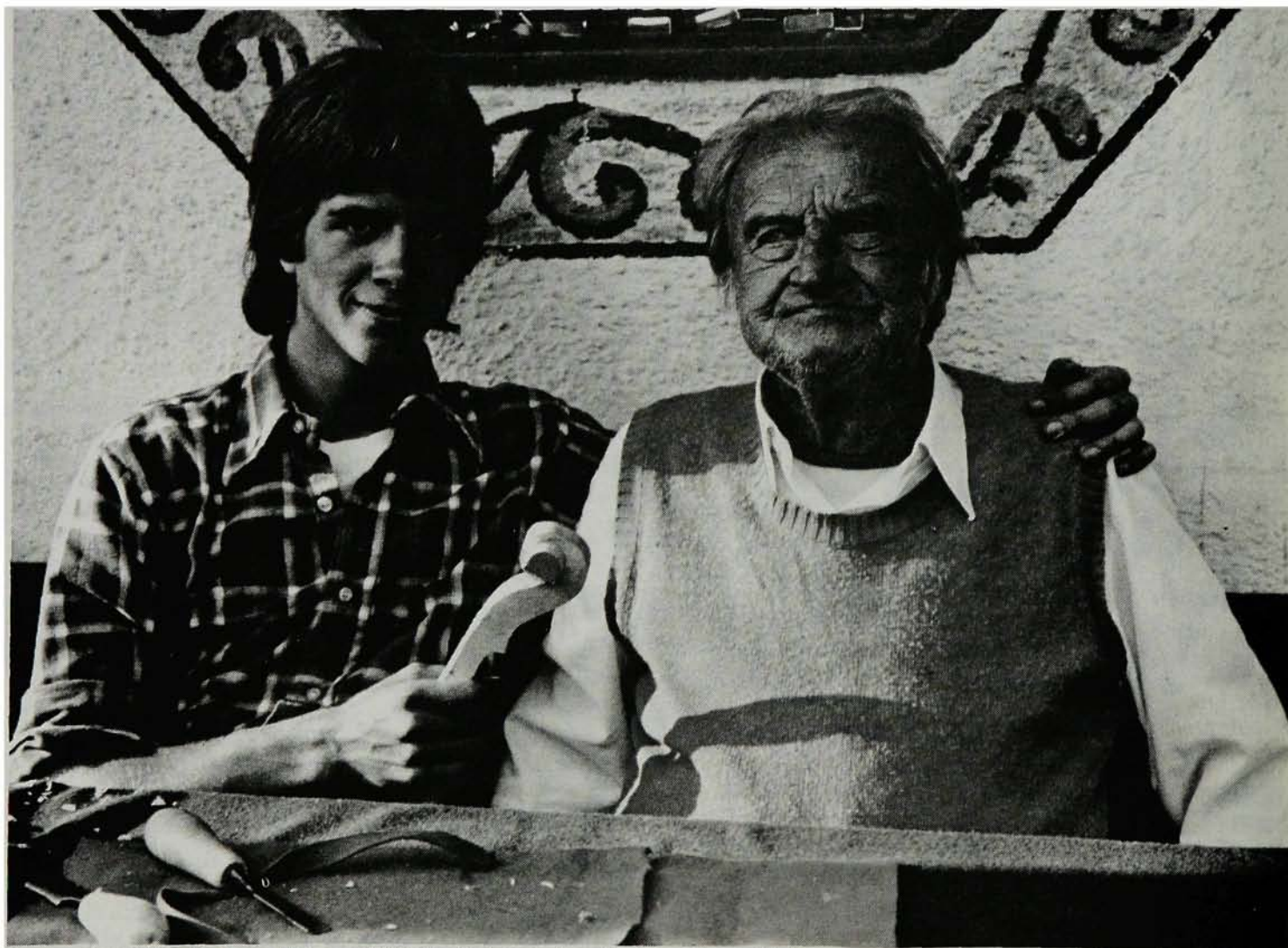

sunrise films

young hands, old skills

by gerry flahive

Globe-trotting filmmakers, Paul and Deepa Saltzman, are out to record ancient craft traditions before they disappear. Their film series on crafts-children from around the world contains a provocative message.



16 year-old Steffan Keller and his grandfather in Germany: from the film *Steve's Violin*

A few desks, some wicker baskets, and a battered Steenbeck editing table were about all that occupied the new offices of Sunrise Films in mid-December. After making thirteen films for a documentary series, in almost as many countries, the small Toronto company has moved into its first real production office. (Previously, everything was done from the owners' apartment.)

Spread Your Wings is the title of the series, which celebrates the inventiveness and dedication to craft of thirteen young people. Paul Saltzman, who, with his wife Deepa and associate Fred Harris, undertook the project, feels that more should be shown and said "about the creativity of humans and a little less about the destructiveness of humans — a little more positive imagery, a little less shoot'em-up."

In the early seventies, while making a film in India about a Canadian diplomat, Paul saw children working at a tourist store that made inlaid marble tables, chess sets, and boxes. "It just sort of blew my mind, watching those eight and ten year-old kids... really masterful craftsmen" — their work, "the offshoot of the creative tradition that you see in the Taj Mahal."

That scene started him thinking about his own culture, in which a college degree, though frequently 'useless', is seemingly mandatory as proof of education. He later wrote that, "True education is a co-ordination of the hands and the mind in the direction of a better life" — an idea that generated four films on the subject, focusing on children between the ages of ten and sixteen. India was chosen as the setting.

Initial support for the project came from Rena Krawanga, an officer at CBC's program purchasing department, who made a commitment for two of the films and provided some seed money. "Absolutely a gem, she's one of a kind," says Saltzman. "She goes out on a limb all the time, as much as she can, to help young filmmakers get started. She's terrific."

Two films, **Hasan The Carpet Weaver** and **Child Of Gold**, each twenty-five minutes in length and shot in colour, were completed during 1975 and 1976. But lack of money and a tiring workload cut the trip short, and the team returned to Canada without making the second two films planned. Still, they had been impressed by the childrens' talents, and were convinced that the potential number of such films was limited only by the number of different crafts around the world.

Making a series now seemed a natural idea, although that had not been the original intention. The Saltzmans realized that the two finished films could be presented as pilots, and they approached the CBC with a proposal to make eleven more. "That's the way the business runs anyway. You do a series by doing a pilot, to show people what the films look like. As small, independent filmmakers, we had never thought as big as a series until that moment."

Fifteen months passed before a contract for **Spread Your Wings** was signed with the CBC. During this time, Sunrise made about twenty films, most only a few minutes in length. Exceptional individuals, who show formidable spirit and a strong commitment to their work, whatever it

may be, are the usual subjects of the company's films.

What's The Weather Like Up There? is a particularly entertaining example. It is a portrait of Louis Lim, an Asian immigrant to Canada. Despite his extensive banking experience, he has only been able to find work in the cashier's booth of the underground parking lot below (ironically) the Commerce Court building in Toronto. But he is resolutely cheerful, an admirable husband and father, and a knowledgeable music lover.

India has been a rich source for the Saltzmans' work. Deepa was born there, and wrote children's scripts at a cinema workshop in New Delhi. The couple met in the country while Paul was shooting a film there, and they later collaborated on an interview-documentary about Indira Gandhi, made during the 'political emergency' crisis. Deepa has also directed a film for the Indian Ministry of Family Planning. So when arrangements for **Spread Your Wings** were settled with the French and English divisions of the CBC in 1977, the filmmakers had a considerable output behind them.

The process of finding eleven subjects for eleven films proved to be a lengthy and expensive one. The World Craft Council in New York "knew very little about what kids were doing in creativity." \$750 spent on phone calls to officials in France produced nothing. The Romanian government wouldn't say yes and wouldn't say no. And when the Saltzmans and Harris arrived in West Germany, their subject, a boy pianist, was unavailable for a week. He was also a child prodigy — a type they definitely did not want to film. The child prodigy, as a very elite member of



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Filmmakers Paul and Deepa Saltzman — with good reason to be on top of the world

society, was hardly a suitable subject for a series intending to inspire anyone, artistic or not.

Flexibility became crucial, and much of the \$50,000 to \$60,000 allotted for each film was spent on logistics — digging out information themselves, and changing locations if necessary. In most situations, it took them eighteen to twenty days, once they were in a country, to find a subject and make the film. In Japan, however, almost three weeks were spent finding and making arrangements with Yoshiko, a young girl learning paper-making. The filming took another two weeks.

In total, four trips, including the first one to India, were made. The second trip, in 1977, took them to Germany, Iran, Greece, and France. The filmmakers travelled twice in 1978, visiting Zanzibar, Florida, and Peru in the spring, and Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand, and Bali in the fall. They were never able to screen any of their rushes, as exposed footage was immediately shipped back to Canada along the way.

In each case, several days were spent with the child, observing his or her daily routine, before any filming was

begun. For the narration, the subjects were interviewed and their comments made into a script, with whatever explanatory information was needed. Saltzman felt it would be “easier and more correct, more alive to use their own words about their own feelings and their own lives, than for us to try and make up what they felt.”

The **Spread Your Wings** films “were never straight documentaries.” Saltzman uses the term ‘docu-tainment’ to describe them — fast cutting, lots of music, and a story line with a beginning, middle and end. While the ordinary, half-hour documentary contains 100 to 200 shots, the films in their series have as many as 450.

The subject of crafts gave them “a visual representation to build the film around — something got made, something got created that the camera could watch coming into fruition.” Narration was cut to a minimum.

Each film shows a child reaching a level of maturity as a craftsman, the creation of beautiful objects being an integral part of their lives. Great respect is shown for elders and tradition, for religion and nature, for family and friendship. Problems are not glossed over, and, at one



From the film **Hasan the Carpet Weaver**, 12 year-old Hasan Gulam Ohar and his grandfather in Kashmir

point in the Japanese film, the young girl feels like quitting her apprenticeship.

Music indigenous to each country was used, and in **Journey To Zanzibar**, a film about boat-building, the filmmakers tried to edit the ship-launching scene to represent the way in which they had experienced it — a happy, frenetic party attended by the whole town. Japanese people, after seeing **Yoshiko And The Paper Maker**, said that in terms of film language, it looked and felt Japanese.

So far, nine of the series' installments have appeared on the CBC, and sales have been made to countries as varied as Denmark, India, Japan, New Zealand, Hong Kong, and others. Interestingly, **Through Amy's Eyes**, about a young Florida photographer, is the only one of the thirteen not purchased by Swedish television. Although it has been called "a real anthropological document, a view of Middle America," Saltzman thinks the Swedes may be rejecting it because "they may feel there is nothing to be learned from it" and are perhaps "ill at ease at seeing the richness of their own (Western) culture." Ironically, this film may be the very one that sells the series in the States. Americans like to see their own image. "Witness," says Saltzman, "the

disguising of Toronto as Metropolis USA, in features shot here designed for American consumption."

Paul, who has worked at the CBC and at the National Film Board, once thought that independent filmmakers were "a bunch of bloodthirsty, cutthroat, selfish money-grubbers." Now, as a private producer himself, he has sought to improve the financial situation for independents.

In 1975, the Independent Producers Group, an umbrella organization of seven Toronto production companies, sent a letter drafted by Saltzman to the Secretary of State, in which an appeal was made for the inclusion of short films in the 100% tax write-off provision. That, for various reasons, later occurred, and Sunrise now receives some private investment. The organization (see Cinema Canada No. 21) is now known as the Canadian Independent Film Foundation.

Sunrise starts production early in the new year in Guatemala, the site of the first of thirteen more films for **Spread Your Wings**. Two of the films will be made in the Peoples' Republic of China, permission for which took two years to secure. Two will be shot in Canada (in British Columbia and on the coast of Hudson's Bay), and the rest, tentatively, in Sweden, the U.S.S.R., Nigeria, Ethiopia, Burma, Bhutan, Australia, and the Tonga Islands.

In their efforts to seek out young creativity, in their devotion to quality, in their 'praise of hands', the filmmakers of Sunrise Films would be good subjects for their own series: **Spread Your Wings** is truly "a co-ordination of the hands and the mind." □

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