, the show has the major quality of street smartness to insure its staying power. As Muller remembers, "Marshall McLuhan told me that TV programmers are really competing with people who make commercials. So there's no down moment in **Vid Kids**."

tributors and, says Schuyler, "Their reaction was to slap a guarantee on you. For example, Magic Lantern (their current U.S. distributor) would walk in and say, here's \$25,000 for schools and libraries."

In the next year Schuyler discovered tax shelters. In 1977 she and Hood did a \$160,000 hour-long children's musical called **Growing Up**, and their investors used tax-sheltered money. The musical had a CBC Sunday night airing.

"We had a happy group of investors who said, 'We want to back you on anything else,'" says Schuyler. In the meantime, **Ida** was doing well in schools and was getting the kind of audiences PWT hoped for. The principles guiding the film and the reproduction strategy were strong enough to produce a four-part series. **Ida** became Film Number 1 and the series, shot locally, became **The Kids of Degrassi Street**.

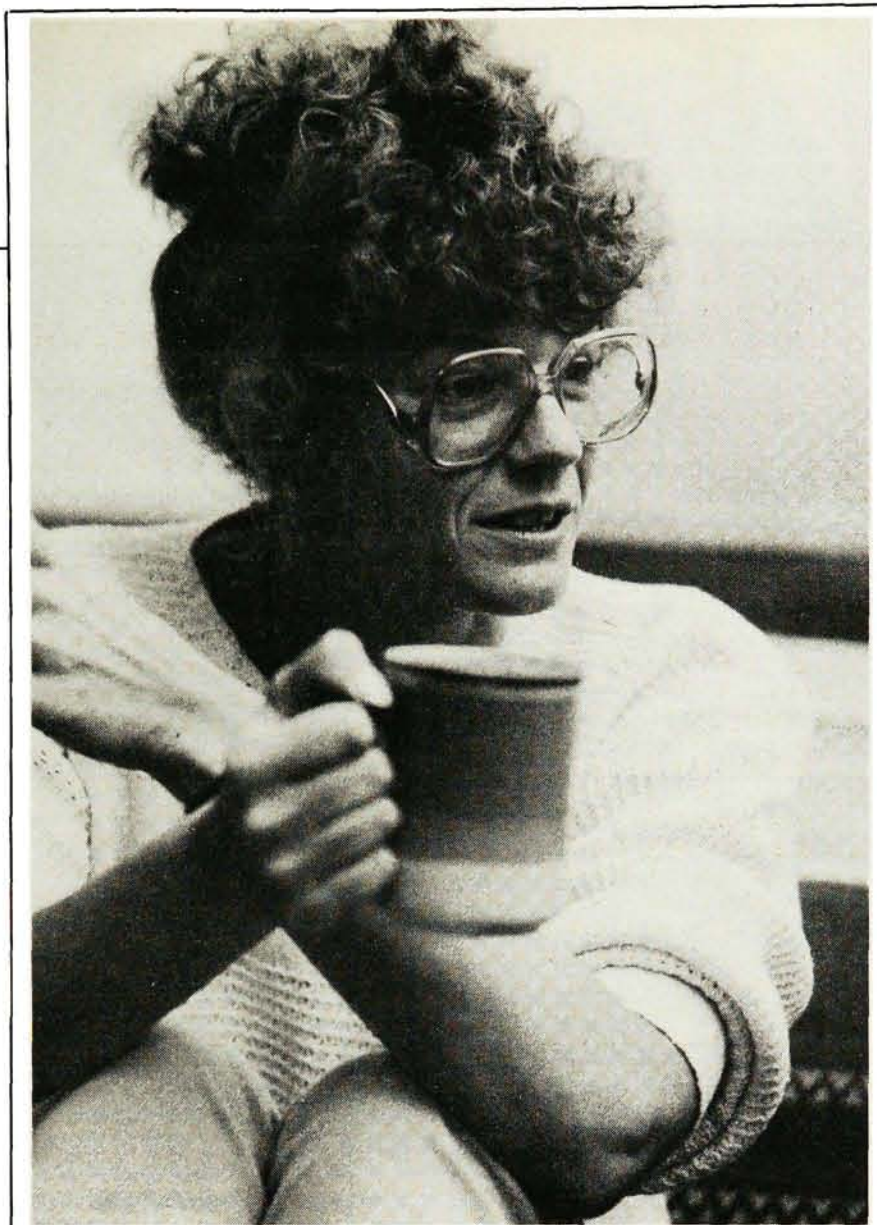
From a production point of view Degrassi Street was the perfect setting for a series. As Hood points out, "It's a one-way street, quite residential. There's a corner store, Degrassi Grocery ('we didn't have to change it'), a little park, and a great mixture of ethnic kids, blue collar workers, your average proportion of gays, and a few trendies. It was a great socio-economic mix."

All of those elements were in **Ida Makes a Movie**. It had an inner-city visual richness that PWT wanted to capture. They didn't want slick, upper middle-class kids. And they wanted a variety of faces, with a different central character in each story.

"I'm so glad we worked with CBC on this," says Schuyler. "Nada really understood what we were trying to do. We didn't want upscale kids and CBC didn't push in that direction. Nada saw that we were genuine. The series wouldn't have been the same without CBC."

Harcourt concurs: "Both Kit and Linda were very much in touch with the true lives of kids and were energized by it. They translated that intimacy with children to the screen and it coincided with my philosophy that Canadian audiences would really respond to 3-D children — there were very few of those on the air. There wasn't that much television from a child's point of view." And Harcourt was also working with other independent production companies at the time — Nelvana, Cineflicks, Sunrise, and Atlantis — who all had similar hopes for children's TV.

So Schuyler and Hood proceeded with a series that wasn't star-based, that was shot in their own neighbourhood, and used amateur actors. The story was all-important. They had presales to CBC and their distributor, Magic Lantern, sold it to schools and libraries. The first year PWT did three episodes, which then became six. Over the next four years they produced between four and six episodes a year, for a total of 26. The last six episodes made up a self-contained children's miniseries, **Degrassi**



• Linda Schuyler: "We pull an Erik Nielsen — lots of eavesdropping"

**Yearbook**, about the kids' graduation from Degrassi Street School. PWT's style has been slow and steady, to say the least — 26 episodes in five years is practically a record setter in the industry, but it suits Schuyler and Hood, who wanted to stay lowscale, true to their subjects, and complete in their production style.

The first 20 episodes ran in the 4:30 p.m. afternoon time slot, while the last six aired on Sunday nights at 5 p.m. However, that air-time presents a problem for children's programming. As Harcourt points out, "The dilemma is how do we get on to the bigger stage without compromising the target audience." In **Kids** the children are not defined by adults, and children are in the forefront of the drama. It's not a 50-50 mix, which is often true in primetime.

In each half hour, **The Kids of Degrassi Street** tackles themes that range from nuclear war to parental separation. Death, jealousy, friendship, sibling rivalry are all dealt with in a natural, honest way. The tone throughout is based in reality, grown-ups are peripheral to all the plots, and kids are in the forefront making decisions. Each episode features one character and the problems he/she has to face.

For example, in "Griff Gets a Hand," when Griff's friend Danny, the school crossing guard, dies of a stroke, Griff is devastated. He's overwhelmed by ennui and feels what's the point of life? Griff just gives up, but by doing that he risks

losing everything, even graduating from grade six. It's a realistic introduction of how to cope with death.

"Karen Keeps Her Word" deals with the ethical conflict of whether to accept an important donation toward the yearbook from a company producing nuclear missile components, after the class had voted itself a nuclear free zone. And in "Benjamin Walks the Dog," six-year-old Benjamin finally convinces his older brother Billy to give him a chance to take over his after-school dog-walking responsibilities (while Billy goes off and smokes cigars with his friend Pete), but then has to face him when the dog runs away and he must admit defeat.

Schuyler and Hood devised a workshop method for the corps of twenty actors. The kids come to the comfortable office space and do a read-through of the script out loud. A lot of vernacular comes out as they correct themselves while reciting the language on the script. Their suggestions are often incorporated by the writer. PWT spends a long time on the writing and development, which results in totally credible dialogue.

The workshops started with **Ida Makes a Movie** and not having money, notes Schuyler, but it became an integral part of the preproduction scheme for the series. Hood had tapped into what he learned as a child actor, and Schuyler remembered techniques she

used in the classroom to develop self-confidence, concentration, and expression. "In kids we look for that bright sparkle of vulnerability and honesty," says Hood.

How has PWT come up with plots for 26 episodes? Schuyler shrugs with a broad smile: "We pull an Erik Nielsen — there's a lot of eavesdropping that goes on." In addition to what they remember from their own pasts and what Schuyler has culled from her classroom experiences, they pick up bits of conversation from the actors who hang around. "We do get feedback and a lot of that makes it into the script," says Hood. "For example, we have a brother and sister team (Sarah and Christopher Charlesworth). When their parents split up, that became the episode, 'Catherine Finds Her Balance.' Then there was a mini-romance on the set. When the boy asked the girl out, the girl's parents said she was too young. Finally the mother said she could go out only if she had a chaperone. We did that film and Lisa (Stacie Mistysyn) said, 'I'm taking this script home right now and showing it to my mom.' Basically we listen to these kids like crazy."

Through the realistic scripts Schuyler wants "to make the kids think, to give them an opportunity to be exposed to a thought process. Also, I prefer if kids don't watch our shows in isolation. Our scripts are designed so that kids can talk to each other about it afterwards."

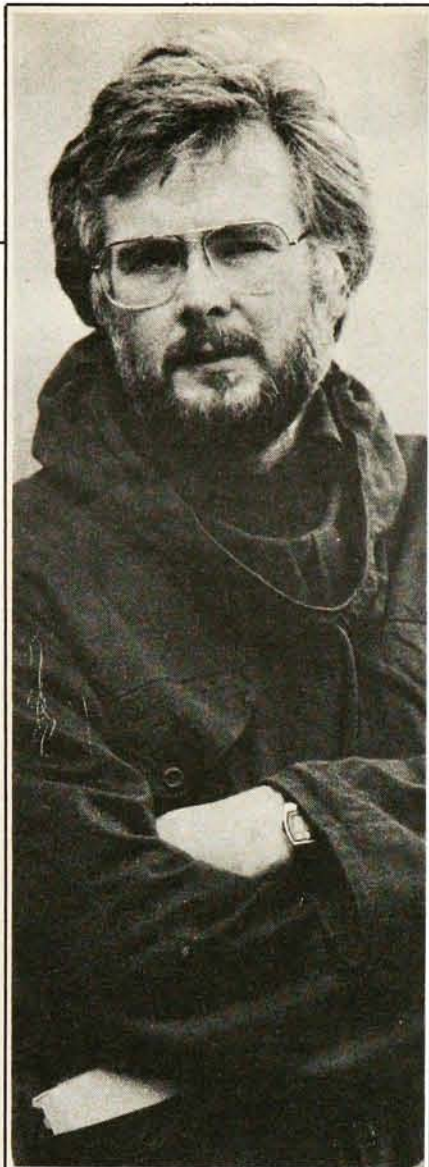
The local kids still seem unaffected by their acting duties. Schuyler stresses that PWT bans the word "star" from their vocabulary. Hood tries not to put undue pressures on their lives. "I expect commitment from them and a sense of professionalism. Actually, we treat the kids almost the way a school-teacher does. And that's why we get such good performances."

PWT's artistic philosophy also extends to their financial dealings, and through patience and perseverance they've become a strong company that went from self-distribution to currently employing a U.S. and foreign sales agent.

Initially, PWT started **Kids of Degrassi Street** with their own funding from a small group of investors and a CBC presale. They gradually built themselves a very stable base of investors. They used some Canadian Film Development Corp. money in the third cycle of four episodes, but when Telefilm Canada's Broadcast Fund became available, they tapped into that for the 1984 and 1985 set of episodes. The budgets began at \$70,000 per half-hour, then rose to \$90,000 and steadied at \$96,000 during the **Degrassi Yearbook** miniseries, still very modest prices for half-hour drama. But PWT feels kids shows are not cheap to do. Says Schuyler, "In the marketplace people draw the correlation between little budgets and little people. There's no reason a film for kids should have any less care and attention."

Both Schuyler and Hood sing Tele-

Photo: Scarborough Board of Education



• Kit Hood

film's praises, but since they began without Telefilm money and describe themselves as survivors, they say they're sure if the money wasn't available they would have found some way to finance their dramas.

"But there's no doubt Telefilm Canada certainly helped us," Schuyler affirms. "Telefilm has made things a lot easier for us. They have money in our new series, giving us the luxury of proper development. Telefilm for us picked up the slack lost when tax incentives pulled back. There's got to be some government assistance. If Telefilm's fund were to evaporate, children's programming would suffer most. It's an area that stations don't consider a high priority."

Since the creation of the fund in July 1983, Telefilm has invested in 33 English-language children's projects (through December 1985) for total budgets worth \$22,204,563. Telefilm's participation in that was \$15,781,457.

What Telefilm has done has made it easier for PWT to be stronger with potential American partners. For example, Disney, which is now running all the *Kids* episodes in the U.S., had wanted to be a co-producer of 13. "They really liked what we were doing and thought we were very strong in our story-telling," says Schuyler. "But we hadn't even gotten to the point of talking con-

tracts and Disney was already asking for changes." Because PWT is so adamant about the credibility of their scripts, they declined the offer. While Telefilm might encourage other producers to go in with U.S. coproducers, PWT is going solo in association with CBC.

So today, Schuyler is a crackerjack dealmaker whose company has stayed small and gives their investors returns. She outlines a typical transaction: "I presell to the CBC — approximately 1/3 of my budget is there. Then I go see Telefilm Canada to make sure that conceptually and financially we're fine and to get them on board for CBC. The formal application goes in. Then I package an investment memo and sell units. So if, for example, Telefilm comes in for \$100,000 and I'm selling units at \$10,000 a piece, Telefilm takes it in the form of 10 units. Then private investors come in for 10 units. The CBC money becomes income. Our investors get tax writeoffs (over two years) and they know they'll make back the CBC money. Magic Lantern (which handles the U.S.) puts up guarantees for what they'll get over a four-year period. We've been able to attract investors because we've kept our budgets modest and they know over time they'll make their money back."

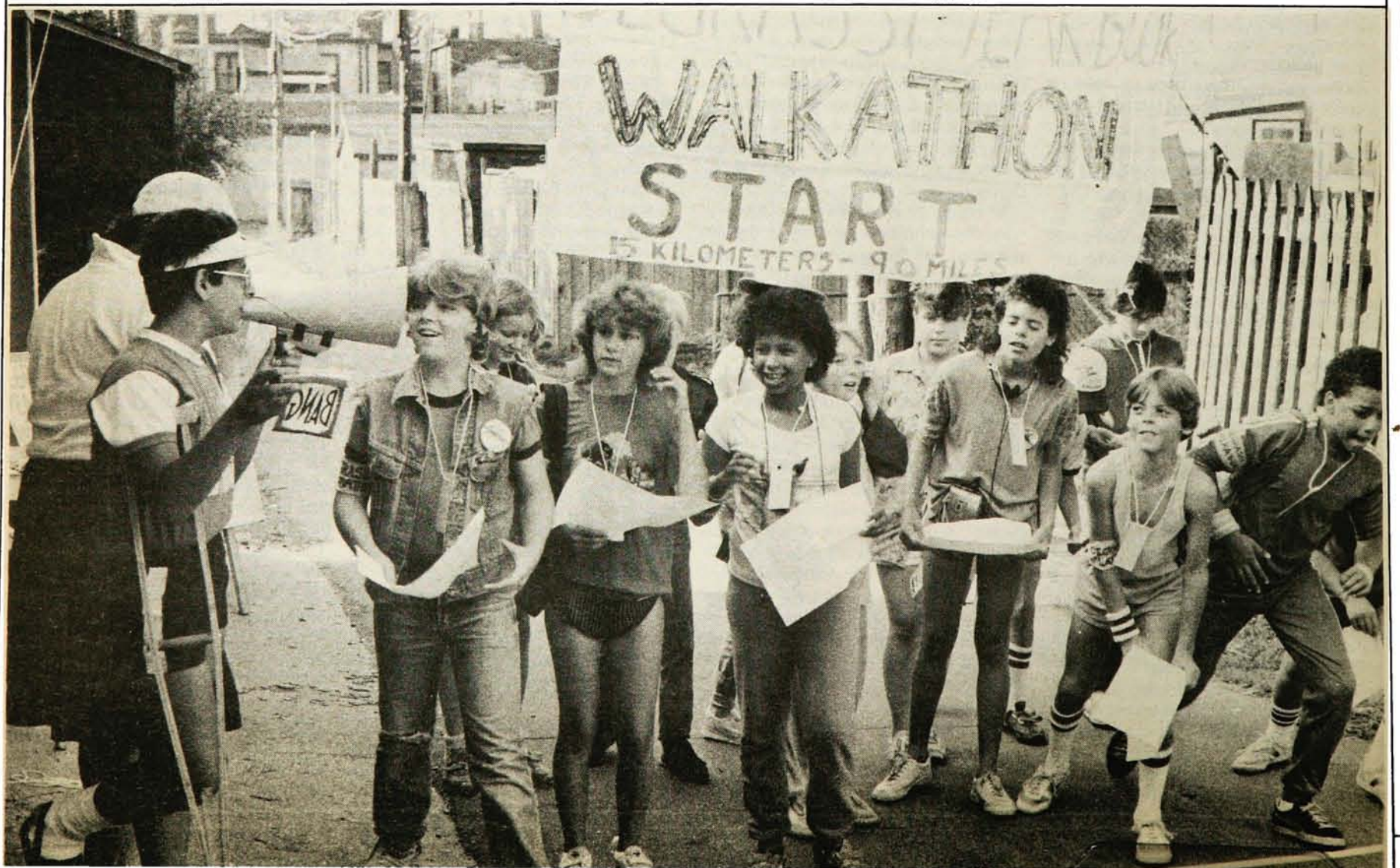
photo: Wayne Roper, Brantford Expositor

In the U.S. *Kids* has run on HBO and Showtime, and then all 13 episodes went to the Disney Channel. Then HBO and Showtime stopped buying children's half-hours and the second set of 13 went directly to Disney. Now PWT is negotiating with PBS.

In Canada the shows have gone first to CBC, who has run all 26, and will soon be picked up by TVOntario for a second window. Because the series was produced piecemeal, PWT had to wait until they amassed all 26 before they were able to be available for a secondary market. This year was the first time that *Kids* was shown in a time slot that had ratings on CBC — the Sunday night timeslot of 5 p.m. for *Degrassi Yearbook*. Ratings were impressive — 32% of their target age group of kids from 6-12 were watching.

If Telefilm Canada is making back their money on children's shows it's because children's budgets are relatively low and foreign sales become a significant chunk. Also, according to CBC's Angela Bruce, children's shows have more shelf life, more of possibility of international sales, and are generally less risky. They're more usable in other markets, including extensive runs in libraries and schools. The strength of *Kids* is that many countries are buying the shows and the shows themselves have not dated.

• "Ryan Runs For Help," episode 23 of PWT's 26 episode *The Kids of Degrassi Street*: series has run from Saskatoon to Singapore





• Benjamin walks the dog in *Degrassi Street* episode 12

Isme Bennie, PWT's foreign sales agent, has made sales for *Kids* in the U.K., Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Malaysia, Singapore, Italy, and the Middle East (Turkey, Dubai, and other countries). She's currently negotiating with France and Australia. What makes the series so successful internationally? "It's a combination of things," says Bennie.

"They're very real stories and even though they take place in Toronto, they're universal and apply to kids everywhere. They do have a lesson, but it's not hammered home. They're done in a very amusing, interesting way. The series is strong on the production level of acting and directing." Bennie finds *Kids*' strength similar to other high-profile Canadian children's programming that is so well received in other countries. And buyers keep coming back to her for more episodes, even notoriously finicky ones like the Scandinavians.

Molly Cox, the BBC's head of acquisitions for children's programming, is even more philosophical. "People regret the passing of the extended family," she notes. "The value of *Kids of Degrassi Street* is that it causes the street and school to represent the twentieth-century extended family, with its loyalties, conflicts, and frictions with the potential of extended ideas."

But Hood feels that kids love their shows around the world because "We are very true to a small area of the world. The truer you are to something you understand very well, the more global you are. If we tried to make *Degrassi Street* look like *Anystreet U.S.A.*, it wouldn't have worked."

In addition to attracting international kudos, the series has also racked up a number of prestigious awards, all hung and mounted prominently in the PWT meeting room. The episode "Griff Makes a Date" took first place in the Canadian Film and Television Association Award in 1985, won the Blue Ribbon the 1985 American Film Festival, and won the Children's Broadcast Institute Award for best Independent Production in 1985. CBI executive director Debbie Bernstein feels "the series reflects the children's perspective on the events of their daily lives, and therefore children relate to it very easily."

So how do you follow an act like *The Kids of Degrassi Street*? With *Degrassi Junior High*, of course. PWT is already committed to this new series at CBC and they've been brainstorming with Angela Bruce, who's a major cheerleader of independently produced children's shows and who Schuyler praises highly for her remarkable support.

The kids were graduated out of grade 6 in the last episode of *Degrassi Yearbook* and the cake in the last shot said, "Good luck in Junior High." So the pressure's on for PWT to complete six episodes of *Degrassi Junior High* by

their on-air target date of January, 1987. They'll use some of the old faces from *Kids* and also do a big open audition and workshop for new actors.

"We want to break away from all those *Degrassi* kids being so nice to each other," laughs Hood. "The new series is going to be raunchier. We can deal with some harder-hitting issues. It's still going to be a morally based show, but you'll meet some screen characters with a harder edge."

Says Schuyler, "We're looking to capture the world of the adolescent. Those kids are really underserved in terms of television."

Bruce finds that *Junior High* will be a continuation of the strengths of the earlier series. "They are about children for children. Children are always the protagonists and adults are the dressing. The shows are very real, very believable, and very enjoyable. What I like about them most is that they are for kids."

Bruce sighs over the most frustrating dilemma in kids programming: the actors grow up. "That's one of the most difficult things about producing kids shows. But the storylines [of *Kids*] have been getting into older age groups. It was a natural progression to go to junior high. And it's the beginning of soap opera for children, which is long overdue."

Soap operas for kids is one of Bruce's pet projects at CBC, where she heads a department that produces 650 hours of children's programming a year, the bulk of which is preschool. There are 78 hours, though, which are independently produced, and Bruce wants to maintain the current balance between 50% in-

house and 50% independent for children's programming.

*Degrassi Junior High* will come out of the children's department, but one of Bruce's goals is to get better air time for children's. "I'd prefer to move into commercial time — when kids are home," she says, and is thinking of rejigging the 4-6 p.m. afternoon time slots and getting some programs into primetime. "I'd like to get the same sort of clout for children's programming as adult, in terms of financial commitment and air time."

This is music to PWT's ears. Bruce feels that teens are terribly neglected and is eagerly anticipating PWT's next foray. Schuyler boasts it makes sense for *Junior High* to be in the children's department. "The child protagonists make it a children's show. Adults don't have important roles and don't present solutions here."

The budget per episode jumps to \$200,000 in *Degrassi Junior High*, and it's aimed for a slightly older audience of 12-15-year-olds. PWT will start with 26 episodes which covers one year at school. The kids will move from grade 7 to grade 8 in the course of a year. "If we become attached to some characters, we might do spinoffs," says Schuyler, but the series as initially structured is designed to run forever.

PWT could have cliffhanger plots (which would truly make it like a soap opera) or resolved plots. The partners see it as a *Hill Street Blues* for kids, using both horizontal and vertical storytelling.

Once *Degrassi Junior High* gets going, PWT might even do a few more episodes of *Kids*, but not in the same

capacity as before — more on a supervisory level. PWT is expanding, moving their post-production and workshops to another location, but they still want to stay small.

"There's a lot of the teacher in PWT," says Hood, "and one of our goals is to almost become a school. We can use the same kind of workshop setting for young writers as we do for actors. The film business needs to be much more fluid, a place for people to learn. We can become a workshop area in all fields of production. We need young, vital people to keep it alive."

And they may look down the road to do a feature film which will naturally be a movie for children. A couple of stories they worked on in *Kids* would work better in a feature-length structure, they feel. "We're incredible believers in evolution," says Hood, but the subject matter of their evolution remains the same.

Both Schuyler and Hood agree with Bruce that "as a country we have the potential to get such an international reputation for children's." And there's excellent work being done all around by Atlantis Films with their *Sons and Daughters* Canadian short story series, Sullivan Films' *Anne of Green Gables*, Nelvana's *Edison Twins* and *Care Bear* movies, Cambium Productions' *The Elephant Show*, M&M Productions-Avenue Television's *Vid Kids*, Sunrise Productions' *Danger Bay*, Evergreen's *Raccoons* series, and Owl TV's nature series, to name a few. While all these independent producers are doing sparkling productions with children's, some are joining the rest of the world in the adult league, hooking up with international coproducers, getting into big-budget productions.

Angela Bruce thinks that PWT is a model for the joy that independent producers get from dealing with children's. "I think nothing's better than doing children's programming," she says. "It's a marvelous way to learn how to communicate, a great place to learn. It's more of a struggle but the returns are greater. If you do something right, it reaches all ages."

Hood agrees: "It's fun to work with kids. Linda and I work very closely with them. We're hands on all the way through." And they wouldn't want to give that up.

So *Playing With Time* is intent on playing with kids and staying with kids, operating out of the East End Toronto stomping grounds, not changing licence plates or street signs, and being true to their school. And even though PWT's financial profile was recently reviewed by an established consultant who observed, wide-eye, "You're a really solid company," in some ways, Schuyler feels, "It doesn't seem much different than *Kit* and Linda mucking around. We didn't even use the word profit until two years ago."