



All Super Speedway photos
courtesy of Openwheel Productions

IMAX

at 250 MPH

An Interview with Stephen Low

Stephen Low got his start in feature films in 1976 as a scuba diver, a particular passion of his, and driver on the dreadful *Orca*, a Richard Harris–Bo Derek turkey that was shot off the coast of Newfoundland. After a period spent studying at Lakehead University and working the tracks for CNR in Northern Ontario, he ended up on the crew of Terrence Malick’s considerably better *Days of Heaven*, where he became a still photographer. The experience drove Malick out of the business and Low towards documentaries and eventually Imax. He has since become unique among filmmakers, a specialist in giant-screen moviemaking, and has taken the Imax camera into the depths of the ocean (the Genie-nominated *Titanica*, 1993); the habitat of a family of beavers (*Beavers*, 1987); and into the sky with a flock of Canadian geese (*Skyward*, 1984). Low produced and directed *Across the Sea of Time* (1995), a time-travelling drama that married archival stereo images with Imax 3D, the cutting edge of motion picture technology. Low didn’t start out to be a ground-breaking filmmaker, but it was perhaps inevitable. His father, Colin Low, is one of the pioneers of the documentary in Canada and helped create the first single-projector Imax 3D film, *We Are Born of Stars*, in 1985 for the Fujitsu Pavilion at the International Exposition in Japan. **Wyndham Wise**

**TAKE ONE:**

What made you decide to make Super Speedway?

STEPHEN LOW:

Speedway is something I've wanted to do for many years. When I was at the Film Board in the late 1970s to develop a Formula One film about Gilles Villeneuve. I actually got the money together to it, but then he was killed. About four years ago I got together with Goulam Amarsy, who wanted to get into the film business. So we gave him—Pietro Serapiglia, my partner, and I—an exercise. I gave him one of my dream films, which I thought was nearly impossible to finance, and that was one on Indy car. Amazingly, gradually, with Peter's help, he put the financing together. *Speedway* is one of the very few purely financed Imax films. There have always been people who have come to us and said, "We want to make a movie about nuclear power," and that's the easiest way to stay employed. But to get your own movie going is a nightmare.

Super Speedway deals with the Andrettis, America's premier racing family.

It's Mario's overview of American open wheel racing, if you will, and his relationship with his son, Michael, throughout a racing season. We start at the beginning of the season and follow the building, in England, of a Lola/Ford-Cosworth from scratch. These mysterious industrial processes are quite spectacular in Imax. We also follow the Newman/Haas test program, which takes place throughout the off season. A fair amount of the film is about testing and getting the cars ready.

You had the problem of actually mounting an Imax camera onto one of those cars.

After we'd spent all this time raising the money, we had to convince ourselves that the concept would work. We did not want to fake the speed at all because racing films typically undercrank the camera and it looks phony.

You get that jerky movement.

They do things like compress the motion with long lenses and then they buy back the speed with undercranking and it looks horrible. So the object here was to mount a wide-angle lens, which gives you the full sense of the speed, and then run the car as fast as possible. In fact, that was Mario's insistence. He said, "We are only doing this for real, otherwise I'm not interested."



Super Speedway

So you actually got the cars doing what, 200 miles per hour?

250 miles. In fact, the first test was at Indianapolis. Mario got out there and looked very ungainly. It kind of scared us when we first put the camera up. It's a combination of the aerodynamic inefficiency of the big box and the fact that you are raising the CofG [centre of gravity] higher, throwing the car off balance. But the engineers assured us that with a 16-, 18-hundred-pound car, 50 pounds moved a few inches up

wasn't going to move the CofG a quarter-inch. So, we get out on the track and Mario kind of smoked out of the pits with his finger on the button and the chief engineer of Newman/Haas said to me, "Well, I think you'll be lucky to get 150 miles an hour," and my heart sank, this movie...

...isn't going to work at that speed.

No! It's going to look slow and boring. Mario smoked by at 200 miles an hour on his first lap, the next lap was 210, then 215, 220. It wasn't long before Mario got up to qualifying speeds.

Which is what, 240, 250?

250 is the actual top speed of a car. The average lap speed was in the 230 range. That's to qualify in front of the grid. Mario would have made the back of the grid with the Imax camera at most of the race courses. Astounding. That kind of penalty. It just amazed everybody.

The functions of the camera were at his fingertips, am I correct?

The on and off. The lenses are very wide angle—90 degrees and even 110. Basically, where Mario is looking or where the camera is looking is the centre of the frame.

Did you go through the whole season?

We didn't want to make a film about the season, *per se*. People have seen that on TV. That's not what *Speedway* is





Left: The very last roadster ever built in the world. Mario Andretti drove it for one year at the beginning of his career. The car was discovered in a chicken-coop in Michigan and restored to absolutely pristine condition.

about. It's kind of compressed into seven minutes of racing from the sidelines, from inboard. I mean the miracle of the whole film is that Indy car allowed us to run in race conditions, practices just before races, and so on, which I don't think has ever happened before, to my knowledge. To have that kind of camera at those speeds, at over 200 miles an hour with 28 cars on the track, is quite a miracle.

What is the storyline of Super Speedway, then?

It's a story of a race car driver—Mario—and his relationship, and his son's relationship, with several cars. One of the cars is the Lola/Ford-Cosworth, the newest technology. Basically, it's Michael's car in the movie. The other car is Mario's first roadster built in the 1960s and it's the very last roadster

Mario Andretti: the padre of America's premiere racing family.



ever built in the world. A roadster is a front engine racing car. Mario drove the car for one year at the beginning of his career. It was discovered in a chicken-coop in Michigan and restored to absolutely pristine condition by a marvellous guy, Don Lyons. The restoration of Mario's first car is the parallel story. My style has always been fairly heavily engineered documentaries. I do a lot of lighting, a lot of camera movements and that comes from a combination of working on features and from my family—my father's documentaries. I was influenced by many of his early films, especially those he made in the 1950s and 60s.

Are you talking about Corral...?

...*City of Gold, Universe*—these were ground-breaking films in the sense that they took real people and real stories, essentially non-fiction, and put very high production values on them. They did beautiful lighting, beautiful camera work. They were shot in 35 mm, but they were about real people. This was the era when the Film Board pioneered—and is credited with it by students of film—the creation of the first great documentaries. There were films like my father's, and Roman Kroitor's, who did *Paul Tomkowicz, Street Railway Switchman*, a marvellous film about a very ordinary guy in Winnipeg who looks after the switches in a streetcar. It's a beautifully filmed portrait of a single character, which is still in many

ways the ultimate in filmmaking, in my opinion.

When I spoke to Graeme Ferguson, he said that from the start, back in 1967, he conceived the Imax process for features and not only short-form documentaries. You, more than anyone else have expanded the Imax envelope. Titanic was 90 minutes and the Rolling Stones film was feature length.

We had known for a long time that Imax had the potential to take that step, to make our films substantially longer. *the Rolling Stones at the Max* was intended to be a feature from the start.

You were a consultant on that film, weren't you?

I went to talk with Mick Jagger. I offered him a list of movies to look at, because he'd never seen Imax. I was reading through the list, I said Space Shuttles, and so on, and so on. He didn't seem to be very interested. All of a sudden I came to *Beavers*, which was one of my early films, and he flipped out. He turned out to be a beaver enthusiast.

That's odd.

Amazingly, he said, "I love beavers. I want to see the beaver movie." So we had this bizarre screening in Holland, for the entire Rolling Stones entourage. Of all things, *Beavers*. None of them had ever seen Imax

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before. They loaded up the seats. Mick Jagger was sitting in the front with Charlie Watts. And they were entranced by these beavers cutting trees, building dams. I think it was a big hit with them. But they must have wondered how they would fit into this format. The only thing they had seen on the big screen was beavers. They wondered...well, how are we gonna look, we're not furry, we don't swim underwater...well, probably they are furry [laughs]. So that was the beginning of the Rolling Stones film. I dropped out early on because it became so amazingly political.

I'm not so sure I would want to get too close to Mick Jagger and his world.

He's a charming guy. And that other guy he fights with...

...Keith Richards.

He's a great guy. He's really friendly. I had a lot of nice chats with him. He's even warmer, much warmer than Mick Jagger, but the people around them are pretty rough. I almost got shot in France wandering around their mansion by one of the henchmen they hire to protect themselves. It was scary. I had strayed absent-mindedly away from the entourage, maybe a hundred feet or so. This guy came out with a gun, and pointed it at my head.

Time to get out.

In the interesting revolutions of things, it was Roman Kroitor who went on to direct the film. There were a whole bunch of people hired, and they all take credit, but it was really Roman who made the film.

Imax now has received its first Academy Award, for Scientific and Technical Achievement. Is this something you find way overdue?

It's ridiculous. They should have done it 20 years ago, but Hollywood is so crusty, ingrained and inbred. They hardly ever look out of the mud-smeared window of the real world. They did a show on big-shot directors. Six of them. They asked them, "What's the future of cinema?" It was all these directors of Spielberg's generation, Coppola, you know. None of them even knew about Imax. It's astounding. Here's the technology they really should want to upgrade to. Especially 3D, it's a fabulous tool. It's 20-times the inspiration of what they are working with. The fact

that Imax didn't get an Academy award in 1970 is astonishing.

You have to be brain dead to sit in an Imax theatre and not say, "Holy cow, this is a hell-of-a-lot better."

35mm was invented in the 19th century. It's crap. Ok, so we need better scripts. That's what everyone says. Well, there's nothing wrong with better scripts and 20th century technology.

Rolling Stones at the Max: "35mm was invented in the 19th century. It's crap. Imax, especially 3D, is a fabulous tool, 20-times the inspiration." Low.



Titanica was a breakthrough, as was Rolling Stones at the Max and Jean-Jacques Annaud's Wings of Courage.

People are making a terrible error in saying that because *Wings of Courage* didn't quite hit the mark, that drama doesn't work. There are many moments in that film where you can see drama working very well. When people look at *Across the Sea of Time*, they are emotionally engaged and they feel like they are on the streets of New York. I think drama works. People make the mistake of looking at *Across the Sea of Time*, if they happened to like it, and say, "well it's an alternative drama—it's quasi-documentary." That's ridiculous, *Across the Sea of Time* is pure drama which happens to have non-fiction artifacts in it, like the old photographs, but the premise is purely dramatic.

It does seem that some of the corporations are now getting on board. Cineplex, I understand, has opened an Imax-format theatre in the U.S.

Here's the difficult stage, the next step in Imax's future. The danger zone is right in front of us, and in the next two years we'll see it working or not. We need to go to drama without too many failures, because it's very expensive to work in 3D Imax. It's approximately, in raw costs, 10-times, 20-times 35mm. Dramas almost are either great or they're useless. And if they are useless, you can't get a nickel back on your investment. Well, I shouldn't say that. Actors and big names help to bamboozle enough people, but it hurts on the next film because the audience is pissed off. The secret is to make a few good dramas so that everybody can say, "drama works in this medium."

I was in Bradford, England, about 18 months ago and it had an impressive Kodak Museum of Photography and an Imax theatre. It was the first time I could actually go into the projection booth and watch the famous Rolling Loop and there were plaques on the wall which talked about Kroitor and Ferguson. Yet in this country, I have never seen that. Is this a case of not respecting what we as Canadians have accomplished? Why is there not a plaque at Ontario Place where North of Superior was first screened in?

It's the classic story....We set up a company in Ontario and were getting going. We did *Titanica* and were part of the *Rolling Stones at the Max* film. The next thing you know, the government slammed the door on our fingers. Because Imax was sold to foreign interests, the government decided to take it out on me, my company, and other Imax producers in Ontario. Which is absolutely astounding to me. We were bringing in millions of American dollars into Ontario and we had production facilities building. We had a studio going and the best sound system in the world, which we still have in Ontario. They said, "you're out of it, we are not giving you any of the breaks we give Hollywood filmmakers and 35mm filmmakers," which absolutely is the most brain-dead thing imaginable.

Is this why you ended up in Montreal?

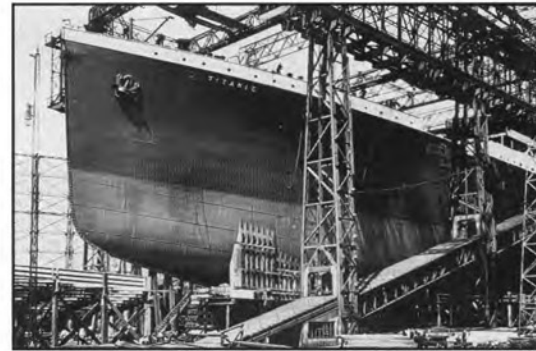
Exactly. Quebec has been far more interested than Ontario. We've basically moved back to Montreal. We had been in Toronto for five or six years. We've moved to Quebec because the SODEC, which is the OFDC of Quebec, courted us and said "come on back and we'll make films."

Meanwhile, in Ontario, they are closing down the OFDC.

They slammed the door on everyone. We could have had a massive industry with a small amount of government aid. It would have been a net gain to the government. I must have brought in, conservatively, \$20-million, in production alone. And that's not including revenues. I mean, *Beavers* was made in Ontario, without any help from the government, and it is probably the highest or second highest grossing Canadian film ever made.

I didn't know that.

Beavers grossed \$60-million. Ferguson's *Dream is Alive* is quite a bit more than that. But those are the two highest grossing. I am a bit bitter. What we could have had has now all fallen apart. We've gone to Quebec, and Imax is setting up in Hollywood. We could have kept the industry in Ontario with a small amount of help from the Ontario government; however, the



Titanica Photo courtesy of Imax Corp.

bureaucrats are so profoundly stupid they would rather throw their money at terrible Hollywood films than support our technology, which was developed in Ontario.

The workshop in Mississauga, that's still staying I understand.

That's not software. It's hardware. The software is more important to the future of Imax than the hardware. That's the tragedy for Ontario and the bureaucrats are responsible. The bitterness that came when Imax was sold, was bizarre. It wasn't us. I never sold Imax. The fact is that Graeme and Roman tried for years and years to sell it to a Canadian company and, of course, none were interested, you can't blame them.

The American company has been hustling and now Imax has its long-overdue Academy award. The number of Imax theatres is expanding in the U.S.

They are doing a great job; [Bradley] Wechsler and [Richard] Gelfond are real pros.

Your next project is Mark Twain's America. Is that going to be feature length?

It'll probably be around 50 minutes, like most Imax. It'll be done for Sony, Columbia and Sony New Technologies. It's like *Across the Sea of Time*. But it's a documentary version instead of a drama. *Sea of Time* was pure drama, it had a kid jumping into the Hudson River and swimming to the Statue of Liberty. This is pretty much a documentary about Mark Twain, then and now...reflections on America, his observations. But we have fabulous old still photographs, 3D photographs of Mark Twain, and we intend to use those. ■