

# a) filmmaking as a political primer

by Peter Pearson

**The Insurance Man from Ingersoll** arrived on my doorstep like a gift in the spring of 1975.

I had spent two years of my life as President of the Directors Guild and Chairman of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers, attempting to juggle various governments, their agencies and crown corporations into allowing us a film industry. Minutious research, constant lobbying conferences and seminars, appearances before standing committees and sitting committees, representations to private members and public officials, civil and uncivil servants. And all to little avail.

Discouraged by my minimal success, I resigned both positions.

The two years however bore some personal insights and begrudging rewards. I had been struck by the similarity between the political process and that of filmmaking.

Both are blood sports: combative, dangerous, invigorating, frustrating and I suppose cathartic. The immense effort to realize even the most picayune result seemed so closely alike in the two fields of endeavour that at the end I could no longer tell whether I had spent two years and ten days in politics in order to make films, or ten years and two days in filmmaking in order to practice politics.

**The Insurance Man from Ingersoll** script amplified that reverberation.

The story was politics. It was Ontario not Federal, it was Construction, not Film, it was the Attorney General, not the Secretary of State. But essentially, it was the same story. Politicians, public servants, good guys and bad guys (we at the CCFM had always called ourselves the good guys), and the omnipresent awareness that power was somewhere else. For me it couldn't have been more perfect. And it was a story, not about the corruption within the society, but about the labyrinthine machinations of government.

Producers Ralph Thomas and Stephen Patrick of the CBC are both ex-journalists. Norman Hartley, the original writer of the script works as a full time reporter for the Toronto *Globe and Mail*. I also had some background as a journalist. So we set about our task of preparing the script with a similar bias.

We were determined to tell the story in as fastidious and accurate a fashion as possible, filling in the myriad of details, abundance of characters and complexity of fact that the story demanded. The finished script reflected most of our concerns, ...dense beyond anything previously tried for television, and yet hopefully clear. It ended up with 77 scenes for 51 minutes; eight principal characters, one main plot and six or seven subplots. Sequences had to be reduced to one scene... scenes often to one line. And it had to be, above all... a film... with a story, characters, plot, action, conflict, locations.

The story also dealt with a milieu, most often shunned by television drama... the movers and groovers. As Sheila Kieran has so aptly pointed out, Canadian Films tend to deal with the lower middle class of our society. The impotent, frustrated, and uncomprehending who react from day to day without visible direction to their lives. Two films of mine, **Best Damn Fiddler from Calabogie to Kaladar**, and **Paperback Hero** certainly were from that mould.

By the start of shooting we knew that we were dealing with something different... and chancy. Some poohbahs with-

in the drama department didn't understand the script, others thought the material a little too close to reality, still others carp about the intricacy of the tale.

So we wobbled into production. Ten days shooting at breakneck pace. Finally, only the excellence of the crew under assistant director Don Buchsbaum, made the production possible. Often we could not, because of the pressure of schedule, afford several locations. Cameraman Vic Sarin was often forced to make one set serve for several locations: by changing the camera angle, altering the lighting, or varying the style of shooting. Peter Razmofsky completed the effect with the props.

The cast, another hazard according to the Chief Poobah was uniformly good, and in three instances at least, excellent. We chose the actors more for their own political savvy than their acting abilities. As a result, we ended up with many who were not, by definition, actors. People like Mike Magee, primarily a commentator and satirist, Warren Davis, and David Gardiner, both better known as an announcer and a director respectively.

Post production was entrusted to three old associates, Jim Hopkins with the sound editing, Eric Robertson with the music and Joe Grimaldi with the mix. Myrtle Virgo edited the complex weave into an integral film.

Discretion forbids that all the intricate political scenes behind the camera be recounted. Suffice it to say that **The Insurance Man from Ingersoll** became a house of mirrors. A film about politics based on the politics of film with a story using a film cameraman covering politics. All wrapped up in the politics of filmmaking within the CBC. Everywhere one looked, the situation was reflecting back on itself. But hardly in a narcissistic way.

The privileges I was accorded to see the inside of the political system while head of the CCFM make me now realize how little we all know about power and its administration in this country.

Because Canadian filmmakers have been so long disenfranchised the great majority of their stories and myths are about the disenfranchised. And perhaps it's only when we insist upon our own film industry that we will then make films about the forces that move our society and their influences on our lives. □



Peter Pearson, director of **The Insurance Man from Ingersoll**.

photo Paul Smith

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