

## PROFILE

By Alison Vermeë



The Lotus Eaters

Vancouverite Peggy Thompson's writing and professional career was forged in the climate of Canada's Liberal-governed 1970s, when subsidies to the arts were fruitful and imaginative. Almost two decades later, *The Lotus Eaters*, the feature project which she wrote and co-produced, is about to be released. It stands as a fitting reflection on a career of collaboration and co-operative work.

From her Genie award-winning partnership with Peg Campbell in the 1980s, to her writing, producing and community involvement, Thompson has found herself most prolific in a working situation defined by close collaboration and exchange of ideas.

Thompson studied theatre and film at the University of British Columbia, leaving without graduating in the mid-seventies. With a group of friends, she formed a feminist theatre group, Hot Flashes. At this point, Thompson wasn't generating any of the scripts herself. "I was ghostwriting a little bit," she says. "They were all plays by people who hadn't written for the theatre before. There was a lot of hands-on fixing of things. We were all acting, directing, producing, and fundraising." A radio play, "Pajama Party," written by Thompson, Peter Elliot Weiss and Elaine Pope, was followed by additional radio work. "A new set of regulations for radio programming meant that they had to have more cultural and spoken-word programming, so I went down to the local headbanger station, CFOX, and got a job doing culture."

After more radio plays for the CBC, Thompson decided to try a new partner, Nora Randall. "*The Beachcombers* was the only show that came out of the West,

so if you wanted to write for television, that was what you wrote. By then, the show had been on air for years, so it was very difficult to pitch them story ideas, as they really had done every idea in the world. Nora and I did three episodes, which was terrific experience."

In 1985, Thompson went to work as a child care counsellor at the Senator Project, a halfway house for juvenile prostitutes. This led her to her next collaborator, Peg Campbell. While at the Project, Campbell made an NFB documentary, *Street Kids*, with Thompson assisting. Thompson combined her work at the Senator Project with writing plays for CBC radio, and Green Thumb, an educational theatre company. She renewed her partnership with Peter Elliot Weiss in an offshoot of Theatre Sports, a late-night improvised soap opera. "I did all these things for about a year. It was a time of a lot of work which shaped the direction I was going in."

The techniques employed in the improvised soap opera gave rise to a short film with Peg Campbell. *It's a Party* was a training film for Vancouver's Cineworks and nominated for a Genie in 1987. The film was collaborative, with Thompson doing some of the producing work and generally helping out. "I think it's a very important thing for a writer to do. If you're just at home writing, you're missing a lot of opportunities to develop the work further, and to really understand the filmmaking process properly." The Genie award-winning short, *In Search of the Last Good Man*, again made with Campbell, followed in 1989. Thompson and Campbell legally made their name "The Two Pegs" to try to produce a feature project. However, Campbell's commitment to docudrama, and Thompson's to comedy precluded an exclusive working relationship. Thompson, at this stage, considers the partnership dor-

mant, not wound up.

Winning the Genie marked a turning point, giving Thompson the opportunity to withdraw from work for a while to assess her next move. "The work that I do now is all self-generated. I've learned that unless I'm very drawn to a project, I'll turn it down. Unless I'm involved in some way in the producing, as in the partnership with Peg where it was very hands-on, the projects just don't turn out very well. With *The Lotus Eaters*, I had a feeling it would take me a long time to develop the script, so I didn't want to have a whole team waiting for me to finish. I didn't want the pressure of time, or any pressure at all."

Thompson had been selected to be part of the Dramalab team from Vancouver at the National Screen Institute in Edmonton in the late eighties. One of her team mates was Sharon McGowan, a documentary filmmaker, now co-producer on *The Lotus Eaters*. Although from different professional backgrounds, Thompson and McGowan agree that the former's experience in ensemble work, and the latter's in the *ad hoc*, spontaneous world of low-budget documentaries, are perfectly suited to *The Lotus Eaters'* ensemble cast, and themes of chaos and the unexpected. From the beginning, McGowan was involved in the project, initially as what she terms a "ghost-producer," guiding Thompson in the ways of the funding agencies.

Development money was forthcoming from Telefilm and B.C. Film, with the NFB gaining enthusiasm as the project developed. The trigger was Malofilm's distribution deal, allowing the \$1.8 million feature to go ahead. McGowan can't say enough about Malofilm and particularly Jim Murphy whose positive and aggressive support helped facilitate the project whenever obstacles arose. The film went into production with Paul Shapiro as director,

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**“If you’re just at home writing, you’re missing a lot of opportunities to develop the work further, and to really understand the filmmaking process properly:”**

although his selection was not straightforward. “Initially, we all said Sandy Wilson is the appropriate choice for this, because of her body of work and our connections,” said McGowan. But Wilson had already agreed to direct *Harmony Cats*, and it became clear that any attempts to do both would be impossible. So a competition was thrown open to the rest of Canada. All recommendations led to Paul Shapiro. From L.A. by way of Regina, Shapiro has a healthy track record on television shows such as *Street Legal* and *Road to Avonlea*, as well as writing and directing a 1984 television movie, *Hockey Night*, starring Megan Follows. His skills at directing comedy, and particularly at directing child actors, secured him the job.

Asked how they felt the project had been affected by losing Wilson, McGowan offered: “It’s funny when you are a team, people label you. We were labeled ‘the girls team’—Peggy, Sharon and Alex (Raffé, executive producer)—and, of course, we were therefore going to work with a girl, like some special girls project. Well, we never saw it that way. We always saw it as a film we were going to make with a huge break from the Canadian taxpayers, and we are going to choose the best person we can find for the job” •

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## Cooperative

## Nature of

## Peggy

## Thompson

