

## **INDEPENDENT FILMS IN CANADA TODAY**

A generation ago, the idea of a "hot" documentary was that it be coolly objective. They were noted for being unbiased pieces that made no reference to the filmmaker's presence. The camera was supposed to be an impersonal eye reporting facts for the viewer to appraise. They were raw data helping us form an opinion. The seeming contradiction today is that some Canadian documentaries are gaining international attention precisely because the filmmaker has made a personal connection with his or her film.

As the poet Rilke said, "Surely all art is the result of having gone through an experience all the way to the end... The further one goes the more private, the more personal, the more singular an experience becomes..."

One person, whose company is getting attention these days is Peter d'Entremont, head of Triad Films in Halifax, Nova Scotia. His award winning films show his over twenty-five years of experience in both drama and documentary production. But regardless of the format it is the personal story that motivates his work. As a writer as well as director and producer he mainly is attracted to the emotional side of storytelling.

Teresa MacInnes, John Houston and Rohan Fernando, three filmmakers at Triad with very different backgrounds and experiences, are each having films screened this year. Teresa MacInnes, who began making films as a social worker and has several documentary credits to her name, is finalizing her plans to present "Waging Peace" at an international peace education event held in Korea this July.

John Houston, a filmmaker with over twenty years experience, has been invited to screen "Nuliajuk: Mother of the Sea Beasts" at the inaugural British Museum Arctic Film Festival in London England at the end of June.

Not yet thirty, Rohan Fernando is a painter who has just finished his first documentary film, "Cecil's Journey," which will air on Vision TV in August. Each director has undertaken a personal journey in order to make a deeply felt film.

Teresa MacInnes remembers that when Peter d'Entremont first approached her about making a film about bullying, she felt his strong conviction to explore this subject. Connecting with a school that was working with this issue came easier than she expected.

"I don't think kids are as crazy and destructive as the media portrays them," Teresa says. "Kids are not more violent these days, they are just abandoned more. Even when teenagers are trying to pull away from adults, that is when they need us the most."

"I am always scared when I begin to shoot a film that it will come to nothing," she continues, "I try to put myself in a situation where I hope something will happen. I always hope I've put enough elements in place."

It took 80 hours of filming to assemble this 70 minute documentary, which aired on CTV last September. "It was the most difficult project I worked on because everyone in the school was burnt out and suspicious," she explains.

MacInnes' objective was to become invisible, allowing students and teachers to be themselves in front of the camera. "By letting people tell their stories, with relatively little interference, I like to think I too can make a difference."

"Making films is hard work," Teresa explains, elaborating on

the pressures a director faces. "You are trying to control and let go at the same time. It is difficult to hold on to your vision yet be responsive to everyone -- the crew, the people being filmed, the producer. A film company ought to encourage people to make socially relevant, artistic documentaries that have intelligence and depth," she says. "I am indebted to Peter d'Entremont because he believed in me, took a risk and supported my vision. I try to show him I'm grateful by making the best film I can. It is because of him that 'Waging Peace' exists."

Though political in nature, "Waging Peace" is ultimately personal. It is as though filmmaker, crew, students and teachers were brought together to be confronted with each other in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of themselves and others. "The process of peaceful mediation is a journey, not a destination. What happened in Caledonia Junior High School, where "Waging Peace" was filmed, is a microcosm of what is happening all over the world," MacInnes says.

Currently MacInnes and d'Entremont are at work on the film-in-progress, "Teaching Peace," about Heddy van Gorp, founder of "The League of Peaceful Schools." "What intrigues me about Heddy is the incredible drive she has because of what happened to her," MacInnes says. "She showed me we all can do something about what is happening in the world."

Ten years ago, van Gorp's fourteen year-old son was killed on school grounds, a victim of bullying. "No child is born with the compelling urge to hurt someone else," van Gorp says. She believes it's the responsibility of all adults to show children more peaceful ways of interacting. Now van Gorp has begun to expand her work internationally. MacInnes plans to join her and record her methods of peaceful mediation as van Gorp travels to some of the most troubled areas in the world - Macedonia, Serbia and Ireland. The

theme of transformation inherent in this documentary, underlies each film Peter d'Entremont produces. He is interested in the stories of individuals who, in quiet ways, effect powerful changes.

John Houston's films about the North and its people also reveal the power of the individual, and how this power is strengthened in community. His first documentary, "Songs In Stone" is both a recounting of the historic contribution his parents, James and Alma Houston, made to Inuit Art, as well as a personal account of how the Houston family was transformed by the values of the Inuit when they lived among them. Yet when he first set out to make this documentary he couldn't find a broadcaster. "Nobody wanted me to make this film because it was about my family and they didn't trust the son to tell his own story and the story of his parents," Houston recalls.

D'Entremont understood that Houston was the only person who could tell the story. "Songs in Stone," went on to win numerous awards internationally and in Canada, including a Silver Chris Award for the best arts film at the Columbus International Film Festival.

Houston attributes this success to the special collaboration he has with d'Entremont. "Instead of making me feel I have to adjust myself to a mold, Peter challenges me to come up with the best possible telling of the story," Houston says. "I am five years into the process of working with Triad and I have never been made to feel my story is being subjugated."

Houston is determined to do whatever it takes to find the essential story, because, in his view, filmmaking is all about the passion you have for the story you tell. The Arctic is fertile ground for Houston; his first two documentaries, "Songs in Stone," and "Nuliajuk: Mother of the Sea Beasts," were filmed there. His third, "Diet of Souls," which is in development, is again set in the North.

"Making a film you love makes you feel life isn't on hold, but that you are fully living it," Houston says. While filming the second documentary about the ancient Inuit Deity Nuliajuk, Houston was confronted by a surprising revelation. The story of Nuliajuk, who was driven underground by the church and missionaries, encompasses his story as well; like the dog-children in the story, he too was hauled out of the Arctic as a child.

"Nuliajuk: Mother of the Sea Beasts" begins slowly, the haunting comparisons pile up, the ecstasy and wildness surge faster and faster until the viewer is right there in the tent with the shaman. Certain this man has journeyed beneath the water to the house of Nuliajuk, where only a real shaman can go. "I can truly say I know Her: Nuliajuk," the shaman says and we have no doubt he is telling the truth.

"It is inordinately complicated to make a film," Houston explains. No one can do it all on his or her own, which is why he is grateful to Peter d'Entremont. Both he and Peter believe that the best tool they have is the people they work with. "The secret is to motivate people to share the director's vision. I believe every single human being wants to excel and do something excellent," John says, but he also believes that people must be allowed to make mistakes and experiment in order for movies to be successful. Houston and d'Entremont make an immense effort to get the best crew they can and then, whenever possible, they hire them on future films. Most of the crew for their Arctic Trilogy remain the same. "There is fluidity in each of our roles," Houston says, explaining he wants his filmmaking to be independent of hierarchy.

This is how Rohan Fernando feels as well. "Anyone who has made a film of value has made him or herself vulnerable, to themselves and the world around them," Fernando says. "

That is where the emotional impact is," he explains. "You can't distance yourself when you make a film."

Fernando began his career as a self taught painter but found the audience for painting too limited. "The audience's response to film is far more dramatic," Rohan says. "In film you take the audience along with you on the journey." Yet if he had known everything he was going to be up against he wonders if he would have gone into filmmaking in the first place. Rohan Fernando's film, "Cecil's Journey," is the tale of a young Canadian's return to Sri Lanka to visit his roots. Rohan, or Cecil as he is known in the film, comes face to face with a war- torn and ethnically divided country, problems which are paralleled in Rohan's own family.

By documenting his family's history, Rohan renders a microcosm of Sri Lanka, and one gets a compelling view of what it was like to live in this country. "There is so much metaphor and symbolism in this film," Rohan says. "The war in Sri Lanka feels tied to my own family's breakup." Without focusing on the family, it would have been hard to grapple with the larger political issues in the country. Yet when Rohan originally conceived of the film he did not intend to visit his family, but planned to make a purely intellectual film, exploring the countryside, interviewing Buddhist monks, soldiers, peasants, all the while searching for subjects and scenery to paint. Producer Peter d'Entremont had a hunch that the core of Rohan's story lay in his reunion with his family. Ironically, what Rohan most wanted to avoid turned out to be where the heart of the project lay.

"I would never have made this movie had it not been for Peter d'Entremont," Fernando says. "He believed not only my personal story would emerge from this journey home, but a larger story would unfold as well, and he was right."

It's startling to see what family skeletons were hidden for so long and what Rohan discovered while filming. Though he

had always had theories about why his family broke up, what had been a blurred story for so long began to clarify itself as he shot hour after hour of film. He never would have predicted the film's surprising outcome.

Rohan considers "Cecil's Journey" to be his pivotal work. It has allowed him to see connections between his personal story and his motivations to try and make sense of the larger world.

"The project reflects me and I've embraced that because it's the individual voice that makes film its most vital," Rohan says. "For film to be art it must touch on the eternal and universal and that can only be found in the personal."

It is the personal element in documentaries that is causing such excitement today. "Triad Films shouldn't exist in this market-driven world, but it does," John Houston says. At Triad, Peter d'Entremont has created the opportunity for filmmakers to tell the stories they need to tell by encouraging them to maintain the integrity with which they started out. In the opinion of those who work with him, d'Entremont does this out of commitment to the community and a deep sense of social responsibility.

"The biggest obstacle," Peter says, "is not financial. It's to think ahead. To fight reduction. To overcome limits of format and approach. It's convincing others to engage and value our creative talent and to find support for the artistic expression which – be very clear about this -will one day become our cultural footprint."