

soaring like a star

These days, with all the press coverage of the funding and production of features, it's hard to tell the stars from the men who package the films. Below, Gunter Ott gives us a profile of executive producer, Garth Drabinsky.

by Gunter Ott



Garth H. Drabinsky in his law office.

The Silent Partner, a 2.5 million dollar Canadian film starring Elliot Gould, Christopher Plummer and Susannah York recently wrapped up principal photography at the new Toronto Eaton Centre. The shoot marks the first time that the steel and glass commercial palace has been used as a location for a feature film. The production company rented 4,000 square feet of space and built their own bank complete with deposit slips and tellers wearing T-shirts that said things like "Penalty For Early Withdrawal" and "Bankers Do It With More Interest".

The bank also contained real money - \$6000 worth which the producers nervously guarded between shots. The "First Bank of Toronto" set was so convincingly situated in the

concourse among the maze of clothing, shoe and stereo shops that a number of people wandered in to open up accounts or deposit money.

Other locations around town used during the 8 week shoot included the SRO bar in the Hyatt Regency hotel, a house in Thornhill where winter was simulated in the heat of August and the old Sick Children's Hospital which housed the set for a body rub parlor and a police station.

Directed by Daryl Duke, veteran Canadian film and television director, **The Silent Partner** is about a meek bank teller who decides to put a little excitement into his mundane life by robbing his own bank. But excitement wasn't just confined to the storyline. One day, an appeal for extras was broadcast over radio stations CHUM and CFTR, two local rock stations. Almost within minutes, thousands of young people swarmed over the multi-million dollar Eaton Centre complex with visions of stardom dancing in their eyes. What they got was a Silent Partner T-shirt, one dollar, a Big Mac and a milkshake... and of course the chance to see themselves for a fleeting moment up on the giant screen when the film is released next summer.

Executive producer on **The Silent Partner** was Garth Drabinsky, a Toronto lawyer, specializing in the intricate entanglements of the entertainment field, who is carving out a career for himself in theatre and film through his own company, Tiberius Productions. Drabinsky, at 29, has published an authoritative book on Canadian film called *Motion Pictures And The Arts In Canada*. He is a lecturer in Entertainment Law at York University, as well as a recently appointed Fellow of the University.

His interest in film began during his school days when he published the short-lived Canadian cinema magazine *Impact*. Later he was involved in the publication of the *Canadian Film Digest* and produced "Flick Flack" a television show on the Global Network during the 1973/74 season.

Gunter Ott is a freelance writer and photographer from Toronto.

Drabinsky's interest in **The Silent Partner** began when two producers, Joel B. Michaels and Stephen Young came to him with a property written by Hollywood screenwriter Curtis Hanson. Hanson, formerly editor of *Cinema Magazine*, had optioned a suspense novel called *Think Of A Number* by Danish author Anders Bodelson, and developed it into a psychological thriller which he presented to Michaels and Young as **The Silent Partner**.

Drabinsky, convinced that the property was commercially viable, with a good script and excellent dialogue, headed for Cannes to arrange financing, largely through Carolco S.A. of Los Angeles.

As Drabinsky explains it, raising the money wasn't a problem: "If you put together the right package, any film is saleable." Drabinsky has both a good package and what an executive most needs... "a good profile, credibility and an understanding of the economics of the business".

The final package assembled by the three producers (Michaels and Young functioning as line producers) included Daryl Duke as director, Billy Williams (**Women in Love**, **The Magus**) as cinematographer, screenplay by Hanson, music by Oscar Peterson (his first film score) and of course Plummer, York and Gould as the icing on the cake. Choice supporting roles went to Canadian actors Michael Donaghy (*Side Street*), Michael Kirby (**Death Weekend**), funny-man John Candy (**Find The Lady**), blonde bombshell Gail Dahms, and **The Far Shore** leading lady Céline Lomez.

Duke was chosen, claims Drabinsky, because... "he is the finest resident English language director in Canada; he has enough experience from Hollywood to control a film of this magnitude with this calibre of stars." Duke's control was crucial to the 41 day shoot which included 600 set-ups covering 130 pages of script. The style of the film demanded a lot of intricate cutting which had to be exceptionally well planned.

Drabinsky, who describes himself as "an entertainment entrepreneur with a backing in law" is unflinching in his enthusiasm for film. A full third of the bookshelves in his otherwise spartan Bay Street law office is given over to film books; the Mickey Mouse cover of Leslie Halliwell's *The Filmgoer's Companion* sits cheek by jowl with hide-bound legal texts. Drabinsky sees himself playing a major role in the development of the film industry in this country. Though claiming not to seek the limelight like some other producers, he feels that he possesses both the credibility and the financial clout to produce top-notch movies of international stature here in Canada.

To further these ends, he is setting up a distribution arm for his Tiberius Productions which will handle **The Silent Partner** and his future projects. Drabinsky is already developing a new property but stresses that he is "not just looking for things to do... it's a question of finding quality things to do. I want always to improve and to take pride in what I see on the screen."

The Silent Partner is the second film that Drabinsky has produced in the last year. He already has a hot property on his hands with **The Disappearance**, an Anglo-Canadian co-pro starring Donald Sutherland, Francine Racette and Christopher Plummer, that wrapped in January.

But, not content to rest on his laurels, Drabinsky has lost no time in promoting the newer film. Barely a week after principal photography had ended for **The Silent Partner**, he already claimed to have sold 12 territories and was momentarily expecting the clincher - the crucial American deal.

Though Drabinsky considers himself a producer in the classic model, like Sam Goldwyn, perhaps a more accurate comparison would be to Irving Thalberg, the young "Wunderkind" of Hollywood in the early thirties who was total-



Drabinsky chats with the crew at the Eaton Centre

ly engrossed in both the craft and the business of every film under his control.

During the shooting of **The Silent Partner**, Drabinsky appeared on the set every day to, as he puts it... "add weight to business decisions, see that the schedule was adhered to and make sure that the script was followed without deviation. I am what you call a non-absentee producer."

His presence had its effect. Despite the complexity of locations and the difficulties of filming in the crowded concourse of the Toronto Eaton Centre, the film came in only a week over schedule and members of the cast and crew were still friendly towards one another. Indeed, few, if any, personality clashes seem to have erupted even with the occasionally "difficult" Gould.

"Elliot was remarkable... the man is a prince, committed totally to the film (which he thinks is his best since Bergman's **The Touch**). He is in almost every scene and was always thoroughly rehearsed when he appeared on the set," says Drabinsky. "Susannah and Christopher were more moody but still thoroughly professional."

The only real blemish to mar Drabinsky's enthusiasm over the film is his exasperation with special effects. "The level of competence in special effects in this country is disastrous. Up to now, if a difficulty was called for, you just wrote it out of the script. That's how they do things in Canada." But Drabinsky admits, the fault lies not so much with the people as with the lack of experience.

"Special effects people in Canada haven't been forced to do the level of effects that Hollywood demands. The same thing occurs with stuntmen." When asked how this situation could be rectified, Drabinsky suggested simply that IATSE (the union responsible for technicians) take all their stuntmen and special effects people down to Hollywood to get some real training.

Since he believes that "it takes almost the same amount of aggravation and energy to produce a low budget film as it does to create a multi-million dollar movie," Drabinsky doesn't intend to consider any project that requires less than a three million dollar budget. He expects his next, as yet undisclosed, project to be budgeted at around 4-5 million. That, plus the setting up of his distribution company, arranging at least one major live production and one feature film every year, and maintaining his law practice, keeps Garth Drabinsky soaring like a shooting star.

Giving birth to a film is never simple. But with both **The Disappearance** and **The Silent Partner** looking as though they may be international successes, Drabinsky certainly makes it all appear so easy. Wunderkind - right?