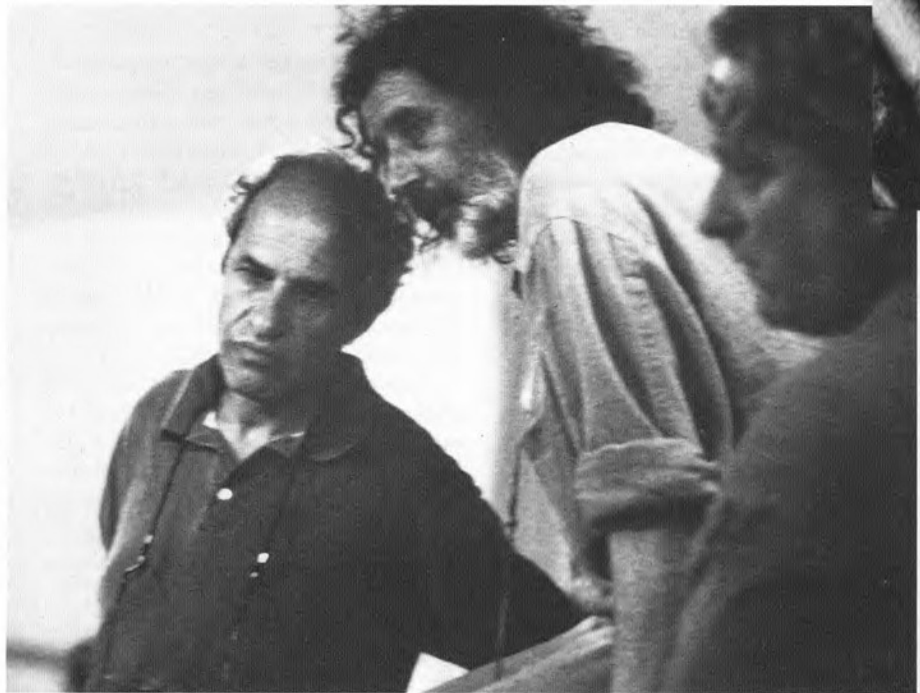


# Ransen Rising

by Ingrid Randoja

▶ Young filmmakers such as Clement Virgo, Stephen Williams and Mina Shum are cutting a funky swath across this nation's



**"I don't think there would be a Canadian film industry without the NFB...it would be much closer to an American industry, and we'd be making much more junk." Mort Ransen**

film industry. The cult of the artist as a youth is blossoming in Canada, except perhaps in a secluded section of B.C.'s Salt Spring Island,

where veteran filmmaker Mort Ransen is thriving. The 63-year-old Ransen has

just finished work on the 1940s period piece *Margaret's Museum*,



opposite page: director Mort Ransen, on left, confers with ace cinematographer Vic Sarin; above: veteran Canadian actor Kenneth Welsh; this page: the luminous star of *Margaret's Museum*, Helena Bonham Carter

his fourth—and best—feature film. Ransen directed, co-wrote and produced the film, which stars Merchant Ivory mainstay Helena Bonham Carter as Margaret, the plucky

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wife of a Cape Breton miner (fellow Brit, Clive Russell) who survives the tragedies of life on the harsh East Coast island.

It’s a well-crafted film built around solid writing and fine performances from Bonham Carter, Russell, Kate Nelligan and Kenneth Welsh. The film took five years to get off the ground and only really picked up speed when Bonham Carter committed to the project with the intention of shrugging off her precious Merchant Ivory image.

“Helena, like everyone in the industry, feels there is a real lack of strong female roles,” says Ransen. “*Margaret’s Museum* is told from a female point of view, and it’s the kind of role she’s been looking for. She was absolutely wonderful to work with, a real gift. In real life, she’s very much like her character in *Howards End*—she’s very determined, tough in the pursuit of excellence in her work, but also very generous and open.”

Bonham Carter is joined by Kate Nelligan, who plays her embittered mother, a woman who has lost a husband and son to the island’s dangerous coal mines. “Kate is extremely demanding. She does her work superbly and expects the same standards from every-

one around her. You have to know what you’re doing and you have to be prepared, but if you fulfill those expectations she’s extraordinary to work with, a very giving actress.”

Ransen bubbles over when talking about his stars, which is understandable when he explains his belief that the lack of household names sank his last film, *Falling Over Backwards* (1990), although it featured well-regarded performers Saul Rubinek and Paul Soles. “I was determined that if I was going to make another feature, it would have to have a star. *Falling Over Backwards* got really good

reviews, was brought back by popular demand at both the Montreal and Toronto Film Festivals, and as far as I know, most people liked it. It then opened on a Friday night in a Montreal theatre and on Sunday night they decided it would close in a week.

“There were two films from big Hollywood studios that drew smaller audiences but were kept on longer than *Falling Over Backwards*. Those films had enough time to draw word-of-mouth crowds, which is exactly what my film needed. It isn’t a level playing field in Canada and the only way you can draw attention to your film is to hire a high-profile cast. It’s almost impossible to score at the box office without stars,” says Ransen.

Scanning Ransen’s career is like reviewing the history of Canadian filmmaking. The native Montrealer began his professional life as an actor and director in theatre, only to make the move into filmmaking in 1961 when he joined the NFB. He quickly made a name for himself as an innovative filmmaker who was not afraid to experiment with a fresh form called the docudrama, which brought together the raw power of documentary filmmaking with the controlled narrative drive found in fiction films.

His 1966 work, *No Reason to Stay*, focused on a high school teen who faces the consternation of his family and friends when he decides to drop out of school. It’s a vibrant, edgy drama that captures the rebellious energy of the late

1960s. Ransen was to explore this theme further in 1967 with *Christopher’s Movie Matinee*. In this now classic film, Ransen gave movie cameras to 14 teen-agers who were hanging around the hippie enclave of Yorkville. The teens shot the footage—which includes endearingly pompous monologues directed at the camera and far-out political discussions—and Ransen cut it together.

“In those early days I was happy at the Film Board because I could be very experimental with my work,” remembers Ransen. “Someone wrote that *Christopher’s Movie Matinee* was the first film shot in North America ever to show a camera in a film. It got the attention of other filmmakers, and when I travelled about and met other directors I began to feel part of a group, artists who were trying to make films in a different way.”

*Running Time* was his first stab at a feature film, which turned out to be a disaster by all accounts. Shot in the NFB studios in the early 1970s on a twist-tie budget, this drama about inter-generational conflict knocked the aspiring features director for a loop. “It was a difficult but really good lesson,” says Ransen. “The people who ran the NFB at the time, whom I got to know better afterwards, were really good people. They were worried about their jobs and didn’t want anything to hurt the Film Board in any way. I think when I was younger I was a self-centred filmmaker. I didn’t realize filmmaking was something done by a team of people and had to be extremely collaborative. Even the people in charge at the Film Board were part of the team, and I should have recognized that. If I had it all to do over again, I would be much more considerate with the people who disagreed with me and would not try to bully my way through. I learned a great deal from that.” Ransen spent another decade at the NFB, focusing almost totally on documentaries. He left in 1984 to found his own production company and make his second feature, *Bayo*.

The 23 years Ransen spent at the Board has given him an interesting perspective on its worth as a filmmaking institution. “I don’t think there would be a Canadian film industry without the NFB. I have a feeling that if there were a film industry without the Film Board, it would be much closer to an American industry, and we’d be making much more junk. It’s the Film Board that has given our industry its integrity.

“What’s interesting is that a lot of features being made today receive money



**above: Kate Nelligan, an extremely demanding but very giving actress;  
below: British newcomer Clive Russell**



from the Film Board, and it's important money, it's first money. The hardest money to get is first money. The first support I got for *Margaret's Museum* was from the Film Board. They are also almost always the first ones to take a chance on a filmmaker, even if there isn't very much money involved, and even if it's only services they are able to provide. They get behind you, and this isn't said about them enough because everybody's always complaining about the place. It needs to be said, especially at a time when it's being assailed by more and more cuts."

Since *Falling Over Backwards*, Ransen has made a few short television films, directed an episode of *Street Legal*, worked as a script doctor and finished *Margaret's Museum*, a co-production between four companies and five funding agencies. Ransen has mastered the art of producing, which he believes is the key to making better films here in Canada.

"I don't think funding agencies are the problem in Canada. The problem is that most film producers come from other businesses. They are lawyers or real estate agents. I've had a script that was rewritten just before shooting by the producer's girlfriend. It's been very hard to make good films in this country for a long time because of this problem. Lately, we've seen producers who have come up through the film business and that's one of the reasons why our films are more successful. The big problem is still the fact directors don't have control over their films. I had to become a producer in order to gain control over *Margaret's Museum*," notes Ransen.

"As the industry matures, I think a lot of producers will realize that their best way of making money is to go along with the director's vision and let the filmmaker do his thing. If they don't like what he does, they don't have to work with him again, but at least while they're doing it they should have to defer to the director.

"As far *Margaret's Museum* goes, I'm very proud of it and I'm very pleased with it. It's strange," says Ransen, "But I think I'm finally starting to make the films I want to make. I seem to be on some kind of a roll and I've had a lot of opportunities. For the first time in my life I can pick and choose what's next and only work on scripts that I really like."

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*Ingrid Randoja is a film and video reviewer for Toronto's NOW magazine. Her work has appeared in TAKE ONE, ICON magazine and SIGHT AND SOUND.*