

Paul and Deepa Saltzman

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# sunrise goes east

by George Csaba Koller

**Sunrise Films, a young production company devoted to making up-beat films, is run by Paul and Deepa Saltzman. As they get ready to leave for India and their next film on Indira Ghandi, they speak of the company, their films and of themselves.**

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When Deepa Saltzman's film **At 99: A Portrait of Louise Tandy Murch** was shown on CBC's **Sprockets**, it elicited 700 letters to the show, breathtakingly flattering for a first effort by any filmmaker. From every part of the country, words of overwhelming praise and sincere emotion poured in. To those unfortunate enough to have missed the film, don't despair, the CBC has re-purchased it for the next three years, so it's bound to be repeated soon. With response like that, it comes as no surprise.

What is surprising is that Deepa Saltzman has never directed a film before and yet was able to touch the audience so deeply with her *première oeuvre*. Obviously the subject and her sensitivity as a director is reflected in every shot.

**At 99: A Portrait of Louise Tandy Murch** focusses on a wonderfully spry near centenarian whose life philosophy dominates the soundtrack while she is shown going about her daily business of shopping, cooking, playing the piano, doing yoga and celebrating her birthday, the very special ninety-ninth. Whether in the midst of her large family group or alone, Ms. Murch shines forth with unmistakable elan and she puts to shame less energetic people not only half, but a quarter her age. She faces every new day with a smile and an inner contentment, which comes from accepting life as well as the imminence of death. But the film has to be seen and experienced!

Deepa Saltzman is the prettier half of a husband and wife filmmaking team. With her husband, Paul, they together comprise Sunrise Productions, a company dedicated to make movies with a positive, optimistic outlook. The company is run from their elegantly furnished Walmer Road apartment near Toronto's Casa Loma. The luxurious fireplace, the huge palm in an ornate oriental pot, the Persian carpets and the colorful Indian pillows betray as much about their joint outlook on life as about Deepa's Indian birthright.

Paul and Deepa met in India, while the former was shooting a documentary on James George, then Canada's High Commissioner there. Having returned to that exotic land periodically since, they're about to make the trek once again to make three documentaries, one a hoped-for exclusive interview with the presently embattled Prime Minister, Indira Ghandi.

The last minute preparations for the trip seem to pre-occupy their minds as we sit down for tea. The interview with the Prime Minister has been confirmed and re-confirmed with New Delhi, and Paul feels that they just might have something at their fingertips that might bring the young company out of debt for a change. But they cannot be one hundred per cent certain until they actually get there with the film rolling through the camera, given the sensitive nature of the situation in Deepa's homeland.

"She's going to the Supreme Court the 11th of August and we're due to arrive to film her the first week of August. They can say to us when we arrive at their whim 'sorry'. So it's a big risk. It's all our resources put together on the line to try and do this trip."

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*Cinematographer and film director, George Csaba Koller revived Cinema Canada in 1972 and was its publisher and editor for three years.*

"Dear Mrs. Murch,

Last night on the television I saw a film about you and your way of life. I felt such a beauty that I was compelled to write to you.

I am 20 years old and in the hospital. When my wife left me I no longer felt life worth living. I tried to hang myself from a bridge. Fortunately, the rope broke and I fell about thirty feet to the ground. I broke my heel, my pelvis in three places and crushed two vertebrae. But I am so happy just to be alive now. You showed me that life is what you make it.

I send you all my love and the knowledge that your spirit will live on forever."

**Hamilton, Ontario**

"... the response to your film was overwhelmingly positive. One of the education officers of our branch suggested that every child in the schools of Ontario should see that film!"

**Ontario Ministry of Education**

"Your **Sprockets** film on the woman of 99 was one of the best. It makes the world beautiful with happiness. Please show us more of these true to life films."

**Aged 13 Red Lake, Ontario**

"Dear Louise Tandy Murch,

May I express my appreciation and gratitude for your wholeheartedly sensible and optimistic approach to life. You have become a great source of inspiration to me; I hope I will always keep your 'spirit' alive within me..."

**St John's, Newfoundland**

"'At 99' was a real winner, and the gang at the office, encouraged to watch your program, have talked at length about the 'wonderful old lady who is sharp as a tack and an example to us all."

**Montreal, Quebec**

"It was a great film about a great person."

**Slave Lake, Alberta**

"I'm in the technical side of the broadcasting industry and it made me feel proud to see the medium rising to such heights."

**Stouffville, Ontario**

"I didn't catch names, but I feel that the film **At 99** is one of the most beautiful films I have ever seen in my life. I hope it will be shown many places, many times, to young and old. It will inspire each person who sees it. It is beautiful, sensitive, and innocent. I send my love and sincere congratulations to the filmmakers and the lovely lady."

**Winnipeg, Manitoba**

There is a segment with Indira Ghandi in the film on the High Commissioner, so Paul has actually met the lady and that is why he thinks the government gave the permission to see her again. It took them four months to get the okay this time and then the political upheaval began. But they can point to a very charming, intimate interview with her on film as a track record so they both feel confident that she'll be available this time also.

"I think they trust us," says Paul, "that we're going to make a personal portrait. We're not interested in making a critical film on Mrs. Ghandi. In all of our films, we believe that if we can't say something good, we don't want to talk at all. But this emergency has arisen, so we wonder to ourselves: how do we do an honest film that's still a positive film? We can't do a political assessment of her, but what we can do is ask her some tough questions, but not in a tough manner. We're not there to say 'why are you doing this?', but rather: 'how do you feel about what you're doing?'"

In answer to the question, what about censorship? Paul replies: "Well, the film will be processed in Canada, not India, and when we go to the cutting room she won't be there. We might have to show it to the Indian High Commission people here, we had to do that with the previous film, but that's okay."

The Saltzmans are also planning to shoot two films on Indian children while they're there, documentaries *about* but not exclusively *for* children. Both of them have to do with the traditional passing down of a trade from father to son, one focussing on a young goldsmith, the other a child musician. These are the films which Deepa seems most excited about:

"There's a vast desert in central India called Rajistan where they have nomads who go travelling from village to village and they play music. The father teaches the child how to make the instrument called a Tamba, with twenty-six strings. The cast of musicians are called Langas, and they actually have a patron caste who are poor cattle farmers. The Langas travel on camels and they play at births, marriages and funerals and other special occasions. What happens is that the child is exposed at a very early age to birth and death and all the other realities of life in the desert. How this effects the children will be the focus of this film which I'm going to direct."

Deepa's contact with filmmaking pre-dates her meeting with Paul. Her father is a film distributor in India, so she was brought up with films around her as far as she can remember. And aside from her American Film Festival red ribbon award-winner, the Louise Tandy Murch film, she has directed a film for the Indian Ministry of Family Planning, which is a portrait of a fifteen year old girl who sweeps and cleans houses for a living, as all the women have done in her family for generations.

"It's in black and white and 16mm, but the girl was so gorgeous, she was really lovely and articulate and bright and she has never been to school. Her mother didn't allow her to have a bath or wear clean clothes for fear that men would look at her, and she was ashamed of the clothes she wore. She was going to get married at fifteen and she has never seen the guy before only his photograph, and that's what the film is about: that it isn't right to have to get married so early without any knowledge of family planning. I think it's beautiful, a lovely little film. It's being shown from village to village and it's the first of its kind to

show a real girl as opposed to Bombay actors and actresses with heavy make-up talking about birth control."

Her real success is **At 99** which has not only been shown on the CBC twice but has sold thirty-six prints to schools and libraries and a U.S. distributor has predicted sales there of as much as 400 prints by the end of the year. "I made it last year. I met the lady soon after Paul and I got married. He had read about her in the paper four years ago and went to see her and they became very good friends. So when I came to Canada one of the first people I met was Louise and I really got off on her. She was my first friend in this country. She was really nice and understanding and I was lonely, so she baked cookies for me and sang for me and really made me happy. I was sick of working on other people's films and said that I'd like to do one of my own. And it was her ninety-ninth birthday two days afterwards, so we got some people together through a friend of Paul's at Global who shot it for free, because I didn't have any bread at the time. Then we got about ten minutes of the rushes together and sent them off to the Canada Council and got a grant. So as soon as I got the money we finished the film during a week of shooting."

As Paul tells it, Deepa was hesitant at first about jumping into the director's role, but as soon as he started filling in for her, she mustered up enough confidence to assert herself. Now they have complete respect for each other as filmmakers and will work within their own spheres on this India shoot. Paul's own filmmaking background goes back to 1965 when he started with the CBC as researcher and a co-host of a youth program on Sundays. Actually, quite a bit earlier than that, when at the age of twelve he filled in for his famous father Percy as the national weather boy on Father's Day. But having a well known father hasn't really helped his career, he claims, since bank managers tended to ask when he was setting up Sunrise productions: "Why don't you get the money from your dad?"

He worked at the Film Board for a stint, then with people like Peter Pearson, Don Owen and Don Brittain. He was production manager and assistant director on Brittain's Fuji film for the Tokyo Fair. He went to India out of personal interest and did some sound recording there. Then when he got married two years ago, he discovered that he was three thousand dollars in debt and didn't know where his next job was going to come from. That's when he decided to start his own small film company.

He borrowed some money and invested in some flatbed editing tables which he immediately rented out to have them pay for themselves. Then he started to raise money for some film projects, "by hook and by crook" as he now remembers it. The first film was **The Perlmutar Story**, which was launched partly with an OFY grant, a pre-sale to the CBC, and some salary kickbacks. It cost \$15,000 to make and even an arts council grant didn't put its budget in the black; they're still \$1,500 in debt over that one. It has won some awards, has been shown on television, and now a U.S. distributor has picked it up, changing its title to **The Bakery**, for greater universal appeal. "It was fun to make, it had its ups and downs," says Paul.

But he still prefers to be working for himself. "I love waking up in the morning and knowing that the day is going to be whatever Deepa and I decide the day is going to be. It wasn't until I was 26 that I realized that

self-discipline was having the strength to do whatever you wanted to do. Obviously it's dictated by having to pay the rent to some extent, but our time is our own. So if I want to work until three in the morning and not work in the afternoon, that's okay."

"What's essential to me is that Deepa and I get as high as we can within our relationship, that we perfect the love between us and that be our core for putting out good feelings in the world. It doesn't matter whether we're making films or just talking to somebody, I want it to feel good. In our films we try to focus on people who are remarkable. When you sit down and see them on the screen you feel good, you get courage from seeing that somebody else can do something."

Sunrise Productions has five or six films to its credit so far. A co-production with CBC Gallery entitled **To Be A Clown**, about kids at an art centre learning clowning was their next project. Then came **Father Mackey**, a still unfinished documentary about a Jesuit priest in the mountains of Bhutan, a small kingdom north of India, who set up a model educational system in this remote, exotic area. Paul is in the process of trying to sell it to **Man Alive**, and has a few words to say about the CBC as a result.

"We thought **Man Alive** would weep at it, it's their kind of film. But when they make a film on location it costs them \$20,000. When they talk to us about the Bhutan film, they're offering \$3,500. Jesus, it's half way round the world! Transportation alone costs that much. So now we're talking to a millionaire who just happens to love Father Mackey and he might give us

the \$7,500 we need to finish. I realize that the CBC has its problems but they should take a serious look at how much producers are offering for independent films."

In the great tradition of the Canadian film industry, whenever someone feels strongly about something, they form a lobby group. Paul Saltzman is no exception. He has joined forces with other small companies like Sunrise to wage battle against the bureaucracies in the media who are currently short-changing them for their output. Insight, Nelvana, Rosebud, Intercom, Gary Nicholl and Cinematics have started to come together with Deepa and Paul to make sure that the rip-offs stop. Paul has even written an impressive multi-paged letter to Secretary of State Hugh Faulkner on the subject of allowing the tax write off for shorts as well as features. He feels that there are a number of potential investors out there just itching to put their money into good, profitable shorts but are denied the same advantages as feature investors.

If their words aren't heeded, then these talented young creators just might be forced to do other things with their time. They have left the door open for just such a possibility. When they incorporated Sunrise (they did it themselves to avoid a hefty lawyer's fee) they included in the charter other potential activities for the company such as music and theatrical production. And since Paul Saltzman has a track record of having produced four successful Leonard Cohen concerts (through a fluke) perhaps the possibility of enlarged horizons for Sunrise isn't that far fetched. □

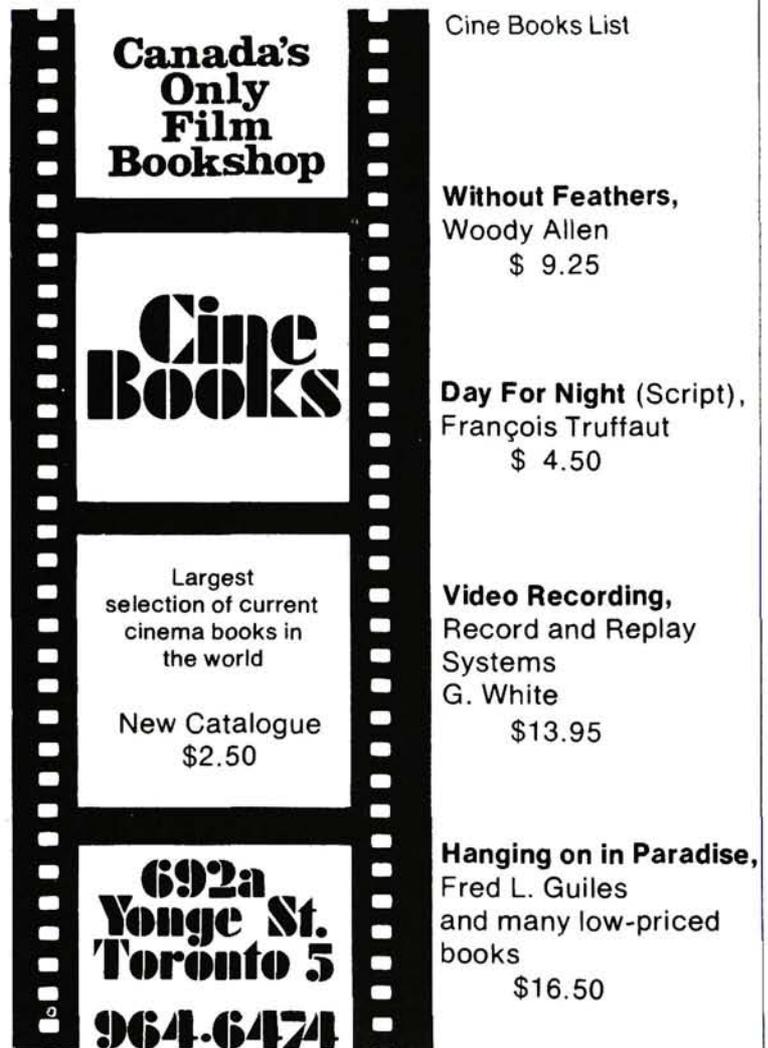


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