

Life Classes — Searching for a Lost Heritage

Life Classes, which began shooting in Cape Breton on September 19 and is scheduled to wrap in Halifax on October 30, seems to have run like a charm. Any feature where the major problems in production can be counted on the fingers of a couple of hands qualifies as a complete success in my book.

In the last week of production the film is on schedule and on budget (at the very modest figure of \$622,000) and everyone from the producer to the focus puller seemed to agree that it had all run very smoothly. *Life Classes* is director Bill MacGillivray's fourth dramatic film and his second feature after *Stations* which was released in 1983. In contrast to the latter, which was shot on trains, planes, buses, and ferries, as well as conventional non-moving locations, from Vancouver to St. John's, and was a hornet's nest of logistical as well as other problems, MacGillivray told me that in writing the script of this film he wanted to keep the structure of the production simple (al-

though, to Art Director Mary Steckle's considerable consternation, one simple scene called for the construction of a small house to be demolished while an actress strolls along a beach reading a letter!). With this in mind the film is shot principally in two localities, one in Ingonish in Cape Breton and the other at various locations in Halifax.

This, combined with a financing package involving money from Telefilm, the Canada Council, the National Film Board, First Choice and CITY TV in Toronto, which was securely in place before production began, have undoubtedly contributed to the relative stability of the project. The other factor, as several members of the crew mentioned, is MacGillivray's own equipoise and balance. He is very much of the auteur school of filmmaking being the writer, director, film editor, and part producer of this film (as he was of *Stations* and his previous hour-long drama *Aerial View*). As such the film depends very much on his vision and he has an acute sense of just the effect he is trying to achieve in each scene. This knowledge gives him a calmness and organization which, in time, infects most of the crew. An acid test of how a production is going, the crew actually seemed relaxed and well rested in the final stages of the shoot.

The lead character of *Life Classes* is played by Newfoundland native Jacinta Cormier, who most untypically for a Newfoundlander is half-French and half-Gaelic. She has been a singer and pianist on the Atlantic music scene for some time and this is her first major film

role. The script tells the story of a young woman from Gaelic Cape Breton, Mary Cameron, who searches for a lost past and heritage. She leaves her hometown pregnant after deciding not to marry the irresponsible father of her child and comes to the big city of Halifax. There she supports herself and her child by working in a large department store where she meets Gloria, a student at the local art college. She begins modelling to try and help make ends meet. Her experiences there motivate her to take up the brush herself. Slowly she discovers her heritage through her art and finds a purpose to her life. The film finishes with Mary returning to Cape Breton to the community she had once left behind.

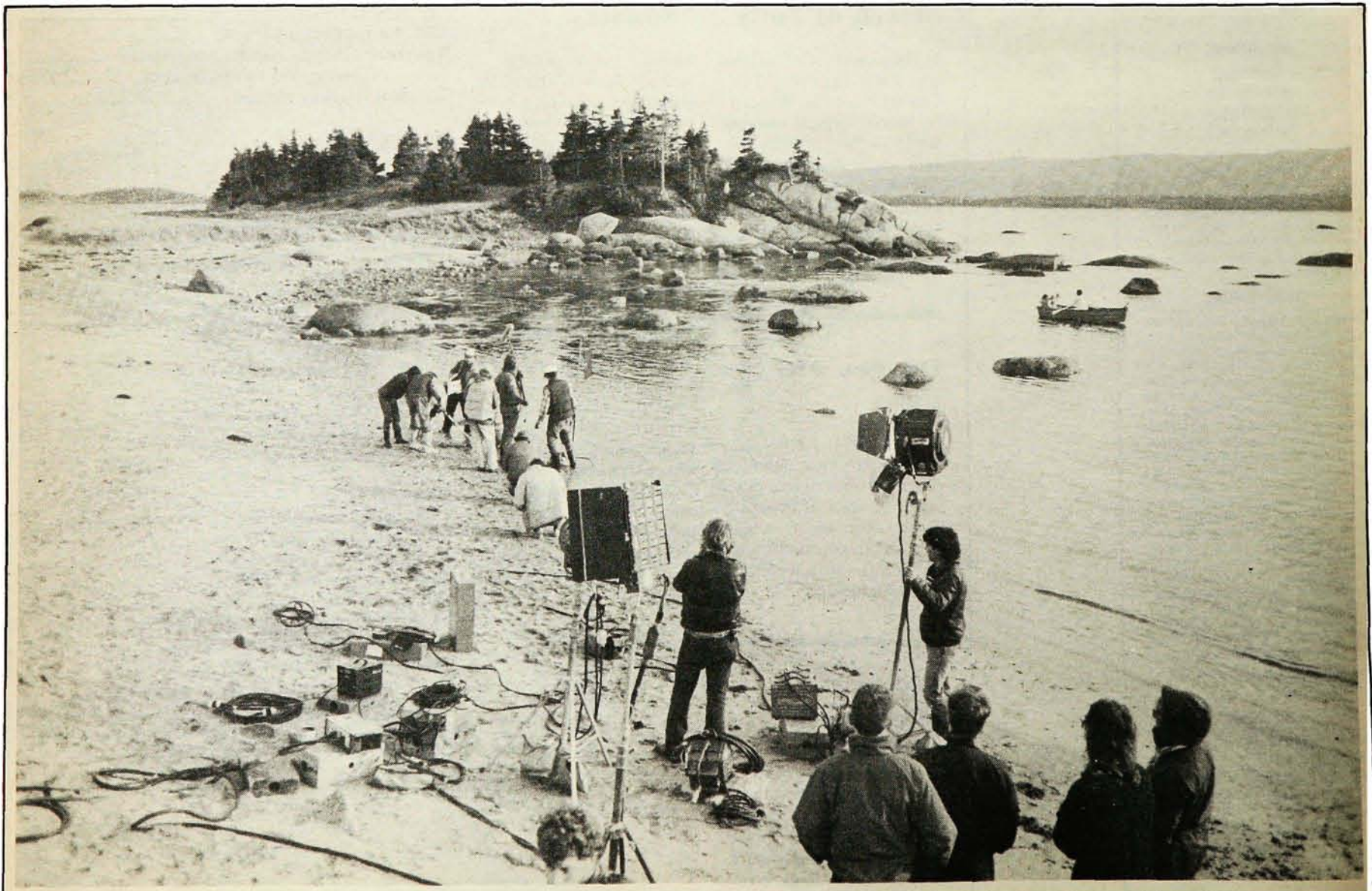
Ms. Cormier feels that her background has been an asset in creating the role of Mary. She sees the character as one she herself might very well have become had she not left home at the age of 15 to pursue a career as a performer and musician.

The cast seems to be weighed heavily in favour of musicians with freewheeling vocalist, composer, musician (founder of the legendary band, "Buddy and the Boys") and Cape Breton native Leon Dubinsky playing the lead male role, Earl. He plays Mary's boyfriend and the owner of a pirate satellite-dish video service. This is his first major role in film although he has often acted on the stage. He told me he felt that in going from performing Shakespeare on stage to MacGillivray's very understated filmic style, he had spanned the entire spectrum of acting experience.

This film is another artistic collaboration between MacGillivray and cinematographer Lionel Simmons who has been the former's cinematic eyes on virtually every one of his films (documentaries as well as dramas). The film is being shot on a modified Aaton in super 16mm with clear plans to go for the blow-up to 35mm in the hope of a theatrical release. This has been the source of some concern since producer Stephan Reynolds told me that he felt labs in Canada were not yet fully prepared to properly deal with the new format. There have been some problems with emulsion scratches from both the lab and the camera but nothing so serious that it can't be repaired through wet-gating. In an unusual twist (particularly for a Maritime production), the bulk of the production equipment was rented out of Boston since Simmons found that the busy shooting season in Toronto and Montreal had tied up much of the gear he was interested in.

The crew numbers 28 people and there are eight principal roles and over 180 extras and minor parts. MacGillivray himself will be doing the editing and the schedule calls for a fine cut by the middle of February and a release print by the end of April, '87. If post-production continues to go as smoothly as production has we can expect that by the spring *Life Classes* will join *Stations* and *Aerial View* in a trilogy chronicling the quandaries, values and ethics of contemporary Atlantic Canada.

Christopher Majka •



• On the waterfront in Ingonish with The Picture Plant