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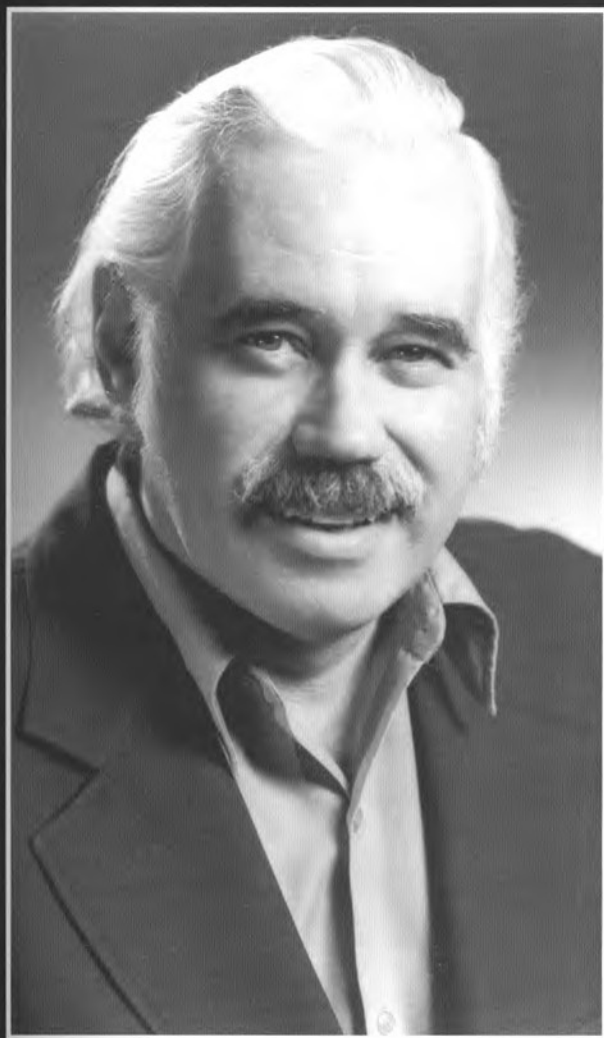


the Beginning

William Davidson's & Norman Klenman's *Now That April's Here*

BY Peter Morris

"Bill and I did Now That April's Here. Even to finance, get it shown – every conceivable obstacle. People laughed, put us down. The newspapers built us up to put us down. They took such glee in it." Norman Klenman



Director: William Davidson; left, Judy Welch.

It still seems the height of audacity if not foolishness. Two young men, having written and directed a few short dramas, truly believed they could kick-start a feature-film industry in Toronto in the 1950s. Bill Davidson and Norman Klenman had both worked for the NFB and discovered a shared interest in filming dramas. Both were convinced that Canadian literature was a major untapped source for feature films. They moved to Toronto from Montreal in 1955 to work freelance for CBC television and develop their own projects. Davidson was 29 and Klenman 34 when they purchased the rights to four short stories by Morley Callaghan. Although later they said they would never have done it if they knew then what they know now, at the time, according to Klenman, "We were compelled by the idea that Canadians were basically as good as anyone else and that our country should have an industry that reflected its own life."

Toronto-born Bill Davidson joined the NFB in 1948 after training to work in radio as a director and dramatist. He had been influenced by Andrew Allan's CBC *Stage* series. "Can you imagine," Davidson says, "what a boondocks, what an armpit, Canada was during the war years? Canada had nothing much going for it except strong guys who went off to war and were kinda decent. Then [Allan] singlehandedly, in a bureaucracy of all places, put together the finest group of actors and writers that he could [and] every Sunday night he'd bring one-hour dramas to this country, half of them original Canadian."

Norman Klenman also listened to every Andrew Allan play, but was less impressed by it as a model, finding it "had a hothouse flavour to it." Vancouver-born Klenman had a career as a journalist and had written six television plays for the BBC when he was lured to the NFB. He had been recommended by poet and novelist Earle Birney, and the NFB was well aware of Klenman's commitment to writing drama. Given desks in the same area, Davidson and Klenman soon found themselves drawn together as kindred spirits. In fact, they, Darryl Duke and some others thought of themselves as "Young Turks" (both filmmakers use the same term). "We were the angry young men, we were the ones who were fighting the NFB at every turn, demanding that new directions be taken, that new opportunities be given," says Klenman. The group, Klenman also notes, had a very clear agenda: "[First,] we wanted a broader range of materials, including the very controversial. The second thing we felt was that there should be new forms of filmmaking, including in the fictional area. The third was that we had to seize control of modern distribution, we had to get into the theatres, we had to get into homes, we had to get onto television, we had to be able to take our films and make them compatible with the means of distribution."

Not surprisingly, the Young Turks found themselves at odds with many of the established filmmakers, notably Tom Daly's Unit B. "I loved Tom Daly," Klenman recalls, "but he was so prissy and that unit was old-fashioned." Few were convinced that drama was important. Klenman gave a lecture on the topic, but was met by "cold and disapproving stares." He insisted NFB films were "a joke...nothing in those films ever spoke to the human soul or touched the human heart. I said, 'don't you think you ought to learn from storytelling and motion-picture drama to get your audience.'" The example he used was de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief*.

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Davidson and Klenman found themselves more in sympathy with several Quebec filmmakers, especially Roger Blais, Bernard Devlin and Raymond Garceau. It was with one or more of these three that they made their first forays into drama on such films as *Referendum* (1953), *Each Man's Son* (1953) and *L'Avocat de la défense* (1955). The latter two were dramatizations of sections of novels and indicate the difficulty the NFB had adjusting itself to filming dramas with actors. The English version of each has a voice-over narration introducing the authors, giving the films a didactic tone. Davidson insists that "those introductions were not part of the original concept, they came at the editing stage so they must have come from on high, somewhere."

In the spring of 1954, Klenman and Davidson developed the idea for *Small Town Tales*. They would take their families and move to a small town (Perth, Ontario). Using their observations, they would create three half-hour dramas for television "based on the reality of the town life." The dramas would be low budget, use a small crew and all roles would be played by the townspeople themselves. If the idea was not entirely original, it was no less radical for that—and certainly was in the context of the NFB. Klenman says his model was "not just neo-realism, but the French-Canadian filmmakers of those years."

The NFB approved the project—probably not least because the budgets were so small, \$5,000 each. However, at the last minute, the Film Board tried to send in Leslie McFarlane, a senior director who had directed several big-budget NFB films, including *The Boy Who Stopped Niagara* (1947), to oversee the project. Davidson protested and McFarlane was withdrawn, and by way of compensation was given his own \$80,000-budget drama, *Strike in Town* (1955).

In the end, only two dramas were filmed: *Curlers* (1955) and *The Hoax* (1955). Neither was widely promoted nor distributed and none of the promotion mentioned that the films were dramas. Understandably, both filmmakers were frustrated—Klenman more broadly with the NFB's structure and attitude, and Davidson with the lack of commitment to dramas. Both men decided to move to Toronto in 1955 to take advantage of the promising new field of CBC television where Sydney Newman, a former NFB producer, was supervisor of drama. Their long-term aim was to develop feature-film projects.

Although warmly welcomed and encouraged by Newman, the pair discovered, to their chagrin, that Newman's own departure from the NFB had triggered an "accord" whereby former NFB employees could not be hired full-time by the

CBC until they had endured a year out of the system. They worked briefly on freelance projects before deciding to set up their own company, Klenman–Davidson Productions, in the summer of 1956. Their principal investors were nine builders, doctors and dentists from Sarnia. At worst, they believed, they could survive as one of the numerous Toronto companies whose principal revenue came from sponsored films. At best, it would be a major step toward feature-film production.

It was not an auspicious moment to make their dream a reality. Outside of the CBC and its original 90-minute Canadian dramas on *CBC Television Theatre*, the Toronto creative film scene was pretty bleak. Just a few years earlier, the association of commercial film producers had told the Massey Commission they were pessimistic about the possibilities for feature-film production in the foreseeable future. Although pressed hard on the issue by the commissioners, the producers repeatedly insisted that the health of their industry hinged on the NFB contracting out lucrative government sponsored films, not on their taking financial risks on films with limited possibilities for distribution.

As they continued to do film work for such CBC series as *Graphic*, Klenman and Davidson pursued their dream of bringing Canadian literature to the screen. “We loved Canadian literature and read it thoroughly. We admired and loved the work done in our own country and we said that it was as good or better than anyone else’s,” says Klenman. They pioneered the idea of the miniseries: six hours of television to cover the breadth of such novels as Sinclair Ross’s *As for Me and My House* and Ernest Buckler’s *The Mountain and the Valley*. They also proposed a half-hour detective series set in Montreal. The CBC turned down both ideas, even though the filmmakers argued they could raise the financing independently.

Klenman–Davidson Productions was now turning a profit, but none of their other creative projects had come to fruition. In 1957, they abandoned the attempt to persuade the CBC to accept their projects and opted to go directly to a feature. They chose Morley Callaghan as “a writer of international stature, so no one could say that he wasn’t any good,” says Klenman. They picked (and paid for) four short stories with a common Toronto locale. Their aim was a film in the manner of the successful British *Quartet* that would convey “the attitude, the mood, the heart and soul of what Toronto life was,” says Klenman. His screenplay was written specifically as a feature, not as a series of short television dramas. The filmmakers were encouraged by several factors. First, they had heard Sidney Furie was filming a feature, *A Dangerous Age*, on the streets of Toronto. Second, their investors were supportive and encouraging. Third, they got tacit support from Nat Taylor and one of his companies, International Film Distributors (IFD). Through Hye Bossin,

editor of *Canadian Film Weekly*, they were encouraged to talk to Taylor. “We met Nat, and, without him saying too much, it was, ‘you guys make your film and we should be able to help you,’” recalls Davidson. This support seemed to solve the problem of how they would sell the film if the CBC didn’t want it. “So while we were shooting, we felt that Taylor [through IFD] was support for us and it gave us an advantage other people didn’t seem to have,” says Davidson.

Shooting began in the fall of 1957. “The shooting went fine, and it went on schedule and on budget and by the time we completed the film we were looking at something like \$55,000 for the whole works, including all of our time for about eight months of work,” says Davidson. Among the actors featured in the four stories were John Drainie, Anne Collings, Don Borisenko, Judy Welch, Katherine Blake and Walter Massey, whose famous cousin, Raymond Massey, provided the voice-over narration linking the stories.

The project drew extensive coverage from the Toronto media. A feature story ran in *Weekend Magazine*, and *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star* and *The Toronto Telegram* all published expansive stories about the production as it got underway. (Curiously, Furie’s production garnered no similar coverage.) Once editing was complete, the film was previewed for IFD and Nat Taylor. At the first screening—with family, friends and Morley Callaghan present—it was paired with a big-budget, widescreen Hollywood film and there was a strong feeling in the room that the film showed well in contrast and might find an audience with the proper marketing. The second screening, with IFD’s booker present, was more prescient. At the end of the screening, the booker turned round to Nat and said, “Man, where did you get that shit?” Despite this, Taylor decided to launch the film with a big party, searchlights on Toronto’s Bloor Street, local show business celebrities and a pipe band.



From left: Fred Diehl, Tony Grey and cinematographer William Gimmi.



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Sydney Furie, left, directing *A Dangerous Age*.

Now That April's Here premiered at Taylor's (long gone) Towne Cinema, June 19, 1958. "The premier of the film was very exciting. It was a lot of fun and a lot of people were there and they applauded the opening credits, and so on. When the film was over their reactions were somewhat indecisive, there was a feeling of rumbles and mumbling," recalls Davidson. The Toronto reviews were equally indecisive and discouraging. Most leaned toward praising the effort and the use of real Toronto locations while criticising the execution. Ronald Johnson (*The Globe and Mail*) noted that the film proved Canada had "the people capable of turning out a highly competent feature motion picture with taste, sensitivity and commercial appeal," but then claimed he found "interest flagging from the viewpoint of both plot and scripting." Jack Karr (*The Toronto Star*) was "grateful to Klenman and Davidson for taking the plunge, [since] others may follow," but concluded the film "should hold ample interest for local citizenry. How it will fare outside our scrambled metropolitan limits remains to be seen." Only the legendary Nathan Cohen was devastating, claiming the film had set back the film industry by seven years. Decades later, Bill Davidson still seethed over that remark, stating the obvious: "There was no goddamn industry to start with, I mean what are we setting back seven years?" Outside Toronto, there were no kind words. *Variety* dismissed its "amateurish production and acting values." *Time* (Canadian edition) noted that the filmmakers had left the NFB to make entertainment not culture but had "failed fully to achieve entertainment."

Their investors got cold feet the day after the premier, asking that Davidson and Klenman cut back on staff and future projects until the financial situation became clearer. The distributor followed. Davidson remembers,

"They didn't know how to sell it, and now people were starting to sound like the guy who jumped up and said, 'Where did you get this shit?'" After two weeks in Toronto and brief runs in Hamilton and Toronto, *Now That April's Here* was shelved and didn't even make it to Taylor's own Twentieth Century Theatre chain.

On the financial side, Klenman still believes they were cheated at the box office. He tells the anecdote about how his mother-in-law and a group of friends went to a 9:00 p.m. screening. The 700-seat theatre had five showings a day and when the group attended, it was clear the 7:00 p.m. screening had been full, as was the 9:00 p.m. screening. When he phoned the box office he was told they had sold only 200 seats all day. He protested that his "mother-in-law had attended the second screening and there were 700 people there so that had to be 700 at least" but was told again that there had been only 200 people all day.

However, Nat Taylor remained supportive, even enthusiastic. Davidson recalls that, hardly had he and Klenman begun to absorb the pain of failure, when Taylor called them into his office. He urged them to remember they would be in the movie business for the rest of their lives. He still thought they'd made a good little movie and it wasn't their problem if people didn't go to see it. He urged them to make a movie that would sell and make them a little money and get them going in the business.

What emerged was *Ivy League Killers* (a.k.a. *The Fast Ones*), an action melodrama about a motorcycle gang designed specifically to sell to the teen market. Taylor's organization initially committed 50 per cent of the financing and a distribution contract. However, no contract was ever signed, no money contributed and eventually the pair brought in a local investor in order to finish the film. "When it was finished, of course they didn't want to talk to us, and we went to New York. Every where we went we were turned down," says Klenman. The sole exception was American International Pictures, and even they didn't want to pay out any advance money. The film was eventually sold to the ABC television network. It also did well in Britain, though the pair never saw any financial return. The film finally opened in Toronto five years later, and was shown in five neighbourhood Odeon theatres during Christmas week. Again there were no financial returns.

Inevitably, this was the death knell for Klenman-Davidson Productions. They closed down the company and sold off the equipment. Both continued to work in television. Bill Davidson did not direct another feature film for almost 20 years. In a final ironic twist, a year after the premier of *Now That April's Here*, a major feature article appeared in the *The Financial Post* heralding "The Big Boom Ahead in Our Film Industry," and Nat Taylor was proclaimed "one of Canada's movie moguls."

TAKE ONE

Notes:

1. All quotations by Norman Klenman and Bill Davidson are from interviews with the author unless otherwise stated.