

Raffé's Triple Play

By Rachel Rafelman

In 1986, Alexandra Raffé co-produced *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* with director Patricia Rozema, her first full-fledged foray into feature film producing. Made for the paltry sum of \$350,000, *Mermaids* has since received international acclaim, returned a tidy profit in excess of 100 per cent to all investors, and continues to earn moderate revenues. Not bad for a beginning, and, as it turns out, a fairly accurate indicator of Raffé's career since.

In the last calendar year, Alex Raffé has been executive producer (a position for which she has her own distinctive job description) of three major feature films, all made for under \$2 million, one of which—*I Love a Man in Uniform*—was invited to Cannes, and all of which are destined to make a sizable splash in the Canadian film indus-

Perhaps her greatest ability is in assessing what a project can reasonably fetch in financing, and finding a way to make a quality movie with that sum. *Zero Patience*, a musical comedy about AIDS, with 40 speaking parts and nine full-scale musical numbers, was made for \$1.28 million, a remarkable feat. "It was an inherently high-risk project. I mean, how many musicals about AIDS have you seen?" Realizing they couldn't hope to ask anyone to put up such a large sum, they laboured to get the budget under a million, but couldn't. The \$1.3 million they finally ended up with came from a number of different sources. Writer/director John Greyson received a \$25,000 screen writing grant from the Canadian Film Centre; the Ontario Arts Council kicked in \$60,000; they got \$35,000 from the Canada Council; \$400,000 from the OFDC; and, \$590,000 from Telefilm. Added to this was a \$75,000 advance from Cineplex

can keep track of what you cut and why," she explains. With *Zero*, they knew early on they had interest from Channel Four and felt an overseas sale would provide prospective financiers with confidence that such an *outré* project had a market. "We could have sold off the rest of the world but wouldn't have gotten much. The project in script form was just too difficult to evaluate." In the end, they sold Canada and Britain only. In the meantime, the film has been testing very well in screenings in the U.S. The release is planned before the end of 1993.

I Love a Man in Uniform had an entirely different financing scenario, although once again Raffé was there to provide the "safety net" for producer Paul Brown and writer/director David Wellington, who initially approached Raffé with only a 40-page outline in tow. "We went over every detail in the script and had huge strategy sessions where we

talked about what we thought the maximum budget we could get away with was, what information we wanted to present to the agencies, how to present it, developing the schedules, and so on. It took a month, with Paul working full time and me advising, to put the financing package together."

Unlike *Zero Patience*, *Uniform* promised to be a film with a wide appeal, but "it just didn't lend itself to being made for \$500,000." They began with a distribution strategy. Fortified with Raffé's input, pro-

visos and caveats, Paul Brown approached Alliance Releasing for a distribution deal, and after the usual negotiations, got a \$250,000 advance in exchange for world rights (excluding the U.S.). "It's not a lot really," Raffé says. "But considering that neither David nor

Tom McCamus in *I Love a Man in Uniform*

Raffé is involved in the most hands-on way possible



try. The "chutzpah and ignorance" that got her through *Mermaids* eight years ago has been replaced by an encyclopedic knowledge of film financing, and a trademark approach to day-to-day producing that combines equal amounts of passion and pragmatism.

Odeon for Canadian distribution rights only, and \$10,000 on a presale to Channel Four in Britain.

Raffé's financing strategies always begin with the-best-of-all-possible-worlds scenario. "If you do that, you don't lose sight of your goals and you

Paul have a real track record in features, and putting it in a Canadian context, it is healthy."

According to Raffé, the enthusiasm and confidence of the Alliance people, not to mention their cheque, was an important element in obtaining the rest of the financing from the agencies. "The financial breakdown is very simple, really," she says. "All the money came from three sources." The remaining two were Telefilm and the OFDC. The final budget was \$1.825 million.

Lotus Eaters with a similarly sized budget (\$1.86 million) had a more complicated financing scheme. By the time Raffé came on board, producer Sharon McGowan and writer/co-producer Peggy Thompson had raised development financing. She helped them get the rest. The breakdown is as follows: \$350,000 from Malofilm (who gave extra funds enabling them to hire actor R.H. Thomson, and an additional \$10,000 to acquire the rights to a song for the soundtrack); \$350,000 from B.C. Film; \$200,000 in cash and services from the National Film Board (Pacific Region); and \$90,000 from Telefilm West.

Initially McGowan wanted somebody on the team who knew more than she did and could be helpful in the financing stages. Raffé went through half a dozen drafts over a two-year period with them before they "got serious" and spent four solid days immersed in strategic discussion. They set the budget at \$1.8 million, which was as low as they could get it. It was just barely enough.

In addition to Raffé's dictum about assessing what a film should reasonably cost at the outset and sticking to it, she has a few other producing rules she will not violate. One has to do with not dipping into post-production funds. "The exigencies of low-budget filmmaking are such that people borrow from post to fund the needs of the moment. Her solution on all three films was to "put a box around post-production funds" and not allow anyone to dip into them for any reason. "We spent an extra couple of weeks of editing on *Lotus* because we

knew we were really close to what we wanted, and we needed to try to get it. We spent 10 days more on *Zero* for the same reason," she says. "I think that is some of the most worthwhile money you can spend on a film."

The other rule has to do with her refusal to simply be a signature on a film deal. She is involved in all her projects in

the most hands-on way possible, from script consultation to final edit, with everything in between, and she makes her mark.

"All of these films would have been made whether I'd been involved in them or not," she says. They just might not have been made as well. "We'll see," she says with a grin •

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