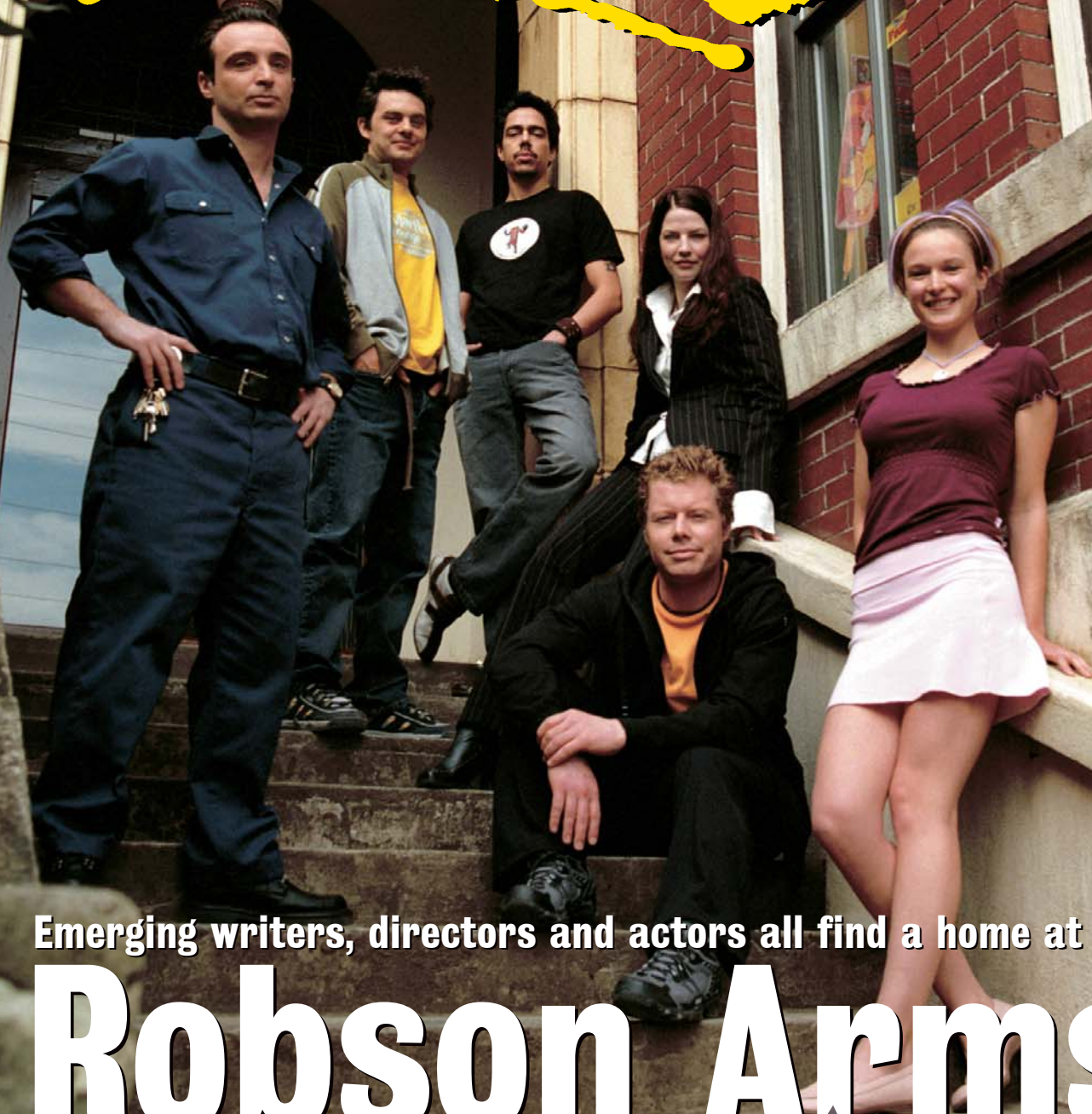


May/June 2004

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Real West

FILM, VIDEO, INTERNET
AND DIGITAL PRODUCTION
IN WESTERN CANADA



Emerging writers, directors and actors all find a home at the

Robson Arms

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Opening Doors at the Robson Arms

CTV's **LOUISE CLARK** was looking for a way to encourage emerging writers and directors. Vancouver writer **SUSIN NIELSEN** and director **GARY HARVEY** helped her find it in a fictional west-end apartment building called the Robson Arms.

by **IAN CADDELL**
photograph by **PHILLIP CHIN**

Remember *The Beachcombers*? Long before there was a film and television industry in British Columbia, there were jobs for people who had a dream. By the early 1980s the show had been on for more than a decade. Meanwhile, Hollywood was beginning to look for new places to make movies and television series. Thanks in large part to the Gibson-set CBC show, B.C. had technicians and actors who could fill their needs.

SINCE HOLLYWOOD HAD NO NEED FOR LOCAL WRITERS AND DIRECTORS, there were few opportunities for talented Canadians to improve their skills. By the 1990s, some television series had opened their doors to indigenous directors and writers, but the opportunities were still few and far between. If there was optimism, it came from companies who had applied for television licenses with the promise of creating shows that would be written and directed by British Columbians.

The optimism proved to be merited. Both CHUM Television, which won a license to broadcast in Victoria, and VTV, which won one in Vancouver, have come through on several occasions. Veteran producer Louise Clark (*A Winter Tan*), who was put in charge of western Canadian production for the Vancouver station when it became part of the CTV network, says she felt the best way to realize the promises was to create shows that promoted emerging writers and directors.

"We decided to do it through half hours, but the shows we produced got lost," she says. "We needed a connective tissue and so we felt that we had to have a series with a format that could allow for new people to step in and write and direct individual episodes."

Clark, who had moved into Vancouver's west end from Toronto, came up with an idea for a series that would be set in a local apartment building. She felt that the setting could facilitate a continuing connection but would also support stand alone episodes with new ideas and characters. "I phoned (Omni Productions') Brian Hamilton and Michael Chechik and said 'we can't wait for someone to pitch us on this idea. So I am thinking of bringing in (writer) Susin Nielsen.' They were excited about it and the pieces started to fall into place."

Nielsen took Clark's idea further, sensing that the show would work better on all fronts if it could go behind one door every week. "One of the things that always appeals to me as a writer is human relationships and our desire to connect," she says. "In the modern world we are so connected and yet it becomes harder to truly connect on a personal level. I was really drawn to the idea of setting the series in an apartment building. That has been done before but I felt that it would be more realistic than, let's say, the *Melrose Place* concept, because in our building some of the people connect but most don't connect at all. However, they may make some assumptions about the others and they may inadvertently affect other people's lives. Someone leaves a pair of underwear in the laundry room and they get put into someone else's laundry basket. So the wife is wondering why there is a

strange pair of women's underwear in the basket. I have always been drawn to a series that would encompass a wide variety of characters who weren't all 20 somethings or 30 somethings. Whether or not this will be successful I don't know, but we do have characters from the age of 10 to 76 and there are a lot of ongoing threads for the loyal watcher. They all have their own arcs and some of them move in part way through the season while others move out. And over the course of the development period some characters have taken on a life of their own."

Nielsen facilitated the development of the characters by keeping both the creative doors and the doors of the building wide open. She wrote the show's bible and the pilot before any other writers or directors had been brought on, but when they arrived she told them to throw their own ideas on the table. "Some of the characters I had written remained the same and others evolved into different people through our discussions. We started out with my episode and then we did five more and then we brought in another group of writers. By that point we knew which characters we wanted to follow so it was a wonderful, evolving process. We were lucky that we had the development time and money to work on 13 scripts before we went into production. We had a lot of time to figure out where we wanted to go with these people, and so some will get a second story down the line."

Clark knew Gary Harvey from the CTV series *Cold Squad*, which he had produced and directed. She knew that if the show was going to fulfill its commitment to encourage new talent, it would need someone who could both direct and work closely with emerging directors, most of whom would be directing their first television episode. Harvey says that when he and Clark and Nielsen went looking for directors they found more talent than they had imagined.

"It was amazing to see how much talent there was in this country," he says. "We had 120 submissions from directors, and from there we went down to 40 who we interviewed. We kept seeing the same people, so it was a really difficult task to narrow it down further. We chose 12 others (in addition to Harvey.) At one point we had considered having every director we chose doing a couple of episodes, but we couldn't get beyond these 12 people, so we let them all do one episode."

Using emerging writers and directors hasn't stopped the show from accessing some of the country's most proven acting talent. Before the first 13 episodes are completed, Harvey and Nielsen and their team will have worked with Megan Follows, Margot Kidder, *Kids in the Hall*'s Mark McKinney and *Kingdom Hospital*'s John Cassini, who has a regular role as the building superintendent.

"Every week we see different actors here and I think that what they are responding to is that each character is fully developed," says Nielsen. "They are all interesting characters and they all have quirks and flaws and I think that as actors they really respond to that. Canadian actors do get good roles in shows and films that are shot here but they usually aren't cast to play the lead. So they get quite excited by the possibility of taking on that task. For instance, Margot Kidder read all 13 of the scripts on her flight home and phoned to say that she wanted her character to move back into the building in season two. Mark McKinney was responsible for us writing episode eight. We had offered him another role in the series and he declined it. Then he ran into Louise in Winnipeg and he said 'I like this guy Tom in the (series') bible.' She reported back to us and he was in the pilot episode, but as a secondary character. We thought 'if we are going to



THIS PAGE: CREATIVE PRODUCER/HEAD WRITER SUSIN NIELSEN AND EXECUTIVE PRODUCER/LEAD DIRECTOR GARY HARVEY ON THE FRONT STEPS OF ROBSON ARMS. LEFT: JANE MCGREGOR, ALISEN DOWN, JOHN CASSINI AND DAVID RIMONDRECK.

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draw him to the project we are going to have to give him his own episode.' So we wrote episode eight to feature Tom."

When Clark, Harvey and Nielsen sat down with writer Deboarh Peraya, they told her to write what she knew. Peraya had a strong background in writing for children's shows and cartoons but had also written a short film about a character loosely based on the grandfather who had helped to raise her. Although the title character in *Mr. Reubens Goes to Mars* was Jewish, he was not dissimilar to Mr. Tan, an elderly Chinese man who appeared in early scripts but had very little dialogue.

"I think *Mr. Reubens* comes from being raised by my grandparents," she says. "My grandfather was a quiet and dignified man but he had a great sense of humour that would come out in quiet moments. The film showed a very rich Jewish world and in some ways it was an homage to my grandfather. It was about a lonely dignified man who is separated and isolated from his peers in the condo in which he lives. He goes to a swing club and he becomes the belle of the ball and finds a newfound confidence and a zest for life. He is then able to reconnect with his peers. For this script, I was drawn to (an earlier) image of a man in a tux practicing his tuba. He seemed to have this passion for the music. I didn't want him to be a stereotype. I was aware that he had to have his dignity and not be a buffoon with his tuba in the laundry room. That was a challenge. I also thought it would be nice to see him and his

wife as this older interracial couple. I thought that would be interesting, particularly in a show set in Vancouver. Once I had come up with these characters I just wanted to keep going with them."

Nielsen knew Peraya from a previous life, back when Nielsen had given Peraya her first writing break with the series *What About Mimi*. Peraya, who had done her masters thesis on animator Chuck Jones, went from there to work on several other animated series. She says that while she wouldn't mind writing a feature, the various aspects of television writing still intrigue her.

"I love features and they are a bigger scope but the thing I love about television is that there is such a great range of possibility in the story telling. There is so much I can do. I think this particular show stretches us as writers because there is a glut of shows that are about 20 somethings who hang out together and, while that is fun to watch and fun to write, as a writer it is nice to deal with different stories. Why would I want to just work on things that have been done before and done well by other people?"

Clark, Nielsen and Harvey focused their attention on emerging writers and directors and not first timers. As a result, everyone who was chosen had some professional experience. Peraya developed her craft through animation while Ben Ratner had come from acting to the directing of the feature *Moving Malcolm* and Jason Furukawa had spent several years working as an assistant director on films and series.

Ratner says that while he had

made his directing debut in *Moving Malcolm*, he had hired himself to play the lead role. That choice complicated his ability to learn on the job. "I was in scenes for 18 of our 20 days," he says. "In my episode I can focus more on the other performances and the visuals and slow things down. I can put twice as much emphasis on directing. For instance, I have worked hard at learning the language of lenses. My feeling about *Malcolm* was that I wished I had chosen more visual energy, which was my responsibility and not the DOP's. So, here I am learning to be more comfortable with the technical side. Of course, if people want to talk truly technically I will automatically tune out. At the same time, I know that because I feel comfortable with actors and can talk that language I will eventually have the time to learn most of the technical language."

Ratner is directing an episode called *Educating Alicia*, which is about the relationship between a timid, eager to please woman and the doctor she works for. He says that while there are similarities between *Malcolm*, which had Ratner playing a hapless loser who will do anything to win back his former fiancé, and his *Robson Arms* episode, he would rather be thought of as the director of bitter-sweet material than as someone who directs shows filled with car chases. "I would prefer this kind of project, but then again at this stage of my directing career, I certainly can't afford to be choosy. However, I don't think a lot of people will be offering me jobs I wouldn't want. My strength is working with actors



From left: Alisen Down; Jane McGregor, William B. Davis and Ben Ratner; Fred Ewanuick and 'roommate' Zak Santiago; John Cassini, Fred Ewanuick, Zak Santiago, Alisen Down, David Richmond-Peck and Jane McGregor; A beaming Alicia Plecas (McGregor) gazes into the eyes of neighbour Hal Garcia (Santiago) while his roommate Nick Papathanasiou (Ewanuick) looks on; 'The Super' John Cassini; Executive Producer/Lead Director Gary Harvey stands with Megan Follows, who plays Janice Keneally, at the front door of Robson Arms.



and creating a collaborative feel with the DOP and the rest of the crew. When I set out to make *Moving Malcolm*, I wanted to tell a story that I could get off my chest and acknowledge a love for my family. I got that done and learned lessons across the board. Now, I can settle down and reach higher and deeper. Having made a film and gone to festivals and seen the world, I want to compete with the best films. To do that you have to make world class movies and learn everything you can whenever you get the opportunity."

Ratner, who commuted from a regular role on the ABC series *Kingdom Hospital* to the set of *Robson Arms* for a week, says he is not going to quit his day job. He says that while acting is his strong suit, it also helps him to be a better director, if only because he can relate to more than one aspect of production. "I am really lucky that I get to do both," he says. "Some actors think that if they are having a good day everyone is having a good day. But what is really happening is that everyone has their own agenda. I have learned how you can give a performance that can be better with editing. I learned a lot of things this week and I think that has to do with the fact that we have really good leadership here on Robson Arms. They give a lot of good advice."

Gary Harvey's advice to *Cold Squad* assistant director Furukawa was to try out for a directing spot on *Robson Arms*. Furukawa, who had already been hired as assistant director for the show, followed through and can now apply the years he has spent as an

a.d. on first and second unit on shows like *The X-Files*, *Lonesome Dove - The Series* and *Smallville* to a *Robson Arms* episode entitled *The Eyes of Grandma Tan*.

"This is a fabulous opportunity," he says. "I am the assistant director for the first 12 episodes and then I get to direct the last one. Doing that has allowed me to see all the char-

director would be a good director. "I believe that 'assistant director' is a logical place to come from, particularly for a Canadian director because unlike American films, Canadian films are always tied to finances. The Americans come from universities and they will tell you 'don't worry about the budget. Worry about making it

"This is a fabulous opportunity, I am the assistant director for the first 12 episodes and then I get to direct the last one. ... I have the advantage of being on the floor and seeing where we are successful. That allows me to understand the logistics and see if one thing can be made easier if I make a particular choice." - Jason Furukawa

acters develop from start to finish and see the storylines and how they intertwine. I have the advantage of being on the floor and seeing where we are successful. That allows me to understand the logistics and see if one thing can be made easier if I make a particular choice. It definitely has its advantages. Watching Gary's establishing show and seeing what is in his mind in terms of the broad scope of the show was particularly educational. The only hard part is stifling my anticipation for directing my own episode."

While Ratner came from acting and most American directors come from educational institutions, Furukawa feels that it just makes sense that a good assistant

look big because they will never hire you again if you don't.' In Canada, the money is always important and it's important to know what your boundaries are. Working with people like Gary who are always aware of the time that is being spent, you learn the styles that are needed to get the best look for the money. When I am standing beside (Canadian directors) I feel their stress and I understand how those moments of brilliance can come from times when they compromise without giving up what they were intending to get. I consider myself to have been very lucky to have learned this craft by working beside the best people from the US and Canada."

As for making the move to directing, Furukawa says he has always just assumed that the best way of making a living was to be an assistant director. He says that the alternative, in Canada at least, is to create your own movies from the ground up. At this point in his life, that is not an option. "It is hard to forget about my family and my mortgage and to spend all my money on making a film. I just see it (assistant directing) as my place in life. If I don't get to be a fulltime director for years to come I can accept that. I want a goal that won't allow me to compromise the other things in my life."

Although it would appear that Canadian comedy has suffered from a funny bone drain to the U.S., Gary Harvey thinks that if there has been a dearth of popular comedy series in Canada it has more to do with the people who have stayed behind than the fact that so many comedians have left. "I think that those of us who have stayed in Canada have tried too hard to make comedy work," he says. "The truth of comedy is that humour should always come out of relatable situations and out of life. One of the great things about this show is that it is funny because it is about life and all its absurdities. You don't have to make jokes. It is the serious things in life that are the most interesting, and that is what is making this show funny for me. We have told the directors 'let the scripts do the work. This is not a sitcom. The humour will come from the scripts. Sometimes the scripts will be a little sad. You don't have to hammer in the points that are already made for you. You don't need to work that hard.'"