

FOUR HEADS, ONE VISION

Rhombus Media at the Crossroads

by Marc Glassman

All photos courtesy of Rhombus Media



Dido and Aeneas

TAKE ONE

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The scene at this year's Gemini Awards must have been a strange one indeed. Niv Fichman, the angular, bearded, bespectacled executive producer of Rhombus Media was, unsurprisingly, up at the podium accepting a Gemini, this time for Larry Weinstein's *The War Symphonies: Shostakovich Against Stalin*. This being the 22nd Gemini that the company has received in the 1990s, the audience surely was unprepared for Fichman's disquieting acceptance speech. Acting rather like a rueful zealot exhorting the flock, Fichman informed the well-dressed crowd that Rhombus was at a crossroads. "I said that it was the last of the breed," comments Fichman, "because we were not going to be able to make this kind of arts documentary anymore. I thanked all the people who had helped us make them over the years. People thought that I was talking about Larry's death or something equally tragic. All I meant was that the films we are going to make will have to change."

Speaking a couple of months later at Rhombus's office, in one of the renovated buildings near the bustling intersection of King and Spadina on the west side of Toronto's downtown media core, Fichman is more sanguine. He and his partners Larry Weinstein, Barbara Willis Sweete and Sheena Macdonald clearly have no reason to panic. Since 1995, they have released 14 films to international acclaim. David Wellington's cinematic collaboration with Stratford Festival actors William Hutt, Martha Henry, Tom McCamus, Peter Donaldson and Martha Burns on Eugene O'Neill's classic play *Long Day's Journey Into Night* garnered all four acting Genies in 1996. Tim Southam's dance drama *Satie and Suzanne* won prizes in Europe, the United States and Canada. And their major project, the six-part *Yo-Yo Ma: Inspired By Bach*, directed by Atom Egoyan, Patricia Rozema, Kevin McMahon, François Girard, Fichman and Sweete has been screened in festivals from Istanbul to Los Angeles, gaining yet more trophies in Brazil, Italy and France.

Though Fichman is justifiably proud that "in the world of classical music, we are the top brand," his concern for the future of Rhombus is based on a close understanding of the international marketplace. He feels that the Yo-Yo Ma series, which featured the brilliant cellist working with such respected artists as choreographer Mark Morris, kabuki artist Tamasaburo Bando and champion skaters Jayne Torvil and Christopher Dean, is unrepeatable today, given current fiscal circumstances. Sony, the co-producer of the Bach programs "would never have the same involvement today," comments Fichman, "because they just don't sell videos and broadcasters don't put these things in prime time anymore."

Culturally oriented programmers at Germany's ZDF, France and Germany's Arte and England's BBC and Channel 4 have seen their production and acquisition budgets slashed in recent years as commercially oriented stations, televising mainly American fare, rapidly take over the market in Europe. Rhombus had built its considerable reputation in the past decade accessing these now diminished funds and putting them to good use, through the creation of a host of brilliantly conceived contemporary performance art and historically based cultural documentaries. Although that window now has its shades drawn, other opportunities have Fichman and his partners excited.

"Much to my surprise," Fichman reports, "commercial studios in Los Angeles treat our kinds of things with enormous respect. They're dying for something cultural, not in

the sense that they would take a documentary on Schoenberg, but they would consider a film about a violin over 300 years and in five languages." Rhombus's *The Red Violin*, a narrative art film directed by Girard, attracted \$14-million worth of investment while, ironically, arts documentary proposals in the \$1-million range, the company's traditional projects, can no longer be financed. Girard's film, along with *Last Night*, Don McKellar's soon-to-be-released black comedy about humanity's last day on earth, represent a new direction for Rhombus.

With worldwide interest in both films peaking among the *cognoscenti*, it is hardly surprising that Rhombus's workplace is humming with excitement at the moment. The office itself, a loft-like environment, is organized in a modified open-concept style. Desks for Rhombus's administrative crew are placed in the middle of the long, relatively narrow main room. Cubicles for the main staff are arranged toward the back of the floor. A huge blowup of composer Kurt Weill, the subject of Weinstein's acclaimed *September Songs*, looms over part of the left wall as one enters the space. A room to the right beckons. Like most things at Rhombus, it serves a variety of differing functions ranging from being a video-dubbing area, a meeting place and an awards room, sometimes simultaneously.

The room is stuffed with Rhombus memorabilia. Dozens of trophies fill its walls and tables—Chris Awards from the U.S. Columbus Festival, Genies, International Emmys. One table has 14 Geminis in a series of constricting, circular rows. Even one of the thick metallic statuettes would be hefty enough to kill someone. When that suggestion is put to Barbara Willis Sweete, the attractive and usually composed director starts to laugh. It has been a long road since the late 1970s when, as she recalls, "we ran the company out of my little slummy apartment, and I was working as a bartender and Niv was working in a grocery store."

Sweete met Fichman at York University, where they both were attending film school. Their first project, the appropriately titled *Opus One, Number One* traced the musical development of a Beethoven piece played by a trio of teenage performers, led by Niv's younger brother Yuval, a piano-playing prodigy. They garnered enough attention from that work to be recommended by Stan Fox, then head of York's film department, to film a performance piece by R. Murray Schafer. *Music For Wilderness Lake*, an environmental music work written by the acclaimed avant-garde composer, was performed and

shot in Ontario's lake district, near Georgian Bay. For the shoot, Fichman and Sweete hired Weinstein, a summer student, who was paid through a youth employment program. He so impressed them that when his three months of eligibility ran out, the two, who couldn't afford to pay Weinstein, arranged to keep him on by making him the chief officer of their newly formed company. "The summer employment program used Larry's story as an ace up their sleeves for years," recounts Sweete. "After 12 weeks, someone had become the president of a company."

During the early 1980s, the trio met screenwriter John Frizzell. He briefly joined them, making the group a quartet and spurring the naming of the company to Rhombus, a four-sided figure resembling an "oblique equilateral parallelogram." Frizzell owned a house at 14 Belmont St., on a heritage block in downtown Toronto, which replaced Sweete's apartment as the firm's illegal office. Fichman lived there as did Frizzell's friend Sheena Macdonald, who was working in advertising for firms such as Vickers and Benson. The lively and funny Macdonald remembers that Rhombus's exciting purchase, an editing machine, dominated their kitchen. "The neighbours suspected that we were running a business because so many courier trucks used to show up on the street. When the zoning inspector would come by, we would throw sheets over the telephones, and I would get the rest of them, Niv and Larry and Barb, to duck out to the local coffee shop. Then I would pretend to be a housewife, at home for the afternoon, waiting for my husband."

Eventually, they were found out and moved to their current, and definitely legal office on King Street. Rhombus continued to grow during that time, making mainly music documentaries, with occasional forays into such subjects as race relations and environmental issues. Their main funders were the National Film Board, the Canada Council and the CBC. The group scored major triumphs during the mid-1980s with *Making Overtures*, a profile of a small town's amateur orchestra, which was nominated for an Oscar; *Magnificat*, a celebration of Bach's music featuring Bobby McFerrin, the New Swingle Singers and Tafelmusik; and *Blue Snake*, an extraordinary depiction of choreographer Robert Desrosiers' eccentric and visually splendid ballet.

In 1988, after years as a friend and former co-conspirator in their office scam, Macdonald was brought on board as the head of Rhombus International, the group's distribution wing. Fichman, who works closely with Macdonald on the marketing of



Yo-Yo Ma: Inspired by Bach—Struggle for Hope

Yo-Yo Ma: Inspired by Bach: What Ma wanted was a different set of collaborators for each Bach suite. Rhombus rose to the occasion, providing Ma with an extraordinarily rich assortment of artists, embodying unique visions for every one of the suites.

Rhombus's works, points out that "one of the main beauties of having our own distribution company is that, on the creative side, we have very truthful reactions to our films in the marketplace. We can never say, like other filmmakers, that the distribution was lousy and that was why a film was unsuccessful." Macdonald is often invited to sit through rough cuts of pieces and make suggestions. "The first three or four minutes are important to me," she says. "Remember that what we have been selling up to now has been television, not cinema."

As the 1990s began, Rhombus settled into an enviable groove. It became a small production house with international clout. Macdonald and Fichman, and a new recruit, Daniel Iron, concentrated on production, marketing and distribution deals while Weinstein and Sweete were given ample opportunities to express themselves as directors. Other talented filmmakers, notably Peter Mettler and François Girard,



September Song

contributed significant new works for Rhombus, pointing the way toward the production of feature-length films. Editing suites were setup in the coach house behind the company's King Street office, making the process and monitoring of postproduction extraordinarily easy for all concerned.

The work being produced through Rhombus became increasingly challenging, sophisticated and costly. Sweete placed her refined and highly visual sensibility into collaborations with such artists as opera singer Kiri Te Kanawa and choreographers Mark Morris and Lar Lubovitch. Weinstein's dramatic sense was utilized in a series of musical biographies which looked at the lives and works of such composers as Kurt Weill, Hanns Eisler, Arnold Schoenberg and Dimitri Shostakovich. Mettler directed the

first Rhombus-produced narrative feature, *Top of His Head*, and achieved a critical success with an adaptation of Robert Lepage's *Tectonic Plates*. And François Girard, whose filming of Carbone 14's dance piece *Le Dortoir* scored prizes from Cannes to Chicago, totally changed Rhombus's expectations with the extraordinary success of the feature-length dramatized documentary, *Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould*.

Rhombus's arts documentary productions reached their peak during that time with the series *Yo-Yo Ma: Inspired By Bach*. It was Ma himself, the internationally acclaimed cellist who, taken with Albert Schweitzer's injunction that Bach was a painterly composer, proposed that a film series be created around his monumental rerecording of the Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello. What Ma wanted was a different set of collaborators for each Bach suite. Rhombus rose to the occasion, providing Ma with an



Hong Kong Symphony

extraordinarily rich assortment of artists, embodying unique visions for every one of the suites.

For the first suite, director Kevin McMahon slyly created a comedy of manners. *The Music Garden* shows Ma at his most political, attempting to seduce Boston's civic leaders into allowing Julie Moir Messervy, an excellent landscape designer immersed in Bach's musical philosophy, to make a horticultural space in the middle of the city. François Girard's *The Sound of the Carceri* uses computer graphics and an historical location to match Piranesi's marvelous architectural conceptions with Bach's evocative music. Sweete's *Falling Down Stairs* interprets the Mark Morris Dance Co.'s stylized vision of Bach, rendering it in cinematic terms.

Atom Egoyan's *Sarabande*, featuring Lori Singer, Jan Rubes, Arsinée Khanjian and Don McKellar, is a drama that tries to recapitulate Bach's structural and emotional notions in a narrative form. Fichman's *Struggle For Hope* marries the theatrics of the greatest contemporary kabuki artist, Tamasaburo Bando, with that of his admirer Yo-Yo Ma. And Patricia Rozema's *Six Gestures* incorporates the wonderful aesthetics of skating duo Jayne Torvil and Christopher Dean and a fine performance by Tom McCamus as Bach into a visually arresting version of the sixth suite. As a coda to the project, Weinstein features Ma in *Hong Kong Symphony*, a fast-paced and surprisingly political look at the takeover of the capitalistic port by the mainland Chinese in July, 1977.

The six-part Yo-Yo Ma series is quirky and daring. It is unique for television, because it dares to treat Bach not only as a subject for reverence, but also as a figure whose ideas



The War Symphonies: Shostakovich Against Stalin

can be wrestled with, interpreted in a number of different ways, and, hopefully, made relevant to contemporary audiences. Ranging from dramas to documentaries to performance art pieces, these works are, at their best, conceptually bold and pictorially beautiful. At their least, as Mark Morris puts it to Yo-Yo Ma in *Falling Down Stairs*, they are not "terrible crimes" perpetrated on Bach.

Morris's collaboration with Sweete was so successful that the two went on to film an adaptation of *Dido and Aeneas*. The tale of the Trojan Prince Aeneas's fatal romance with Dido (the Queen of Carthage) before he goes off to found Rome is the stuff of myths. The 17th-century composer Henry Purcell's opera, based on the legend, inspired Mark Morris to create one of his most acclaimed

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dance pieces. Sweete knew that "it would make a great film because it is a very melodramatic story, set to gesture, which right away invites the camera in...*Dido* is a combination of emotional and dramatic images with the tableau of dance."

As in the Yo-Yo Ma piece, Sweete engaged in a process where she attempted to "get inside Mark's brain," in order to interpret his artistry on screen. "We're all afraid of limitless options," observes Sweete, "so we have to find rules. Mark does and they liberate him. And he breaks them if they stop liberating him! For the film, I did the same thing. The first exercise I set myself was how can I make this look like it can't possibly work on stage? And how can I take advantage of the camera to get the optimum view of everything that's going on?" One of the finest auteurs in the new field of visual poetry known as dance film, where choreography is married to the camera, Sweete thought through what Morris

stylistically into a mockumentary. Actors play Schoenberg's friends and students Anton Webern, Alban Berg, Hanns Eisler and Alma Mahler. The visual poetry of Schoenberg's opera *Erwartung* is represented through a Freudian, expressionist scene set in a noirish forest, in which a young woman, dressed in night-clothes, runs through a nightmarish scene. Weinstein's approach throughout this film is a perfect parallel for Schoenberg's challenging, but beautiful, music.

In response to the changes in the international marketplace, Weinstein and Sweete are now developing feature films. Weinstein wants to continue his run of biographies by dramatizing conductor Arturo Toscanini's musicality and heroism through his impassioned disputes with fascist leader Mussolini. Sweete is planning on directing playwright Judith Thompson's *Perfect Pie*, a drama with music about the changing friendship between two women



Yo-Yo Ma: Inspired by Bach—Six Gestures



Yo-Yo Ma

wanted to achieve with each character in *Dido*, and then crafted her own film direction in response to his movement vocabulary. Alternately free-floating and rigorously controlled, Sweete's direction of *Dido and Aeneas* respects the classical verities of Purcell's music while engaging in a dialogue with Morris's brilliant choreography.

If *Dido and Aeneas* is Sweete's finest work to date, surely Weinstein has created a work of equal merit with *My War Years: Arnold Schoenberg*. Humanizing the controversial Viennese composer, who shocked polite pre-First World War society by writing atonal music, was no easy task. Weinstein and his co-scenarist Thomas Wallner came up with the brilliant solution of dramatizing his story, turning the tale

over 30 years. Macdonald is excited about these new projects but still feels that there is a future in arts documentaries. Despite all the changes at Rhombus, she finds the identity of the group to be unchanged. "Last week," she recalls, "Niv and Danny Iron and I were staying at the Paramount Hotel in Manhattan. We had to get to the Brill Building to show *The Red Violin* to Fine Line, who is interested in distributing the film in the States. It's only three blocks, so we decided to walk it, but then realized that we had only allowed a few minutes to get there. So there were Niv and Danny, each cradling those huge metal canisters of 35mm film in their arms and me running behind them, holding our briefcases, as we rushed down the crowded streets around Times Square. Would any Americans have done that?"



François Girard's
Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould

