

BY RON TOLEY MACDONALD

HALIFAX UPDATE

While the cold winter winds are howling, the East Coast scene can take some comfort in the knowledge that 2002 is shaping up to be a strong year for local production. Already three major features are being lined up, along with at least two and possibly four television series.

Balanced against the usual flood of offshore service productions, this year may mark the return of Nova Scotia as one of the major producers of English-language Canadian features. With a clutch of five low-budget features from imX Communications collectively called *Seats 3a & 3c* in post-production, including Thom Fitzgerald's *Wild Dogs*, Dan MacIvor's *Past Perfect* and Patricia Fish's *Dragonwheel*, the spring and summer should see separate new projects from both Fitzgerald and MacIvor.

With budgets substantially up from the \$750,000 each had for *Seats 3a & 3c*, Fitzgerald and MacIvor will have a wider cinematic palette. MacIvor's project is *Marion Bridge*, a domestic story about three Cape Breton sisters who await the death of their mother while reconciling long-buried family differences. The play toured Nova Scotia a couple of years ago to strong reviews and packed houses; audiences outside the Maritimes familiar with MacIvor's previous work will be in for a shock. Unlike the scattered and obsessive one- or two-man shows MacIvor is known for, *Marion Bridge* is warm and relatively conventional. Another odd fact is that MacIvor has ceded direction over to Wiebke von Carolfeld, an accomplished editor who cut *The Five Senses* and *Eisenstein*. Although set in Cape Breton, the film will be shot mostly in Halifax with a budget of around \$2 million. Molly Parker is set to star.

Thom Fitzgerald's film is called *The Event*. While extensive details are unavailable at press time, the story concerns a slightly out-of-control party that threatens to unravel the various threads of an unstable and mostly transient neighbourhood in Halifax. Fitzgerald has written the script and directs. The third indigenous project is the direct result of yet another Toronto producer relocating to the East Coast. Susan Chapman has moved her company, Prospero Productions, to Halifax, bringing with her the rights to Carol Shields's acclaimed novel *Larry's Party*. With a script written by former film reviewer, and now acclaimed novelist, David Gilmour, Chapman has plans to produce the film this summer with a hefty \$6-million budget. Most likely it will be a British co-production, and there's a good chance that the both the leading player and director will come from the Olde Sod.

On the television front, Mike Clattenburg's Showcase series *Trailer Park Boys* is slated for another 13 episodes to be shot through the late summer. With the boys making themselves unwelcome at two real trailer parks already, Clattenburg may be forced to build a new one this time around. If that's the case, he promises far more "car crashes and explosions." The first two seasons of *Trailer Park Boys* were picked up for broadcast in Australia; American interest has been stymied by the FCC's Standards and Practices Division that has objected to the show's generous profanity and cartoon violence. I guess the FCC hasn't tuned in to the last two seasons of *The Sopranos*.



Seats 3a & 3c: Directors, left to right, Thom Fitzgerald, Andrea Dorfman, Tricia Fish and Daniel MacIvor

Another series that is well into production on 13 episodes is Steve Comeau's Gemini Award-winning animated Teletoon strip *Ollie's Under the Bed Adventures*. Ollie, the hyperimaginative youngster with a thousand wacky stories, grew from 10, three-minute spots to a full series over the fall. Comeau has 40 animators working in his Collideascope Digital shop located in downtown Halifax; he also has an hour-long CTV documentary on laughter scheduled for completion and broadcast later this spring.

Two of the East Coast's longest-running and most durable series, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and *Street Cents*, are shoo-ins for renewal. With a shelf full of awards over its extraordinary 13-year run, *Street Cents* is the Energizer Bunny of Canadian television. Oddly enough, much of the recent production cluttering up all those new lifestyle channels resembles more and more *Street Cents*'s fast-paced magazine-style format and skeptical consumer-eyed viewpoint. *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, on the other hand, survived a near-death experience with the departure of Rick Mercer. However, replacement Colin Mochrie has come through with flying colours, virtually guaranteeing another two-to-five seasons for one of Canada's most highly rated shows.

The fate of a slew of other series will have to wait as producers, funding agencies, talent and crew wobble through the winter. The initial word on *Lexx*, Salter Street's internationally successful sci-fi series, was that 2001 would be its last year. An unexpected surge of interest from American broadcasters has dangled the possibility of one more year of production. Meanwhile fans snapped up props, costumes and as many giant plastic space bugs as they could carry at a *Lexx* sell-off last fall. I suppose the fans could always rent them back to the show if it does go back into production.

TAKE ONE