

A Filmmaker of Vision

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TAKE ONE's
Interview with

Colin Low

Part II

By Wyndham Wise and Marc Glassman

In the Spring issue, No. 23, *Take One* ran the first half of this interview with veteran NFB filmmaker, Colin Low, someone who has committed 50 extraordinary years to Canadian filmmaking, and still, in his 74th year, remains active. From the visually and technologically stunning *Labyrinth* installation at Montreal's Man and His World in 1967 to the raw, hand-held footage from Fogo Island, Low has done it all. His job description includes animator, director, producer, administrator, innovator and is known as one of the most accomplished storyboard artist ever to work at the Board. His sympathetic and authentic work with the First Nations people through films such as *Circle of the Sun* earned him a special place among the Bloods of Alberta and his *Transitions* film for the 1986 Vancouver World's Fair (co-directed with Tony Ianzelo) was the first to be shot in the IMAX 3-D process. His creative energy is boundless and his vision uniquely Canadian. On the occasion of the National Film Board's 60th anniversary, it is appropriate to remember where we came from.

Where did the idea for the Labyrinth project come from?

Roman [Kroitor] and I used to talk about myth and legend quite a lot. I told him about my interest in Theseus and the Theseus myth from Mary Renault's book [*The King Must Die*]. Roman came back several months later and said we should do a project for the Montreal World's Fair and why not a labyrinth? I thought about it for a while and told him about an idea I had been working on. The audience walks through a door into a darkened room and everything is subdued. Suddenly, the room lights go out and they are standing on a glass floor looking down 1,000 feet into the middle of Montreal. Roman liked it and rented a helicopter, clamped a 35mm Ariflex to one of its skids, and flew across downtown Montreal to do some aerial shots. We had a portable projector put up in the rafters of the Board sound stage and projected the footage onto a screen on the floor. We got up into the rafters, lay on our stomachs, and looked down for a long time. Roman said, "It doesn't quite work, does it?" It didn't have the effect we were looking for. Roman had some more ideas, so I came back in the afternoon and we got up there again. He had recorded the sound of traffic and put a couple of loud speakers on the floor. Suddenly it was magical. It gave the sense of space and reinforced the whole idea of looking down a great distance.

We realized that the 70mm footage was tremendously stable on the screen, with no movement, and running the projector on its side was perfect. It gave me the idea that you could make a triptych show, using 70mm on its side, much like today's IMAX.

Roman, being a genius with promotional ideas, said we had to sell this to the Board. We needed a big screen, 70mm, and to put the audience above the thing, we needed a glass floor. We went to Grant McLean and asked for \$10,000 to put on a show for Mayor Drapeau and the Expo committee. We also talked to Guy Roberge, who was the commissioner of the Film Board at that time. They both loved the idea. So we used some footage that I had done for *Microcosm*, a zoom through a crystal lattice. We had it blown up to 70mm and projected it with a mirror system on a back screen.

You mean rear-screen projection?

That's right. We had a catwalk and a glass floor. The mayor came with his staff and they were quite enthralled with the whole thing. We had sound effects, music and some of the aerial shots blown up on the screen under their feet. Then we took them into a theatre and showed them Arthur Lipsett's *Faces* film on two screens with an incredible soundtrack by Arthur and Maurice Blackburn. I had also done a few sketches of what some of the chambers might look like. That's how we sold the Mayor and the Board on the project.

How many chambers did you plan?

We planned more than three [the final installation had three chambers] and we guessed at a budget of \$4 million. The city asked what resources we would need to proceed and we said we would need about \$75,000 to continue development and go onto the next stage, which was an actual architectural plan. It was my job to relate our ideas to the architects. We had to make a mockup of the pavilion in a space large enough to hold it so that the technology could be done at the same time. We looked around Montreal to no avail and then someone suggested Canadair. I met with the president who said, "Yes, we have an old hanger." I asked how much he would rent it to us for three years. He said \$110,000. And even though we only had \$75,000 I said, "we'll take it." [Editor's note: The Board subsequently advanced the funds necessary to cover pre-production expenses.] This way we got out of the Film Board; however, we took quite a lot of the Film Board with us. We hired staff and built in the changes. I was in the drawing room most of the time, working back and forth between the architect and doing the storyboards. We bought 30 years of *Life* magazines and tore them up, filling the room with pictures, trying to create the feeling of going from childhood, to confident youth, disillusionment, then to reaffirmation of the spirit. Then we went out and shot test material. We made a trip around the world to about 10 countries. I went to Ethiopia and had a good shoot there.



Labyrinthe

Then I went to Cambodia for Angkor Wat. Roman went with a smaller team to southern Ethiopia for a crocodile hunt. I went to Japan, but I didn't do any shooting there. Later Roman went back with a small crew. Hugh O'Connor went to India with a small crew. The full team went to Russia and other countries, of course.

Was all footage shot on 35mm and later blown up to 70mm?

Chamber one was shot in 70mm for the aerials then 35mm anamorphic blown up for the projections. It was our first experience with 70mm film. We had a vertical screen at the end of the theatre and a horizontal screen at the bottom, which worked together. We realized that the 70mm footage was tremendously stable on the screen, with no movement, and running the projector on its side was perfect. It gave me the idea that you could make a triptych show, using 70mm on its side, much like today's IMAX.

What you were doing was combining 35mm with 70mm. Had this been done before?

They had tried it on a big screen with Cinerama in the 1950s, but we were really looking back to Abel Gance who shot *Napoleon* using three screens in the late 1920s.

It wasn't that you were inventing anything new, it was just unusual to see this combination.

The reason we used five screens was because the audience was on four different levels in chamber one and we didn't want to take them off those levels, so when they came into chamber three we wanted them to be viewing the film on the vertical and horizontal. We built everything on a one-third scale at the Canadair hanger and we also designed the maze there. The maze was three prisms in an octagonal room full of mirrors on all the walls, floor and ceiling. The prisms were made of partial-silvered glass so when the lights were on the audience, it would be the audience reflected back to itself, and when the lights went off the audience and came on in the prisms, it made an infinity of stellar lights. A cosmos.

Some people consider Labyrinthe as one the highlights of the Film Board's many accomplishments. It attracted a lot of attention to the Board and what it was capable of doing.

Certainly we didn't know that until the second day when the lineups started and then they became seven hours long. It

TAKE ONE's Interview with Colin Low

became a real problem, strategically, to control the movement into the pavilion. The design capacity—running 10 hours a day—was for 1.2 million people, and that was met. The downtime was amazingly short given the complexity of the whole thing.

Going to Fogo Island must have been a complete change for you.

I was exhausted after five years of continuous work on *Labyrinth* and it was nerve-racking. I was delighted to finally drop it. I had started to worry about everything, like were people going to fall over the edge of the balconies. It was a very exciting experience, too exciting. One of the people who worked on the project as location manager was David Hughes. He had left *Labyrinth* and had gone to the NFB to work with John Kemeny on *Challenge For Change*, which was called the "Poverty Program" then. Kemeny had produced *The Things I Cannot Change* and he asked me to come and talk to them about poverty. I said I knew a thing or two, or so I thought. I talked to them about the whole question of community development and how you had to go about the educational and communication problems of poverty. They asked me what my ideas were and then they said, "We have a project for you. We want you to go to Newfoundland." I worked all summer on Fogo Island while *Labyrinth* was playing.

Didn't you start at Memorial University in St. John's?

Yes. The head of the extension program at Memorial was Donald Snowdon who had worked in the Canadian Arctic in fish co-ops. He took me places in the province that were supposed to be models of community development and let me draw my own conclusions. They weren't. They were simply resettlements off islands to cut services. It was resettlement to permanent welfare. So Donald sent me to Fogo Island with a community-development man by the name of Fred Earl. He was from Fogo Island. You could see there were the seeds of local government there; there was an improvement committee which was very articulate, lively and smart, made up of fishermen, merchants and school teachers. I went back with a crew. I had Bob Humble with me as my cameraman, a sound man, and four kids from Memorial University, including Greg Malone, who later became famous with CODCO. When I got there, I realized that people were very nervous about this pro-

ject. They generally would try and avoid us, because, number one, we were mainlanders, and two, they thought that we were with the government. There were great differences of opinion. Part of the island wanted desperately to be resettled and others were absolutely convinced that they could stay there and continue to fish. All they needed was a bit of intermediate technology.

The idea was to shoot the footage in a straightforward manner, is that right? To have the people talk directly into the camera with no editing. How did you manage this approach?

We asked people if they would talk to us. They were diffident. They said, "we aren't educated" or "we don't know what the government wants," pretending to be shy. But when you had a glass of rum with them, you could tell they weren't so shy at all. They were just about the most articulate people you could ask for. I said, "If we go down to the wharf and have a discussion, would you do it?" They would say, "No, I don't want to be on film." So I said, "If we have a discussion, and I put it on film, I guarantee you I will bring that film back to you and if you don't like it I promise you I will burn it." And they said, "You're not serious." And I told them I was perfectly serious. Eventually they agreed. Usually I would work with Fred and the two of us would do the interviews. I didn't really know enough about their lives to ask all the right questions. Fred would talk and I would ask some questions that were sometimes foolish. The people would answer with a kind of intensity, trying to explain their situation to someone who wasn't knowledgeable. We used a one-to-one shooting ratio and a hand-held camera. We made 27 films and then we brought the rushes back to Montreal where we did the rough edit. I worked with a local school teacher, Randy Coffin, who had agreed to come and spend three months in Montreal. And then we took the films back to the island.

Were these films of a uniform length?

No. They really couldn't be. Sometimes we let them run on, this way people felt their whole opinions were being expressed and not taken out of context. For the screenings on Fogo, we balanced the footage we projected with films like *High Steel*, which I would put in for entertainment. It took us a month to run the films. There were 6,000 people on the island, in seven towns. We would move from community hall to community hall in the middle of winter. We would advertise and get the people out. We got around the island about four times every four weeks and ran as many of the films as we could. Sometimes we would have good, sustained audiences and sometimes, after a second or third showing, the audience would drop off completely. But generally they were good, with as many as 300 people crammed into a small hall. The discussion afterward was absolutely riveting. That was where the action was, but we didn't film this because if we had poked our camera into the discussion it wouldn't have had the spontaneity or truth we were after.



The Children of Fogo Island



The Children of Fogo Island



There was at least one film, Billy Crane Moves Away, that must have been provocative.

When we ran that on Fogo Island, it raised the roof. One of the senior fishermen said, "I don't agree with all that Bill Crane has to say, but I think he knows a great deal about his life and business and the government should hear him in his entirety." And he got cheers. So the *Billy Crane* film didn't get edited when it went to St. John's.

What happened to the people on Fogo Island? Did they get resettled?

While we were there, a government group came up to the island and met with the improvement committee. We filmed that night. The people told the government people that they wanted a functional co-op. The government said co-ops wouldn't work, but the people said, "we know enough to make it work." The government agreed to build a shipbuilding yard so that each family could build its own boats. The films had shown that could be done. During the course of filming a man had built a longliner after a generation of not building boats.

Then you went to work in the United States on another community project.

That's right. One of the people with the OEO, which is the Office of Economic Opportunity, a lady who was the head of their media services, came up to Fogo Island while we were there. Then she came back to Memorial University the following year while I was teaching a small summer-training course. She wanted me to come the United States and do a film in California.

This was the Farmersville project?

Yes. I went that autumn in 1968. We were contracted by the OEO—Julien Biggs, Donald Snowdon and myself—to do the

Farmersville project in the style of Fogo Island, with prestudies and poststudies. When we finished, Washington considered the whole thing a success and wanted us to do a similar project in Hartford, Conn., which was the headquarters of the Black Panther Party. But I predicted that such a project would have to be sustained for at least five years and maybe 10 to be a success. The OEO didn't have that sort of time or money because when Nixon came to power in 1969, it was immediately taken apart.

Could you talk a bit more about your experience in Farmersville.

It is the part of the country that Steinbeck wrote about in *The Grapes of Wrath*. It's a town of people from Oklahoma and Arkansas who had come out there to work in the fruit and vegetable fields.

And this was 35 years later.

That's right. They had become the blue-collar workers in Farmersville and now the labourers were the "wetbacks." The community action agency had never been able to establish a working group in Farmersville. The Latino workers lived in tin shacks without proper facilities. It was a complex and interesting situation and we got some incredible material right in the orange groves. We talked to labour contractors and foremen. Just down the road from Farmersville there was a town with nothing but millionaires. We set-up our cutting room and movieola on the main street, next to the barber's shop, so everybody could see us, and we ran film once or twice a week in the veterans' hall. We invited everybody in town to come. We were working with young Peace Corps kids and students from UCLA.

How many films resulted from this process?

Thirty-six in three months. The screenings were very successful. People who came from Washington couldn't believe

"They [the people of Fogo Island] would say 'No, I don't want to be on film.' So I said, 'If we have a discussion, and I put it on film, I guarantee you I will bring that film back to you and if you don't like it I promise you I will burn it.' And they said, 'You're not serious.' And I told them I was perfectly serious." Colin Low

you could put Chicanos and Anglos in the same hall and get lively debates. They saw this and then they wanted to put money into the Hartford project. However, Julien Biggs got ill and I was exhausted from Fogo and other things. I had had enough.

So you came back to the Board, is that right?

At that point the Film Board wanted me to take over the *Challenge For Change* program. George Stoney was going back to the United States, and they wanted somebody to take it over. Everyone in Ottawa knew me at that time because of the Fogo Island films. I am not an administrator but I agreed to do it with the people who are already there, people like Rex Tasker. I ran it for three years before they got another person. After that I continued to work with the Board with Tom Daly for the next three years. I think there were over 100 films made during that period.



Including Torben Schioier's and Tony Ianzelo's High Grass Circus and Ianzelo's and Andy Thomson's Blackwood, both of which were nominated for Academy Awards. There was also the wonderful Cree Hunters of Mistassini.

That film was planned just before I left *Challenge For Change*. The Privy Council wanted to do a film about aboriginal rights. Boyce Richardson started the research and I wanted to put a really good journalist and a filmmaker together. So I put Boyce and Tony Inazelo together for the first time.

Which was a great team.

It was a wonderful team. Then we heard from the prime minister's office that Mr. Trudeau didn't want the films made because they were fraught with hazards. Trudeau wanted to integrate Indians into the mainstream and Indians were suspicious of this. I suggested we proceed to do four films about four different families and if the subject of aboriginal rights came up, then we would simply shoot it. That was agreeable. *Cree Hunters of Mistassini* was the first of the four and Boyce and Tony met with three hunting families and spent the winter with them in the bush in the James and Ungava Bay areas of northern Quebec. At the same time, they shot *Our Land is Our Life* which was more on the political end of the aboriginal issue as it involved the development of the Hydro projects in northern Quebec. That was a popular film, but not as popular as the *Cree Hunters*. *Cree Hunters* was shown in all the Cree communities across Canada. They understood the language and it was a knockout.

If we could divert for a minute from the chronology, there is a film I would like to talk about. Circle of the Sun is a film you directed in the early 1960s about the Blood Indians of Alberta. It seems you have a particular sensitivity toward the native people.

The *Circle of the Sun* had the same problems, politically, as *Cree Hunters* and the other films. The warrior religion of the Blood Indians had survived because it was a clandestine and highly secret affair. The federal government tried to outlaw the Sun

Dance in the 19th century. They took away the buffalo tongues which are sacramental in the Sun Dance. Fortunately, the Mounties were sympathetic toward the Indians and resisted the orders of the federal government. In the Sun Dance of the Blood Indians, the tradition of the North American Indians is preserved. It is very elaborate, and I had seen it several times when I was younger.

When you were growing up in Alberta?

I had seen it for several summers, but I wasn't allowed to participate in the ceremonies. The Indians were quite private about all that, but I had got to know a man who had known my grandfather, who was a minor chief among the Blood tribe. We got to be friends and he arranged for me to shoot what was available to shoot. I was not allowed to shoot any of the ceremonies of the Horn Society, which is the centre society of the Sun Dance, or the Buffalo Woman Society. But I could shoot private ceremonies that were going on simultaneously like the beaver-bundle ceremony, which is very important. In those days, you needed the permission of the federal government to go onto the reserve. John Spotton and I shot the film over a couple of years. We got to know Pete Standing Alone, a band member, who helped with the crew. Stanley Jackson wanted someone to help him with the narration, so we brought Pete to Montreal and he and Stanley did the narration together. It endorsed the whole idea of editorial control remaining in the hands of the Indians. We couldn't have done it without Pete. He knew what people would accept through a white man's eyes and what they wouldn't accept.

Subsequently, you were named an honorary chieftain of the Blood Indians. What did that mean to you?

It was very important to me. I know some people would think it funny, that I was joining John Diefenbaker and Prince Philip, who were also named. The Bloods are a very smart people



Standing Alone

because they have a tradition, called Kainai, which means many chiefs. If any enemy was impressive enough, they would make him a member of the band, even a chief, so confident were they of their own power, which was very great before the Europeans arrived. I think the reason I was chosen had a lot to do with the influence of Pete Standing Alone. The film really gave him a special place in the tribe. He became an important man because of that film. The Blood Indians really loved the film. They were seeing their grandparents, and any showing of the film on the reserve would result in a full house. They still run that film in schools. Of course, now it's on video. Pete Standing Alone married a woman from an important family, and I made *Standing Alone* years later. It was Pete's idea to make *Standing Alone*. He came to Montreal and proposed the film to John Spotton and me and we made it in 1982.

In the 1970s you became important in organizing regional offices for the Board.

After working as an executive producer for three years, I was asked if I would take over regional production.

That was a big moment for the Board because nothing had been done much in the regions before that.

Rex Tasker, who was a friend, was keen to go to the Maritimes to start up something there. Peter Jones had gone to the west coast, but never had been given enough money to work with. Grant McLean had had the idea for regional productions years before, but it had not jelled. *Challenge For Change* made it jell, in effect, because we stimulated the nerve endings of the country with our experimentations in new media. It made a Winnipeg studio seem possible. Rex proved, very quickly, that the Board could make good films in Halifax. John Taylor and Peter Jones proved that it could be done in Vancouver. I had been reluctant to become involved because I really believed in the necessity of a creative critical mass and everybody told me if the Board regionalized, the centre would be gone. In retro-

spect, maybe they were right. Sid Newman, the film commissioner at that time, also believed a critical mass was everything. However, Bob Verrall asked me to take over the regions, so I did that for three years. It meant spending a lot of time going back and forth across the country, but it was apparent that good films could be made in the regions.

It was a lot of work setting up all these units.

The one I was quite proud of was Edmonton. It was Tom Radford who came down to Cardston when I was vacationing with my parents and pestered me about setting up an office in Edmonton. We managed to persuade Sydney. So, in one sense, I don't look back at that as a bad experience but I do wonder whether or not, as some had predicted, it was the beginning of the end for the centre. I care a lot about that. I think the idea of the Film Board is strong enough to survive until it is

rediscovered. But if it is really eliminated in Montreal, it may not survive in the rest of the country.

Do all the cuts at the Film Board worry you?

Yes it worries me and I see the erosion and the disappearance of the creative critical mass. I think the creative critical mass has been badly mauled and the Film Board has never been given the proper credit it deserves as a kind of cultural bridge between Quebec and the rest of the country. I think a federal government that doesn't understand that lacks acumen. Now serious documentary filmmakers fish for money in strange and hostile waters.

Was your last film Momentum?

Yes, that was done for the Spanish World's Fair. We wanted to do another 3-D film. We did *Transitions*, which was the first film shot in Imax 3-D, for Vancouver's Expo in 1986. It was such a hit that we thought we would like do another one, so we asked to do that for Seville. After *Transitions*, IMAX had decided that 3-D was the way to go and was off and running with it. It's been very successful for Imax and its growth. IMAX 3-D had come out of Norman McLaren's early experiments for the festival of Britain in 1950-51. I was also very interested in 3-D. The night I first met McLaren, I saw his 3-D paintings on the wall of his apartment. He was very enthusiastic about the process but it never went anywhere for years because the problem with 35mm is that it moves slightly on the screen and your eyes can not tolerate any vertical misalignment. When I first saw an Imax film on the full screen, which was Graeme Ferguson's *North of Superior* in 1971, I said now you can do 3-D properly. It took 15 years to do it properly for Expo '86 in Vancouver.

As someone who has gone from the visionary films of Universe and the Labyrinth project to IMAX 3-D, to the simple, straightforward filmmaking of the Fogo Island films which returned to the

TAKE ONE's Interview with Colin Low

Griersonian sense of films made for social change, over the years have you developed a philosophy of filmmaking?

Film troubles me and I have occasionally been frustrated as a filmmaker. It's a bit like Navajo sand painting. It's not very permanent in relation to art. It maybe has become permanent, but the new wave of filmmaking done on video is highly temporary. I don't see it making monuments. The most fun in filmmaking is the making of it and the people you work with. I loved working with John Spotton, Tom Daly, Bob Verrall, Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroitor and the dozens—no hundreds—of wonderful people who worked at the Board during my 50 years there. •



Circle of the Sun

On the Occasion of the National Film Board's 60th Anniversary, Some Thoughts on the Future of the Film Board

By Colin Low

Let's go back to Grierson and the idea of the Board as something that would interpret Canada to Canadians and the world, which was the buzz phrase at the time. It was probably meant to be political, something you couldn't quite put your finger on, but it has had an amazing longevity.... In a way the Board comes out of 19th-century ideas which were the English/Scottish emphasis on education and with a scholarship you could see the future. I think Grierson, like H.G. Wells, believed that. Grierson really was a school teacher and he believed you could devise an educational system using film.... Film has lasted longer than anyone could have imagined. By the time the documentary school really got started there had been 30 years of filmmaking and they knew it could last.... What is the worrying thing at the moment is that everybody rushed into television and the electronic future. And I think it is a very shaky future because tape lasts only 20 years at the most. Film has lasted over a hundred. The physicality of video recordings is very short life. We know that now. We didn't know that 10 years ago, but we know that now. In a way, the NFB is leading the way in video preservation. It has lowered the temperature in its vaults, which was a very expensive process.... If the Film Board does actually succumb to all this downsizing it will have thrown out the baby with

the bath water, all that wonderful 19th-century technology. You have to preserve things that give meaning to the present.... Fortunately the Board has maintained its 35mm equipment for the animation work, because nothing else will do the same thing. And the Film Board, as we all know, has led the country in animation in a firm and vigorous way and it still has a huge reputation for that. It's still very much experimentation, but that's very close to the artistic heart of the Board.... The downsizing of the Film Board seems more like political revenge than anything else, to get at the French-Canadian fact. Being in Montreal was not helpful in that respect. When you go to the yearly Film Board party, held at Christmas, the place is completely full, and it's French and it's English. It is a spectacular gathering. It [the NFB] was a bridge between the two solitudes. Many of the best filmmakers of this country have come through the Film Board. There's a good deal of memory of things past. It's nostalgia. The NFB made Canada a kind of gentler culture than the American's and gave focus to the country.... Grierson's original intention was for the maintenance of film and its historical importance, to create a storehouse and, of course, to create a leading-edge experimentation into what the hell moving pictures are all about.