

ROGER FRAPPIER

Habitual Hit-Maker

by Peter Haynes

"Nowadays, I think the way to make money is to produce...good films! But, of course, we don't know what a good film is."

This fact notwithstanding, Roger Frappier's career has been quite remarkable. He has produced or coproduced four of the best Canadian films of the past two years, and two of the best Canadian films ever. *Anne Trister*, *Pouvoir intime*, *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, and *Un zoo, la nuit* are stylish, intelligent, and frequently whimsical films, well-acted and well-directed. Each was made for a budget of less than \$2 million and they have all done well financially.

"It's intuition really, but, at the same time, it's knowledge and experience. In large measure, that experience comes from watching films. I saw a lot of movies from a very early age because my aunt worked at Théâtre Sorel. When I was a student in Montreal, I saw three films a day for three or four years. I worked as a projectionist; I worked as a film critic. Even now, I still see as many movies as I can, especially films related to what I'm working on. In the end, though, after all the discussion, if you feel right about the film, that's all you have to go on."

Roger Frappier is an extremely charming, agreeable man in his early 40s. He is also, as he says, "a man of habit", and one of his habits is to eat breakfast at L'Express, a pleasant restaurant-bar situated on *rue St-Denis* in Montreal. We're surrounded by mirrors and chrome and ma-

room paint as we chat about the course of his career.

In June 1984, after a previous stint some years earlier as a producer, he returned to the National Film Board as executive producer and head of programmes for Studio C. But he agreed to come back only on certain conditions.

"I was not interested in producing the way I had produced before. I wanted to make low-budget, contemporary movies dealing with our problems, with our lives. A lot of things were happening to us that we never saw on the screen, so, since writing is the most difficult and important part of filmmaking, I wanted to put together a group of filmmakers to develop these kinds of themes. But for this to be worth anything, I needed a financial commitment from the Board to produce the films developed in the group. I got that commitment and I put together *Le groupe de travail cinématographique* comprised of Léa Pool, Jacques Leduc, Denys Arcand, Bernard Gosselin, Tahani Rached, and Pierre Falardeau.

"We worked collectively. Once someone had written something, he or she gave the text to the rest of the group. They read it, made notes, then we had a meeting. Everyone had their say, one after the other, and no one was allowed to interrupt the person who was talking. When he or she was through, the writer had to answer to the notes. The process worked very, very well and, slowly, the scripts were developed."

The process did indeed work well because out of it came the scripts for *Anne Trister* and *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*. Such strict attention to the development stage of the script has another advantage for the producer. It means that, by the time he comes to pro-

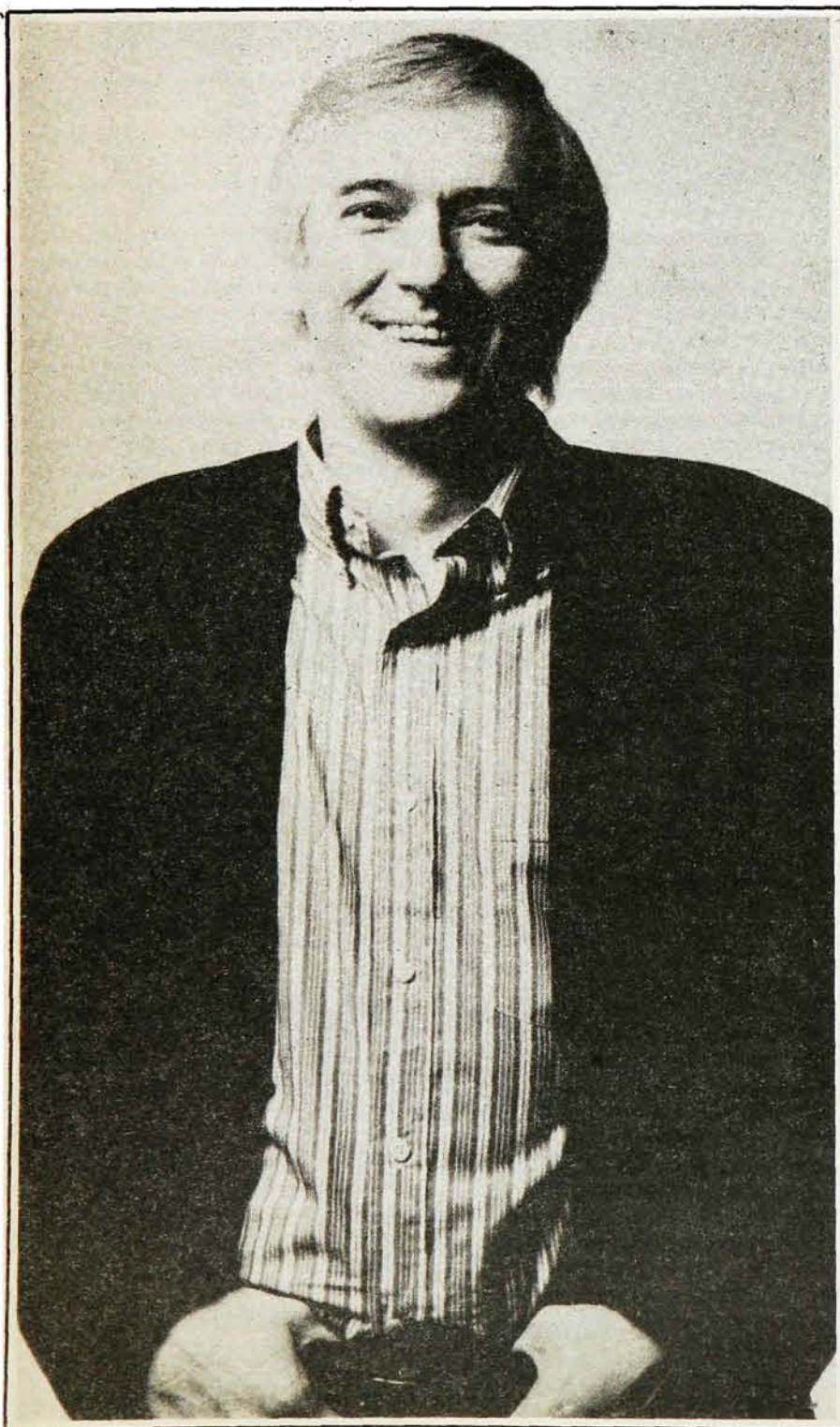


photo: Ron Levine

Peter Haynes writes screenplays and teaches film production at Concordia University.

duction, he knows the script as well as the director.

"I know what is essential to the movie and what is not because I don't take a script two weeks before pre-production. So when there's a problem, I can go to the director and say that we have to cut this or we have to cut that. Of course, at first, they think I'm a bastard like the rest of them, but the next day we talk it over and it always works out.

"I can give you a specific example. On **Anne Trister**, Léa Pool wanted to shoot on a train in Switzerland. But when we found out that it would take three days to film the sequence in the train and we'd only have the use of it from 11:00 at night to 3:00 in the morning, we said, 'Why don't you shoot the scene at an airport? She can be in a plane instead of a train.'

"It was a question of what was really important. Take the painting sequences in **Anne Trister**. We never did anything to compromise those because they were so important to what she wanted to say. They had to be there. Once you fully understand the vision of the director and the screenwriter, then it's only day-by-day. It's hard, but it's day-by-day."

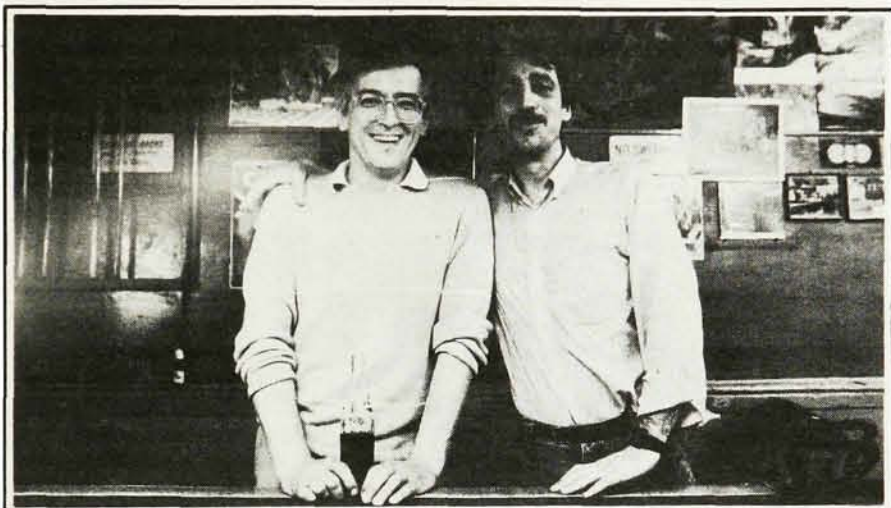
He tries to reduce the difficulties, the uncertainties and the burdens of production by co-producing with people he trusts: Claude Bonin on **Anne Trister** and **Pouvoir intime**, René Malo on **Le Déclin**, and now Pierre Gendron with whom he formed Les Productions Oz, now become Cinéma Plus Production Inc. But even with a partner to talk things over with, sticking to your belief in a film which has come in for some serious international criticism is still very difficult and very harrowing. **Le Déclin** was screened in Paris as part of the selection process for the Cannes Film Festival. The screenings were a disaster.

"They were awful. People didn't laugh or, if they did, it was at the wrong places. Everything went badly; I could see all the mistakes in the film. I was completely shaken. Afterwards, Pierre Gendron and I were walking along one of the most beautiful streets in the world, the Champs Elysées, completely oblivious to our surroundings, utterly depressed, asking ourselves, 'Could we have been so wrong?' We'd liked the film when we saw it in Montreal, we'd laughed a lot, we thought it was really good. So we had a meeting with everybody concerned and decided that the film would stay as it was for better or for worse. Then, after all of that, the film was selected enthusiastically to open the Directors' Fortnight, and the rest is history.

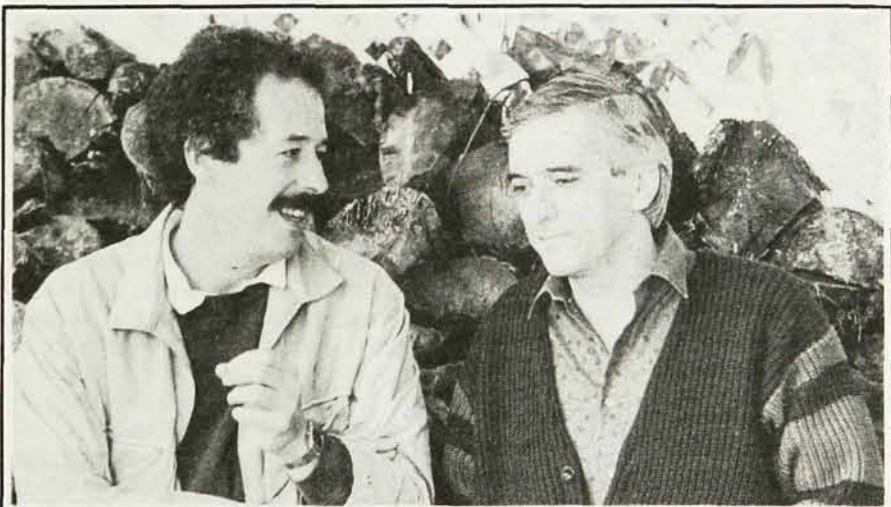
"Same thing happened this year with **Un Zoo, la nuit**. Pierre and I arrived at Cannes with our hearts in our shoes. The film had been screened earlier and they didn't like it, they didn't take it seriously, they didn't laugh. But on this occasion, Pierre Gendron and I said, 'No, we're not wrong this time.' But, Jesus, it's tough; it's really, really tough. It showed me again that when you're making a film you're telling a story the way you think



• Collaborating with Jacques Leduc on **Le Dernier Glacier**

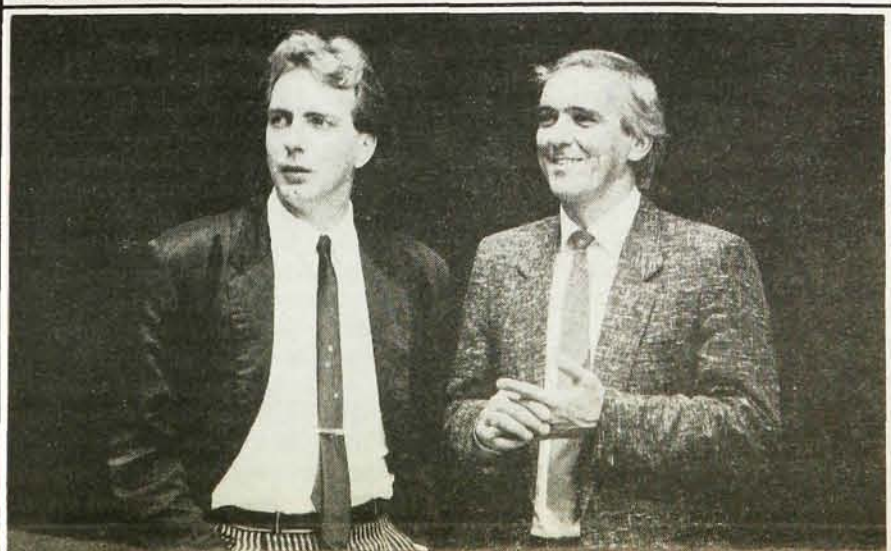


• With Claude Bonin on the set of **Pouvoir Intime**



• Listening to Denys Arcand

• With partner Pierre Gendron



it should be told. You have to stick to that and fight for what you think is right.

"You really need good help throughout and, of course, the most important help comes from the director. It's the director that takes you where you want to be. It's tremendous to work with different directors because they each have their own world. You have to understand that world, you have to get into it, and you have to work with it till it is realized. So a very important part of the process is learning what the director has inside himself, and how to get that out.

"Apart from the director, you must have the best crew for the film, the best director of photography, production manager, assistant director, art director, editor, and so on. These people give the day-to-day life to your movie. When everybody is working together, it's wonderful. But when it's only individuals fighting against one another, it's hell. There's nothing worse than a crew that does not get along. On **Un Zoo** we couldn't get everyone we wanted in June so we postponed the film until September. We waited for the director of photography, Guy Dufaux, and some other people. It was an important decision to make, and the right one.

"We had problems on this film like you wouldn't believe. Take the pool-room/snackbar set. Jean-Claude Lauzon, the director, saw I don't know how many snack bars, but he was never satisfied. And then suddenly shooting was three days away and we still didn't have a location. There was one place that Pierre and I liked and so, with two days left, we said, 'We're very sorry, but that's where we're going to shoot.'

"There was a space at the back where we were going to store the equipment. We arrived on the day of the shoot and there it was: the place we'd been looking for for weeks and hadn't found. It was two in the afternoon and the place was bare. Four hours later it was completely dressed with pool tables, restaurant equipment, lamps, and so on, and we were shooting in an amazing location we couldn't have dreamed of the day before. That's what, when the crew is together, you can do almost instantly.

"There are times, when a film is going well, that the feeling is almost magical. It's 3:00 in the morning in the middle of nowhere, raining a little; there are trucks in the fields, the crew is taking its lunch break, eating and chatting, and the rest of the world is asleep. You look around and you really feel like you're in touch with something unique, and it's beautiful. But you can be there at 3:00 in the morning wondering, 'Why am I here? This is awful. Why am I doing this for a living?' It's simply a matter of whether or not the crew is working together and the movie is going well.

"What this all boils down to is that the producer's final, most important responsibility is to the film itself. You have to ask, 'Is this what's best for the movie? How can we do it? Do we have time to do it?' And one way is to be there from the beginning to the end. I think that's

Photo: Pierre Crépeau

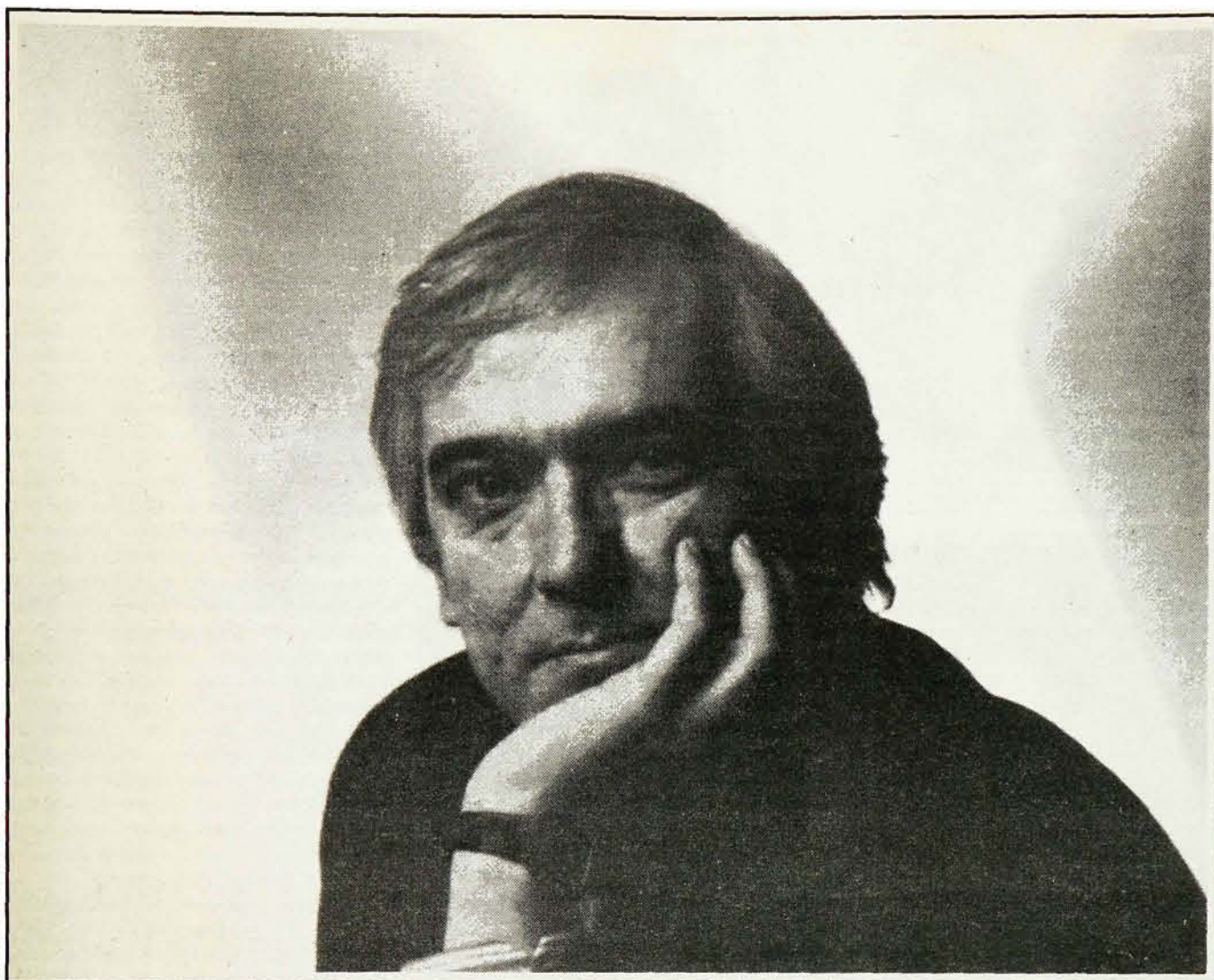


photo: BFI Studios

FILMOGRAPHY

CO-PRODUCER 1985-1986

UN ZOO, LA NUIT

Feature. d. Jean-Claude Lauzon. A co-production between the National Film Board of Canada and Les Productions Oz Inc.

LE DÉCLIN DE L'EMPIRE AMÉRICAIN

Feature. d. Denys Arcand. A co-production between Corporation Image M & M and the National Film Board of Canada.

POUVOIR INTIME

Feature. d. Yves Simoneau. A co-production between Les Films Vision 4 and the National Film Board.

Executive Producer and
Head of Studio C
at the National Film Board
1984-1985

CINEMA / CINEMA

TV Special d. Gilles Carle and Werner Nold **running time** 1 hour.

UNE GUERRE DANS MON JARDIN

Feature documentary d. Diane Létourneau.

HAÏTI-QUÉBEC

Documentary d. Tahani Rached **running time** 60 minutes.

LA FAMILLE LATINA

Documentary d. German Gutierrez **running time** 60 minutes.

SONIA

Drama d. Paule Baillargeon **running time** 60 minutes.

*Started a series of co-productions of videos with Spectel-Vidéo which include Michel Rivard's "Rumeurs sur la ville", Richard Séguin's "Double vie" and Claude Dubois' "Le Chanteur chante".

PRIVATE SECTOR 1970 - 1983

1983 - **LE DERNIER GLACIER**. Feature. Producer, co-director with Jacques Leduc. An NFB Production.

1981 - **LES HAUTES-TERRES DU CAP BRETON**, producer, Cinémax Inc.

1981 - **L'HABITATION**. 13 documentary films of 24.4 min.; **Vivre en ville, Des cités jardins aux villes nouvelles, L'autre campagne, Acheter du vieux, Acheter du neuf, D'un bail à l'autre, Le Logement social, Acheter, vendre et après, Faire ou faire faire, De la consommation au recyclage, En quête d'énergie, Conservation de l'énergie, and Prospective**. Director. An Interimage Inc. production with la Société Radio-Canada and Hydro-Québec.

1980 - **VOYAGES DE NUIT**. Short drama. Director, producer, Cinémas Inc.

1975 - **LA VIE QUOTIDIENNE**. Feature documentary produced by the NFB. Director of a segment.

1974 - **XENAKIS**. A Cinéfactrie Inc. production for the Office du film du Québec. Director, producer **running time** 22 min.

— **LA GRAVURE**. A Via le Monde Inc. production for Société Radio-Canada. Director and editor.

1973 - **L'INFONIE INACHEVÉE**. Feature documentary. Producer with Marc Daigle, director and editor.

1971 - **GASTON MIRON**. Documentary produced by Les Films Jean-Claude Labrecque Inc. Inc. for L'Office du Film du Québec. Director and editor.

1970 - **LE GRAND FILM ORDINAIRE**. Feature documentary. Producer and director.

*Between 1975 and 1983 Roger Frappier also wrote or collaborated on the scripts for **Le Dernier glacier, L'Homme expérimenté, Voyage de nuit, Mesdames et messieurs la fête and A Change of Heart**. Between 1982-1983, he directed many commercials for **Les Productions Harwood Ltée, Cinémax and Les Films 24 Inc.***

very important; it's the way it should be done.

"And this can be exhausting, especially during production itself. It's very tough on the family. **Un Zoo, la nuit** was particularly difficult. When you're working for 14 weeks, seven days a week, 18 hours a day, you don't see anybody at home and when you do, you don't have time for them. Your mind is always on the film. There was a time on **Zoo** when it was as though the movie had taken over my life. It was uncanny.

"A pipe burst and flooded the house, so we had to open up the wall and repair it. There was so much dust we put our bird upstairs. And one morning, with this hole in the wall and all that plaster, I was coming down the stairs with the bird in my hand and I saw Albert with his bird in his hand in his wreck of an apartment. I sat down on the stairs, my house was a shambles, I had a real bird in my hand, and I thought, 'This is absurd. It gives a whole new meaning to bringing your work home!'

"I think it will always be like this. My wife and I have been married for the last 11 years and we have two kids. So, in that time, we've been through a lot of films together. You don't get used to it, but you know it'll be O.K. afterwards. It is tough on the family though, there's no doubt about that."

Anne Trister, developed at the National Film Board during the *groupe de travail cinématographique* days, was the first of the four films to go into production. Frappier had production money guaranteed from the Board, but not enough in his estimation to do the film justice. He had lunch with Claude Bonin of Vision Quatre.

"Claude had developed **Pouvoir intime**, written by Yves Simoneau and Pierre Curzi, and I had **Anne Trister**. Claude had the same problems on **Pouvoir intime** as I did: he needed more money to do it properly. We realised that if we pooled our resources and put everybody together, La Société Générale, Telefilm and the National Film Board, we could do what we wanted. And that was how the National Film Board and the private sector started co-producing. It was as simple as that.

"**Pouvoir intime** ended up with a budget of \$1.7 million and **Anne Trister** was \$1.4 million. If I remember correctly, the National Film Board put up something like \$250,000 for **Pouvoir Intime**, the rest having been raised by Claude from the other agencies; and for **Anne Trister** the Board's share was something like \$800,000 and Claude got the remainder from the Société and Telefilm. The differences in the levels of financing simply reflected the fact that the Board had developed the one project and Claude had developed the other. So putting the two together provided the missing link and it worked perfectly.

"The budget for **Le Déclin**, the second film developed by *Le groupe*, was \$1.8 million. We did it for \$1.7. In fact, in the case of all three films, it was the

first time, I think, in the history of the Board, that films came in on or under budget! We used the same basic financing structure. I took the script to René Malo who read it and really liked it. He got his money from the Société Générale, Radio-Canada and Telefilm, and four days later we were in pre-production.

"At the end of *Le Déclin*, things got a little difficult at the Board. Pierre Gendron had been the line producer on that film and we had gotten along very well, so it was natural for me to quit and go and work with him. Pierre already had *Un Zoo* as a project. So when we got together it became the first film that we wanted to do. We applied exactly the same group technique on the script as I had employed before. Denys Arcand and Léa Pool joined us and we all discussed every scene and then, after a lot of planning, we went into production. It was the first feature I produced which was financed in part by private investors. Its total budget was \$1.9 million and of that \$350,000 came from non-governmental sources.

"All of these films have done very well. *Le Déclin*, apart from its critical successes, has made a lot of money. *Un Zoo*, given its current box-office showing, will probably go into a profit position some time in the future. *Anne Trister* did not recoup but it did well. It played in Montreal for 27 weeks in a row – a very good run – and, after its success at Berlin, it sold in Germany and France and elsewhere. Remember, Léa is making very personal films, for which she has to build an audience. When you think of her, you must think over the long haul. *Pouvoir intime* played 22 weeks in Montreal. It hasn't recouped completely, but some will, some won't.

"After we finished *Un Zoo*, we were completely exhausted. We took the summer off, reorganized the company, and now we're ready to start again. We're preparing to shoot three films next year. The first will be the new Denys Arcand film. The script will be finished in December, and it will be a continuation of his previous work.

"Then we have two projects that are completely different from anything we've done before. One is called *La ruée vers l'art* written by Claude Meunier and Serge Theriault – Ding et Dong – a duo of very popular stand-up comics in Quebec. We have a first draft of the script and now we're looking for a director. When we pick one, he will work with them on the final script.

"The other project is a musical written by Luc Plamondon. We really wanted to do a musical, and we've been talking to Luc for the last eight months. He has a very good story, a kind of filmic opera, which is to me like the new *West Side Story*. It's very urban, very contemporary, and related to events that happened here. It's really beautiful.

"So we have these three features for next year, which we intend to produce back-to-back with the same crew. Costs have increased, partly because of the

amount of American production in the province, so, although these will all be low-budget films compared to American standards, I fear the average cost is likely to be between \$2.5 and \$3.0 million apiece.

"If I had talked to you a month ago, I would have said that these films would have been financed in the usual way. Now, of course, I can't do that. La Société has been absorbed by the SOGIC and we don't know how that's going to work. Telefilm is in a dreadful mess and may only have about \$70 million for disbursement next year: about half of what it should have. And it looks like we've lost the already emasculated capital cost allowance for private investors. So, I don't know what we're going to do. What amazes me is the unerring ability of both provincial and federal governments to spot those programs that are working well, move in on them, and kill them. They're dedicated to assuring that we don't succeed.

"Radio-Canada doesn't help, either. They are not living up to their responsibilities. You should keep in mind that if one produces two films for the same budget, one in Toronto and one in Montreal, then the CBC will put in \$300,000 to \$400,000 and Radio-Canada only \$80,000 to 100,000. It is already difficult enough to produce viably in French because the market is so much smaller than the English market, without having to put up with this level of funding.

"I think it's a disgrace. I think that Radio-Canada should be obliged to put aside \$5 million a year for French production in Quebec and they should earmark between \$300,000-\$400,000 a production. Radio-Canada has a billion-dollar-a-year budget; there is absolutely no reason why it shouldn't do this for Quebec cinema. How else are we going to keep up the quality of production?

"Still, I'm very happy doing what I'm doing, even if it's really tough. Directing, although I didn't realise it at the time, was a step on the road to production, and I've been able to use everything I learned. I don't think, at the moment, that I'd like to return to the *angoisse* of writing and directing. I've just started in production and I haven't come close to finishing what I started out to do.

"Besides it's fascinating. You go from literature to financing to negotiating to dealing with Tilden rent-a-car. There are so many different levels of activity and each one opens up a new universe. But, at the same time, one is curiously disengaged. When I was a director I always felt the need to solve all the creative problems myself. Now I have the same drive, but it's for somebody else. If I can't find a solution, I can still sleep; the director has to solve it.

"When the movie's finished, I know it's not as much mine as it is the director's, but I'm fulfilled. And when you feel fulfilled, you're happy in life. If you're happy in life, you like what you're doing. If you like what you're doing, you'll be good at what you're doing. It's as simple as that."

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