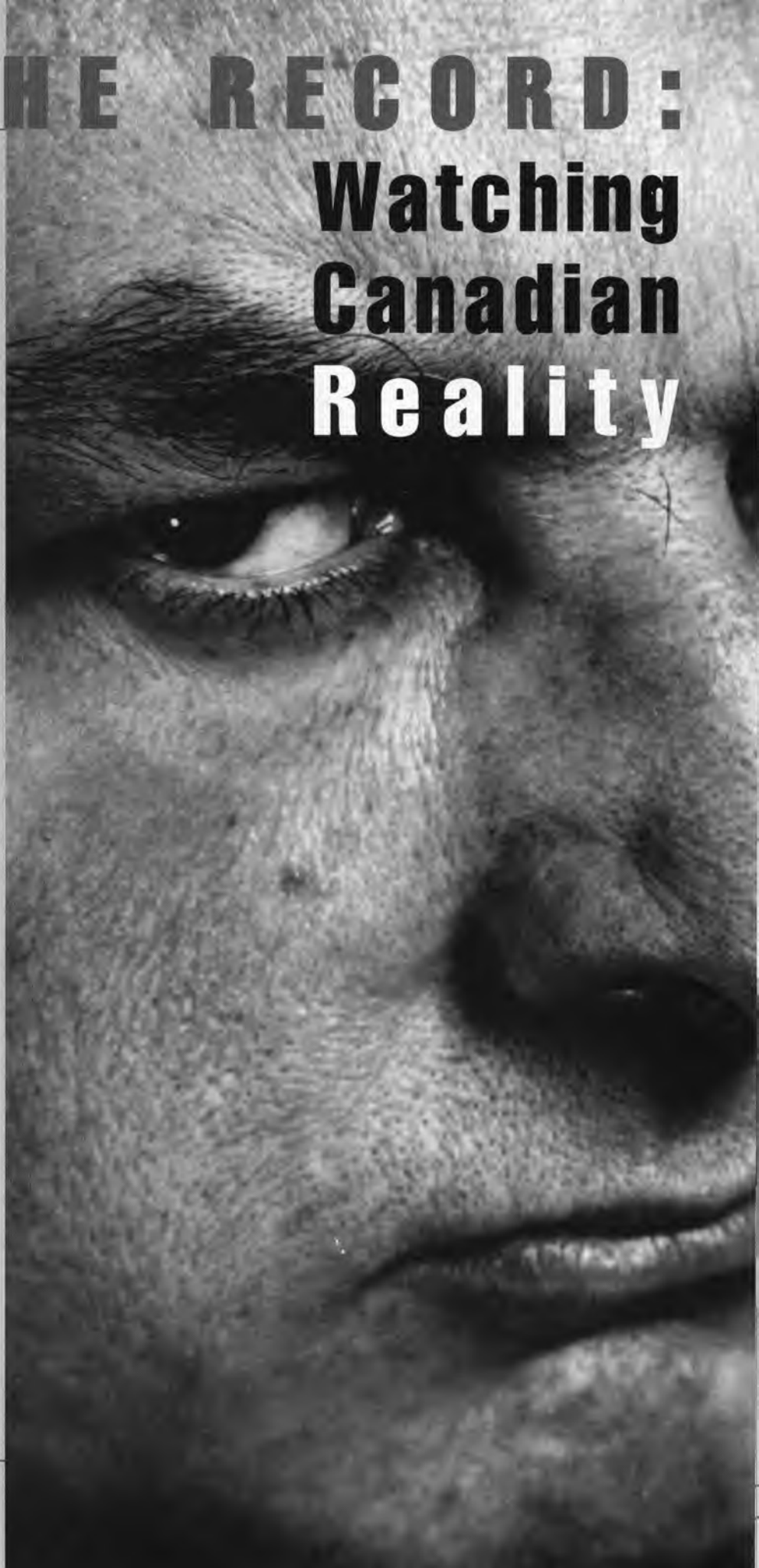
FOR THE RECORD: Watching Canadian Reality

By Paul Eichhorn

Ken Finkleman's latest sardonic television series for the CBC, *More Tears*, portrays TV journalists and news gatherers as venal, opportunistic and self–absorbed individuals. Their sole interest is in creating grand video moments and entertaining stories instead of reporting about the substance or facts related to the news event. It is ironic, therefore, that some the most intelligent, thought–provoking and entertaining dramatic programs to be aired on the public network were the product of professional journalists fusing news with drama.

For the Record, the CBC's last major anthology series, which ran from 1976 to 1986, offered hour–long (sometimes 90–minute) docudramas focusing on major political, social, business or cultural issues. Utilizing the talents of some of Canada's best directors, writers, cinematographers and actors, four or five were produced each season. And quite unlike the shock–based, sensationalistic American TV movies of the week, *For the Record* aimed to inform, educate and entertain. The series was, in many respects, the product of Canada's documentary film tradition.

"We had to entertain, but we were there to provoke and to challenge and to get viewers to think about social issues," explains Sig Gerber, *For the Record*'s executive producer from 1983 to 1986. He claims having a journalism background was helpful to *For the Record* executive producers. "We understood what a good story was." Gerber and his predecessors (Ralph Thomas, Stephen Patrick and Sam Levene) were all products of the CBC current affairs department, not entertainment and drama. Thomas began his career as a newspaper reporter and produced the CBC current affairs magazine *Something Else*. Patrick was a CBC current affairs producer in Halifax and Levene had previously worked on *This Hour Has Seven Days*, *The Public Eye*, *Man Alive* and *Telescope*. Gerber had overseen *Man Alive* and *Take Thirty*. The late John Hirsch, CBC's drama head in the mid–1970s, recruited Thomas and Patrick to produce a series that would translate the "mainstream Canadian experience." In the book *Rewind and Search*, former network executive Peter Herndorf (now head of TVOntario) credits John Hirsch for taking a chance by bringing Thomas and Patrick into drama. Both jumped at the chance to create what they soon dubbed "journalistic dramas."



Warren Davis in
The Insurance Man From Ingersoll

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For the Record was originally an offshoot of the weekly arts and entertainment showcase *Performance*. The first five full–hour journalistic dramas came under the title of *Camera 76*. CBC promotional material described the programs as "utilizing techniques usually associated with documentary and electronic reportage to achieve a particular mood" and described the program topics as "typical of stories that might appear in today's—or tomorrow's—news." The first drama was Peter Pearson's *The Insurance Man From Ingersoll*, broadcast on February 8, 1976. Pearson, who also directed *Kathy Kuruks is a Grizzly Bear* that season from a script by Thomas, says extensive research was done for each film. He says the experience of directing for *For the Record* was positive. "I liked all four of the shows I directed. They were all satisfying."

Claude Jutra, centre right, directing *Dreamspeaker*

Patrick left after season one, but Thomas continued to work on even more groundbreaking programs during season two, including Claude Jutras' powerful *Dreamspeaker* and Don Haldene's labour drama *Hank* (co–written by Thomas). But it was Pearson's *The Tar Sands* that became a news story itself. Pearson, who also began in the CBC current affairs department on programs such as *This Hour Has Seven Days*, wasn't happy about the controversy surrounding the program. "It blew the screen and our careers apart." The story involved negotiations between the big oil companies and governments of Canada, Alberta and Ontario that led to $2 billion of public money being earmarked to develop the Athabaska Tar Sands. The show featured Kenneth Welsh as the Albertan premier (widely known to be an unflattering portrait of Peter Lougheed) along with Donald Brittain's ubiquitous voice–of–God narration. Some critics hailed *The Tar Sands* (which was based on a book by Larry Pratt) the year's best TV program. Peter Lougheed wasn't so enthusiastic and launched a lawsuit against the network. CBC/SRC president Al Johnson wanted to bury the program, but senior managers battled to get *The Tar Sands* aired once. The broadcast began and ended with Barbara Frum reading a disclaimer about how the program was "fiction constructed around certain known events." The CBC eventually reached an out–of–court settlement with Lougheed for $250,000 and a public apology. Today, *The Tar Sands* is the only *For the Record* program not available in the CBC tape archives.

The Tar Sands marked the beginning of the end of the Ralph Thomas era and the start of Sam Levene's term as executive producer. Levene's years may not have been as overtly political but did feature cutting–edge programs on wife abuse (*A Far Cry From Home*), a married man coming to terms with his homosexuality (*Running Man*), Down Syndrome (*One of Our Own*) and the official secrets act (*Every Person Guilty*). However, Levene does recall the headlines sparked by *Harvest*, a 1981 drama about a farmer who refuses to sell his farm for a uranium factory. The Saskatchewan government tried to keep it from airing and Al Johnson sent an angry memo criticizing the program. *For the Record* budgets were tight, especially just prior to the series' demise. Sig Gerber and Sam Levene recall shooting episodes for between $80,000 to $120,000 in just eight to 10 days. Gerber says there were no lines of Winnebagos but just the lone CBC cinebus, a converted schoolbus that often broke down en route to a location. Make–up would be done in a nearby high school cafeteria and, if possible, real homes or buildings were used instead of sets. "It was lean, location drama, very gritty," adds Levene, who admits that the street level, from–the–hip improvised style of filmmaking was inspired by early Canadian feature filmmakers such as Don Owen and Don Shebib. And like both of those directors, who began as documentary filmmakers, *For the Record* was a testament to how Canadian filmmakers regularly made the crossover from documentary to fiction films. The series' unique combination of journalism with drama was what distinguished these made–for–TV films from similar productions south of the border.

"We often got ideas from newspapers," explains Levene. He and a team of four producers would then take those ideas and get writers to work on the script. Gerber adds stories were based on reality and than fictionalized. "We created really engaging stories and we did a lot of research, especially on programs like *Ready For Slaughter*." Gerber says the programs didn't trivialize important issues just to attract large audiences. Their goal was to reflect reality and still offer it in an entertaining context. Stylistically, the series contrasted greatly to U.S. network movies. *The Insurance Man From Ingersoll* had the look of a TV news report thanks to its distinctive cinematography and direction. *The Tar Sands* had a voice–of–God narrator, a traditional documentary technique; Allan King's *Marie* was shot in black and white; Gordon Pinsent's *A Far Cry From Home* featured gut–wrenching scenes of spousal abuse shot with a hand–held camera. Author Mary Jane Miller in *Rewind and Search* notes that *For the Record* was unlike other North American TV dramas that excluded experiment, stylistic innovation and nonformula TV.

For the Record is often cited because of the directors who contributed to the series. The list of distinguished directors includes Don Shebib, Allan King, Claude Jutra, Donald Brittain, William Fruet, Gilles Carle, Francis Mankiewicz, Paul Almond, Robin Spry and Anne Wheeler. The series was also a place where some of today's most gifted writers developed their craft. Roy MacGregor, better known as a journalist, wrote several impressive screenplays, including *Cementhead*, *Ready For Slaughter* and *An Honourable Member*. Rob Forsyth, who wrote the critically acclaimed feature *Clearcut*, wrote the intense stories for *Harvest* and *The Winnings of Frankie Walls*. Canada's screenplay whiz John Frizzell penned the program *I Love a Man in Uniform*. *In this Corner*, a drama about the IRA in Canada developed for *For the Record* but not aired as part of the series in 1986, was written by Paul Gross (*Due South*), and Suzette Couture (*Love and Hate: The Story of Colin and Joann Thatcher*, *The Million Dollar Babies*) wrote her first TV script, *Where the Heart Is*, for *For the Record*. "I believe *For the Record* was serving a great function—a new vehicle for new writers and directors," says Gerber. The short, one–hour dramas were ideal for new directors and writers to cut their teeth on.

Gerber says, since only four or five programs were produced annually, the odd failure was forgivable.

For the Record began to lose its edge toward the end of its run. Many programs originally slated for the series were used in different timeslots by 1985. CBC drama head John Kennedy began to question the viability of the series. *Oakmount High*, loosely based on the Jim Keegstra case, begins strongly when a small-town history teacher is exposed as a Holocaust denier. But the script soon goes way over the top and it deteriorates into a formulistic TV movie drama where everything is wrapped up nicely by the end. By 1986, producers began to consider incorporating psychological dramas into the series as well. *Michael and Kitty*, about a couple on the verge of a bitter divorce, was a story told through recurring flashbacks. It had its moments and strong performances but it was not vintage *For the Record*. By the end of 1986, Sig Gerber returned to current affairs and CBC Drama opted to go with two-hour event films. Levene says there was talk of reviving *For the Record* in the 1990s, but a relaunched series never materialized. The CBC has more or less buried the original films. With the exception of a syndicated package of programs in the late 1980s called *Moment in Time*, viewing a series episode is extremely rare. Even getting access to files related to the program or watching tapes requires special friends inside the Corp. Why all the secrecy and why keep it buried? Maybe the current regime just doesn't want people to see what great work was being done years before the massive cuts began. The CBC's Sunday TV movies now tend to be epic historic dramas (*Dieppe*, *The Arrow*) or big scandal-driven stories (*The Butterbox Babies*, *Conspiracy of Silence*, *The Sleep Room*). These films rely more on conventional, dramatic entertainment techniques and this new breed of CBC-TV movies often feature American subplots or characters to make them more attractive for resale to U.S. broadcasters.

For the Record offers an incredibly diverse look at Canadian reality from the mid-1970s through to the mid-1980s. The programs are truly accurate records of our times thanks to the journalistic instincts of the series' producers. *For the Record* deserves to be more than a footnote in Canadian film and television history. Not doing so would not only be a great loss artistically, but it would also be a great loss of stories about Canadian realities now long gone.

The Insurance Man From Ingersoll

1976 *d* Peter Pearson *sc* Norman Hartley, Peter Pearson *with* Al Bernardo, Charlotte Blunt, Warren Davis, David Gardiner, Mavor Moore. A dark tale of political corruption and corporate greed opens with the brutal beating of a construction worker witnessed by a TV crew. This event is then linked to the Ontario government, a corrupt union and a $100,000 corporate kickback. A governing party bagman, "the insurance man from Ingersoll," tries to defuse the scandal. Pearson effectively uses shots of the Ontario Legislature's historic halls while simultaneously running a soundtrack of a house debate on government corruption. The viewers are drawn into the program as though their watching one long news report. Vic Sarin's cinematography gives the film immediate and realistic feel.

Dreamspeaker

1977 *d* Claude Jutra *sc* Anne Cameron *with* Ian Tracey, George Clutesi, Jacques Hubert, Robert Howay, Jon Pallone. This 75-minute film is stylistically and artistically unique when compared to others in the *For the Record* series. Jutra, working for the first time in English, offers viewers some of his best directing in years. After setting a school on fire, an emotionally disturbed 11-year-old boy (Peter) is placed in a juvenile detention centre. He's hostile and prone to violent fits of self-strangulation. Peter manages to escape into the B.C. wilderness where he meets up with a native shaman, or dreamspeaker, and his mute friend. Peter finds a solution to the troubling voices in his head through the shaman's spiritualism. But after authorities return him to the detention centre, Peter hangs himself. Jutra offers no happy endings but instead an insightful and emotionally charged look at native spiritualism and mental illness.

Ready For Slaughter: Gordon Pinsent with Allan King

Ready For Slaughter

1983 *d* Allan King *sc* Roy MacGregor *with* Gordon Pinsent, Diana Belshaw, Booth Savage, Mavor Moore. This film is a vivid portrait of Canadian farmers trying to stay afloat in the early 1980s in the face of skyrocketing interest rates. Pinsent stars as embattled Ontario beef farmer, Will Hackett, struggling to make ends meet. A young, uncaring bank executive from the city decides farmers like Hackett must pay up or have their farms seized. A friend of Will's decides to fight back with other farmers. Hackett finally must fight himself when word gets out the bank is going to seize his farm. When Hackett threatens to burn his corn crop, the bank gives him another 60 days. *Ready For Slaughter* has a powerful performance by Pinsent, especially a scene in a graveyard where he laments on how he was ruining the legacy built by previous generations, while director King delivers the drama in a straightforward manner and provides viewers with an extremely realistic portrayal of farm life.