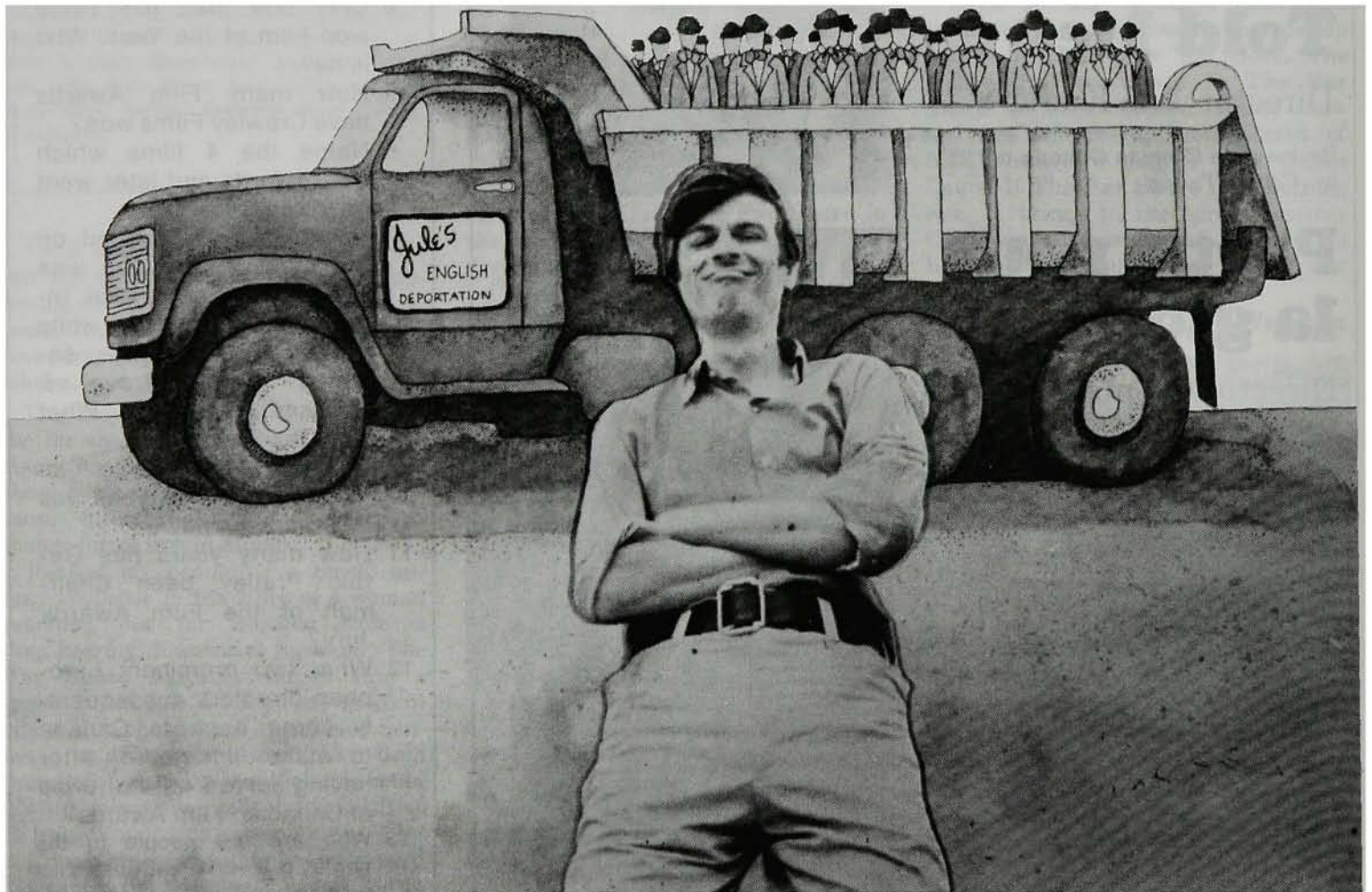


# the testing ground

While many eyes are on Toronto and the Awards, the majority of Canadians are still out in the 'regions' oblivious or indifferent to the fancy goings-on. During Atlantic Film Week (Sept. 28-30), Connie Tadros had a chance to visit the Atlantic Regional Studio of the National Film Board and wonders about the implications of the regionalization program.

by Connie Tadros



Truck; why not deport the English?

What business is it of the National Film Board of Canada to become the spearhead of a movement in the Atlantic regions to turn people on to filming, to fund local filming co-ops, to set up an editing table in the basement of the Federal Building in Charlottetown? What business has the NFB getting into a "continuing working relationship" with Memorial University – which seems to have cornered the market on filming hardware in Newfoundland anyway. Why did it fly in Verna Fields and screen **American Graffiti** and **Jaws** – two films which she has edited – in order to entice people to come to Halifax and talk about filming? What is "regionalization" all about anyway?

"In 1970," says Rex Tasker, executive producer of the NFB Atlantic Regional, "we had a big austerity crisis and we felt that the National Film Board was in serious danger of either being abolished or cut down radically. That created great turmoil..." After analyzing what had gone wrong at the Board and trying to foresee what the future could promise, Tasker and others hit upon the idea of regionalization. A few years later he made a concrete proposal to the NFB and moved to Halifax to open up the studio which is now three years old.

In fact, when one analyzes the activities of the Atlantic office, it does look like the model which is being suggested in studies to reorient the NFB in general. The training program is there; Tasker is working with a restricted number of filmmakers, giving them enough experience to qualify them professionally. The involvement with the exhibition of non-NFB films is apparent in several of its programs. And certainly, the trial of the computer distribution system echoes the will of the NFB to become the clearing house for certain kinds of Canadian films other than those produced by the CBC.

The accomplishments of the studio are well outlined by Tasker (see box). In Halifax, no one seems to question the appropriateness of the Board's involvement in the nascent filming communities... except, perhaps, the few people involved in private film companies.

## An Overview

Because of the distances involved, filming in the four Atlantic provinces is an isolated undertaking. In all, there are three functioning production companies: ABS Productions in Dartmouth which does some commercial work and provides post-production sound services; Cal Film Productions which owns Eastern Film Labs in Halifax and has opened a second lab in Moncton; and Fiddlehead Productions in Fredericton, 99% of whose work consists of sponsored films for the New Brunswick government. Then there is Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland, whose Media Section, Extension Service, seems to be the best equipped, most active and longest-lived film crew around, thanks to its early involvement with the NFB's Challenge for Change. Add two co-ops (one in Halifax and one in St. John's, Newfoundland), a few film crews for local CBC and CTV news services, an isolated filmmaker or two, and that's filmmaking in the Atlantic Provinces. Minus the NFB.

## The NFB

Tasker would like to avoid institutionalizing the relationships he is building with other groups and organizations in the regions. "There's a fine line between the sort of family thing we've had going, on the one hand, and the *organization* on the other... We've got to find a way somewhere in between because one is paternalistic or patronizing and the other is the *system* again." And that is indeed the challenge. How can the Board grow and flourish without dominating all filming activity in the region?

Tasker's goal is to "open new doors and treat people reasonably, intelligently and sympathetically". He relies on feedback to keep his filmmakers in touch with the people, and trusts that this will keep their work pertinent.

## The Production

From the ten-odd films screened in Halifax, the production is generally competent, locally oriented and sane. The NFB films are useful films as the titles (**The Islanders**, **Halifax Music**, **Tara's Mulch Garden**) denote. The most imaginative film (not to say the most subversive) was **Truck** by Robert Awad which combined animation and a performance by its screenwriter Jules Bourdereau, which made for a quick, crazy little film about a man, his truck and *les maudits anglais*. The most worthy films were the ones which used archival material to trace the history of the region. **The Islanders** by Brian Pollard uses old stills and drawings to recapture the early days of the settlers, shipbuilders and fishermen of Prince Edward Island. Kent Martin has just finished an hour-long documentary, **Moses Coady**, which tells the story of a zealous Cape Breton priest who was responsible for the foundation of the co-operative movement in the Maritimes.

The film co-ops got together for an evening of screenings as well, and, though the films seldom lacked imagination, the scripts were weak and the production values low. Only two filmmakers seemed in control of their work. **Watercolor** by Richard Davies was a brief, graceful study of swans made interesting by the play of light and color. John Brett had two films, **Two Brothers** and **Voices From a Landscape**, which documented the life on a southern Nova Scotia island where a handful of Acadians settled long ago and now eke out an existence. Brett's inquisitive mind and willingness to get involved with his subjects made the films lively and coherent. But, all in all, if the co-ops were in competition with the NFB, the Board would win hands down. Which simply raises the question once again: what is the goal of the regional studios and what should their involvement with the film communities in the regions be?

## The Week

It was interesting to me that given the Atlantic Film Week and the chance to get to know the region, the Board, and its filmmakers better, the in-house meetings of the NFB which took place during the week were closed to observers. I should have liked to sit in when the commissioner told the staff members of the NFB that funds for regional production will soon be considerably increased. And then there was a regional production meeting involving heads of departments from Montreal and regional representatives from as far away as Vancouver. What better chance to find out what was really going on!

Alas, the only open meeting was one where members of the Atlantic distribution services and the film officers described their functions. The office is sponsoring a series of programs of Canadian films, both features and shorts, NFB and independent, throughout the region at cut rates: a sort of mobile cinémathèque. The seven distribution offices within the region are brought together through a lively *Atlantic Newsletter* written at the NFB which contains film news from all sectors of the community. These offices are also experimenting with a system of computerized distribution which the Board will adopt across the country if the trial is successful. This meeting gave rise to the only argument I heard during my stay; one which merits attention.



Medoonak the stormmaker; the re-enacting of an Indian myth

## The Argument

One of the protagonists was missing: the color control officers from the Montreal office. About three years ago it was decided that only one color control would be used at the Board, and since the NFB (Montreal), and the CBC have installed modern, cool-light xenon projectors, as have most of the commercial movie theatres, all prints are balanced for xenon projectors. The only trouble is that few people in the Atlantic provinces – including the NFB – have a xenon projector. The same prints, seen through a hot-light tungsten projector, are “warm”; faces become magenta and certain films become disagreeable to watch. Try **Halifax Music**, for example. The technical officer who brought the subject up chided the distribution officers for agreeing to circulate such inappropriate prints.

## In Lieu of Conclusions, Questions

This problem is of real importance to the users of NFB films. The local schools and libraries will not convert their projectors in the foreseeable future and will have to put up with less than perfect prints.

But it is also symbolic and raises the question of whether the NFB is ready to reorganize itself to render service to the regions. Or are the regional offices to serve as a stopgap, a lifesaver for the Board which is being seriously challenged?

What did seem clear was that, despite the goodwill and enthusiasm of the Atlantic Regional office, the federal filmmaking policy is hardly clarified by the creation of NFB regional offices. Should the regional offices be soliciting sponsored films when the Tompkins report recommends that the NFB get out of the sponsored field? Should they be training filmmakers when the graduates from present film schools can not find work? Should they be adding to the mass of governmental productions already made at the CBC and seen on television when there is no evident willingness on the part of the CBC to buy films made in the private sector? One can only hope that a film policy will soon be forthcoming which will deal with these questions. □

## NFB Atlantic Regional Office



Rex Tasker

The Atlantic Region Production Unit of the National Film Board of Canada was established in Halifax, N. S., in April, 1973.

The main aim of the studio was threefold – to make good films about or relevant to the four provinces; to provide an opportunity for local filmmakers to develop and work without leaving their home provinces; to do whatever possible to create a vigorous film/video community.

Three years later we can point to the following results:

Eighteen films completed and twelve in production. (All of them directed by residents of the Atlantic Region.)

Co-production of a special CBC network TV ‘them-ed evening’, *Atlanticanada*, followed by a NFB/CBC 90-minute live audience response telecast in the Maritimes.

The establishment of a Video Theatre open to the community at large. One of the objects of the Board’s involvement in small-gauge video is to explore its technical limits, and one production received a French-language network telecast, again followed by audience feedback.

Permanent editing rooms have been set up in Charlottetown, PEI and Saint John, N.B.

A continuing working relationship has been developed with both Memorial University Extension Service in St. John’s, Newfoundland, and CBC, Halifax.

Financial help and advice have been given to the newly established film co-ops in Halifax and St. John’s.

Formal training has been given to eight local filmmakers, all of whom are now working consistently in production. In addition, another 15-20 freelancers have been employed in various capacities.

Extensive help and advice has been given to schools, universities, community groups and both federal and provincial government departments.

Establishment of a regional chapter of the SMPTE.

The regular publication (with the Distribution Department) of a regional film/video newsletter.

The organization of an Atlantic Film Week, an intensive get-together of regional film people, other NFB regional studio representatives, and heads of departments of NFB in Montreal.

Introduction of a NFB/CBC Atlantic Films TV show in January 1977. Each program will be followed by audience feedback.

Outside the Board’s own jurisdiction, new film labs have been set up in Moncton and Charlottetown, and a sound studio is in operation in Dartmouth, N. S.

Various provincial government departments are now starting to fund more films than previously.

All in all, we are pleased with our results to date but, in the future, we hope to do better.

**Rex Tasker**  
Executive Producer  
NFB Atlantic Region