

## A Feature Interview with Michael MacMillan

Atlantis Films has played a large part in the staggering growth of television production in Canada that has occurred over the past two decades. From a tiny independent production company in 1978 (started with \$150 by five university friends who "just wanted to make films"), Atlantis Films has grown into a \$175-million production, distribution, broadcast business, one of the largest independents in North America and one that has benefited enormously from the explosion in the global broadcast industry. From *Sons and Daughters*, its first series sold to the CBC in 1982 (for which Atlantis won an Oscar for Don McBreaarty's *Boys and Girls*), through *Ramona*, *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, *The Ray Bradbury Theater*, *Kurt Vonnegut's Monkey House*, *Maniac Mansion*, William Shatner's *TekWar*, *My Life as a Dog*, *The Outer Limits*, *Psi Factor: Chronicles of the Paranormal*, *Gene Roddenberry's Earth: Final Conflict*, *Traders*, *Cold Squad* and the soon-to-come animated *The World of Peter Cottontail*, Atlantis's series are marked by high production standards, broad audience appeal and global marketability. Michael MacMillan, Atlantis's cofounder, chairman and CEO, has gained industry-wide respect for being one of the shrewdest players in the business. So, on the occasion of Atlantis Films's 20th anniversary, *Take One* asked Michael for his take on the state of Canada's television industry, 20 years after Atlantis changed the ground rules. We began at the beginning.

# at 20

BY WYNDHAM WISE



*Psi Factor: Chronicles of the Paranormal*

All photos courtesy of Atlantis Films



Amanda Plummer in *The Outer Limits*



*The World of Peter Cottontail*



**MM** I was born in Scarborough and raised in East York. I left to go Queen's University [in Kingston] where I met my partners. By the time I had finished Queen's and come back to Toronto in 1978, I had been away for four formative years. In a sense, it was coming back to a new place.

**WW** *What was the scene like in Toronto at that time?*

It was really heady times to think that we were going to make films, which is all we wanted to do. We were living together in a small house on Church Street. We lived on the upper two floors and had the three rooms on the first floor as the office area. There were five of us in the first few months: Seaton MacLean, Janice Platt, myself, Andy Rednick and Nick Kendall. Nick was only with us for a few months and Andy left after a year-and-a-half. Apart from the excitement of trying to make films, it was also lonely. We weren't part of a film scene. We used to read with great interest *Movie Works Weekly*. It was one of the few connections into the rest of the community. We were 21 years old with precious little relevant experience, contacts or money. Our first connection into the film community came through the folks at 35 Britain Street. PS Production Services was upstairs and Linda Beath was on the main floor. We had known Doug Dales from before (while we were still at Queen's), and when we came to Toronto and needed equipment, we would call up PS. We could rent our Steinbecks down in the basement and we would mix

there. So that was our sense of community at first. In fact, just to roll forward on this point (and I've told this story often), when we first went to MIP-TV in 1980, we took with us the *Olden Days Coat*, and it was one of the most exciting moments of my life. Landing in Cannes, sitting on the Croisette, reading that thick book of all the attendees at MIP-TV, we realized that there were hundreds, even thousands of people like us in the world. We were connected into a much larger world.

*As young filmmakers from Queen's, what led you into this much larger world of television with dramas like Boys and Girls which won you the Oscar in 1984?*

We treated them all as short films. We knew we'd make economic sense out of them by selling them to TV, but equally as important was the nontheatrical market in those days. That market was as important as broadcast is today. We were still independent filmmakers mostly adapting short stories or books. After doing that for a while, we realized as an economic model, television was the way to go. As a result, we made about 50 half-hour adaptations of short stories from 1980 to '85. It was fantastic, because every one was its own little film. Each one had a different story, cast, crew, writer and director. Each one was different.

*It seems to me that there was a period in 1983, '84 and '85 when things jelled for Canadian television. Telefilm Canada had come on stream with its Broadcast Fund, pay TV had been*



The Ray Bradbury Theater



Megan Follows in Boys and Girls



successfully launched, Empire Inc. had been broadcast on the CBC with Denys Arcand directing, Atlantis came along and won an Oscar and Kevin Sullivan was shooting Anne of Green Gables. Did you sense a shift, that filmmakers were doing something different with Canadian television that had never been done before?

I suppose, yes. I am very proud of films we made then and I still am. They were real hands-on individual works and we did a lot of the jobs ourselves. We were very filmmaker-type producers. Not to take anything away from the contributions of the directors, writers and performers. We had a very simple agenda—to tell Canadian stories as well as we could in a half-hour format. It was a natural thing for us to adapt. Canada has produced so many strong short story writers. Financially, half-hour was a bite that we could take without indigestion. The other thing that happened was that we grew a lot from 1981 to '83. We were too young and too stupid to know that there was a recession going on. We didn't think in those terms. So we grew. We hired people and took on more production opportunities. Then winning the Oscar in 1984, and *The Painted Door* being nominated but not winning in 1985, did change things. It made us more confident and proud and wanting to do more. It also opened doors to America. While we had visited the U.S. and talked to Americans before and sold finished programs, the Oscar put us in the position of being able to develop things with the Americans. It meant a more traditional TV broadcaster. It meant more traditional TV formats and the first evidence of that was our first series with American money up-front, *The Ray Bradbury Theater*.

How did that series come about?

We were introduced to Bradbury by a guy



Michael MacMillan

named Larry Willcock, who was a star on *CHiPS*, the old TV show. After the Oscar, there was some shine on us. HBO was very interested. We then did a deal and sold it to Global in Canada and Telefilm invested in the first three episodes. We replaced HBO with the USA Network after the sixth episode and continued with USA until the end. It was very important for us, a new paradigm for producing. It involved foreign money and multiple broadcast partners, because it is difficult to fully finance programs at home. That was unusual for 1985. In 1998 it is absolute standard, but in 1985 we were just seeing the effects of fragmentation with the new technology, cable and VCR.

Do you feel Atlantis has led the way in doing this?

Others were figuring the same thing out at the same time. It wasn't that we invented electricity. It was the obvious response to reality.

In the mid-1980s I attended a graduate seminar where Canadian cable pioneer Izzy Switzer was talking about Canada's growing capabilities in the television market. He said Canada was moving toward an auto-pact-style television industry where 25 per cent of the product for North American TV would be made in Canada. His prophecy has been born out with the success of Atlantis and others like Alliance, Nelvana, Cinar, etc. Did you see that back then, that Canada would develop an industrial base for such a huge quantity of TV product?

I attended a seminar that Izzy addressed in 1985, and he said the same thing. So he was consistent. He talked about that and he talked about the new satellite technology that doesn't respect boundaries and can't be controlled as easily; that we had to figure out ways to make and finance programs that weren't reliant on establishing barriers or protective roadblocks. In fact, the main stimulus for the production and financing of Canadian programming is all on the supply side, with the Canadian Film and Television Production Fund, Telefilm Canada and the new measures being discussed in the feature-film area likely won't result in tariffs or barriers. So Izzy was correct. Canadians now do make a decent percentage of North American TV, but I would be reluctant to make the auto-pact comparison. Cars and television shows are not the same thing. When I drive a car, I don't really think it matters where it came from, apart from the jobs that were created. But when I watch a TV show or film, yes, there is a very important job component,



# Atlantis

Traders

however, there is a very important reason why we subsidize or encourage TV and film. They tell stories and contain information that transcends the jobs. Film and television are ultimately about story telling and reflecting to people something about who they are and what they are. I'm fearful that if we went to an auto-pact solution then there wouldn't be any room for rules designed to encourage programs that reflected their roots, and that is very important.

*That goes back to the argument that cars don't carry culture, but sure as hell TV does. We are constantly fighting the cultural battle in Canada. However, what Izzy pointed to was our production capabilities. Given the quantity and quality of Canadian TV in 1978, I wouldn't have thought you could have made that statement 20 years ago, but now there is no question Canadians can produce that sort of quantity and quality.*

We are very happy focusing on TV. It's a world that we know and importantly it is a world that allows our programs to be seen very widely. Millions and millions of people see our programs and that's very important to us. That said, we did put our toe in the waters of making feature films in the mid-1980s. We made a few films and bought international distribution rights to other films. We felt we wanted to get into that business, but it was not a successful activity. In retrospect, we were probably not committed enough. We only put a toe half in, and you have to jump in. We weren't dedicated enough. We have been diligently focused on TV, but we don't rule out making feature films. We don't have any plans right now, but I don't deny we would enjoy making feature films.

*You have said earlier, and I go back to an early Cinema Canada interview you did, where you said you shied away from features. I thought that*

*"To think that this industry could create this present level of output, this quality of output, this consistency of quality, would have been ridiculous 20 years ago."*

*was a very clever move because it is so risky. I know it is the sexy end of the market, but you seem to be grounded in what works and what is practical.*

But today you can finance feature filmmaking through TV, home video and other revenue streams. The ability to make a feature film, one that actually walks and talks and acts like a feature film and not just TV show pretending to be a feature film, can be made with TV money. To work best, of course, a feature film has to be successful on the big screen, which creates awareness and a greater value when it comes to selling to TV. One can mitigate the downsize risk much better today than 10 years ago because of the proliferation of TV outlets, VCRs,

pay-per-view, etc. But my limited knowledge of feature films also tells me that it is increasingly dominated by very large budgets, which has its own difficulties.

*In another Cinema Canada interview, Janice Platt said something about using an ACFC crew on the Sons and Daughters series that struck me as very interesting and indicative of your modus operandi. Apparently you couldn't afford to pay the going rate so you went back to the ACFC and said, "please let us pay this much ...and all of this was put in a letter and we were very, very clear about it. We set standards, we set rules." It occurs to me that a large part of the success of Atlantis has come about by rewriting the accepted rules of making television in this country.*

We have frequently broken the established ways of doing things, the accepted norms, especially the norms people say you can't do. People told us we couldn't build Cinevillage, we were out of our minds. People told us that offices in Amsterdam and Sydney were not on. People told us we couldn't apply for specialty channels like The Life Network and Home & Garden TV. We've often done things we weren't supposed to do. In an industry that is changing so fast and growing so fast and is part of the communications industry—which is the growth industry of the past half century and therefore has lots of new people coming into it, lots of money coming into it—you have to keep changing, keep breaking the rules to have the opportunity to do things. Risk is part of the game. If you spend half your time figuring out how to mitigate the risk, creating nets for a soft landing if something doesn't work out the way that you think, then you're willing and able to take bigger risks.

*You have been active in the business of setting policy for broadcasting with your work at the CFTPA.*



Maniac Mansion

We try to get our two-cents worth in whenever we can. I was very active in the 1980s, and recently I have been very active again with the CFTPA. Getting involved again was a real eye opener because it is like night and day as an organization—the quality of people involved, the level of discussion and issues being debated—the whole thing had exploded to a different level. I shouldn't have been surprised, because it reflects the number of really successful people in the industry. It reflects the size and shape of the industry. If you think back 20 years, it's unbelievable. You are right. To think that this industry could create this present level of output, this quality of output, this consistency of quality, would have been ridiculous 20 years ago.

*Going through your catalogue, there is a large number of science fiction series. Is that because it is an easier sell, because it is set in a fantasy rather than rooted in any particular reality?*

Very interesting observation. Our start in science fiction was through writers like Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut. We got Vonnegut, or were validated in his mind, through Ray Bradbury. Our entry point was literature and short stories that happened to be in science fiction because they were great stories. It is fun to do. Not a very sophisticated reason, mind you, but nevertheless true. And that genre has similar characteristics to animation and historical pieces. To my mind, there are three kinds of programs that stand the best chance to have real longevity. Programs that do not take place in the here and now—animation doesn't, science fiction doesn't and obviously historical pieces don't. It makes for a very imaginative way of working that has a long shelf life. We are still selling *The Ray Bradbury Theater*.

*Is that your most successful series?*

Yes, although *Gene Roddenberry's Earth: Final Conflict* is doing very well in a short period of time.

*Speaking of animation, I understand you have Peter Cottontail.*

*The World of Peter Cottontail.* Some folks in Vancouver, Chris Bruyere and Mary Bissell, approached us with the project. They had secured the rights from the estate and they brought us the idea. We have been working with them for close to two years developing the series. We have had a family and children's aspect to what we have done over the years. However, in the past four or five years, our focus on prime time drama really meant that we had neglected or forgotten about our kids. Now we want to return to that. *Peter Cottontail* is a great property and the idea is to produce a couple of animated series if we can.

*What else is Atlantis planning for the future?*

We want to expand our broadcasting activities. Apart from *The Life Network* and *Home & Garden TV* which just went on-air, we have applied for a food channel. We are currently importing an American one as a temporary measure. We have applied for a National Geographic channel, a people channel, which we are doing with the CBC, a health channel and *Fitness TV*.

*These channels are very niche marketing. How can they all survive?*

People like choice and people like to tune in the channels where they know what they are going to get. If you have got a hobby, no matter what it might be, you will go a long way out of your way to pursue that hobby. It's a very busy and noisy world out there and there is not enough time to do

everything. When people come home tired after a very long day or week, they are looking for something they can see themselves reflected in, a leisure activity where they know what they are going to get. Personally, what I like to do when I get home is cook or watch a cooking show or read a cookbook. There are a lot of people who want to tap in readily to whatever their leisure is.

*You don't think that the market is saturated?*

Not at all. Thirty per cent of viewing in North America this year is speciality or pay channels. This is a fundamental shift in viewing habits. People like choice. You've seen it in books, in magazines, everywhere.

*Out of all the programs Atlantis has made over the past 20 years, what is your personal favourite?*

That's difficult, because my personal role in these things has changed. Now I am running a company that includes broadcasting and distribution.

*Well, if you step back as the filmmaker and look at what you have created on the screen, what do you like best?*

That's easier. I guess the two projects that I personally take the most pride from, and I'm probably forgetting something here, would be *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, based on Dylan Thomas's poem, and a documentary we made in 1982 about the Canadian painter, *Chambers: Tracks and Gestures*, which is a beautiful film.

*With John Walker directing.*

And Chris Lowry. I spent a whole summer editing that film with those guys. Those are the two that stand out. And *Boys and Girls*, of course.