

Calgary

Primo Baby

It's the last week of November and the final days on the set of *Primo Baby*, an indigenous Alberta film close to wrapping in Calgary. A band of extras, myself included, is huddled around the crafts van in a parking lot next to the Stampede Light Rail Transit station. It's cold, but luckily there's no snow. In fact, the word "snow" has been banned from the set. Eda Lishman, the film's writer/director, has jokingly threatened to fire anyone who even hints at the possibility.

Primo Baby is Eda Lishman's first feature film, but not the first time that this producer-turned-director has worked with horses and children in the unpredictable fall weather of southern Alberta. Six years ago she braved the weather and the skeptics to produce *The Wild Pony*, an award-winning feature-length made-for-television movie, about a pioneer family's struggle to survive prairie farm life.

The Wild Pony, produced by Lishman and her company, The Producers Ltd., was to be the first of a trio of family films that got put on hold while they worked on distribution and paying back private investors. It took two years. The Producers did well in the American market selling *The Wild Pony* to HBO, Disney and PBS. The market niche was obviously there, but other confidence-building projects took precedence. In the intervening years Lishman worked as production manager on several American features, paid the bills doing commercials and pushed a lot of works by other young writers. When she discovered the *Primo Baby* treatment a few years ago in L.A., she said to herself, "Eda, it's your turn to go as far as you can, and to risk as much as you can artistically."

Within the confines of a two-million-dollar budget Lishman and her The Producers Ltd. partners have taken some major risks with *Primo Baby*, least of all the weather. What was originally a spring picture turned into a fall shoot when some private funding fell through. Undaunted, Lishman made a secret pact with the Calgary chinook winds and the cameras rolled on October 24th. Her unwavering faith in the weather paid off. During the five-week shoot there was only one small snowfall that necessitated sweeping a few city street intersections. "That only happened," Lishman swears, "because I let the staff empty 10 bags of leaves (out of the 30 stored for an emergency) for the wrap party in the studio."

A sense of humour is just one of Lishman's strengths. She is a passionately positive woman who handles crises without crumbling. At one point she almost gave up on *Primo Baby* because she couldn't find a Canadian actress to play the lead role of Paschal, a 15-year-old street-wise teenager. After a cross-country search, she held



Director Eda Lishman, DOP David Herrington and other crew members prepare a shot on *Primo Baby*

an open call in Calgary. In walked Esther Purves-Smith, an 18-year-old high school drama student who had never been in front of a camera before. She had, as Lishman explains, "the look of someone who could have believably been a street kid. Not just the look, but the depth... a waifish, sharp eye."

I know that eye, that look. As an extra, I spent four hours sitting across from Esther on the LRT train riding between the Stampede grounds and Olympic Plaza, trying to get the chase scene just right. Paschal is fleeing from the police who apparently caught her at the racetrack running bets for her petty thief father. She is supposed to shove me and dart through the doors and slink into a seat. The timing is critical and the doors don't cooperate. We make four round trips. I have lots of time to study Esther's face. She looks like a street kid, dressed in ripped jeans with funky pins covering her jacket and gray fedora pulled tightly over her head. "Paschal and I have a lot in common," says Esther, "she's on the run but she's also smart. She's still going to school because she wants to keep her options open."

As the story unfolds, street-wise Paschal gets caught, and is placed as a foster child in the home of a wealthy horse breeder whose son is handicapped. Paschal agrees to stay and "baby-sit" on the condition that she gets a horse to train. She chooses Primo Baby, a thoroughbred with an eye disease that has marked her for the glue factory. The film is a lighthearted action/drama about overcoming handicaps, both physical and emotional.

Esther carries the film. She is in almost every frame. Going with a total unknown was anathema to Lishman's producer's logic but she counters, "When I saw the rushes the first day on Esther I was totally overwhelmed. I said, either I've made the best choice that I've ever

made in my life or I'm not seeing it... maybe I'm really blind here. You can't take your eyes off her; can't get enough of her."

As stories go, *Primo Baby* isn't that unique. But the setting is. It makes no apologies for being Calgary. The cars say Calgary Police and the big race is at the Stampede racetrack. In many ways *Primo Baby* is promoting the city. "We wanted the rest of the world to know that we had some pretty good horse material in this part of the country," says Eric James, one of the co-producers. "We also wanted to show some of the country where these horses are raised and to show that some people are doing very well in the horse business."

The *Primo Baby* cast and crew are 100 per cent Canadian, the majority from Calgary. Janet Laine-Green stars as the trainer/love interest and Duncan Regehr as Primo Baby's wealthy owner. His disabled son is played by Calgary teen Jackson Cole, another new discovery. Funding came from Telefilm, Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation (its second equity investment after Anne Wheeler's *Bye Bye Blues*), National Film Board and private sources.

Lishman can't stop singing the praises of David Herrington, her director of photography. "If *Primo Baby* doesn't make his phone ring, I don't know what will." Herrington and production designer Rick Roberts gave Lishman the environment she wanted, "a western flavour with a cosmopolitan attitude." It's in Paschal's clothes, the furniture in the mansion and the silks on the horses.

Lishman believes in hiring the right people and letting them do their job. As a first-time director her concern was getting performances. Even as an extra I could see that there was a warm unspoken trust between her and Esther as they worked. A grimace or a nod was all it took to signal another take.

The toughest stars to direct were the horses. A confessed animal lover, Lishman met her match with the thoroughbred stock – four different horses stood in for Primo, a three-year-old bay. "I thought I knew what I was doing with horses, but I had no idea that racehorses, thoroughbreds, would be such prima donnas."

Until it's cut, Lishman won't know if she got her culminating race sequence. Instead of the eight or 12 races she needed for footage, the horses broke down after two. "How do you recover from that? You don't," shrugs Lishman. "The horror of that kept going, but I think we pulled it together with bits and pieces of second unit."

"Eda has an immense creative ability to take elements and make them work," says Nives Lever, the film's other co-producer. Lever has watched her work her magic for 10 years. Lishman, James and Lever are The Producers Ltd. They have all learned their craft from the bottom up, wearing all the hats that it takes to make a picture work, on time and on budget. *Primo Baby* has won that race. Now it's up to the editor. The film is due for a theatrical release in June, premiering—where else?—in Calgary.

The Producers Ltd. are on a roll. They learned their lesson after *The Wild Pony*; stay out there hustling new films and leave the distribution to others. In the seed stage is *Charcoal*, based on the book by Hugh Dempsey, associate director of the Glenbow Museum. It's a turn-of-the-century prairie picture about an Indian who kills his wife's lover and is then chased by General Steele, representing white justice.

As Lishman relates the complex story line I chime in, "Sounds like more horses." She frowns and groans, "Oh, God, don't remind me."

Linda Earl •