

Bob Hackborn

The designer behind the art of *The King Chronicle*

Murphy's law came into play in the last issue of Cinema Canada. Among other errors, the sketch of Bob Hackborn's set was printed upside down and backwards – a printer's error, almost impossible to make. It rendered the article absurd, and we apologize to Hackborn for the embarrassment it caused. Below, we reprint that article, using the occasion to correct other mistakes which were discovered.

by Greg Clarke

Art director Bob Hackborn is a pioneer. And although the image of a pioneer seems somewhat incongruous in the '80s, the era of the re-decade where most everything seems compiled from fragments of the past, Hackborn is the real McCoy – someone who was there at the start of Canadian television and is still plying his trade.

One wouldn't know it by looking at the expertly classic work he's done for Donald Brittain's forthcoming *The King Chronicle* but Hackborn is someone who has experimented widely within the television medium since the very beginning. In Hackborn's case, the beginning was in the mid-'50s when he came to the

"People really get off on the illusory stuff. It's trickery. It's like magic."

infant CBC after graduating from the Ontario College of Art. "Going into scenic design seemed like a natural step," he says, looking back on the early days of Canadian television. "Nobody else was doing it. At the time, the environment at the CBC was both highly creative and experimental because no one knew what

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they wanted. We ended up developing styles which were unique to television."

Hackborn and his associates based their work on a myriad of influences. "We were young artists working in television for the first time," he remembers. "At first, we tried to do things like on American television. Dramatic shows, for example, were quite traditional in their use of period settings, but I think we became quite bold very quickly and our

"There's an English guy in Hollywood, Whitlock, who's been painting for a long time. He's probably the most famous matte painter. He's absolutely the tops. He's retired now but I went down to see him and the Disney Studios in California and they were all very very nice. I guess they didn't think I was any competition. They showed me what they were doing and I learned some more technical stuff that I could bring back. I'm still re-inventing the wheel."

variety programs became more and more imaginative. Nicolai Soloviov, a Russian who had worked with Eisenstein on *Alexander Nevsky*, was working at the CBC then. It's like a direct line. It really appeals to the romantic side in me."

After 30 years, it wouldn't be surprising to see that romantic edge wear off and be replaced with pragmatism and cynicism: traits which too often seep into one's outlook after so many years in the business (in any business, for that matter). But Hackborn still approaches his work with a great deal of freshness and enthusiasm. "Things have changed a lot here over the last 30 years. Often for the better, sometimes not. I'll always appreciate the wide variety of work available at CBC. I'll do drama, children's shows, even news. It's all very interesting – you're not necessarily categorized or slotted."

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of his work (aside from the inherent originality that is found in all of his work up to and including *The King Chronicle*) is its adaptive nature. "My job is to develop visually the content of the script. You try not only to understand what the director's trying to say, but also the mood he is trying to create. That abstract notion comes to life in the drawings and later in the sets themselves."

Despite the creative release which Hackborn enjoys while working on his various projects, he is always faced with factors over which he has no control. "No matter what you're working on, whether it's *Fraggle Rock* or *Mackenzie King*

you have to understand and accept one condition – you're always working within certain constraints. Because every shot has these constraints, set designers are always concerned with the practical."

"I have such a romantic attitude about *The National Film Board*. I wandered around the building and when I saw names like Norman McLaren on doors, it really meant something to me. Colin Low did a film called *Corral* which I still think is one of the great films of all times."

Hackborn often sees his role as that of a problem solver, and he seems very much to relish the challenges he confronts. "I give myself these problems, but it's fun working with them. They're self-imposed and sometimes you feel terrified. But then you solve them, and it feels great. I really get high on a project. If I don't, it becomes routine and I'd just as soon quit."

The problems and constraints, of course, vary from project to project. For *Fraggle Rock*, Hackborn was recruited during the second season and many of the sets had already been designed and built.

“As an art director you know what kind of visual character you want to evoke and you do it as best as you can, you try to get as close as you can to that quality. Whether you achieve it all the time or half the time or even if it’s just a couple of scenes that you’re very satisfied with, it’s rewarding.”

“Fortunately, Jim Henson is very open to visual styles and effects,” recalls Hackborn. “Bill Beeton had already designed the house and all the rocks. We were able to design new stuff, but we had to work our way around the existing caves. The old stuff was constantly rearranged and reused, like a jigsaw puzzle.” Hackborn pauses briefly and then mutters: “Those rocks, all those rocks”, as if nothing more could be said to sum up his work on 31 episodes of Henson’s subterranean muppet show.

On some shows, the limitations are often extremely severe. In the case of the CBC production of the Stratford version of *Twelfth Night*, the set had to be modified for television, but the bulk of the set remained unchanged from the stage production. “That sort of thing makes it

easier in one sense because the style is already established, but when you have to expand on it, you’re dealing in a very strict set of parameters.”

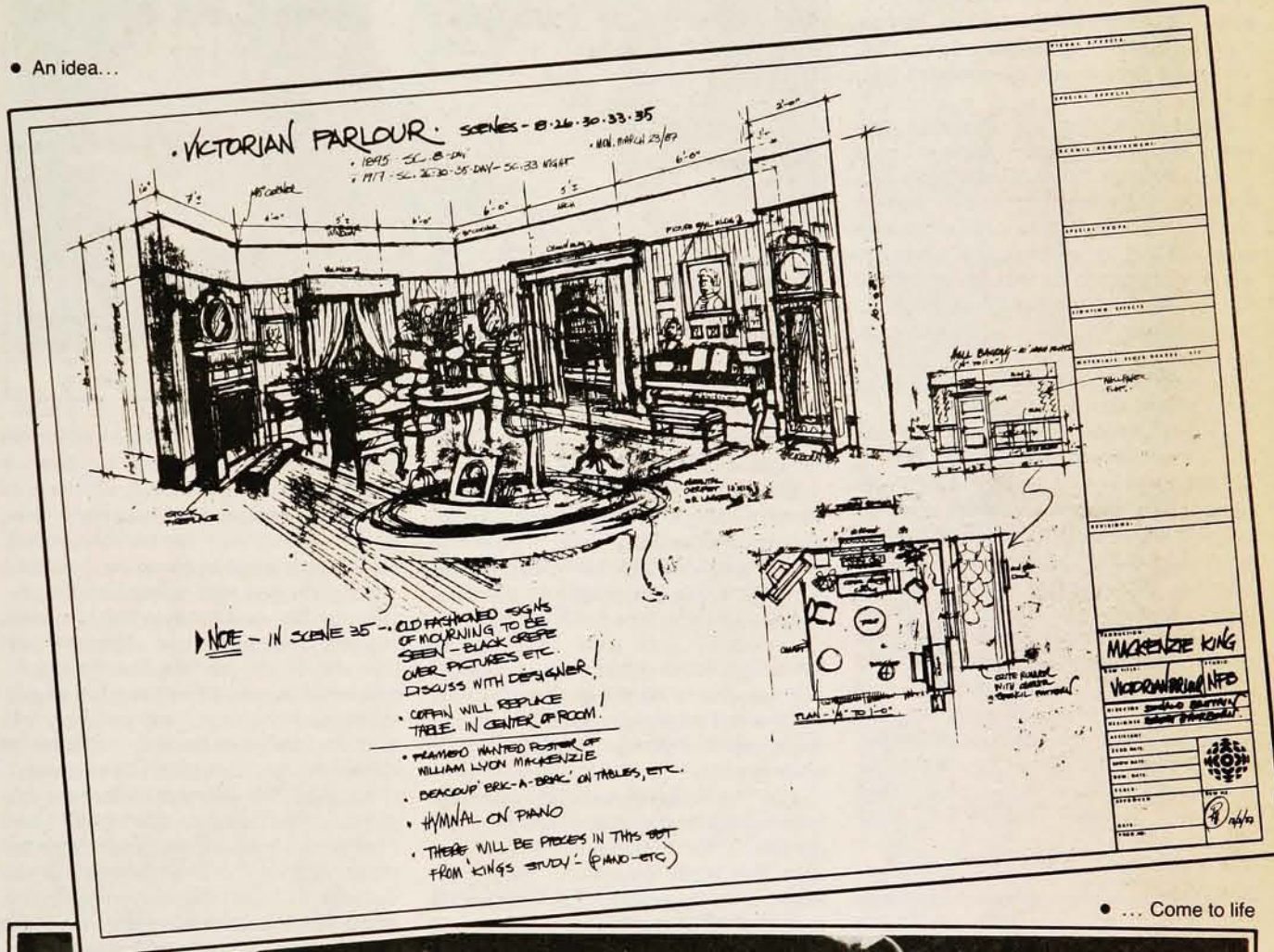
Among the shows which Hackborn looks back to with fondness are those which allowed him to flex his creative muscles in more technical areas. At the root of film and television set design is

perspective. This may seem quite obvious but the ways in which perspective manifests itself on the television screen are not. Through the use of matte paintings, the illusion of reality is maintained, but a good part of the frame is only a two-dimensional painting suspended a few feet in front of the camera. The lines of perspective have to be perfect or else the

illusion is lost. “Mattes had been done for years in films but, as far as I know, never on Canadian TV,” explains Hackborn.

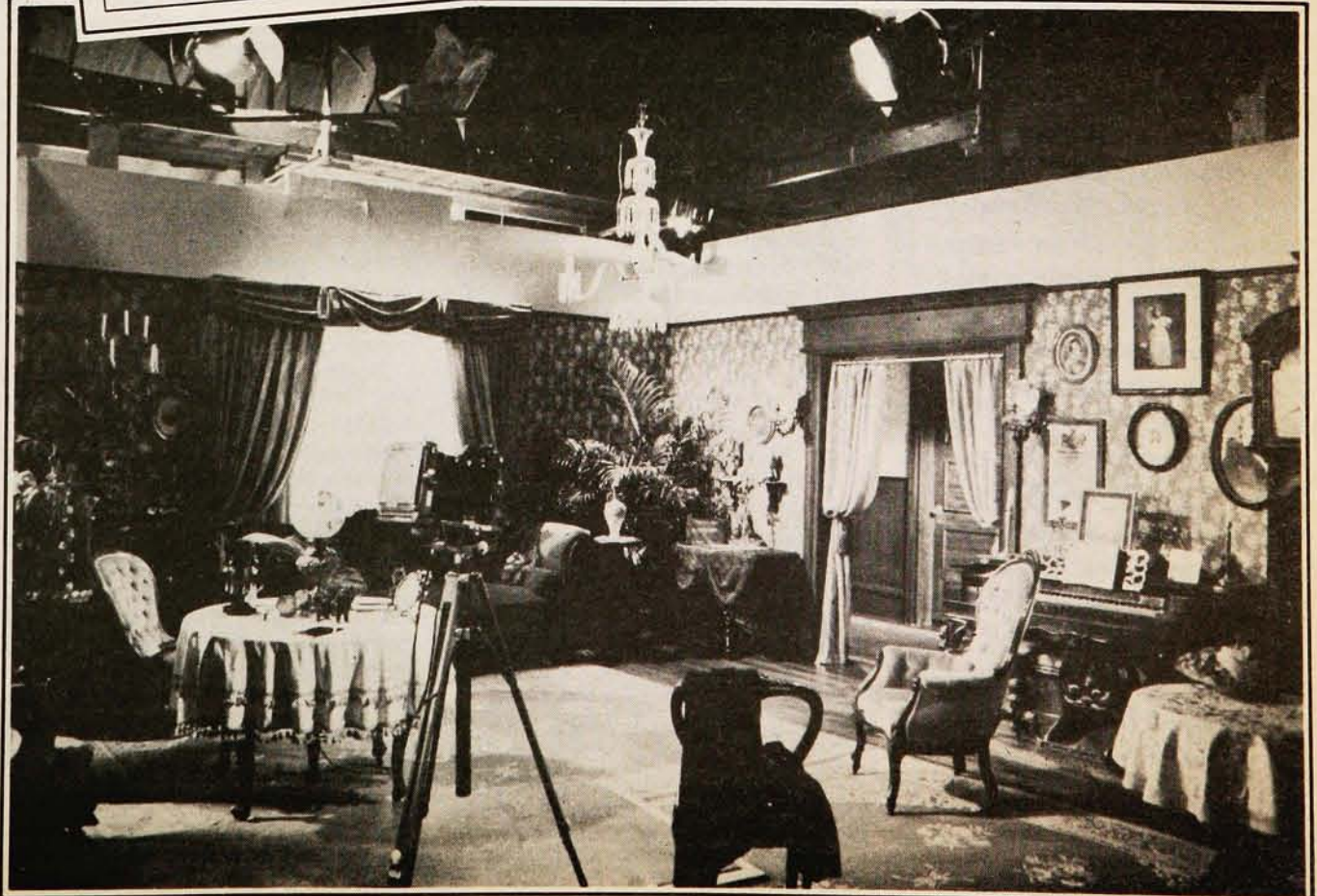
Hackborn experimented with the process in the late ’70s and used it to comic effect in the 1980 Royal Canadian Air Force special in a skit involving a man hanging from a ledge many stories above the ground. “It was the second (matte

• An idea...



• ... Come to life

“There are some films that I call art director’s films and one of them was Bladerunner. That is one of the most stunning visual productions. Terrific visuals. I felt that was an art director’s film. It becomes obvious when an art director’s taking too strong a hand: you have to be careful and not push too hard if the director is a little weak so you really have to try to keep control. What I call art director’s films have a visual consistency. There’s a consistent visual line throughout Bladerunner. It doesn’t jump all over the place. It’s rare that that happens.”



shot) I ever did, and when it worked out, it felt so good. (Producer) Peter Kelly liked it so much that I did about 12 of them for *I Married the Klondike* (1981)." That particular program required designs for a town in goldrush days, but instead of going through the prohibitively expensive process of building large sets of elevated tressles and sleuces, they were instead painted on glass. "When the editors saw the rushes, they thought we had built the damn stuff. You can't get a better compliment than that."

Hackborn's visual investigations continue. Whether using the ultra-matte process on *Fraggle Rock* or experimenting with the nodal points in a camera lens to create a 'tracking' matte show using only pans and tilts (by pivoting the camera on the center point in the lens rather than on the camera's weight point) as in the recent special by the Canadian Brass, Hackborn is intent on pushing the camera's technical capabilities to create the most imaginative visuals possible.

Two of his most recent projects—*Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks* (1985) and the recently completed *The King Chronicle*, both directed by Donald Brittain—seem somewhat surprising. The surprise is actually twofold. First, the two projects are historical docudramas, and in both cases, the set design is more standard in its use of traditional decor; no fantastical shots of the Canadian Brass playing in a medieval castle here, just meticulous reconstructions of drawing rooms from the past. Second, *The King Chronicle*, like *Hal Banks* before it, is a co-production with the National Film Board. Thus



• 60 years experience to bring one King to life – Hackborn with director Donald Brittain.

Hackborn found himself working outside the CBC for the first time in 30 years.

The art director seems to have relished the experience. "It was a real kick—it really meant something to me. When I was in art college, we all felt that the NFB was fantastic. Over the years I've talked to people like Colin Low and Ernie McNabb who've done some great films. I guess I've always felt that there was an element of being able to do things that are fun at the Board. I think that connection has always been there for me, and now it's even more present."

The King Chronicle production is one of the largest undertaken by either the CBC or the NFB, and it is unquestionably the most expensive project in Hackborn's long career. The massive job included designing 16 major sets as well as countless location adaptations. The designing stage, as well as the eventual shoot, was simplified when Brittain and Hackborn agreed to straight-forward axis shooting. In this arrangement, most of the sets are 'L' shaped, thus eliminating the need for the design and construction of sets with four walls. Although simplifying things somewhat, this decision didn't really reduce the scale of the mammoth job Hackborn undertook.

Some locations, such as the Privy Council room and King's study at Laurier House, were inaccessible because they were designated as heritage landmarks by the Canadian government. As a result, both rooms had to be reconstructed on a soundstage. "In some ways," says Hackborn, "it's more difficult doing this sort of design because it's a copy. All the details such as furniture, colour and even the stained glass have to be perfect. When you're working with your own ideas, you can be inventive. When you copy, you can only really succeed by being as accurate as possible."

In some cases, though, complete accuracy had to be compromised for logistical reasons. A case in point during the shooting of *Mackenzie King* was the use of the House of Commons. Although the

chamber has changed little in the 50 years since King delivered his fiery, if somewhat stilted, rhetoric, all traces of electronic equipment which today wire it for sound had to be eliminated. Hackborn's solution was to create plastic woodgrain desk tops to cover the microphones. The end result is that the desks actually look somewhat different than they did during the '40s, but most viewers, with the possible exception of parliamentary historians, will probably feel that the flavour of the war era House of Commons has been faithfully recreated.

Perhaps the greatest difference between *The King Chronicle* and Hackborn's past efforts (aside from the sheer size of the new project) is the amount of historical research required to bring this dramatization of past events to life. The mini-series is set between 1890 to 1948, focusing largely on King's years as Prime Minister in the '30s and '40s. Not only did the sets and decor in each time period have to be created, but an even flow representing a broad sweep of 60 years had to be maintained throughout. Admits Hackborn, "You could spend forever researching and immersing yourself in the past. But it's a strange experience familiarizing yourself with a period you grew up in and feeling that you know it better now than you did then."

Despite the many months of work on the project and the long production schedule (or perhaps because of it), Hackborn seems to have only praise for the *The King Chronicle* mini-series and its director, Donald Brittain. "I really enjoyed working with him," confides Hackborn. "Brittain is very open to suggestions. He doesn't always accept them, but he has good reasons to turn them down. He works quite differently than most people; he's very spontaneous. I like that a lot because it lends immediacy to a project that would normally be all laid out from the start. It ends up being very creative. It reminds me of live television where people were winging and where things had to be done instantly."

If Hackborn has any misgivings at all, they certainly aren't related to his distinguished career which continues to set standards which would satisfy even the most demanding professional. His main concern is that his knowledge, and that of his peers, has little chance of being passed on to a younger generation of artists in the industry. "They (the CBC) are letting people go and they are just hiring freelancers," laments Hackborn. "That's one of the real shames, both here and at the NFB. People have these skills which have been developed and refined here, as well as at the NFB, over many, many years. But these guys are all getting old and are going to leave at some point. They won't be able to pass these skills on—there isn't anyone to give them to. It really bugs a lot of us here."

"Painting mattes, illusions, model tricks and all those kind of things were all old-timers' crafts. When they began doing Earthquake and The Towering Inferno and movies like that in the early '70s, they dragged all those guys out of retirement to do the illusions for them. That was the beginning of the renaissance of these special effects movies that are so big at the moment. The techniques have been picked up by many young people now."

In 15 years or so, the set design department at CBC Toronto has dwindled from 25 people to less than half that number—Hackborn has taken it upon himself to impart his knowledge by continually increasing his lecture load. He is even eyeing the possibility of teaching a course in set design and art direction at some point in the future. And although he is saddened by the situation at the CBC, he finds some comfort in the fact that a current-day mainstay such as special visual effects, which had virtually died out by the mid-'60s, has been revived in a major way in the last two decades.

Hackborn still approaches his craft as a learning experience, with all the freshness of outlook that a young art school graduate might have had on his first day on the job. And though the CBC and the NFB have changed over the years, they still embody for Hackborn the pioneering spirit of Canadian film and television production which holds much promise. Hackborn helped create that spirit during CBC's golden age. If *Mackenzie King* is any indication, he is now helping fulfill the promise.

"I've always wanted to own the NFB stuff I liked so much when I was at the art college. Now you can buy them on tape. Terrific! Now I've got a library I've always wanted. I can just pop the cassette in. City Lights, Modern Times, a lot of Chaplin stuff, Frankenstein. I really like Apocalypse Now. That war scene—going up the river—was just such a style, like it wasn't real. But it was so beautifully done. Not that I'm a war fan or anything but it's a beautiful piece of art direction."