

**THE YOUNG, THE RESTLESS, AND THE DEAD**





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VOLUME

1

**THE YOUNG, THE RESTLESS, AND THE DEAD**

INTERVIEWS WITH CANADIAN FILMMAKERS

**EDITED BY GEORGE MELNYK**

Wilfrid Laurier University Press



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The interview as an interrogatory form of research has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages include the pleasure of reading spontaneous expressions of orality,<sup>1</sup> the revelation of personal experience that has not been part of the record, a strong sense of the interviewee's form of speech, insight into the evolution of a project—often missing in critical discourse on completed works of art—and the presence of a vital emotional response to issues that can be a mainstay of the interviewee's professional life but exhibited nowhere else.

The disadvantages are equally numerous. Some interviewees are evasive and hesitant, while others are outgoing and unafraid to express their feelings and viewpoints. This means some interviews are captivating, others less so. Interviews can range from rambling and almost incoherent to so precise and defined that one senses barriers more than anything else. Some interviewers are “professional” in the sense that they can evoke responses that are truly enlightening, while others are more amateurish and so elicit less insightful answers. Some interviews display a genuine camaraderie between the interviewee and the interviewer, while others seem like formal Q&A exercises. Also, an interview is very much of the moment. Like a photograph, it captures a particular point in time and space that an interviewee has inhabited. An interview done the next day, by a different interviewer, for a different publication could result in something completely different. This means that there is the quality of the ephemeral that creeps into an interview and colours it. As a result, the typology of interviews occupies a wide and sometimes chaotic range that can make standardization of the form difficult and, in the end, not really worthwhile.

Most of us experience the interview through journalism. We read interviews in newspapers, trade or professional magazines, or on the Web. Occasionally interviews appear in books, either on their own or as addenda to critical studies. Most often, interviews serve as simply the raw

material of research, reappearing as occasional quotes or paraphrases to support an argument or an insight. I have chosen to feature the interview as a valid interlocutory statement in its own right, useful to scholars and non-scholars alike. Believing that the Canadian filmmaker needs to be known through his or her eyes as much as through the eyes of the critic, I have launched this series of interviews with the hope that scholars and the public will have access to creators of cinema in a format that is readily available, whenever required. Books are easy to save and store.

The title of this book (and the series), *The Young, the Restless, and the Dead*, requires an explanation. The Young refers to filmmakers who are generally under forty and have just launched their careers with one or two feature films. They represent the future of the Canadian film industry. The Restless are those filmmakers of any age who have established themselves in the field with a body of work recognized by their peers and critics alike. They are the present, which forms the backbone of the contemporary creative canon. The Dead are those deceased filmmakers who have come to be acknowledged as significant figures in the field and whose work continues to inspire and attract critical acclaim. The former two categories are filled with original interviews for this book, while the latter category is based on previously published material.

Each volume in this series will contain from eight to ten interviews that vary in length from 3,000 to 6,000 words each. The choice of interviewees will be eclectic, while the interviewers will be primarily academic. The scholars that have been selected to do the interviews have a background in the filmmaker's work and bring a critical approach to their questions and discussion. Media interviewers are often less knowledgeable and have goals other than that of gaining insight into the filmmaker's work, which is the main purpose of this book. In general the interviews begin as audio tapes or as e-mail responses to questions. The audio tapes are transcribed verbatim and the resulting interview material is edited by the interviewer to a suitable length. This draft is edited by the editor of the book and then reviewed and revised by the in-

interviewee so that the final result reflects his or her responses to the questions asked. Why these stages? The goals are accuracy and readability, and this process is necessary to achieve both ends. The document that emerges from this process provides material “for the record.” In confirmation of this goal the editor intends to create a university archive of the interviews in the series that would contain the audio tapes, original e-mails, and various versions of the interviews so that future researchers into Canadian cinema are able to follow and analyze the process.

This volume begins with an interview in **THE YOUNG** category. It’s with **Michael Dowse**, who was born in London, Ontario, in 1973. He moved to Calgary, where he went to school and graduated from the University of Calgary. He made his first auteur debut with *FUBAR* in 2002. F.U.B.A.R. is the urban lingo acronym for “Fucked Up Beyond All Reason” or “Fucked Up Beyond All Repair,” and the film is self-described as “the original banger classic” on its Web site. Set in Calgary, the film deals with the antics of a couple of alienated slackers. The film was a cult hit. Dowse followed this initial success several years later with his sophomore auteur film, *It’s All Gone Pete Tong*, a Canada–UK co-production about a dance music DJ living and working on the Spanish island of Ibiza. Dowse, who currently lives in Montreal, represents the new globalized generation of Canadian film directors for whom there are no territorial boundaries in the creative consciousness. They are part of the great digital web of music, visual imagery, and subject matter. Bart Beaty, who teaches popular culture and communication at the University of Calgary, interviewed Dowse.

The second section, **THE RESTLESS**, is more diverse and includes three Canadian women filmmakers—Mina Shum, Lynne Stopkewich, and Anne Wheeler—as well as five males—Guy Maddin and Gary Burns, both interviewed by George Melnyk of the University of Calgary, and a troika who run Anagram Films of Vancouver.

The first interview is with **Blake Corbet, Andrew Currie, and Trent Carlson**, the principals of Anagram Pictures. They have begun making waves with several recent films. They are interviewed by Peggy Thompson, who teaches screenwriting at the University of British Columbia. Since Vancouver is one of the three major centres of film production in Canada, along with Toronto and Montreal, and a leading venue for American offshore productions, Anagram's vision for and experience of Canadian feature filmmaking provides a searching look into the industry today.

Anagram Pictures was founded in 1996 by Currie and Carlson. Corbet joined a couple of years later. Carlson is a graduate of the Simon Fraser University film program (1993). The company has made three notable films—*Mile Zero* (2001), *Delicate Art of Parking* (2003), and *Fido* (2006). Because the films tend toward the dark comedy genre, they represent an important Canadian approach to humour, which parallels the approach favoured by Dowse. It seems to be a generational leaning. These Generation X filmmakers have taken their cue from Vancouver's own Douglas Coupland, whose 1991 novel, *Generation X*, launched the term into popular north American vocabulary. This transitional generation—childhood in the 1970s, youth in the 1980s, early adulthood in the 1990s—eschewed the serious intents of the radical boomer generation for satire, mimicry, and self-deprecation.

The second interview is with **Guy Maddin**, who was born in Winnipeg in 1956 and lives there now. Known for his idiosyncratic black-and-white silent-era imitative films, Maddin launched his career in 1988 with *Tales from the Gimli Hospital*, a surreal tale set in Manitoba's Icelandic community on the shores of Lake Winnipeg. His second feature, *Archangel* (1990), was set in Russia at the end of World War One and was a homage to Russian montage. He then moved to German cinema, recreating a 1930s "mountain genre" film titled *Careful* in 1992. He made several more features (and shorts) before his 2003 release, *The Saddest Music in the World*, a tale set in Winnipeg during the Great Depression as various nationalities compete to win the prize for the saddest music in the world.

He then did an “autobiographical” film titled *Cowards Bend the Knee* (2004) and in 2003 published two books—*From the Atelier Tovar: Selected Writings* and *Cowards Bend the Knee*. In 2006 he premiered *Brand Upon the Brain* at the Toronto International Film Festival, a silent film that used a live orchestra for music.

As a filmmaker who has staked his career on Winnipeg, he concludes with a certain melancholy that “from a stationary position I churn thoughtlessly through my time spent here on Earth, past the vistas and the plains of my outer landscape—Winnipeg—a life lived with glacial slowness.”<sup>2</sup> For someone who is going nowhere, he has certainly given Canadian cinema a whole new dimension and his films have an international cult following. In 2007 he moved to Toronto, suggesting his Winnipeg life may be over.

**Mina Shum**, who was born in Hong Kong but raised in Vancouver, where she still lives, made her first film, *Picture Perfect*, in 1989. She did not make waves on the cinema scene till 1994, however, with *Double Happiness*, which she wrote and directed and acted in. This autobiographically based look at Chinese immigrant family life in Canada was considered a breakthrough. She followed its success with *Drive, She Said* (1997), and *Long Life, Happiness and Prosperity* (2002), both of which she wrote and directed.

As an auteur filmmaker, Mina Shum has opened the Asian persona to a wide audience and revealed the challenges and contradictions of multi-generational family life in Canadian society. Although she has worked extensively in the Vancouver television industry, it is the clash of Old World and New World values that is a mainstay of her feature films. She is interviewed by Jacqueline Levitin from Simon Fraser University.

**Lynne Stopkewich** was born in Montreal in 1964. Her debut feature, *Kissed* (1996), was a serious treatment of transgressive love. Based on a short story titled “We So Seldom Look on Love,” by renowned Canadian novelist Barbara Gowdy, the film explores the consciousness of a necrophile who works in a funeral home in Vancouver. Stopkewich both

wrote and directed *Kissed* when she was in her early thirties. Rather than adopt the Hollywood approach of using either comedy or horror genres to marginalize the topic, Stopkewich was distinctly Canadian in using drama as a vehicle. Her second feature, *Suspicious River* (2000), continued the discussion of female sexuality.

Since then she has made a music documentary (*Lilith on Top*, 2001) and directed television dramas. Just as Shum was able to use the Canadian actor Sandra Oh early in her film career, so Lynne used Molly Parker. Both women have gone on to major television careers in the US. Shum is interviewed by Kalli Paakspuu of York University.

**Gary Burns** (b. 1961) is a lifelong Calgarian who has made four feature films since the mid-1990s. His black comedy about Calgary's office-towers, *waydowntown* (2000), was awarded Best Canadian Feature at the Toronto International Film Festival. Trained in film at Concordia University, Burns began with two modest auteur productions—*The Suburbanators* (1995) and *Kitchen Party* (1997), which expressed the going-nowhere attitudes of Generation X youth. Critics considered these films as expressions of North American life because of Calgary's "American" attitudes and culture. After *waydowntown's* success Burns made *A Problem with Fear* (2003), which was based on a similar downtown scene but was not well received. Yet he continued with his fascination with urbanity as represented by Calgary with the acclaimed mockumentary *Radiant City* (2006), co-produced with the National Film Board. The film savages suburban sprawl as exemplified by Calgary. While Shum and Stopkewich depend on female cultural grammars to convey their vision, Burns sees the world through the eyes of a male satirist.

**Anne Wheeler** (b. 1946) was born and raised in Edmonton, where she began as a documentary filmmaker. Her breakthrough feature was *Bye Bye Blues* (1989), starring Rebecca Jenkins, who won a Genie for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role. The story was vaguely based on the life of her mother during the Second World War. Anne's father was a Japanese prisoner of war. Earlier Wheeler had done a docudrama about her father's incarceration (*A War Story*, 1982). She had also

directed and produced the 1986 made-for-television feminist drama *Loyalties* (1986), which told the story of a white woman and a native woman in northern Alberta. After the acclaim received for *Bye Bye Blues*, she did several youth-oriented feature films and went on to direct *Better Than Chocolate* (1999), a lesbian love story that received wide circulation in mainstream theatres. Two further features, which were primarily romantic comedies, came out early in the new century, but her bread-and-butter work continues to be in television, much as it is for Shum and Stopkewich. All three women directors work in the Vancouver-based industry. Wheeler approaches filmmaking as an art that recognizes the value of each character. “There are no villains in my movies,” she has stated. “There are just people who make mistakes.”<sup>3</sup> She is interviewed by Peggy Thompson of the University of British Columbia.

The final section, **THE DEAD**, contains an interview with the late **Jean-Claude Lauzon** (1953–1997), who was born in Montreal. He made only two feature films, but both were recognized as outstanding works. *Un Zoo La Nuit* (1987) won Best Motion Picture at the Genies as well as Best Screenplay (Lauzon) and Best Achievement in Direction. Lauzon followed his auteur debut with his masterpiece *Léolo* (1992), for which he again received a Genie for Best Original Screenplay. Both films deal with family relationships in a truly raw way with strong metaphors and disturbing imagery. The films are often driven by powerful music scores. The interview was done by Claude Racine and translated by Jim Leach of Brock University.

**These seven interviews** represent a wide range of directorial and screenwriting talent from Montreal to Vancouver. They capture the minds of Canadian filmmakers as they work to create national cinemas in a country whose film audiences have been Hollywood-ized and hostile to indigenous production. This is especially true in English Canada, where

screen times for Canadian films average under 2 per cent annually and most films are relegated to the art house circuit. In Quebec since 2000, the situation has changed, with recent attendance for Quebec films in the 25 per cent range, which is a truly remarkable achievement. Canadian identity has benefited from its creative talent in a number of artistic fields. These interviews represent some of that talent and how it speaks for all of us.

## NOTES

- 1 It is important for readers to realize that the “verbatim” interview is often a construct. For example, a two-hour interview can end up as a fifty-page double-spaced, raw document, unpublishable and barely readable in that form. This transcribed material has to be edited into coherent sentences and subject matter with more material deleted than retained. A published oral interview is a work of literacy, not orality.
- 2 Guy Maddin, *From the Atelier Tovar: Selected Writings* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2003), 87.
- 3 Katherine Monk, *Weird Sex and Snowshoes and Other Canadian Film Phenomena* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2001), 85.





# **THE RESTLESS**

**Blake Corbet**

**Andrew Currie**

**Trent Carlson**

**Guy Maddin**

**Mina Shum**

**Lynne Stopkewich**

**Gary Burns**

**Anne Wheeler**

the funniest people in the world are Canadian

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**CORBET, CURRIE, CARLSON**

the boys from Anagram Pictures interviewed with an Introduction by Peggy Thompson



PHOTOS BY CLANCY DENNEHY

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Anagram Pictures is a unique hybrid. On one hand, it's a collective of filmmakers who work on each other's films; on the other hand, it's a company that is making a big imprint on the Canadian film scene. Anagram's films have screened in theatres, in festivals, and on television around the world. Anagram's films share a commitment to storytelling, impeccable craft, and an exploration of what it is to be a man in a world in flux.

Anagram Pictures was founded in Vancouver in 1996 by filmmakers Andrew Currie and Trent Carlson. Blake Corbet joined the group in 1998. Anagram is dedicated to the development, financing, and production of "original, ground-breaking feature films for theatrical release around the world which promote social conscience and innovation." Anagram's roster to date includes the feature films *Mile Zero* (2001), *The Delicate Art of Parking* (2003), and *Fido* (2007). *Mile Zero* received very positive critical response in *Hollywood Reporter*: "An engrossing, low-key thriller featuring a riveting performance by Michael Riley in the lead role." Directed by Andrew Currie and produced by Trent Carlson and Blake Corbet, the film concerns an alienated father who kidnaps his young son on the pretense that they're going on a camping trip. The film tracks the father's emotional collapse and explores with style and depth the themes of fatherhood, masculinity, and contemporary paranoia. *Mile Zero* was well received critically, and put the group on the map.

*The Delicate Art of Parking* (2003) followed two years later. It is the story of a man who loves his job, and can tell you why. The film is a mockumentary about the people who issue parking tickets. It manages to incorporate elements of romance, mystery, heartbreak, determination, and friendship, according to Liz Braun (Jam! Movies), and be a good laugh. Anagram's first comedy was written and directed by Trent Carlson and was produced by Corbet and Currie. The film ran for months and attracted an almost cult-like following.

The company has grown. There are more partners, including pro-

ducer Mary Anne Waterhouse (*Desolation Sound*), and more films. The most recent is *Fido*, Currie's zombie comedy, which was produced by Corbet. Corbet's own film, *Elijah*, about Aboriginal activist and politician Elijah Harper, for CTV, is well under way. However, the group still works together on each other's screenplays, hammering out ideas in their writers' room. And they all share the vision that film can serve to rattle the status quo.

I interviewed the three original Anagrammists in February 2007 shortly before the theatrical release of *Fido*. *Fido* is a satire of zombie films set in Willard, a small town lost in the idyllic world of the 1950s, where the sun shines every day, everybody knows their neighbour, and zombies carry the mail. "Canadian director Andrew Currie has crafted a smart and funny genre mash-up—it's a boy and his dog picture in which the dog is a ravenous if good-natured zombie. The tone is pure fifties melodrama, with a script leavened by black comedy and satire" (*Globe and Mail*).

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**Andrew Currie** (b. 1962) is an intense young man with a passion for film, and Canadian film in particular. We met in Anagram's home office, a large warren of offices near Vancouver's Commercial Drive. All of Andrew's films, including his acclaimed short film *Night of the Living*, and the features *Mile Zero* and *Fido* are about the inability of fathers and sons to communicate with each other.

**Thompson** When and where did you start making films?

**Currie** I studied at Simon Fraser University from 1989 to 1993 and that's where I met Trent Carlson. We hit it off right away. We're like-minded about filmmaking. That's also where I met Bob Aschmann [the director of photography on *Mile Zero*]. Trent, Bob, and I worked on each other's projects. We have a great shared work ethic and belief in collaboration. We'd often be "up on the hill" at SFU editing at 4 a.m.



**Andrew Currie.** Photo by Clancy Dennehy.

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I loved SFU — it was film history and film theory, and it really built a foundation for me as an artist and filmmaker and set a course for the kind of filmmaker I want to be.



SFU was experimental. Chris Welsby [a renowned experimental filmmaker] was my first-year teacher and a huge inspiration. I had no real belief in my own artistic abilities and I had a lot of strange ideas. I remember sitting down with Chris and unloading this really weird idea for a movie and him saying, “That’s great, what else do you have?” He embraced the idea of expressing yourself regardless of what the idea was. I’d always felt pushed into boxes and Chris was the opposite of that. I loved SFU—it was film history and film theory, and it really built a foundation for me as an artist and filmmaker and set a course for the kind of filmmaker I want to be.

**Thompson** How did you and Trent form Anagram?

**Currie** Trent and I were making short films at the time. Truthfully, shorts are as hard as making features, and some people don’t realize that. The process of making the film is the same, so we both made conscious decisions to start writing features, which is what we did, and formed a




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The critiques at the Film Centre were painfully honest and that's where I learned to have a tougher skin. Dezso would say, "There are no clothes on in this room."

writers' group and focused on understanding narrative structure in a feature form.

Trent and I formed Anagram in 1996—we made Trent's short film *Groomed*, which we co-edited and co-produced. And as soon as it was finished editing I was accepted into the Canadian Film Centre and left Vancouver in the summer of 1996.

**Thompson** And that's where you made *Night of the Living*, about a boy whose father becomes a zombie when he drinks?

**Currie** Yes. The Film Centre was a great place for me to be. I met a lot of writers and directors whom I admire. The director Dezso Magyar was inspiring and, unlike *sfu*, his focus was character and story. He put a huge emphasis on that. He mentored with István Szabó, the director of *Mephisto*, and he had a strong European sensibility.

The Film Centre is great. You're either writing, in prep, shooting, in post, or critiquing. No breaks. No rest. I did about six short projects,

*Opposite:* Andrew Currie directs Michael Riley as Derek in *Mile Zero*. *Above:* Currie directing Michael Riley and Connor Widdows. Both photos by Carol Racicot.



most of them scene studies. The critiques were painfully honest and that's where I learned to have a tougher skin. Dezső would say, "There are no clothes on in this room." It was hard on people but it made you grow quickly.

**Thompson** *Night of the Living* is a wonderful film, which played festivals world-wide including Sundance, and it won several short film awards including the Telefilm award for Best New Director at the Vancouver Film Festival. Would you describe it for me?

**Currie** My films are always about parents. I think that comes from my own fears about not being a good parent—and I love zombies. They're a metaphoric sponge, the multi-purpose metaphor. I was watching zombie movies and was interested in addiction at the time, particularly alcoholism and how prevalent it was. And there was this perfect metaphor for brain damage. It was great to tell it from the point of view of a child. The story is about a boy whose father turns into a zombie when he drinks, although the boy is the only one who sees it. The boy's afraid of his father because he's a zombie, but of course he also loves him.

**Thompson** *Mile Zero* is also about fear of the parent.

**Currie** I know. The genesis of *Mile Zero* came when I was at the Film Centre. I was only seeing my two-year-old son in Vancouver every four or five weeks. It made me feel like a bad parent. That was difficult. *Mile Zero* became an expression of that space. I also wanted to explore male vulnerability. I hadn't seen it expressed that often in movies and it was certainly something I was feeling and I needed to explore.

The father Derek [Michael Riley] has a lot of fear. The way a lot of men express vulnerability is through anger and aggression. I have male friends who hold onto a lot of their anger, and it's a problem. There isn't really a platform for men to be truly vulnerable. I find it sad that we're a culture that's like that. I've travelled a lot to different festivals and in Spanish-language cultures, where men are more comfortable with being open and vulnerable and emotional. Our lack of openness is conditioned. At least I hope we're not born this way.

**Thompson** *Fido*, your next film, seems to build perfectly from *Night of the Living* and *Mile Zero*.

**Currie** *Fido* is about a boy who prefers a zombie to his father. It wasn't a conscious development, from *Night of the Living* to *Mile Zero* to *Fido*, even though you look back and see such an obvious path.

**Thompson** You co-wrote the screenplay.

**Currie** Yes, and that was a long process. In 1994 Dennis Heaton, Robert Chomiak, and I were close friends and wanted to write a project together. We had everyone bring five ideas to the table, and Dennis had

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**My films are always about parents. I think that comes from my own fears about not being a good parent—and I love zombies.**

*Opposite:* Still from *Fido*. Bill (Dylan Baker), Fido (Billy Connolly), Timmy (K'Sun Ray), and Helen (Carrie-Anne Moss) at the cemetery. Photo by Michael Courtney.

written a story about a boy and his pet zombie. The boy stopped his pet from eating people by giving it raw meat, and so we fleshed out that idea and made it *Fido*.

Once we finished I took it out to the Film Centre and it was optioned by a company out there. And then it got trapped in three years of an option phase. And then about 2003 Anagram optioned it back. And that's when it came back into the story room here. It was post 9/11 and there was this sense that the film could express something about homeland security and the state of the world and still maintain its place as a comedy and a satire. The premise is that years ago, the earth passed through a cloud of space dust, causing the dead to rise with an insatiable hunger for human flesh. Terror spreads across the land, until a collar is invented that makes the zombies docile. And so the zombies become gardeners, milkmen, servants, even pets. Hence, Fido, the zombie.

**Thompson** Tell me about the Anagram story room.

**Currie** The story room has always been an incredibly positive experience. We approach all our stories from the point of view of character and theme. For *Fido* we defined the theme as “love, not fear, makes us more alive.” Bill the father is afraid of zombies, but also of human intimacy and love. But Fido the zombie is more emotionally alive than Bill. Bill's demise and Fido's integration into the family as father and partner is the backbone of the story. At the San Francisco Independent Film Festival they talked about “Fido” as a metaphor for alternate lifestyles.

**Thompson** What's the trick to making the extraordinary seem real and believable?

**Currie** The most pleasurable part of making the film but also the most challenging was setting the tone. For me the key was keeping the performances real. I didn't want the actors performing with a nudge and a wink. They had to believe the world that they were in. I call it “repressed camp.”

At SFU I was terrible with actors and couldn't understand them. It became my obsession and focus. I learned to work out what's motivating them beat by beat through the whole film. I remember watching

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Still from *Fido*. Helen (Carrie-Anne Moss) dances with Fido (Billy Connolly). Photo by Michael Courtney.

one student film and the filmmaker had cut off everyone's heads (in the framing). The filmmaker said, "I'm showing how marginalized these characters are." It was ridiculous. But in a funny way it helped me realize how elements in a film need to be integrated in a way that people can connect to or understand. Otherwise, who are you making it for? If it's just for yourself you're not doing the film any service.

**Thompson** *Fido* is both stylish and stylized. Can you talk about that?

**Currie** The art direction in *Fido* is critical to the film. Fairly early on in the process of writing I saw the film in a Technicolor wide-screen way. Probably the best thing I did was to make paintings of key images in my head. I also worked with Ricardo Sandoval, and I found black-and-white images from the '40s and '50s—images like a guy pumping gas—and in Photoshop we turned him into a zombie. That helped people with the tone. We also used clips from *All That Heaven Allows*. That helped a lot. With the music, I started working with Don MacDonald a year before. Don's a brilliant composer and he's done *Kissed* and the Bruce Sweeney films. So *Fido* was the perfect movie for him. He's a classically trained violinist in an orchestra, and he's conducted orchestras. *Fido* has this big '50s orchestral score. I put all those elements onto a DVD, what we call a style book, and sent that out with the script. It really helped.

**Thompson** What's next for you?

**Currie** I'm writing "The Truth about Lying" formerly known as "Sperm." It's about a guy in his late twenties. He's a sort of a Walter Mitty type who's paralyzed by expectations from his mother. His father died when he was one, so all he knows is what his mother's told him and what he's seen in home videos. His father was a fighter pilot, orchestra conductor, brain surgeon. Well. It turns out those were all lies. His mother went to a sperm bank and then created this fiction about the father. It's about a family of liars.

**Thompson** What are your feelings about Canadian film these days?

**Currie** I'm really excited about Canadian film. I grew up on Atom Egoyan, David Cronenberg, and Patricia Rozema, and I love Canadian film.

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The art direction in *Fido* is critical to the film.... Probably the best thing I did was to make paintings of key images in my head. I found black-and-white images from the '40s and '50s—images like a guy pumping gas—and in Photoshop we turned him into a zombie.

What's sad is this desire to place Canadian filmmakers in commercial boxes or art house boxes. I feel that if you look at a lot of the great indie filmmakers they manage to entertain and make meaningful films. The key is originality. The funniest people in the world are Canadian. I think about Australia in the '90s and films like *Muriel's Wedding* and *Proof* that could not have come out of anywhere but Oz, and Canada can do that too. We can't be Hollywood. Our US distributor Lionsgate said only a Canadian could have written *Fido!* So they know something about us that I'm not sure even we know.

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My next interview was with **Trent Carlson**, a deceptively low-key talker who has an incisive mind and a great sense of humour. His award-winning short films—which have played festivals worldwide, including Sundance—include *Groomed*, *Around the Corner*, and *The Station*.

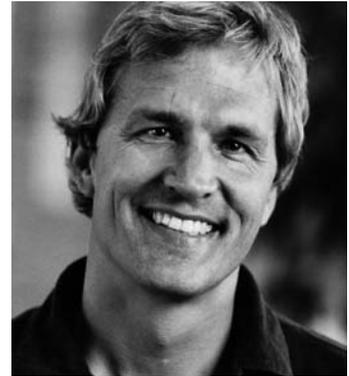
**Thompson** How did you get started?

**Carlson** When I saw Anne Wheeler's film *Bye-Bye Blues*, I thought you can actually do this in Canada. I was driving a truck in Alberta, and I realized for the first time you can be a filmmaker in Canada. I came out to Vancouver to study at Simon Fraser University.

**Thompson** Why do you think you and Andrew hooked up?

**Carlson** We share a huge love for story and felt and still feel that the script is everything. We committed at Simon Fraser University to working together. Our first step was to form writing groups and learn how to write.

During that time we continued to work together and write together, and we remained committed to keeping control of our stories. We made short films but we weren't meeting any producers. Then we met Blake Corbet. Blake and I are both from Alberta, and we started sharing info. Blake was going through a transition from directing stage plays to short films. He also had his own construction company. Andrew and I felt we



**Trent Carlson.** Photo by Clancy Dennehy.

didn't have the business sense to build a larger company. Blake was a good fit. We started to meet regularly and although Blake was contemplating a move to Toronto, we talked him into staying and joining us. The three of us committed to making the feature films *Mile Zero* and *The Delicate Art of Parking* to test drive the relationship. Blake and I were the producers on *Mile Zero* and Andrew was the writer/director. Ask Blake about losing the distributor four days before the shoot. It was one of those "the sky is falling" moments. It was a huge learning process for all of us, facing the realities of what we knew and what we didn't know. And looking at how we as a group could continue to grow and work together.

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Ask Blake about losing the distributor four days before the shoot. It was one of those "the sky is falling" moments.

**Thompson** How did *The Delicate Art of Parking* come about?

**Carlson** The idea for the story came out of real-life experience. I had parked illegally, ran into a store, and returned a few minutes later only to find a guy placing a parking ticket on my windshield. I unloaded on






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**With *The Delicate Art of Parking* it was a real-life experience that inspired a personal exploration into the meaning of work.**

him and then immediately regretted it. I'm a calm guy by nature, so got the feeling if I'm doing this, a lot of people have to be. I started thinking what it would be like to get yelled at all day long on a regular basis and thought there might be a great opportunity to create an interesting comedic anti-hero. I brought a first draft into our story room and ended up collaborating with my partner Blake on the script. We shot the final script, but I also did a lot of improv with the performers during shooting so I think a good portion of the writing credit has to go to the actors. With *The Delicate Art of Parking* it was a real-life experience that inspired a personal exploration into the meaning of work.

**Thompson** *Parking* won best Canadian film at the Montreal World Film Festival. Tell me about the Montreal connection.

**Carlson** We released *The Delicate Art of Parking* with a Montreal company called Cinema Libre, a wonderful company, sadly no longer in business. This was the largest film they'd been involved with and the first in English.

*Opposite:* Trent Carlson directs Fred Ewanuick on the set of *The Delicate Art of Parking*. Photo by Murray Forward. *Above:* An angry car owner returns to his car to find that Grant (Fred Ewanuick) has written him a ticket. Photo by Bob Akester.

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There are advantages to being in the West. We're a smaller community and you know more about what everyone else is doing, especially here in Vancouver.



Still from the *Delicate Art of Parking*. Grant (Fred Ewanuick) tends to his best friend and mentor, Murray Schwartz, in the hospital. Photo by Bob Akester.

Releasing a film is hard. As a filmmaker, I think you need to be there on the opening weekend, when people show up or don't show up. Movies cost a lot of money to make and to release. It's fiercely competitive to get your film into the theatre for the first weekend. We have big respect for the distributor. The film was out there in the Canadian *Zeitgeist* and enough people had heard it about and seen it. It did very well at the Canadian box office, but the film hasn't travelled as much internationally as I would have liked.

I've played it at enough festivals down in the US to know that they get it. Car culture is everywhere. But the film didn't get big exposure. Distributors looked at it and said, "It's a little too much work for us, there's no star." It's starting to make international sales now.

**Thompson** Would you say Canadian film is healthy at the moment?

**Carlson** I can only talk about Western Canadian film. I think there are advantages to being in the West. We're a smaller community and you know more about what everyone else is doing, especially here in Van-

cover. It's kind of the centre of the western universe as opposed to the eastern universe in Toronto. It's the same kind of frustration if you're an Albertan, or from Saskatchewan, because things are run out of Vancouver. A lot of the people you need to talk with are centred here. Telefilm, Movie Central, BC Film are people we can see, go for coffee with.

I don't think any of us have felt we can't make the movies we want to make because we're not in Toronto. But of course we want to cross borders and become more international. I know there's always more media attention and hype around filmmakers based in Toronto and that's fine. I don't feel any animosity about that. None of that changes your movie so if you're reacting to that, well, it's more about ego. And that's not why I'm making movies. I'm more interested in telling the story and connecting with people.

The next phase for us is discovering how our stories can be truly universal. How can we cast that will help? How can we establish relationships with US distributors, international sales agents, executive producers so that you can get that perspective about what your story can use in order to widen its appeal? Sometimes people acquaint making it more commercial with making it less unique, but that's not true. I believe there's a hunger for film that's riskier, unique, and uniquely Canadian. With some smart choices you can open it up in ways that are rewarding for you and for your audiences locally and globally.



**Blake Corbet.** Photo by Clancy Dennehy.

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**Blake Corbet** (b. 1961) is a dynamic director, producer, and writer. His films as a director include *The Chain*, starring Molly Parker. He co-wrote *The Delicate Art of Parking*, was producer on *Mile Zero*, *The Delicate Art of Parking*, and *Fido*, and was co-producer on the Danny Glover film *Missing in America*.

**Thompson** Tell me how you became involved with Anagram and about the philosophy behind the group.

**Corbet** I joined eight years ago. We're looking at films with some social conscience; we're driven to make films with important themes. You can have a message built into a film that isn't a "message film," and our films do that.

**Thompson** Can you elaborate on the role of a producer?

**Corbet** I liken a producer to a developer. A real estate developer sees a piece of land, wants to buy it, and then hires an architect to design however many units you want to put on the land. The developer decides who the units are going to be for, empty nesters or first-time buyers. Then you raise the money. You own the property. You hire everybody and ultimately reap the benefits if it's successful. And that's what a producer does. You look for properties to develop. A lot of the time producers in Canada are running dogs of the directors. They find a producer to do the work for them.

**Thompson** Tell me about your own film background.

**Corbet** I made my first short film in 1982 when I was an English major at Carleton University. They had a big journalism school there and they also had a lot of old film cameras. I was taking a film studies class and you could make a film rather than write an essay and I got the bug. I'd been taking Creative Writing and wanted to be a writer but when I realized how much fun making movies was, that was that. I learned about photography and framing and reframing in the darkroom. I learned about grain and contrasts. So I learned a lot about photography and writing and actors. Ever since, I've wanted to be a filmmaker. It's been a long route, though.

I went to Simon Fraser University in 1985–86. Somewhere there's an SFU film I never finished. I never liked the rushes. I still have trouble with rushes. Rushes make me want to throw myself off a bridge. I find them so intensely disappointing. I have a lot of trouble with the post process, but my partners help me through that.

**Thompson** You and Trent produced Andrew's first feature *Mile Zero*. Tell me about that.

**Corbet** Shortly after film school I made *The Chain*, got married, and

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You can have a message built into a film that isn't a "message film," and our films do that.



Rushes make me want to throw myself off a bridge. I have a lot of trouble with the post process, but my partners help me through.

Storyboard for Fido.  
Storyboard art by Rob Pratt.

had three kids. It was hard to become a full-time filmmaker. I had a construction company. I'd pave driveways and do landscaping. I needed that to keep the family going.

I dabbled in film and dabbled in theatre, which I loved because it has no post-production process. You get the play just how you like it and you learn about blocking, performance, staging, set decorating, lighting, and costumes. There's everything you need to make a film except a camera. Blocking for the stage is different but it's still blocking. I built my company up to the point where I could sell it. I sold it in 1998. I was looking for a team because I saw companies grow more quickly when there was a team involved. It was a gestalt thing. I had a lot of business skills, and then Trent and Andrew asked me to come on board for *Mile Zero* and *The Delicate Art of Parking*. I ended up writing on those scripts and learning about the Canadian financing system.

There's nothing easy in this business. I went to an indie film financing conference in San Francisco a few years back called IFFCON and met a group of US producers who were also trying to raise money. We were trying to do *Mile Zero* and were pretty hopeful we could get Telefilm and BC Film on board. The US producers felt I had it easy, being able to access those public sources of funding when everything they have to raise has to come from the studios or private money. As a result, Americans think a lot more about the development process. If they don't get an audience, they're sunk. Granted, many young producers are rich kids who might have a safety net, but it's not as difficult here as it is south of the border.

**Thompson** What is your philosophy as a producer?

**Corbet** To me, again, script development is like land development. Your goal is to get the greatest value added. If you've got an idea for a piece of property, where you add the value is in the zoning. I've learned to carefully choose what property to develop. Your film is still going to be summarized in one sentence—for the sales agent, for the audience—and that's something that's never going to change. You ask yourself what's the reward, financially and artistically, in your life?

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There's nothing easy in this business.

We look at a lot of projects and ideas, and, ultimately, being able to see what it is clearly is the first and most important thing. You have to get excited about it and then see what it is, and make it into a story that will be compelling.

**Thompson** *Fido* had a large budget. Can you talk about that?

**Corbet** *Fido* was pretty scary. We believed we could do it and we were able to convince a couple of executives at Telefilm we could do it. We had the huge advantage of the Canadian system. When you're in Los Angeles and you can say I can bring \$5 million into the project that's a huge leg up. It makes it easier for the numbers to work for the people you're going after. We were able to get Lionsgate because it made it easier for them to work with us.

The film had a lot of challenges. We started to deal with some cast that were very sought after and their reps. We hadn't cast from the Hollywood system. These actors have a lot of representation. That was all brand new for us. We were dealing with fifteen different lawyers, eleven sources of money. I'd have conference calls with five different lawyers.

Everybody wanted *Fido* to happen and, as hard it was, I think it can be a lot harder. When you're making a film with an interesting theme, people go easier on you. When you're into those phone calls, people know that what you're doing isn't strictly business. They're all defending their clients but the overall goal becomes to get this done.

**Thompson** What was your role in the actual making of the film?

**Corbet** I was involved in all the key creative aspects, which include production design, hiring the first assistant director, the composer, the director of photography, the editor, and all the casting, particularly the leads but all the way down to anyone with a speaking part. I was involved in the costume design and approving all those elements, and after that I didn't have a lot to do. Well, there were script changes. There were script changes right up to the end with Carrie-Anne Moss because we had to write her pregnancy into the story.

Then there's closing the financing. There's a date on which the company that bonds the film sends an e-mail to the banker and then the

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**We were dealing with fifteen different lawyers, eleven sources of money. I'd have conference calls with five different lawyers.**

banker sends a fax to release the money. We'd already spent a million but there was \$9.7 million I couldn't touch, and that came through the day before we started principal photography. I closed at 12:30 in the afternoon and walked down the hall for a cast read-through, and then Mary Anne Waterhouse took over and ran the film.

**Thompson** What advice do you have for young filmmakers?

**Corbet** For years Canadians seemed to shy away from genre pictures, but that's changing, now, and you can say a lot within a genre.

**Thompson** How do you see this time in Canadian film?

**Corbet** Telefilm doubled the amount of money they invest four or five years ago. The Canadian Television Fund is still standing. Everybody asks why hasn't Canadian film broken through? But in terms of the US, those of us who make films for under \$10 million are the little guys. And for every *Blair Witch* there're a couple of thousand guys sleeping under bridges.



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For every *Blair Witch* there're a couple of thousand guys sleeping under bridges.

I like to work one-on-one

7

**ANNE WHEELER**

interviewed by **Peggy Thompson**



ANNE WHEELER EDITING *GREAT GRAND MOTHER*, HER FIRST FILM ABOUT WOMEN OF THE EARLY WEST

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She's one of Canada's defining English-language cinematic voices. During her career she's directed eight feature films, nine movies for television, and numerous documentaries, miniseries, and television episodes. Her movies for television have been nominated for a total of thirty-one Gemini Awards and her films for a total of thirty-eight Genie Awards. As François Truffaut wrote in *Hitchcock*, directing films requires "multiple and often contradictory talents ... only a mind in which the analytic and synthetic are simultaneously at work can make its way out of the maze of snares inherent in the fragmentation of the shooting, the cutting and the montage of a film."

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**Wheeler trained as a mathematician, musician, and music teacher before directing her first film. When she talks about directing she uses musical analogies and notations. And when she shoots, it's with a mathematical precision.**

Wheeler trained as a mathematician, musician, and music teacher before directing her first film. When she talks about directing she uses musical analogies and notations. And when she shoots, it's with mathematical precision. At our first meeting in 1998 to discuss working together on *Better Than Chocolate*, producer Sharon McGowan



Anne Wheeler on the set of *Edge of Madness*.

and I arrived at Anne's office to the sound of delicate piano playing. It was Anne. When we asked her what the piece was, she said it was her morning improvisation; each day begins with one. I think that this ability to start fresh, to reinvent, is a hallmark of her work as a film artist.

Wheeler's body of work harks back to classic auteurs, directors like George Stevens, Akira Kurosawa, and Billy Wilder whose themes and styles embraced all genres: westerns, comedies, film noir, drama. Wheeler is the same: whether it's the social-issue drama of *Loyalties*, the romantic naturalism of *Bye Bye Blues*, the neo-noir of television's *Da Vinci's Inquest*, or the romantic comedy of *Better Than Chocolate*, Wheeler's recurring themes of liberation and self-knowledge run through them all.

Like George Stevens, Wheeler is a director who understands the importance of landscape in relation to the psyche. Stevens's westerns *Shane* and *Giant* share with Wheeler's Alberta films the metaphor of western place. Land and sky become a tabula rasa on which deeply internalized characters (male and female) can see themselves in a new light. Like Akira Kurosawa, another director who understood westerns, Wheeler isn't afraid of epic pacing, and, like Billy Wilder, whose comedies stressed character exaggeration, Wheeler's forays into comedy (*Better Than Chocolate*, *Suddenly Naked*) prove that she too can handle an "everywoman" protagonist thrust into a cockeyed universe.

In the 1970s and '80s Wheeler collaborated with the National Film Board making documentaries and short dramas such as *Great Grand Mother*, *Augusta*, *Happily Unmarried*, *Teach Me to Dance*, *One's a Heifer*, *A Change of Heart*, and *A War Story*. The latter, narrated by Donald Sutherland, explores her father's experiences as a doctor in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp during World War Two. These films laid the groundwork for the films to follow.

Her first feature film, *Loyalties* (1986), starred Tantoo Cardinal and Susan Wooldridge and was written by Sharon Riis. *Loyalties* is a powerful film about a friendship between a Metis and a British woman, and deals with child abuse and how a case of abuse (the British woman's

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**Wheeler isn't afraid of epic pacing, and her forays into comedy prove that she can handle an "everywoman" protagonist thrust into a cockeyed universe.**

husband assaults the Metis woman's daughter) propels the two women to action. This groundbreaking film moved Wheeler into the international narrative film world and won awards at film festivals in Houston, San Francisco, Toronto, Portugal, South Africa, Montreal, and the Grand Prix at the Créteil International Women's Film Festival in Paris.

*Bye Bye Blues* (1988) was inspired by her mother's war years as a musician in a small dance band, and established Wheeler as an auteur director. We explore the making of *Bye Bye Blues* in this interview. In 1990, she directed the adaptation of the classic novel *The Diviners*, by Margaret Laurence, for CBC Television. The novel was adapted by renowned screenwriter Linda Svendsen. "Writing is a form of divining," Laurence has famously said, and with *The Diviners* Wheeler develops what is now becoming her major theme—women's struggles to discover and divine self-knowledge.

*The War Between Us* (1995), another film for CBC Television, explores the Japanese internment in Canada during World War Two and is again a film about the bonds between women. This film was written by screenwriter Sharon Gibbon, the granddaughter of the lead character. As with so many of Wheeler's films, real life is once again "divined" into fiction. The film garnered international awards, including the Special Jury Prize from the Houston Film Festival, the Red Cross Award for Humanity, the Critic's Choice Award at Monte Carlo, and a Cable Ace Award for Best Foreign Programming in the United States. In 1996 Wheeler wrote and produced *Mother Trucker: The Diana Kil-mury Story*, directed by Sturla Gunnarsson. The film is a biopic about the woman who fought to change corruption within the Teamsters. That film won the Cable Ace Award in the United States for Best International Programming. In 1998 Wheeler directed the first three episodes of *Da Vinci's Inquest*, setting the style for the gritty hit series. *Better Than Chocolate* (1999), our lesbian-themed romantic comedy, premiered at the Berlin Film Festival and was a critical and commercial success. The film received wide distribution in the United States, playing in over 300 theatres. We discuss our collaboration on this film in

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**"Writing is a form of divining," Laurence has famously said, and with *The Diviners* Wheeler develops what is now becoming her major theme—women's struggles to discover and divine self-knowledge.**



the interview. *Marine Life* (2001), adapted from the linked short stories by Linda Svendsen, also explores Wheeler's primary themes of families headed by women and the discovery of self. In 2000 Wheeler directed *Suddenly Naked*, a romantic comedy that also premiered at Berlin and, through humour, questions what happens when artists create for fame and fortune rather than express themselves truthfully.

For the purposes of this interview I focus on two of Wheeler's feature films: *Bye Bye Blues*, a story rooted in her family and place of birth, and *Better Than Chocolate*, a film rooted in my family and place of birth. But to begin, I ask her about getting started in the film world.

On the set of *The War Between Us*. Local residents who were related to those who were interned played extras in this drama about Japanese Canadians during World War Two.

**Thompson** Your first major film *Great Grand Mother* [1976] was a documentary about women who settled the Canadian West. What does the West mean to you?

**Wheeler** The West and more specifically the Prairies have always been a source of inspiration for me. The endless horizon symbolizes the endless possibilities. I grew up in Edmonton, but both of my parents came from the country, and one aunt had a farm north of the city where I kept my Appaloosa mare. As a child, I felt safe and would ride alone for miles in any direction. If there were fences, I could always find a gate. The experience of being alone, with no one watching or judging, allowed me to just “be there” in the moment, to enjoy and absorb what was wild and real.

**Thompson** You’ve been working as a director for almost three decades. What’s kept you going?

**Wheeler** My sense of curiosity, I suppose. And a sense of purpose. It started with *Great Grand Mother*, a small documentary that led me into

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An aunt had a farm north of the city where I kept my Appaloosa mare. As a child, I felt safe and would ride alone for miles in any direction. If there were fences, I could always find a gate.





the personal lives of women who had never been asked about their stories. They had come to this wilderness to settle the land, many of them naively and, in doing so, they discovered their own capabilities. Many gave up. Others died trying to survive. The research unearthed a multitude of stories that had never been told, stories that would have been lost and forgotten. It was fascinating to hear of their experiences and I came to have a tremendous respect for those who had gone before me.

**Thompson** How did *Bye Bye Blues* [1988] come to be?

**Wheeler** In the late '70s I started out to make *A War Story* [1981], which was to be about my parents. It amazed me that they were separated for

*Opposite:* 1979. Anne in front of a poster for *A War Story*, a feature documentary, narrated by Donald Sutherland, about her father's experiences as a doctor in a prisoner-of-war camp. *Above:* cast on the truck during the filming of *Bye Bye Blues*. Photo by Doug Curran.

more than five years during World War Two, when my father was in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. They had met as children on the Prairies, married, and went to India in the '30s, where my father was a doctor. When the war broke out he was assigned to a division from India and my mom came home to the Prairies. They were reunited late in 1945, and I was born ten months after dad's return. Both of them had changed significantly yet the commitment, without question, remained. I was a child of the '60s, a time of "free love" and "no strings attached." Their relationship was not uncommon amongst their peers, but the definition of marriage was now being questioned. As I worked on *A War Story*, I met many of the men with whom my father had been interned, most of them Scottish or Welsh. He had never seen any of these fellows since they had parted ways more than thirty years before this. I became consumed by my father's story and their stories, and that whole theatre of war, where East met West, and their worlds collided. It was thought provoking and so little had been written about it. So, my mother's story was put on hold. Almost ten years later, the time was right for me mount a substantial feature, and I chose to go back to what I had put aside, but I would make a fictional drama, inspired by what she had experienced.

**Thompson** Why a drama?

**Wheeler** I felt the limitations of documentary filmmaking with *A War Story*. Often you are bound by your research and personal connections. I felt protective of my parents. And when I took a group of men back to where the camp had been, I felt exploitive. For me, they were going back to hell. I couldn't push them to tell me what I already knew in some ways. It was horrendous what they had endured, and now I was forcing them to relive what they had spent most of their lives trying to forget. As a filmmaker, I felt I was telling the story from the outside looking in, and I wanted to reverse that situation. Because my mother was still alive, and my father died when I was young, I had a much better sense of who my mother was, and what the experience had meant to her. Still I approached *Bye Bye Blues* as though it was a documentary, interviewing many women who had gone through World War Two alone. Many

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I approached *Bye Bye Blues* as though it was a documentary, interviewing many women who had gone through World War Two alone. Many had done things they'd never thought they were capable of doing.



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In *Bye Bye Blues* the distances between people and places is a metaphor for the distances between them spiritually and emotionally.

had done things they'd never thought they were capable of doing.

**Thompson** What for you is the theme of *Bye Bye Blues*?

**Wheeler** A person awakening to her own strength. The ongoing consequences of war.

**Thompson** There's a lot of imagery and shot construction of the heroine in the vast expanse of the Prairie. Can you elaborate on that?

**Wheeler** In *Bye Bye Blues* the distances between people and places is a metaphor for the distances between them spiritually and emotionally. Every generation goes through an evolution, and in *Bye Bye Blues* Daisy represents an emerging breed of women, so different from her parents. She has travelled and knows about the world beyond. Because of her circumstances she is forced to return to where she was born, to live with her parents, and of course the wilderness becomes her prison.

**Thompson** Music is also a force for liberation in the film.

**Wheeler** From the time I can remember, my mother played and our

Working with Kate Reid on the set of *Bye Bye Blues*.

Photo by Doug Curran.

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There is no point listing a series of events that happens in a lifetime if you can't abstract some meaning from those experiences. To distill that meaning takes time.



family gathered around the piano to sing. Others danced. Music is a big part of our relationship. I was four years old when I realized I could find the harmony in any song and sing it effortlessly. It was a gift, and I always felt so lucky to be able to perform with her, which we did for years. We sang together, played together. I always felt closest to her when we were making music.

**Thompson** Although Daisy is liberated in the film through music and romance, it's her husband she stays with.

**Wheeler** Yes. I'd been moved by the sacrifice my mother made for the family. She was talented and beautiful, and yet her own ambitions did not fit well with her circumstance. Think of it. She could not have known *who* would come home after five years, but she remained faithful to the core. That's who she was. She was naïve about what he had experienced, like everyone was at the time. But she was his wife and mother of his children. They were childhood sweethearts, and in the end she made a choice that many today would not make [to give up her personal dream] but she couldn't have lived with herself had she done otherwise. And she never expressed any regrets to me, but I could see the delight she felt whenever she sat down to play.

**Thompson** How long did it take you to write the script?

**Wheeler** Three years. The first draft started with my parents' childhood friendship. With draft after draft I got down to the heart of the story. There is no point listing a series of events that happens in a lifetime if you can't extract some meaning from those experiences. To distill that meaning takes time.

**Thompson** Is the film an epic?

**Wheeler** Epic? It's a small word for something big. Some would say it's an epic—extraordinary in size and scope, starting in India, ending in Alberta on the cusp of a new age. But I want the audience to feel it is about someone not unlike themselves, caught up in events bigger than their world. It is a personal film, a romance, and in some ways a tragedy.

**Thompson** I'd like to explore your relationship with the producer of *Bye Bye Blues*, Arvi Liimatainen.

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**Epic? It's a small word for something big. Some would say it's an epic—extraordinary in size and scope, starting in India, ending in Alberta on the cusp of a new age.**

*Opposite:* Luke Reilly and Rebecca Jenkins in *Bye Bye Blues*. Photo by Doug Curran.

**Wheeler** Arvi and I have worked together many times [*Cowboy's Don't Cry*, *Bye Bye Blues*, *Angel Square*, and *Marine Life*] and consider each other family. We weren't always close. For a time we both lived in Edmonton, but we were not on the same path. He was doing a number of shows with American producers, breaking into that market, and I was a devout Canadian documentary filmmaker who made films, mostly for the National Film Board. There was no specific conflict; we just didn't connect.

Then I was asked to make *Cowboys Don't Cry* [1988], produced by Janis Platt, and she asked me who the best line producer for the film would be, and I honestly had to say "Arvi." He laughed when I asked him. Then he said yes and we never looked back. The last film we made together was *Marine Life* in 2001.

**Thompson** The shoot for *Bye Bye Blues* involved two continents and two seasons. Tell me about it.

**Wheeler** The shoot was thirty-two days in total, I believe. We had a twenty-day summer shoot—half of it in Drumheller and half in the brand-new Allarcom Studios in Edmonton. Then we went to India for a chaotic six-day shoot. We only took twelve people to India, so most of the crew there was local. When we left India to come home, we had trouble with customs and had to leave our footage behind, so it was almost two months before I knew if the footage was all right. That was stressful. But overall, the making of *Bye Bye Blues* was fantastic. Hugely rewarding on all levels. I had a freedom, never again experienced, to simply go for it. We built a farm on the lip of the valley outside of Drumheller (designed by John Blackie, with whom I have worked time and again) and three dance hall sets. The new studios were a symbol of what we hoped was going to happen in terms of production in Alberta. Dr. Allard [the television station owner who built the studios] was there most days, watching from the shadows, as we initiated the space. We felt like the whole city, the province, was behind us. The support was overwhelming.

**Thompson** How do you work with actors?

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**We felt like the whole city, the province, was behind us. The support was overwhelming.**



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I often work with each actor separately so that the other actors don't necessarily know what is going to happen—they will have to react to what is new.

**Wheeler** I like to work one-on-one. Rarely do I have the opportunity to rehearse, and, quite frankly, unless it's a love scene or a fight scene or something that needs to be planned for safety and expediency, I'd rather have "it" happen on set. The important thing is to walk through each character's journey with each actor, so that we both know what we want to accomplish. I have discovered a lot of talent through casting, because I treat the sessions as an opportunity to test our working relationship. Does an actor have lots of colours to play with, or are they rigid in some way? Can we connect? Is their ego in the way? Do they listen? Every actor needs something different from a director. Can I provide what they need to do the best they can? I want to know that the actor and I can work one-on-one, openly. That requires a confidence in each other that is ready to respond.

I like to keep things fresh. On set I often work with each actor separately so that the other actors don't necessarily know what is going to

Anne on the set of *Cowboys Don't Cry* after the bulls got loose and the crew took off after them.

happen—they will have to react to what is new. I make secret adjustments, which ups the stakes and results in a wonderful sense of surprise, sometimes igniting a whole new take on the scene. It keeps the performers—and the crew—in the moment. If people are confined by some plan and are reluctant to change, they will be discombobulated.

**Thompson** Final images are so critical to the meanings of films. Tell me about designing the final moments of *Bye Bye Blues*.

**Wheeler** In the story, it's early in the morning and Daisy gets up to see the band that she has grown with, musically, throughout the war, leave town for what will likely be an exciting future. The man who has encouraged her, taught her, loved her is also on that bus, and the urge to be a part of what they have brought together is overwhelming.

So many stories about war are about men doing the right thing. Rarely do we see the flip side, the decisions made by those outside the fighting. What Daisy does was a heroic act. The title, and the song “Bye Bye Blues,” is a farewell to a part of her which leaves on that bus, a part of her that we will never know. To be honest we shot a couple of scenes that were scripted, and would have played after the final scene that is now in the movie. But they were redundant and dropped after the first rough cut.

**Thompson** Where did *Bye Bye Blues* premiere?

**Wheeler** In Edmonton! I brought my mother. I never talked to her about the film. She didn't want to read the script, to meet Rebecca Jenkins, to come on set or to the editing room. She did, however, come to a recording studio and play for hours with some of her old friends, and that music was a template for the style of music that drives the film. It's lively and uplifting, even when the words are rather melancholy. George Blondheim embraced the style, even sat down and played four-handed piano with her—which she thought was terrific. When I told her I was going to make a film about her, it amused her. “You better add a little spice to the story,” she advised me. “A story about someone waiting could be quite boring.” I reassured her that I'd add a little flavour. She never asked how much.

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So many stories about war are about men doing the right thing. Rarely do we see the flip side, the decisions made by those outside the fighting.

So when the film was going to be shown for the first time, we dressed to the nines and went together. I was terrified. Over a thousand people. I don't think she knew what to expect, maybe she thought it would be like *A War Story*. During the screening she was still, quiet, and I thought, "Oh no, what have I done? Maybe she is horrified!" Daisy, the lead character in the film, has a relationship with a man she grows to love, a father that disapproves, a life that is titillating. When the film ended, the hometown crowd went wild. I got her to stand up and folks cheered enthusiastically, and still she said nothing. After the audience left, I found a moment alone to ask her, "What did you think, Mom?" and she turned to me and privately asked, "How did you know all that?" Now that's drama.

**Thompson** The next year you pulled up your roots and moved to the West Coast. How did that move change your work?

**Wheeler** To be honest, it disconnected me artistically for a while. I had been driven by my roots and still had stories from Alberta to tell. The move was motivated for reasons other than my work. In BC you had Sandy Wilson with *My American Cousin*, Phil Borsos with *Grey Fox*, you and Sharon McGowan had done *The Lotus Eaters*. There were filmmakers telling stories out here, this place, as I had done on the Prairies, but I didn't belong. I no longer had my own library of stories—or sense of purpose. I moved from being an auteur, writing and directing my stories, to a director for hire and started to do more television. Maybe the change was good for me.

And thank goodness the work found me. I was offered the opportunity to tell stories that fed me, inspired me like *The Diviners*, *The War Between Us*, and *Mother Trucker*. These were mostly driven by television and I came to realize that television can be a great forum—and reach a huge audience.

**Thompson** Our collaboration in 1999 on *Better Than Chocolate* [I wrote and co-produced with Sharon McGowan] began with a phone call. When I'd finished the screenplay Sharon and I talked about you as the director. We had both seen all your films, and admired them and admired

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I came to realize that television can be a great forum—and reach a huge audience.

you as a leader in Canadian film. We thought you'd be brilliant with comedy. But we wondered if an established director would be interested in a lesbian romantic comedy. What made you want to come on board?

**Wheeler** The humour! And *Chocolate's* theme of liberation is part of the continuum of stories I'd been telling about relationships between people, not only women. It was about tolerance and the power of understanding the other. These are themes I've always been drawn to but *Chocolate* offered me an opportunity to go back to comedy and to reach a new audience.

**Thompson** So here you were working with a writer and producer you hadn't worked with before.

**Wheeler** I was being invited to join a family rather than initiate one, yes. It was more your story than mine and that made the relationship to the story different. With *Bye Bye Blues* the project had stemmed from a personal place. You and Sharon had clear ideas of what a director was and what you were looking for in a collaborator. I remember being "auditioned." I always feel that auditions are a two-way street, and so it was with us. When I got the part, and it all came together, I felt excited.

**Thompson** During pre-production we did a lot of research.

**Wheeler** Yes, I had to get inside the heads of a generation and a community different from my own. You had gathered together a group of twelve or so young lesbians who were willing to tell us their stories, which gave me confidence. I worry about telling other people's stories. They also told us what kind of film they wanted to see. They didn't want the "poor me" film about coming out, feeling alienated—the full-of-angst film. They wanted a sexy movie that would make them laugh and feel good about themselves.

**Thompson** Let's talk about the script a bit. I recall we did a great deal of bouncing ideas off each other, and we did a draft together and continued to shape the script even when we were shooting.

**Wheeler** Happily, I was brought in early and we were all open to taking risks. The film in itself was a risk and that was exciting. Really it still is

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***Chocolate's* theme of liberation is part of the continuum of stories I'd been telling about relationships between people, not only women.**



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I came from comedy; during university I had paid my way by doing musical comedy and theatre, so I was thrilled to get back to what I felt was a basic instinct.

quite unlike any other film out there. You provided the situation, and I found a way to execute it—in nineteen days! The fact that it was a “lesbian” story was neither here or there. I came from comedy; during university I had paid my way by doing musical comedy and theatre, so I was thrilled to get back to what I felt was a basic instinct. I concentrated on pacing the movie up, and playing with the unpredictable.

**Thompson** I’ve noticed that you have an impeccable plan when you shoot, but you’re able to invent and develop on set with input and collaboration. You stay true to your vision but involve the talents around you.

**Wheeler** Yes, with the body-painting, for example. It could have been more conservative, more controlled. But I wanted it to be organic. [This scene is a visual feast, where the two young women paint each other’s naked bodies.] The lighting, the possibilities were premeditated, but I let the actors paint what they felt like painting. When they needed a little

Christina Cox and Karen Dwyer from *Better Than Chocolate*. Photo by Rosamond Norbury.

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It's not so much about making a movie for the sake of making a movie—it's about what I will learn or perceive and what will others learn through me.



inspiration, I'd throw in an idea and they would take it a step further. It was a little like playing jazz. We could have pencilled on the bodies and had them fill in the lines, but I gave them the tune, the colours, and let them improvise creatively.

**Thompson** The shoot was nineteen days. That's hard.

**Wheeler** We were lucky that we had a lot of filmmakers on the producing team and on the crew. If I wanted input, I could turn to someone, and they would contribute.

**Thompson** I know that I was very nervous when we were invited to the Berlin Film Festival to premiere the film. Were you?

**Wheeler** I had no idea how people would react to the movie. Germany has a highly developed aesthetic sense of cinema. And we were competing against films that cost fifty times more than ours did. We had limited promotion and launching support. Yes, I was nervous. But we got this huge response—a wild screening with a standing ovation. And they got

Wendy Crewsen with toys  
in *Better Than Chocolate*.  
Photo by Rosamond  
Norbury.

every joke! In fact, I think they “got” the film more than many North American audiences. The interviews were provocative and insightful.

**Thompson** As a director, what do you change in your approach between comedy and drama?

**Wheeler** Comedies like this one are bigger and more exaggerated than life. So while I want to keep it real so there’s an emotional attachment for the audience, I torque things up. You can’t play comedy only for realism, you have to bring the audience into the humour. The shape remains the same ... like a symphony, a dance, the act of making love.... You start by intriguing the audience, pulling them in closer, and engaging them—and hopefully they will embrace you and respond.

**Thompson** Once you’ve got the script, how do you start?

**Wheeler** I read the script many, many times so I can verbally walk through the whole story. Once I have a good grasp of it I start to plan out the shots, aware of the transitions. It’s important to figure out what will pull me from one scene to the next. I think of each scene as a mini-play or a musical phrase, with a beginning, middle, and end. I design a lot of scenes in one shot, which means I choose where to be wide or tight, the pacing and so on within the scene. It’s like editing before you shoot. In some scenes I may want lots of shots, which I can cut in a rhythm so I have to make sure I have all the bits and pieces I need. If possible, I spend a lot of time with my D.O.P. and designer and we’re all clear before the shoot begins. Sometimes my plans are difficult to illustrate—I don’t use storyboards. Usually I use floorplans—and my own notation, which includes everything from the size of lens, the sound, a sense of lighting, colours, and how the piece rises and falls, much like a complex piece of music. Directing is akin to conducting and I try to have it all in my head before I take the podium.

**Thompson** What directors have influenced you?

**Wheeler** I began making films as an art form because of the power they wielded. Film was a political tool used for change. I was influenced by the early filmmakers at the National Film Board, like Norman McLaren, Donald Brittain, and Colin Low, and cinema vérité auteurs

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**Directing is akin to conducting and I try to have it all in my head before I take the podium.**

such as Frederick Wiseman. Then when I moved into drama I watched directors like John Cassavetes who were breaking the mould, and internationals like Satyajit Ray, who revealed worlds outside of my own experience. Recently, I have been moved by the work of Fernando Meirelles and his ability to capture reality.

**Thompson** What keeps you going?

**Wheeler** It's not so much about making a movie for the sake of making a movie—it's about what I will learn or perceive and what will others learn through me. With *Bye Bye Blues* I learned a lot about myself by putting myself in Daisy's place. She chose to stay and nurture her family, which in some ways parallels my decision to stay in Canada. *Better Than Chocolate* plunged me into issues of gender and made me more aware of the spectrum of what is masculine and feminine.

**Thompson** Any regrets?

**Wheeler** Not really. Sometimes I think I would have made bigger more marketable films if I'd gone to the States early in my career but I am aware that there would have been trade-offs. Sometimes I haven't fought hard enough for my work, or taken a big enough risk artistically. Mostly I think I've been so lucky to have had this opportunity to explore and express.



**FEATURE FILMS**
**GARY BURNS**

*A Problem with Fear* (2003) Director, writer  
*waydowntown* (2000) Producer, director, writer  
*Kitchen Party* (1997) Director, writer  
*The Suburbanators* (1995) Director, writer

**TRENT CARLSON**

*Fido* (2006) Co-producer  
*The Delicate Art of Parking* (2003) Director, writer

**BLAKE CORBET**

*Fido* (2006) Producer  
*Missing in America* (2005) Co-producer  
*The Delicate Art of Parking* (2003) Producer, writer  
*Mile Zero* (2001) Producer

**ANDREW CURRIE**

*Fido* (2006) Director, writer  
*The Delicate Art of Parking* (2003) Producer  
*Mile Zero* (2001) Director

**MICHAEL DOWSE**

*It's All Gone Pete Tong* (2004) Director, writer  
*FUBAR* (2002) Producer, director, writer, cinematographer, editor  
*Bad Money* (1999) Editor

**JEAN-CLAUDE LAUZON**

*Léolo* (1992) Director, writer

*Un zoo la nuit* (1987) Director, writer

**GUY MADDIN**

*Brand Upon the Brain* (2006) Director, writer

*The Saddest Music in the World* (2003) Director, writer

*Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* (1997) Director

*Careful* (1992) Director, writer, cinematographer

*Archangel* (1990) Director, writer, cinematographer

*Tales from the Gimli Hospital* (1988) Director, writer, cinematographer

**MINA SHUM**

*Long Life, Happiness and Prosperity* (2002) Executive Producer,  
director, writer

*Drive, She Said* (1997) Director, writer

*Double Happiness* (1994) Director, writer

**LYNNE STOPKEWICH**

*Suspicious River* (2000) Director, writer

*Kissed* (1996) Producer, director, writer, editor

**ANNE WHEELER**

*Edge of Madness* (2002) Director, writer

*Suddenly Naked* (2001) Executive Producer, director

*Marine Life* (2000) Director

*Better Than Chocolate* (1999) Director

*The War Between Us* (1995) Director

*Angel Square* (1990) Director, writer

*Bye Bye Blues* (1989) Producer, director, writer

*Cowboys Don't Cry* (1988) Associate producer, director

*Loyalties* (1986) Director, writer

*A War Story* (1981) Producer, director, writer

For further information go to [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com).

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**JIM LEACH** is a professor in the Department of Communication, Popular Culture and Film at Brock University. His publications include *Claude Jutra, Filmmaker* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999) and *British Film* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). He is also the author (with Louis Giannetti) of *Understanding Movies* (fourth Canadian edition) (Pearson, 2005) and co-editor (with Jeannette Sloniowski) of *Candid Eyes: Essays on Canadian Documentaries* (University of Toronto Press, 2003). His most recent book is *Film in Canada* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

**JACQUELINE LEVITIN** is a filmmaker and film historian-critic who teaches at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. Her recent film work has been in ethnographic documentary ("Building Bridge: A Housing

Project for Women” [2003]), live video collaborations for dance and theatre, and an experimental documentary, *Mahjong & Chicken Feet* (2008), on China’s relation with her Jewish “others.” She is the co-editor of *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing* (2003), a dialogue between women filmmakers, critics, and theorists.

**GEORGE MELNYK** is an associate professor of Canadian Studies and Film Studies, Faculty of Communication and Culture, at the University of Calgary. His publications on cinema include *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (2004), *My Mother Is an Alien: Ten Takes on Life and Film* (2004), and *Great Canadian Film Directors* (2007). He is currently completing a monograph on urbanity in Canadian cinema and organizing the second volume of this series.

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**PEGGY THOMPSON** is an associate professor in the Creative Writing Program at the University of British Columbia. She is the screenwriter of the feature films *The Lotus Eaters* (1993), for which she won a Genie Award for Best Screenplay, and *Better Than Chocolate*. She was one of the producers on the feature film *Saint Monica* (2002) and most recently was one of the executive producers on the documentary *The Oldest Basketball Team in the World* (2006).