

Airwolf North

Sometime last year, MCA Inc. found itself with a cancelled prime-time action/adventure series on its hands. It needed 24 more hour-long episodes to get the series into syndication on USA Network. The last 24 were to be shot at roughly 1/3 the budget of the originals (from \$1.2 million U.S. per hour to \$400,000). Jan-Michael Vincent, Ernest Borgnine, and a killer helicopter were the former stars. Only the chopper remained (along with stock action footage) A Los Angeles-based company, The Arthur Company, tried to put a deal together to produce it in the States, but labour problems caused it to collapse. MCA came to Canada for help.

In the fall of '86, Atlantis Films took over the production of the \$10 million project, which is code-named *Airwolf*. It is currently shooting in a converted distillery in North Vancouver.

I have to admit that I had a couple of prejudices against *Airwolf* when it came to town. Sure, it carried the Atlantis Films name, it had a 100% Canadian certified banner on it, and it was giving Canadians lots of work. But a U.S. style shoot 'em-up that starred a gun-laden helicopter didn't exactly top my list of sets I'd like to hang around on. So for several months, I hid behind highbrow remarks about the Canadian industry's role as a running dog for low-end American programming.

But after awhile *Airwolf* began to get a good name around town, especially from the people who were working on it. It seemed that "the comic book that moves" was giving work to lots of locals, and some interesting associations were being formed. Randy Bradshaw, a local director, helmed an episode - his first gig with Atlantis - which led to more work on Atlantis' *Ramona Q* series. And guys like Al Simmonds and Ken Jubenvill, who've worked with just about everyone in town already, were having fun enjoying the old home-week atmosphere, as well as getting to meet people from Alberta and as far away as Montreal. Simmonds said the series was his first chance to work with old pal DOP Ron Orioux, and Jubenvill felt it was a chance for oldtimers and newcomers alike to prove themselves to the Americans.

The former Park & Tilford distillery where *Airwolf* was underway was easy to find - the parking lot was full of jeeps. But the Atlantis producer, Jonathan Goodwill wasn't dressed in olive drabs and gold chains at all - he looked like a nice, Canadian soccer-player-type, who fit right in with my preconceived idea of 'The Atlantis Profile' (young, bright, but casual - the new breed of Canadian winner?) He explained that he had never worked with Atlantis before: "We're all about the same age, and have the same basic perspective on things, so it's nice to work with them." But isn't *Airwolf* a

bit of a change of pace for the darling of Canadian production companies? Goodwill agreed, but pointed out the obvious reason for getting involved. "It was a chance to establish a positive relationship with a U.S. major that hopefully will lead to bigger and better things." A \$10 million meat-and-potatoes production that comes off well could open doors. And like it or lump it, the U.S. majors are the centre of the action. The trust seemed to be there already - I noticed no bevy of hysterical MCA producers storming around. Goodwill said that the Americans held back and let the Canadians go for it. The only MCA producer was Steve Ecclesine, who had nothing but praise for the Canadian production.

The challenge of producing a good quality series on a shoestring budget had its difficulties, not the least of which was 12-hour shooting days, though Goodwill was pleased that 80% of the crew stayed for the duration. We went on a tour of the former distillery, where designers and set construction people transformed the studio and grounds into Paris, the steamy jungles of Burma, a pool hall in midwestern U.S., a bar in Afghanistan, etc. We chat with Ken Wells, who was putting the finishing touches on a series of gravestones for the following week's cocaine-smuggling episode. Part of a log cabin leaned against the far wall - Goodwill pointed out that it was salvaged from last spring's *Brother by Choice* shoot, and had been used several times for *Airwolf*.

When we returned, Jana Veverka, (who also has a co-producer credit) was back from lunch. Her office was on the bare side and she explained that she'd almost finished her *Airwolf* stint, and was slowly moving over to *Danger Bay*. I asked her what on earth she was doing on *Airwolf*. She burst out laughing. "It's a challenge! At first, I had terrible apprehensions - an action/adventure with

a helicopter is not my predilection. But the job offer came at the right time, and I thought it might be fun." Her first action was to arm up with a couple of issues of *Soldier of Fortune* and the *Airwolf* flight manual, studying such things like Uzis and I.R. jammers (automatic system that produces omnidirectional radiation of infrared energy to disable IR tracking). After looking over the 12 scripts that had come with the series she hired Rick Drew and Chris Haddock to write an act as story editors. Michael Mercer, Lyle and Barbara Brown, Bill Gough and Rob Carney made up the balance of the Canadian writing team.

Aside from learning 101 ways to describe a helicopter entering a scene, ("She swoops from the sky" "She spins over the horizon." "She shudders onto the tarmac.") the challenge for the writers was to find low-budget ways of creating suspense and action. "There was no money to blow up a lot of helicopters, so we had to turn to the traditional storytelling techniques. We approached it like any other series - through the characters and stories."

Mercer, who was written for U.S. series before as well as Canadian (*For the Record*, *Sidestreets*) commented that writing formulaic drama can be fun, "once you get over any pretensions to make a statement about humanity." On the four *Airwolf* scripts he wrote, he especially enjoyed creating the villains. "I'm a character writer and I love to create characters that would be unnatural in a Canadian naturalistic setting. And with the good guy of the series being this virtually unbeatable gunship, I wanted to create a villain who was big enough to create a real threat - otherwise you'd just feel sorry for him."

Lyle Brown, who with his wife Barbara wrote two *Airwolf* scripts, commented that although they lean toward family drama and documentaries, the fantasy

action/adventure genre is one they enjoy working on. "After the CBC series, *The Collaborators* and *Sidestreet* disappeared, there was virtually no opportunity to write action-oriented programs in Canada." In fact, after writing one episode, they began plotting ways to write a second. When they found a spooky overgrown garden on the Park & Tilford grounds, they were inspired to write a script about a deranged doctor and his deadly plant experiments. "We hoped that Atlantis would go for it when they got toward the end of their budget and would need a script that could be shot in the backyard. And they did!"

Veverka's pride in Canadian writers is emphatic. "It's not a matter of asking the American companies to please give Canadian writers a chance - we're as good as anybody. Our writers have credentials, and most have written more than their U.S. counterparts because it's a smaller pool up here. There's an opportunity here for writers to broaden our base, whereas the U.S. writers tend to get stereotyped and wind up only writing sitcoms or whatever."

Okay, but doesn't writing schlock ruin you for writing really serious, heartfelt Canadian drama? Lyle Brown's response was simple - the *Airwolf* job bought him time to work on a pet stage play, "which probably will never see the light of day."

The Canadian directors (Ken Jubenvill, Alan Simmonds, Bruce Pittman, Randy Bradshaw, Brad Turner, J. Barry, George Erschbamer, and Zale Dalen), were unanimous about the directorial challenge - the shooting schedule (5 days for a one-hour-long program) and the budget restrictions. According to Jubenvill, "We had a horrendous schedule, and had to create exotic locations we couldn't afford to go to with a helicopter we didn't have." All had praise for the designer Steve Geaghan and the locations and set construction people who took care of the latter, along with Canadian DOPs - Richard Leiterman, Ron Orioux and J. Barry Herron.

Steve Ecclesine, the MCA producer, believes that the good experience MCA had with the *Airwolf* shoot will bode well as far as future television production with Canada goes. "In light of the Canadian content requirements, we had no choice but to go with Canadian talent. It was a risk, but once in, we were very impressed. We were in the position of having to cut our budget into a third, but what could we do - we couldn't send letters to the audience to explain why the last 24 are going to look different. But we found that the quality was very good, and in some cases even better than the original."

The next day I'm driving up Cypress Bowl with a friend on a typical warm, Vancouver spring day, and encounter a roadblock. After the nice, clean-cut Canadian RCMP officer waves us through, he turns to his partner, "Hey did you see *Airwolf* last night? It was really neat...!" I smash my nose against the window shouting, "It's Canadian! I was there - they gave me an *Airwolf* flight manual!" Well, I can change my mind, can't I?

• Anthony Sherwood, Michelle Scarabelli, Geraint Wyn Davies - seated, Barry van Dyke



Toronto Law

"When I first saw the place, I couldn't believe it," says Maryke McEwen, executive producer of CBC's new urban law series, **Street Legal**. "It's as if it had been built for us."

True. The day Mono Lino Typesetting went out of business overnight, leaving lock, stock and half-empty coffee cups behind, was a godsend to McEwen. The building at 420 Dupont came equipped with such luxuries as his-and-hers bathrooms, loading docks, high-ceilinged workshops on the ground floor and brightly-lit offices on the top. The building was perfect. It wasn't long before **Street Legal** moved in and started setting up house.

"Sometimes you forget you're on a set. It's like home" says Sonja Smits, who plays the series' topnotch criminal defense lawyer, Carrie Barr. True. Once you enter the building, past the reception area, the crew's kitchen, and the stars' dressing rooms, you find yourself in the offices of Barr, Robinovitch and Tchobanian – the world of **Street Legal**.

You are standing in the firm's library, appropriately lined with rows and rows of 'real' law books. On the right is Leon Robinovitch's (Eric Peterson) office, complete with indoor greenhouse and a picture of Tommy Douglas on the wall. Carrie Barr's (Sonja Smits) and Chuck Tchobanian's (C. David Johnson) offices are on the left. Further back, there's the boardroom and, beyond that, the court's main hallway, adorned with stained glass windows, and the courtroom itself...

There is more... turn a corner and you soon find yourself in Leon's cozy living room and well-equipped kitchen... further on you stumble onto prison halls leading to a cell. There is also what will soon be known as Carrie's loft apartment. And, there is still room to expand... little by little, as the characters develop, gaining depth and background, the little house on **Street Legal** takes shape.

The series, which had a six-part run in January, has been renewed and expanded to 13 episodes this season and, if McEwen has her way, is here to stay.

Street Legal examines the trials and tribulations of a team of three dedicated young lawyers, Leon, Carrie, and Chuck. It is about the firm they put together after law school, in the Queen Street West District. It is about life and friendship and love. And it is about Toronto, the city, its neighbourhoods and streets.

The series is the brainchild of Maryke McEwen who patiently nurtured the project through the three or four years it took the CBC to approve it. Previously associate producer of **For The Record**, McEwen is an energetic and versatile woman who knows what she wants and leaves nothing to chance. New to the fast-pace, back-to-back shooting and heavy schedule of a dramatic series, she works long hours, seven days a week.



• Sonja Smits' Giacconda smile

The day I was there she had a story meeting, a music meeting and a budget meeting on her schedule.

"What I find hardest is constantly having to switch gears from the creative to the business," she says. Not to mention the ever-expanding union demands resulting in ever-shrinking workdays... and those budget cuts. It gets pretty hectic.

McEwen handpicked her crew and, since it is crucial to the show's continuity and rhythm, she does her best to keep them happy.

"At first I was nervous because I never knew what was going to happen to my character, and I didn't know if I could do it," says Eric Peterson.

Peterson plays Leon Robinovitch, the series' idealistic left-leaning lawyer; a lover of the downtrodden and of worthy causes. To research his character, he spent many hours observing sessions at the municipal court, and chatting with a lawyer friend whose philosophical and political bent is similar to Leon's. Having overcome his initial fears, Peterson now thoroughly enjoys acting in a series. Far from routine, the challenges of mastering a new script, collaborating with a new guest star and adding dimension to his character, keep him on his toes. This feeling is shared by the series' other two principals.

C. David Johnson, the most ambitious of **Street Legal**'s three lawyers, is fascinated by the way his character, Chuck, has grown, becoming more defined and complex as the writers explore every aspect of his personality. "It's a bit like Christmas... you never know ahead of time what is coming up," he says.

Johnson, who most recently starred in CBC's **Red River**, is happy to be back in Toronto but misses the outdoor life and the camaraderie of a remote location. "We are all very close on this set, but at night everyone goes back home to their

own life," he says.

To prevent burn-out, **Street Legal**'s actors, producers, directors and writers work on a rotating basis. Every episode features one of the three principals in its main plot, giving the other two a chance to develop their character in a sub-plot situation. The show's two producers – David Pears and Duncan Lamb – each take a show and pick their director, writer and guest lead.

The day I visited the set, they were shooting **Star Struck**, this year's second show, written by Don Truckey and directed by Alan Kroeker, recently arrived from Winnipeg where he directed **Heaven On Earth**. By all accounts, it was a quiet day and everything was going according to schedule... without a hitch... well, that's if you don't count a passing train rudely interrupting a scene (the tracks run right in back of the building) David Johnson's wretched cold and Sonja Smits occasionally giggling at one of her lines.

"Up until now Carrie had no personal life," says Sonja Smits of her character. "I felt like a nun. But they've found me a lover and apparently in next week's scene, I end up in bed with the guy without even having met him... Sometimes I wish they'd shoot this thing in sequence." (burst of laughter).

"It's all in a day's work, I tell you, I've been in the business for 22 years," said Bob, one of the light men as we walked to the corner greasy spoon at lunchtime. It was around 12:30, there would be no displaced lunchtime penalty... definitely a good day.

Toronto is one of the characters on **Street Legal**. At least 50 per cent of the show is shot in its streets. According to Maryke McEwen it is time the beauty of Toronto be captured on celluloid, just as it has been for New York, Paris or Rome. Well... OK. But this presents some minor

problems. One, it irks many Canadians whose favourite pastime is actually to hate the city. And two, there are thousands of crews out there doing the same thing; many of which, far from trying to capture Toronto's elusive soul, are busy using its body to portray Anonymously City, U.S.A....

Why just the other day **Street Legal** ran into **M.R.T.**'s crew, while trying to shoot behind old City Hall...

Well, it is 2:00, time to get back on the set. The crew in the kitchen have finished eating their grilled tomato sandwiches, Eric Peterson has come back for the natural food store a few doors down, Avril, the first assistant director is shooing everyone back on the set to block the next scene... the happy little family is ready to resume its day's work.

"Don't say that, it sounds suspicious," says Johnson.

Maybe... but in this case, I don't think so.

Josée Miville-Dechêne •

Shooting Britain's King

Napoleon is dancing the fox trot badly.

For René Pothier, first assistant director on Donald Brittain's latest docudrama **Mackenzie King**, that is just one of the little problems he is trying to deal with this morning.

The Napoleon-like figure is an extra who, together with the remainder of disguised extras, is barely past his teens and looks like he's never heard of the fox-trot, let alone danced it. Now he and the others are being rushed through an impromptu lesson under the fretful eye of Pothier. They throw themselves with total abandon into the dance. After a while they actually start to look good. But Pothier keeps cutting in with further instructions about positioning and looking happy and stopping at just this point and...

The setting where they swirl is the Tudor Room, one of those grandiose Victorian staterooms, rich with a beauty of former times and eloquent with a history unspoken, on the fifth floor of Ogilvy's, one of Montreal's oldest and largest department stores. On this sunny Sunday morning it has been dressed up prettily, for a special occasion, a special illusion. A costume ball at the Governor General's residence, circa 1920's.

The liveried waiters – who look pinched in their too-tight tuxedos and smart haircuts – and the art-deco lamps combine to form visual hints of an era in our history when Mackenzie King was our young nation's Prime Minister – not

yet the odd-ball mystic we later got to know through his diaries.

The era texture is also reproduced. The dark and rich wood panelling of the Tudor Room and the way it is lit exude an aesthetic quality that speaks of the upper-class and power – prized qualities in the Ottawa of those days. Even the multi-hued garlands that presently color these walls, together with the pure white roundness of the dancing young ladies' shoulders as they peek out of strapless period gowns, interact with the textures in this visual theatre – enhancing the whole.

The dancers swirl in a rising and falling circle around the high-tech grayness of the modern camera. An 'audience' of similarly costumed extras, perhaps 40 all told, forms a kind of multi-colored crescent moon around them. A '20s tune is booming out of the high-power speakers just off the set, filling the room with a party atmosphere that is real and vivacious. Into this setting of noise and colour enters a man wearing a baseball jacket of the now-defunct and ever-losing Saint-Louis Browns. Leaving the jacket draped on the director's chair, he then pads over to the camera and sits behind the eye-piece. They have a physical run-through as he studies how the scene will look. They do so only once, for he nods his approval quickly and camera operator Susan Troy returns to her controls, smiling.

He is Donald Brittain, four-time Oscar nominee, several-time winner of countless Genies, Nellies and other international awards, and the writer-director of



• Donald Brittain gets the hell out of the way

photo: Fun Diamond

this film on one of Canada's greatest and most complex statesman.

A \$2-million NFB/CBC co-production, **Mackenzie King** is set to be a three or four-part mini-series to be aired next November or January. Shooting on a 45-day working schedule in several locations around Montreal and Ottawa, **Mackenzie King** stars Sean McCann in the title role (already familiar to most as **Night Heat's** crusty but kind-hearted Lt. Hogan) in a film that promises, like Brittain's **Hal C. Banks: Canada's Sweetheart**, to be multi-faceted, realistic, sometimes humorous but always painstakingly detailed and researched.

Asked to describe his formula for success, Brittain once said, "Get a good subject, get a good crew and get the hell out of the way," and on this morning he seems to be living up to his maxim. He allows first a.d. Pothier to handle most of the technical aspects of direction while he concentrates more on the general look of the scene, on the actors, and how they handle the material. In the beehive-like activity of the set he is not the Omnipotent Director but more the chief interpreter of the vision, first among equals, a team player.

Indeed he is painstaking in his preparation of the scene with the actors,

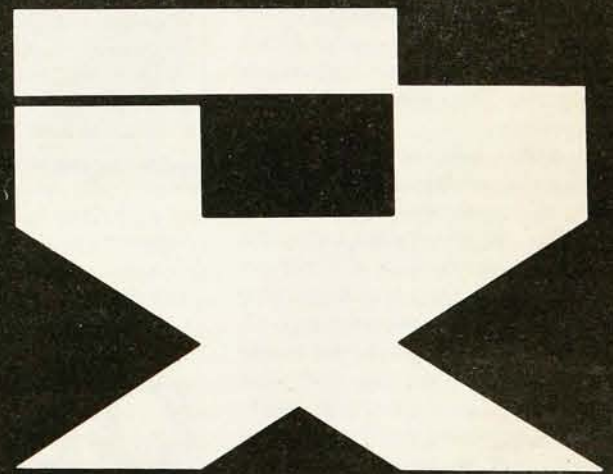
searching with them for how the scene should or *could* go. Richard Farrell, playing Governor General Lord Byng, and Patricia Collins, in the role of his marriage wife, listen intently as Brittain talks to them in his distinctive low voice. "Brittain is known to rewrite much of his films as he goes along," says the film's press attaché Ron Jones. "At night he'll rewrite the next day's shoot, sometimes even on the same day, locked up in a side-room just off the set."

Now that several rehearsals have fine-tuned the scene to Brittain's satisfaction, he turns to his a.d. and calls for an actual take. As Pothier's voice rises to call for filming, the crew become instantly aware, everyone going to their respective positions, intent, listening. A bell rings. A red lamp just outside the set begins to flash. The people who walk on the large wooden floor near it stop, for their steps are noisy on this surface. For a moment, everything else seems to freeze, everything except the play of the actors. Under the hot, fiery lights, before the rolling camera, before the 50 or so extras, crew and onlookers are attempting not to make noise, they *look* and *listen* – the actors play.

Then, for that crystalline moment, there is no audience, there is no director, there is no camera, there is only the delivery of a scene rendered in time and space – its images etched on chemically-treated moving plastic, its sounds magnetically captured elsewhere – the beauty of its capturing, yes, forever ours.

André Guy Arsenault •

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