

An Elephantine Hit

Sharon, Lois and Bram's **Elephant Show** is currently taping its fourth season for the CBC, TVOntario and Access Alberta. Sharon Hampson, Lois Lilienstein and Bram Morrison, arguably the most successful children's performers in Canada, if not North America, excel in an area that Canadians have come to dominate. Their **Elephant Show** is an award-winning ("Best TV Variety" by CFTA and "Best Children's Programming" by ACTRA), lively, musical TV series that has become the highest-rated program in TVOntario's entire broadcast schedule, reaching three quarters of a million viewers in Ontario alone. CBC viewers exceeded half a million for its third season.

Arnie Zipursky, 31, co-producer for Cambium Productions, traced the short history of the show on-location at the *Mississauga News*.

"Cambium started in November of 1982, so we're just coming up to our fifth anniversary. The first thing we did was a half-hour concert on Sharon, Lois and Bram. We went to First Choice, Super Channel, C Channel, and TVO, and everyone was interested. Basically the only one who was not interested at that point was the CBC. Because we had not produced a children's program, the feeling was: 'What do you guys, want now? Come back and see us when it's finished'. So we produced it with TVO and private investors through a private offering. C Channel was third partner at one point, but they quickly folded. TVO allowed us to sell the film prior to their screening it. We made our first sale to First and then to the CBC. It was called **Sharon, Lois and Bram at the Young People's Theatre**.

Shot for \$44,000, in one day on 16mm with six cameras, the show was so successful that it paid back its investors in full. In 1983, Zipursky and his partner in Cambium, Bruce Glawson, 32, went back to these same investors to finance a pilot for a half-hour series based on the music of Sharon, Lois and Bram — a sort of musical situation comedy for children. Even without a confirmed pre-sale Zipursky and Glawson had no trouble raising the money.

The following year the CBC gave them the go-ahead to produce 12 more. The **Elephant Show** has gained such a solid reputation in the financial marketplace that when Dean Witter Reynolds (Canada) Ltd. offered 332 public units for the third series at \$5,000 apiece, they were snapped up in two weeks.

Critics have called the show "charming" and "refreshing" and a great deal of the success must be attributed to the natural and spontaneous chemistry between the lead performers. Strongly rooted in the North American folk tradition, their sincere and authentic style

simply refuses to condescend to their young "friends", making them popular with a wide range of children. Add to this a variety of games, stories, jokes, animal characters, guest performers, like Toller Cranston and Murray McLaughlan, animation, and excellent on-location production values, and you have what the prestigious U.S. Parent's Choice organization called "the best overall children's television series"

Today at the *Mississauga News*, the Elephant is leading the trio through the news room to find out how a newspaper is put together. Three children accompany the Elephant while the real city editor of the *News*, Vic MacBourne, tries to remember his lines. Each half-hour explores a new theme with a different guest and musician Eric Nagler, the regular co-star. This episode is being directed by Eleanore Lindo, whose 10-year stint at CBC Halifax and one year at the American Film Institute makes her a very competent, and busy, television director. She laughs at the irony of doing heavy sexual assault one month for **Street Legal** and pie fights for this show.

The Elephant, the real star of the show, is in fact Paula Gallivan, daughter of the popular sports telecaster, Danny. She is brought out in costume for each take. Once the scene is shot, her dresser, Caroline Simmons, immediately enters to remove the 18-pound head. If the retake is delayed, Caroline holds an electric fan close to Paula's face as she sits in her heavy costume. With extensive outdoor location shooting, the mechanics and

weight of the costume play a major consideration in the practicality of each script.

"This is no glamour gig. It really wears me down," Paula laughs. "I spent the first year in therapy with chronic whiplash." Then her chiropractor and a prosthetic specialist teamed up to design a system of braces that holds the head on her neck.

Paula started with the Toronto Dance Theatre where she played in a production of **Babar the Elephant** at Young People's Theatre. When Sharon, Lois and Bram's manager called the theatre for a dancer to perform in an elephant costume, Paula rushed to apply. She's been with them ever since. She takes her work seriously and with a great deal of personal pride. Even though she's "buried alive" in the costume, she feels a strong empathy with the character and has a deep understanding of children." The Elephant struggles a lot. What is important for the Elephant is to allow feelings to come out that for children are not so readily acceptable socially."

Despite the Canadian success of **Sharon, Lois and Bram's Elephant Show**, the producers are finding it difficult to crack the U.S. market. Without obvious gimmicks or grabbers, nor the vast marketing campaigns that accompany product-driven children's shows, Cambium, to date, has had to settle for rave reviews from organizations like Parent's Choice and the National Telemedia Council (formerly the American Council for Better Broadcasts).

With the completion of this current

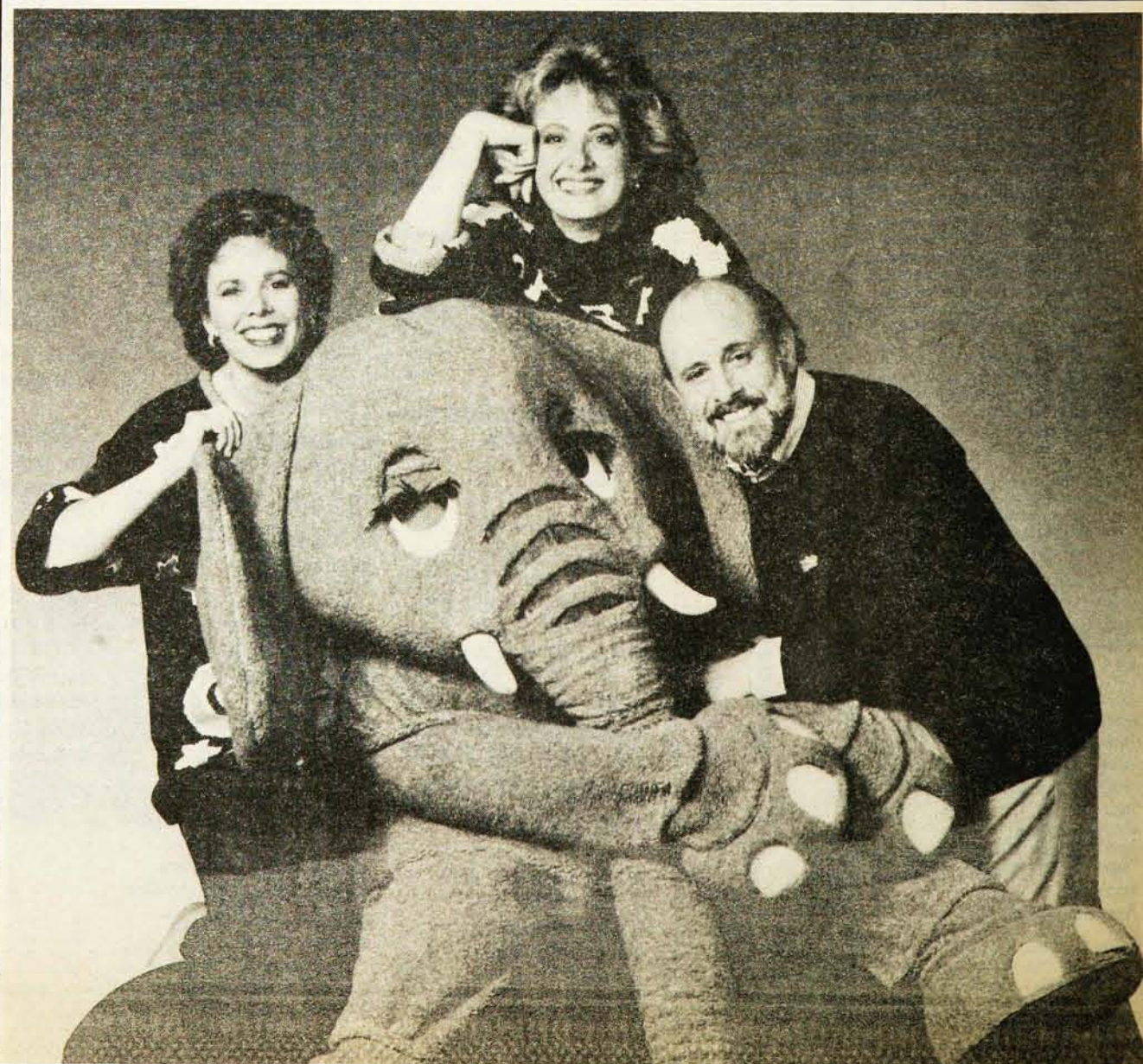
series of 13 shows Cambium will have 52 episodes, usually considered the minimum for syndication. Zipursky and Glawson remain optimistic that if they can pick up a local U.S. pay or syndication deal the show will quickly snowball into other markets. The **Elephant Show** is just too good and too popular with children to be ignored indefinitely south of the border.

However, a larger problem looms. With the proposed changes in the capital cost allowance regulations, reducing the deduction allowable from 100% over two years to 30%, a fifth season is in jeopardy. "We couldn't go into another season without the 100% write-off over two years unless we have a major pre-sale between now and next year," says Zipursky. "We work on the **Elephant Show** between eight to 10 months of the year. Four months writing, two months shooting, and four months editing. We have to start thinking about October if we're going to do the show next year. We just can't see investors coming on board with only a 30% pre-sale and a 30% write-off over two years. Our broker would probably get out of the business."

Once again a small, independent production company is being held captive to uncertain government film policy, a fate all too familiar in the Canadian industry. It would be a real shame if Cambium were forced to cancel the **Elephant Show** when it has yet to reach its full potential.

Wyndham Paul Wise •

• The gang gathers round Paula Gallivan, starring as the elephant

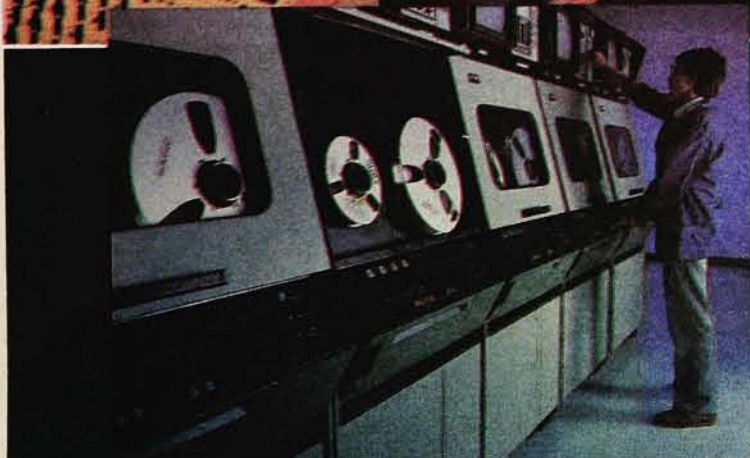


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