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**Michael Donovan**

# The Donovan Brothers Produce on the Edge

**I**f you want to become the premiere filmmaking team in Atlantic Canada, start out by studying—law. Or—make that physics.

If you're Paul and Michael Donovan, that's essentially the way to end up writing, directing and producing a stream of feature films and television shows (*Buried on Sunday*, *Life with Billy*, *CODCO*).

"Let me reach back into the dim, dark recesses of the past," says Michael Donovan, searching for an explanation for his not-quite-linear evolution from would-be lawyer to administrative mastermind behind Halifax's Salter Street Films Limited. "I went to law school because I didn't know what else to do. Shortly after law school, after I practised briefly, I realized the world of law was better off without me. But I'm not sure if the world of film is better off with me."

The world of film has certainly been pushed out of its Toronto-Montreal-Vancouver triangle by the brothers from Antigonish. Since founding Salter Street in 1982, Michael has produced and/or developed seven projects, including *Defcon-4*, *Diplomatic Immunity*, *CODCO*, and the upcoming, *Life with Billy*. Paul has written and/or directed an equal number of films including, *The Squamish Five*, *Buried on Sunday*, and *Life with Billy*. He's also written and published a novel, one fairly critical of the Canadian film industry, entitled *Paint Cans*.

Salter Street can now be considered an established and prolific company.

This fall it will release a new half-hour CBC series call *This Hour Has Twenty-Two Minutes*. It will be done "almost live, it will be taped just before air times," says Michael. "It will be the true version of the news." The cast includes four actor/writers from Newfoundland, *CODCO*'s Mary Walsh and Cathy Jones, along with Greg Thomey and Rick "I've killed before, I'll kill again" Mercer.

*Life with Billy* is the story of Jane Hurshman, the battered wife who struck back with precedent-setting results. The film, which stars Nancy Beatty and Stephen McHattie, has been a private obsession of Michael's for years. It was a difficult dream to realize. Script writing alone took four years, and Hurshman died during production. (She was shot to death in a car on the Halifax waterfront. Police ruled her death suicide, but there have been reports that she had received death threats.) A *Globe and Mail* piece on the film was aptly named: "A tragedy that swallows everyone it touches."

"Because of Billy's monstrosity, he has a tendency to tower over her story. One of the challenges was to make it even handed and focus the light on Jane's struggle to emerge from a life of oppression to one of consciousness, and I think we did," says Michael.

It was Hurshman's courage that attracted Michael's attention in the first place. The court trail, which established the defensive of aggravated protection, forms "the backbone" of the story, with "time shifts" exploring her life before and after. Some of those scenes made for difficult shooting, and will probably make difficult viewing, as Billy Stafford



Paul Donovan



Michael Donovan

## PROFILE

By J.M. Sullivan

allegedly tortured and tormented his wife for five years.

*Life with Billy* may prove the strongest work yet from Salter Street, a studio that cut its creative teeth on low-budget thrillers. *Siege* (1983), for example, cost \$250,000. The Donovan's apartment-office was used as a location. Paul wrote and co-directed, a nice employment change from delivering newspapers. *Seige* earned 1.5 million.

The Donovans made *Def con-4* in 1983, which returned five times its 1.1 million budget. This didn't make either the producer or director rich, but it helped cover debts from their not-talked-about *South Pacific 1942*, and both got intensive lessons in their respective areas of movie making. Their perseverance kept the studio going, and in 1986 *CODCO* fans everywhere had reason to be grateful. The sketch series premiered, and by the next fall was a regular feature on late night CBC. A total of 62 shows would be shot, and several Gemini Awards accumulated, before the series ended. Over 75 employees were involved in the show, which was radical in its insistence on keeping the show's Newfoundland roots intact, and its refusal to use a laugh track.

*CODCO* had barely bowed out of the CBC line-up when Salter Street released the feature, *Buried on Sunday*, an alluring, quirky film. "We wanted to make a separatist film, essentially," Paul says. In *Buried on Sunday*, it is fishing quotas and ill-behaved ministers that threaten to knock the country on its ear. "If the country is seriously debating dividing up, I just felt that you have to make a film about this. As a filmmaker, you have to

deal with it." Not to mention that the fishing quota aspect has evolved into a regional crisis.

For their next feature, the Donovans have tentatively planned a drama on the WWI battle of Passchendaele, viewed through the eyes of a soldier fighting in the 85th Battalion of the Nova Scotia Highlanders. Whatever they produce next, the fraternal collaboration should continue to be one of the filmmaking success stories of the country.

Michael Donovan has said that one of the beauties of working in a team is never getting a swelled head. However, as praise comes from outside sources, each half of the team is available to remind the other of previous ludicrous or costly decisions. It's hard to persuade a duo that they are stars or geniuses. They can remind each other that they are not. This is a very helpful thing, providing a reality check in the fantasy business.

The filmmakers split their duties down the middle, with Michael heading the business side, and Paul running the boot camp/mechanical ballet that is filmmaking. "I don't make films, I make phone calls," says Michael. "Halifax is the end of the world. The money's not here, and I have to go to the money." And, when it comes to casting projects like *This Hour*, "I have to

go to St. John's for talent," he jokes.

It's the price the Donovans continue to pay for the lunacy of producing movies on the edge of the continent •

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Stephen McHattie and Nancy Beatty in *Life with Billy*

