

The Wish

Roll camera,
wheelchair

Jericho Beach is one of those places that make Vancouver the only sensible place in Canada to spend summer. To the north lies English Bay and, beyond its steel-blue waters, the mountains of West Vancouver. To either side are hills and valleys of human flesh gloriously disregarding recent warnings about the dangers of too many UV rays. And, approaching from the diving dock, a group of wheelchairs, their silver spokes glinting in the midday sun.

It's lunchtime on the set of *The Wish*, a half-hour drama destined for '88-89 broadcast on the CBC *Family Pictures* series. Many of the people on the beach blankets turn to look at the passing brigade of wheelchair consultants and extras. Some glance up and then look away, not sure what to make of the procession. Somehow people who can't walk in the sand seem a little out of place at the beach.

That's partly what *The Wish* is about, our able-bodied attitudes and reactions to those who 'walk' with their arms or, in the case of more severe handicaps, with electric motors. It's the story of 16-year-old Allison Bates (Candace Ratcliffe, *Cowboys Don't Cry*) and her relationship with her parents (Merrilyn Gann & Grey Rogers). Allison has been in a wheelchair for a year and a half following a skiing accident. The story, by first-timer Leigh L. Wilks, begins on Allison's 16th birthday. With the gift of scuba lessons and equipment, her mother challenges her to start using her body again.

The show is a production of Christian Bruyere's Face to Face Films Ltd. (*Rape; Face to Face, Dads and Kids, Walls and Shelley*) and is directed by Roy Hayter (*Our Last Saturday* and *Lies from Lotusland*). Bruyere found the story while teaching a writing course at the University of British Columbia. He guided Leigh L. Wilks through a breakneck schedule of rewrites so that shooting and post-production would be completed for a fall broadcast date. Wilks says the idea came from both personal experience and research.

"I'd never known anyone who was disabled before," she told *Cinema Canada* while sitting on the dock watching her first screenplay being turned into celluloid. "I think Rick Hansen's tour made me more aware of some of the problems and then meeting (a new friend who is in a wheelchair) made me even more aware.

"I'm a university student and I did a paper this last term on doctors and their attitudes toward disability, both in their patients and in their colleagues. One of the things I learned was that the media does present disabled people with a hook; a person who is so good, or so plucky, they're always a bit larger than life, either



PHOTO: BOB ANHESTER

Director Roy Hayter, Candace Ratcliffe (Allison Bates) and Peter Yunker on location for *The Wish*

incredibly positive or incredibly negative but they are just people who happen to have some kind of physical problem."

Chris Bruyere says that's one of the reasons CBC picked up the script so quickly, taking the risk that some viewers might be put-off by the story about a handicapped girl.

"I don't think its going to make anyone uncomfortable," he argues, "It's more of an awareness type of program. Rather than having a negative, heavy point of view it's treating the subject quite lightly. Yet there are some real problems that are overcome in the half-hour. It gives people a real feel for paraplegics and for hope in their own lives."

Pamela Gerow is on-set both as a tennis-playing extra and as a consultant. She's been in a wheelchair since a "car crash, SFU field trip, Biology, on The Island, and I broke my back". Like Allison, she spent some time withdrawing from life before "I got fed up." She's now co-ordinator of volunteers at Vancouver's G.F. Strong Rehabilitation Centre and an enthusiastic member of Theatre Terrific, a company specifically for the disabled. She's Candace Ratcliffe's coach on *The Wish*.

"People imagine what you can't do," she says, wheeling her way across a bumpy parking lot to the catering table, "they don't know what you can do. And a lot of times you don't know yourself until you get on with it. I think it's wonderful at the end of the script when she says 'I'm normal as long as I feel that way'. The idea of scuba diving is that you don't even need a wheelchair, you're in the water, you're on your own and it's a wonderful feeling of complete freedom."

Candace didn't have 18 months or even 18 days to get used to wheeling her way through life. Cast just a few days before shooting began, the Vancouver Youth Theatre graduate took a crash course.

"I got a big old rickety chair and went out at first for a few minutes at a time. My arms got so sore. After the first day I had big blisters on my hands, they popped, I have callouses, raw thumbs and sunburnt knees.

"There's a lot of different reactions," she says, admitting that handicaps weren't a subject she'd given a lot of thought to prior to *The Wish*, "For example, guys my own age don't look at you no matter what. Older people talk to you and help you the most. Young girls are kinda scared and mothers sometimes warn their kids to 'get out of the way'."

The cast and crew would be optimistic to hope that one half-hour CBC drama is going to do as much for the handicapped as, say, Rick Hansen's awe-inspiring marathon. But they feel it's part of an ongoing process of education which could lead to disabled actors being cast in everyday parts, even if the script doesn't specifically call for a wheelchair. Pamela Gerow speculates on Alexis Carrington suffering a spinal cord injury in some future episode of *Dynasty*.

"It would have to be a long process," she suggests, rolling back from lunch to continue shooting on the dock, "She'd be injured and go through rehab. But he'd still be the same personality. She dresses very sexily but she could dress that way in a wheelchair. Forget the chair, put her in a couch and put some wheels on that!

"Maybe not start with such a big role. Start a new series off where someone like myself plays psychologist. Or in *Danger Bay* maybe I'm a marine biologist. Show this person with a regular social life, a boyfriend, a regular life. It's not that farfetched. People are people whether they walk or roll." *The Wish* wrapped up shooting on July 28th.

Mark O'Neill ●

No Blame

Suissa, Shaver
and Martin

In the corridor of a new office tower in downtown Montreal, Danièle J. Suissa, dressed in white for the current heat wave, sits in the director's chair and speaks in French to her calm crew.

Cameras and sound roll, elevator doors open and close as extras walk in and out, here and there, then tiptoe off the edges of the small, crowded set. Helen Shaver, in the lead role of Amy Donaldson, a successful city-magazine fashion editor, sobs deeply. Amy has just learned from her doctor (played by Jan Rubes) that she is a carrier of the HIV virus. She sinks to the floor. She is seven months pregnant.

No Blame, budgeted at \$1.7 million, being shot on 16mm and edited on video, is a co-production of Suissa's 3 Themes Inc. (Canada) and Hamster Productions (France) in association with the Venture Entertainment Group. It is billed as the first made-for-television movie on the subject of a woman with the AIDS virus. Suissa, Shaver and Donald Martin, on whose story the film is based and who co-wrote the screenplay with Suissa, deem the film to be, above all, about 'fear'. Martin placed the scenario amidst the lives of the affluent, white North Americans in order to punctuate the fact that AIDS can affect anyone... and does.

No Blame is a project which got off the ground quickly. Martin, working as a publicist (formerly for Helen Shaver), novelist and screenwriter in Toronto, was having dinner with Helen Shaver's agent Michael Oscars when the subject of AIDS came up in conversation.

They discussed the true story of a woman who had wanted to become pregnant but tested positive to the HIV virus. The story became the starting point for the screenplay *No Blame*. Martin allowed himself three days locked away in a room with a word processor to write the first draft.

Accomplishing what he'd set out to do, Martin then asked his agent to send the script to Suissa with whom he'd become acquainted through his work as a publicist and journalist. Coincidentally, on that same day, Martin bumped into Suissa at the corner of Yonge and Bloor in downtown Toronto, told her about the script he'd written, and personally sparked her interest. She promised to read it as soon as she got back to her office in Montreal. One and a half weeks later, Suissa purchased the option on the screenplay and *No Blame* was set in motion towards production. Within the four days that followed, Suissa made a deal with producer Nicole Godin of Hamster Productions (France) which became the first twinning of Canadian and French productions. *No Blame* was to be the first of two projects. Hamster Productions, prior