

# 90210 with brains

The Producer of *Madison* talks about the show and what it takes to be a success in the Canadian entertainment industry

BY SOPHIA MAXWELL

Mickey Rogers, one of the Executive Producers of the Canadian teen drama *Madison*, was in town recently to participate in a seminar entitled "The Big Launch" as part of the Atlantic Film Festival's Industry Series. Rogers spoke of her experiences during the creation and airing of *Madison*.

The show is now in its third season and is set in Vancouver. The story lines revolve around a core of ten teens from varying backgrounds. It has been described as a "Beverly Hills 90210, with brains". This season the show is moving more towards character-driven story lines, rather than the "issue of the week" approach used in the past seasons. Topics which will be explored include: teen pregnancy and marriage, substance abuse, quitting school, facing a parent's mortality, the search for identity and, of course, dealing with friendships, betrayals, and new loves.

Realism is one of the main elements that distinguishes *Madison* from some of its more vapid counterparts. The writers and producers get story line ideas from the show's young cast as well as from research with teenagers. The music of local alternative bands is featured wherever possible. This season will include musical contributions from Deep Julia, Daytona (the band responsible for

the show's catchy main title song), Molly's Revenge, DBS, Cinnamon, DJ Lace, Perfume Tree, Knock Down Ginger, Marc La France, Adrenaline, Daisy Chain, Stick Monday and Taste of Joy.

Rogers is one of four women who head up *Madison's* production company, Forefront Entertainment Group. The firm's mandate is to make "entertainment that matters." Formed in 1989, the company's first projects were documentaries, but while interviewing for these documentaries, they learned that teens preferred to watch educational programming which was in a drama format. What evolved from this process was the original episode of *Madison*.

Eventually, after raising the funds themselves to get the first six episodes produced, Forefront was able to sell the show to CanWest Global. *Madison* has now won 25 international awards and is seen in 65 countries. Galvanized by the success of the show, Forefront now has a development department and a releasing arm, focused on creating and distributing high quality family and adult-oriented dramas. They are one of the few distributors of dramatic television based in Western Canada.

Mickey Rogers is the head of Forefront Releasing. She works with producers helping provide market research, assisting in promotion and packaging of productions and selling the shows

worldwide. While she was in town for the Festival she made time to speak to the *Gazette*.

**Gaz:** For those *Gazette* readers who are not already avid fans of *Madison*, could you please explain why university students as opposed to high school students would enjoy the show?

**Mickey:** Because our actors grapple with issues that are a little more universal than just "teenage" issues. For instance, we deal with someone getting pregnant — I think that happens in university. And the story from this season about the "good" girl who gets involved with a guy who's living on the edge, and her efforts to change him, or about the young woman who used to be kind of a wallflower and now becomes involved with two guys... Young people can all relate to that. Also, as this season progresses, the characters are getting out of high school and they're starting to deal with employment and going to university.

**Gaz:** The cast of the show is all between the ages of 19-25. Since *Madison* is promoted as being so "true to life" shouldn't the cast members be in their teens and not their twenties? Why does it always seem that shows about teenagers have a cast that is invariably in their twenties?

**Mickey:** I think there are two reasons actually. Sometimes people who are 14 or 15 aren't ready to carry a show — they don't



have enough experience. I think that the teenage audience is very discriminating, and they want to see people who can carry their stories well. Our cast contributes to the story ideas as well, and it's not like they're that far away from being 17 or 18 themselves.

**Gaz:** What are the best parts of being a producer?

**Mickey:** Travelling, meeting people and selling — I like that a lot. I also enjoy doing public speaking and talking to people about ideas, and about possible ways that we could make a show work for them. And I also like negotiating deals.

**Gaz:** Least favourite?

**Mickey:** I don't like going over contracts over and over and over again.

**Gaz:** What are some of the qualities which a successful Canadian producer of film and television projects must have?

**Mickey:** A good sense of humour, flexibility... A passion for the works they create, and an

openness to what they need to do to make it happen and the ability to get along well with people — you have to deal with a lot of people, on all kinds of levels.

**Gaz:** Do you have any advice for aspiring producers who might be reading this?

**Mickey:** The great thing about this business is that you can enter at any time. A lot of producers are lawyers, a lot have come out of the creative process, and many others have come out of all walks of life... It's ideal to work up the ladder and know all aspects of production, but that isn't always the case. It's a question of whether you have a passion for getting things on the air, and that you can raise and handle the money needed to accomplish this goal, as well as having a really creative vision of what you want to do.

*Madison* can be seen on Tuesdays at 8:30 p.m. on ATV.

# The sounds of pocket change

Three Penny Opera  
Oasis Bar & Grill

If you are getting sick and tired of the Halifax Alterno-pop-ear-candy scene, then you should have been at the Oasis Bar & Grill this past Saturday night. If you were anywhere else, you missed Halifax's real alternative music.

We are not the types to chuck around that over-used 'A' word, since it is now equivalent to 'mainstream'. However, the purely original sound Mike Clark

(bass), Kameron Abdi (guitar), Steve Reble (drums), Andrew Reeser (percussion) and Mercel (keyboards) create is beyond categorization — hence alternative in the true sense of the word. Trust us, even the band members have difficulty labelling their music.

But forget the labels. A crowd of over 300 packed the small back room at the Oasis and flooded the dance floor as soon as Three Penny Opera took the stage. With all the bouncing around, the place

turned into a sweathouse in just minutes. But this wasn't the kind of dancing that could send you to the hospital, it was refreshingly low-key. Three Penny Opera changed a bar with Video Lotto as it's main attraction into a fun place to be. Their two 45 minute sets were divided by a half hour trip-hop/house showcase from Michel Deveau which kept the crowd energized.

Formed around this time last year, Three Penny Opera played open-mic night (Grawood) several times before graduating to the bar scene. Although their members are not cast in stone, they continued playing in various forms throughout the summer.



Being lowly and feeble arts editors we have no business trying to categorize their music. However, with many apologies to the guys in the band (who we are, no doubt, about to mortally offend) we would describe it as a groovy jazz/funk, kind of sort of thing...maybe?

Regardless, it's good music, and when they put on a show, it's a hell of a good time. Look for Three Penny Opera at the Birdland Cabaret on October 24, and who knows, possibly somewhere else before then.

BY ANDREW SIMPSON AND JOHN CULLEN

