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900 minutes live with Peter Gzowski and friends

While the jury is still out on the merits of CBC's late night talk show, 90 Minutes Live with Peter Gzowski, Excalibur editor Michael Hollett ventured downtown to spend a day behind the scenes with the people who make the show. What follows is his report.

By MICHAEL HOLLETT

It takes 900 minutes, over a hundred cups of coffee and a little help from Captain Fantastic to put together CBC's late night talk show, 90 Minutes Live with Peter Gzowski.

Although 90 Minutes is noted for its cross-Canada format Toronto is the headquarters for the show's production and the majority of the staff spend all their time operating out of the CBC's Bay Street offices.

The staff put in an intense 13-hour day to produce what is certainly the most am-

bitious, if not yet the best, program ever attempted by the CBC.

Starting around 10:30 in the morning, staff members roll in to begin a pressure-packed day that will not end for many of them until after 2 am, long after the test patterns have hit the screens.

At 11 o'clock, the bulk of the production staff gather for their first meeting to discuss the schedule for the rest of the day. A printed line-up is distributed with an hour-by-hour outline of the days activities as well as a rough script for the night's show. Guests are Chuck Berry, Jean-Luc Ponty, science popularizer David Suzuki, psychiatrist-cop, Harry Schlossberg and the author of Rush to Judgement by Mark Lane.

Schlossberg will speak on mentality of hostage takers while Lane will defend his theory that John F. Kennedy's and Martin Luther King's assassinations were parts of

conspiracies covered-up by the FBI and CIA.

Someone says its going to be a bloody show.

After a very general discussion of what should happen on the show, executive producer, Alex Frame gives the staff what is to be the first of the day's good news. The ratings are up. Over 600,000 people at night are watching the show while 1.25 million people tune in at least once a week.

TRACKING GUESTS

With this news its back to the main office, to pick through magazines, track down guests over the phone and basically rush around to get ready for the show that is now only ten hours away.

There is little clear job distinction bet-

ween the office staff. They are loosely divided up into the current affairs department, variety, advanced booking and research but people are continually crossing into each others work area.

While some staff work to prepare for tonight's show others are digging through magazines, books, whatever, to find guests for upcoming programs.

To prepare for tonight's show, a number of writers are writing 'greens' on the guests. A 'green' is a brief biographical and informational summary of each guest which Gzowski, the executive producer and the senior producer will read to determine what approach to take with each guest.

90 Minutes Live's executive producer, Alex Frame, is busy in his office, but we managed to talk for a few minutes.

Frame has been with Gzowski since he produced the CBC radio hit, *This Country in the Morning*.

Wearing dress pants and a faded Los Angeles Kings hockey sweater, Frame discussed the philosophy of the show. "We try to give viewers some slightly sophisticated information that's as entertaining as possible."

Frame says that although the format of 90 Minutes is similar to that of Johnny Carson, the show has a different emphasis. "We try to give our viewers a solid alternative to our competitors as opposed to a pale imitation. The most serious thing on the Carson show would be something like a baby doctor, for us that would just be a feature," said Frame.

ENTIRE SETS

Frame also said that the variety guests are given more freedom on 90 Minutes Live than on other shows. While a singer might do one song on the Carson show, on 90 Minutes they would do an entire set.

Frame does not see the program as playing an evangelical, save-Canada role. "The job of a program like ours is not to propagandize. Our job is more journalistic, it is a job to reflect the country. We try to give a sense of who is saying what in Canada about the country."

Discussing 90 Minutes' cross-Canada format, Frame said, "We show that you

don't have to be living in a major centre to be able to say something interesting. This also helps make us aware of the rest of the country."

Frame explained the approach to the regional shows, "We try to give the flavour of the place without the show being totally about it. The show must have a solid representation of people from the area we are doing the show in."

Frame said the cross-Canada format created difficulties for the variety department. "A lot of people aren't keen about doing the show out in Halifax or Newfoundland".

NEWFOUNDLAND

Frame said the show had a rough start. "Our sense of the show was pretty amorphous. The show had a certain inconsistency in the beginning but its coming along fine now. Any show of this size takes at least a season to develop. Shows that stop developing die."

What does he think of the show's live format? "It gives you a buzz. The fact that the show is live, that all energy is directed to one particular 90 Minutes generates a certain electricity. You know that whatever event is taking place will be broadcast".

Because of Canada's various time zones, the only part of the country to actually see 90 Minutes Live, live is the Maritimes. The rest of the country sees the show on a delayed broadcast. However, according to Frame nothing is edited before the show is re-broadcast. He said there are no facilities at the studio to tamper with the tape. "We could only stop something from going on the air by not running the entire show".

As we speak the office door next to Frame's is closed, however, the familiar sounds of a pinball machine being played can be heard coming from within. There is a sticker stuck upside-down on the door that says "Thank God I'm Polish". Finally it swings open and out flies Gzowski. He is a big man, taller than he seems on television though his posture is stooped. He looks more like the journalist he once was rather than Canada's late night tv hope. Notes and a book stick out of his pocket as he heads for the coffee machine. He pours himself a cup and paces the room intensely. He then disappears back into the office for another game of Captain Fantastic, the pinball machine the staff keeps in his office. We won't be able to speak to each other until later tonight.

PINBALL WITHIN

At four o'clock many of the staff head home for a few hours to shower and rest before this evening's push to showtime.

Gzowski, Frame and the treatment editor meet in Frame's office to study the 'greens' the staff have been preparing all day. They will decide the type of questions Gzowski will ask each guest and which way to direct the conversation.

By this time 90 Minutes Live's technical crew have already started to set up at CBC studio four at Yonge and Sumnerhill. The studio is surprisingly small. It seats no more than 150 people.

The first business for the crew is the rehearsal of the Jean-Luc Ponty Band. The Ponty Band run through their set about six times before everyone is satisfied with the sound, timing and positioning of the cameras.

After a meal break, Chuck Berry sweeps into the studio. Berry is notorious for being hard to work with and tonight is no exception. He refuses to rehearse with the camera people and will not sing until the show. After a brief warm-up with the band Berry disappears.

After five minutes he's back, this time to put the band through an intensive warmup. He makes them practise one song for 45 minutes. Berry will have the last laugh on the band when he drops the song from the show once they're on the air.

With Berry and the band churning away, Gzowski makes his first appearance in the studio. Gzowski's calmer now, but he looks like he has already been through six shows. His hair is a mess and his shirt hangs open to the navel. He still manages to joke with the staff before disappearing to his dressing room for makeup.

While the crew make last minute checks and changes to the lighting, Programming Organizer, Nancy Oliver tells me, "Gzowski and Alex (Frame) are very nice people to work with. You're glad when things go well for Peter because you helped."

LIVE ENERGY

Oliver says many of the staff are new to live TV. She likes being live and she too mentions an "energy" that makes it special.

Oliver also likes the fact that the show goes on the road. "The small places are really nice. The audiences are great out of town, the people seems to live us."

At this point, the crew go through the final rehearsal. The office staff of the show act as stand-ins for the guests and go through an abbreviated run through of the entrances and exits.

At 9:30, with only an hour to airtime, the "notes meeting" is held. The various writers, directors, editors and staff gather in a loft office over the studio to go through the final run down of the show. CBC current affairs chief, Peter Herndorf, one of the key people in getting 90 Minutes on the air, is at the meeting tonight. Gzowski ambles in singing "My Ding-a-Ling" and the meeting begins.

Its decided that they will stick to the original script that was handed out earlier this morning. No one is sure what to expect from Berry but people seem confident about the show.

Herndorf speaks and he's brought the staff good news, the CBC has decided to renew the show.

Says Gzowski, "You mean I can sign the lease".

After the meeting Herndorf tells me he's happy with the "major" aspects of the show but that they are going to work on improving the current affairs department. Herndorf says, "We have to make the bad nights very rare. We are still judging the show by nights instead of by weeks and months".

In the studio, the audience is already being brought in. With only half an hour to air time, floor director Joan Mead and the rest of the crew are surprisingly calm.

At 10:15, warm-up man Allan Gordon comes and tells the crowd a few bad jokes. Perhaps his most important bit of news is that it will be almost impossible for any one in the audience to go to the bathroom once the show starts.

At 10:34 Joan Mead starts the count-down, the crew get ready, the Jack Lenz band strikes up the theme and then the opening credits roll on the monitors and on tv screens across the Maritimes.

Things go well tonight. The guests are interesting and the music side of the show is especially strong. Even Chuck Berry behaves himself.

If you have wondered what Gzowski does during commercial breaks, he generally doesn't make small talk with the guests. He gets up, stretches his legs and has a quick smoke. Sometimes the little, bowler wearing cue card holder runs up to Gzowski to let him get a closer look at the cues.

COUNT DOWN

Berry brings the show to a resounding finish with an extended version of one of his many songs that sounds like most of his many songs.

After the show the staff and guests head for the Green room, to 'mingle' and a grab a drink or two to gear down from the show.

I manage to grab Gzowski who agrees to answer a few questions though he feels obligated to get back to his guests as soon as possible. After pouring himself a big Scotch we head for his dressing room.

Gzowski says he enjoys making the show though he finds it very different from his work on *This Country in the Morning*. "This Country in the Morning did not spring full blown when it came on the air and I took a long time to develop. TV is no more and no less severe. My background and training was in print. Learning radio took a long time and learning TV is taking the same amount of time."

But Gzowski is happy with the show's recent progress. "I think I have come a long way. We are finally getting a feeling of what the show should be and how I can be used."

"It doesn't mean we're there but we have found a level", he said. Gzowski says he doesn't have any favourite type of guest but, "I'm not good with glib and sleazy people who occasionally cross our way".

With that it is back to the green room and the hard work of relaxing after having spent an entire day on the crest of an adrenalin wave. It seems that for most of the staff, its almost as hard to gear down after the show as it is to make it.



Donna Mobbs photo

Peter Gzowski relaxing in the early going as he prepares for 90 Minutes Live.

Exotic pets bought for selfish reasons, many species coming close to extinction

By MAXINE KOPEL

Where do you turn to if you want to buy a pet oselot or a woolie monkey but you don't know the first thing about their feeding or exercise habits?

You could bone up on your Funk and Wagnell's or you could seek information from the Endangered Animals Sanctuary.

The four year old society is dedicated to the betterment and preservation of exotic endangered species. Jason Titlebaum, a faculty of science student at York and an active member of the organization, feels that too many people innocently buy exotic pets with too little information about them.

SELFISH STATUS

"You can't control the amount of people buying exotic pets. Either they have a genuine interest in animals or it's a selfish way of establishing status," he said. Titlebaum explained that many such animals require extensive care that their masters are unaware of. For example, the rare woolie monkey has respiratory problems in cold weather.

"People have a strange conception of animals. They think that when an animal gets sick it will get better like a human with a cold. So they wait and wait and finally go to a vet, and the animal dies," Titlebaum maintains.

The central theme of the FAS, according to Titlebaum is that "every animal species has the right to live in co-existence with mankind, free from the threat of senseless persecution, cruelty, and eventual an-

ihilation. There are a lot of animals just going. I have no idea where or how or why. "We're not a group of bleeding hearts. We're concerned with helping endangered species. We're concerned with what's happening."

The Sanctuary plans to breed animals and supply zoos with these offspring so they won't have to import animals. According to a pamphlet distributed by the society, 931 mammals and 650 birds are on the endangered list, among the many reptiles and fish that accompany them. "People are ignoring the leopard and cougar, which are on the list," explained Titlebaum. "The number of animal species on the endangered list is high, but the list is growing at an unbelievable rate."

ANIMALS HAVE MOODS

Titlebaum, and cohorts from the Sanctuary introduced some of the society's exotic animals to students in bear pit last Friday to kindle a new awareness to many students concerning these animals. "You must be aware of the moods of different types of animals. Suzi (the woolie monkey the society owns) associates going into her cage with being upset. Woolies are one of the more intelligent primates.

"Animals think, see and reason. Our macaw parrot, John, speaks. When too many people are around, he will say 'fuck off'. He will call whoever he wants. If you ask him to make pretty, he will put up his wings to show you. He also wrestles. Titlebaum continued to explain work

done with monkeys. "They can learn sign language. We can communicate with monkeys, killer whales, and porpoises. The intelligence of the monkey is close to the intelligence of the human".

JUNGLE ZOO

The society concerns itself with the welfare of mistreated animals, and has a vet who takes care of any sick animals, free of charge. One situation that plagued the members of the society was a case in the Jungle Zoo at Barrie, in which two lions were kept somewhere else and became ill. "We checked it out and were sent away. I don't know why. How can such things happen? We told the Humane Society, but they didn't do much. They said the lions were OK. When we saw them, they were sick."

The Sanctuary is not legally capable of caring for native species, such as Canada geese. "We legally are not allowed to care for native species. We can prevent people from doing a way with them".

The sanctuary currently cares for 40 animals of 26 species. Although a mini sanctuary now exists, they hope to obtain money to buy land. So far, two cities have been eyed for the bigger sanctuary, one near Belleville, and other unknown. "It doesn't matter where it is," said Titlebaum, "but we'd like to keep it in Canada."

The sanctuary relies mainly on donations, which is causing its members

some headaches. "It costs \$250 a week to feed the cats," claimed Titlebaum. The Age of Aquarius pet shop is practically feeding the animals.

We're hoping to convince one of the political parties to help out. We're non-political but reality dictates that we must get something from someone."

The sanctuary is not like a zoo, which has some of the same exotic animals as the sanctuary. Says Titlebaum, "the zoo pleases an audience, and is not dedicated for the preservation of endangered species. Every zoo has too many African lions. They're used to people. Some are sent back home, and go into the villages. Then they're shot."

LACK OF COMMUNICATION

Titlebaum, who has worked and currently owns 4 reptiles, two turtles, an iguana, and 8 aquariums of fish, is not upset with people buying fur coats. "It's ignorance. They're not able to interact with animals. They have no idea what it's like to communicate with animals... Dogs and cats are the only animals most people have contact with."

Most of the animals the sanctuary houses were sick or endangered before being turned over to the sanctuary. Some of these animals include bleeding red-eared sliders (which are not imported due to an illness they carry. The ones that were given to the sanctuary were the only living ones left in Canada and had poor masters.



90 Minutes Live crew member during final rehearsal before air time.