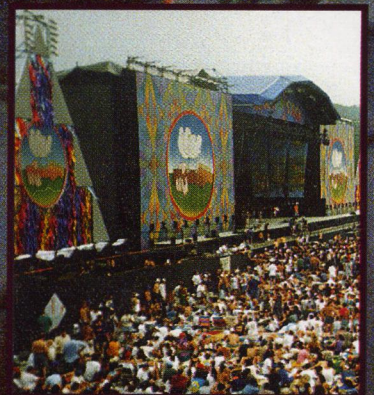


For the Film & Video Professional



**On the Move –
A profile of
Richard A. Stringer csc**

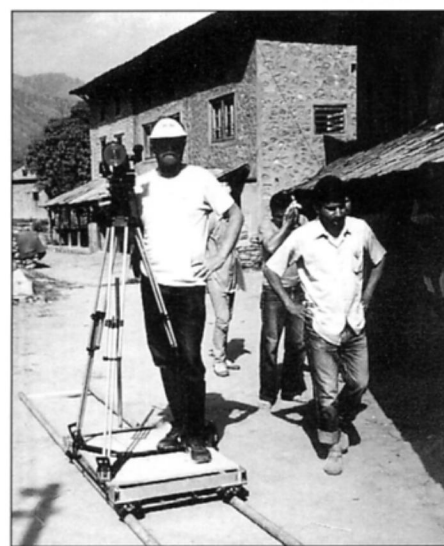
**INSIDE:
Matthew Phillips
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Profile: Richard A. Stringer csc

By Joan Hutton csc



Stringer: On location in Nepal.

Toronto-based Richard Stringer, with nearly 30 years as a director of photography and documentary cinematographer, has been on the move—across Canada and around the world—since he did his first bicycle-mounted, 8mm “doc” on hometown Winnipeg when he was just 13.

In this wide-ranging interview, Stringer talks about his career, challenges and travel adventures.

Hutton: I'll ask you the traditional opening question. How did you get into this business?

Stringer: I was given a camera for a Christmas present in 1957 when I was 13 years old because I was interested in the National Film Board documentaries and I just knew that's what I wanted to do. The first little film I did in 8mm was a tour of Winnipeg. I was on my bicy-

cle and I'd run from one end of town to the other to keep the sequence going right. I just liked the idea. Not too many kids were doing that. Nowadays everybody's doing videos at that age but that was real odd for a kid to be doing back then.

Hutton: So how did you get from there to here?

Stringer: I came to Toronto and went to Ryerson from '64 to '67, although it was mostly a still course then with only a little film training. It got me hands on a bit and I got to play with the gear, although I was basically self-taught. Right out of Ryerson, I did a drama for the University of Manitoba so I got into filming right away. I had also been doing my own little projects, but while I was finishing up a film on The Pan-Am Paraplegic Games in Winnipeg, editing it in Toronto, I got to do the news for CHCH-TV (Hamilton) for a year. Then I went on, basically freelancing and commuting quite a bit between Toronto and Winnipeg. I actually set up a production company out there and that's where I did the bulk of my commercial work.

Hutton: You come from a strong documentary background, so I want to ask whether you feel you have a visual, artistic and intellectual style in documentaries—one style that covers all those three bases?

Stringer: I find documentaries are driven by what's happening around you. You always have to be flexible and ready for anything. A lot of the stuff I've done has been more actuality, like what's going on in a certain situation—the bush pilots in the North, for example. Not many social

issues. I mean, I've done some, like on native housing up North, but most of what you're dealing with is that something is happening and you have to get the coverage out of it. And that's the core of the documentary. You have to think on your feet. You have to put a lot more directing element into it.

Hutton: What goes through your mind when you're doing it? How are you going

“I was given a camera for a Christmas present in 1957 when I was 13 years old because I was interested in the National Film Board documentaries and I just knew that's what I wanted to do.”

to shoot it? What have you just done? What's coming next? How do you plan

Stringer: That's the interesting part about filmmaking. There are so many different levels of logistics going on at the same time. It's pretty instinctive. You shoot something, you come back to the editing room and you know, 'Oh, I should have done that.' There's automatic learning going on all the time. That's why film is a good medium to work in. I shoot video now and nobody really sits down and looks at the rushes and analyses them. There's not as much of that discipline of looking at the material and working on it as you're going through, how the scenes are put together and what train of thought you need. I work with a lot of directors who need that kind of help from my end: 'Well you'd better get a cutaway of this,' simple, fundamental things. One thing I try



Stringer and Panavision.

to look for is something around the scene that is an essence of it, something that can really tell the story and is a good cutaway as well. So you're always looking for the angles, something that can be an integral part of what you're trying to say in that particular location.

Hutton: Do you ever picture in your mind what you're going to do, and then you get there and realize what you can do as opposed to what you want to do?

Stringer: Exactly. But that helps keep up the energy you know. You're always striving for something, keeping up your interest. The National Film Board tended to shoot too much and you lose your initiative and your energy, because you don't know if they are going to use this sequence or what. Those kind of shoots are a little frustrating.

Hutton: Let me ask you about Expo 88 in Brisbane, Australia. You designed the special three-camera mount for the 35-mm movie at the Canadian pavilion,

called *Canada—Another Government Movie*.

Stringer: That was one of the biggest jobs I've done because of the 100 days of shooting across Canada. It was for a 15-minute, five-screen show in Brisbane, and it was adapted for showing at Seville's Expo 92. It was a kind of funny look at Canada, making slight fun of itself. As for the mount, we decided we had certain sequences where we wanted to see the motion come through differ-

"One thing I try to look for is something around the scene that is an essence of it, something that can really tell the story and is a good cutaway as well."

ent screens. We had no budget and no time, but I had this platform made up that had a main shaft on the bottom, with teeth pulleys that went right on to the inching knob of each camera, and you had to sync them up. The big problem was that we only had three cameras, period; so those cameras could not be dedicated to the mount.

Hutton: The mount was built so you could turn the three cameras on and off at exactly the same time and keep them in sync?

Stringer: Yes, for things like the chuck-wagon race sequence. You have the whole thing go through the three screens.

Hutton: So you had the cameras set up so the field of view was just barely overlapping?

Stringer: Yes, just touching. It was as simple as that really. It was far from the perfect 360-degree systems which have the same nodal point. You had to line up according to distance. Naturally, if you had somebody up close they wouldn't match somebody you had far away. But everything was around 30 or 40 feet away so we were pretty safe.

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Stringer Cont. from page 5

There wasn't much precision as to how they were lined up, just little lock nuts. We would put all the cameras on, get them all organized and in sync, and then we'd run about five feet of 36-exposure still film through each camera and develop it. We would use a piece of camera tape for our horizon and some other way of determining where the edges of the frame were. We were going by the viewfinder to a degree, but to get precision you'd have to run these pieces of film and then look at them and see if they were a little off. The mount worked for what we wanted it to do. We couldn't dedicate the cameras; we had to use them for two-camera coverage, maybe two hand-held, maybe one with a zoom.

Hutton: You have a strong documentary background but you have also been involved in drama. What was the hardest thing about the changeover?

Stringer: I guess the bigger lighting setups and dealing with limitations, but, then again, on a low-budget drama you're kind of doing the same thing you do in documentaries. You have to deal with existing situations. If the ambient conditions are a certain way you have to give and take. The operating can be a little more complex—you're on dollies more and stuff—but I've always done a bit of this and that so it wasn't a sudden jump for me. And I think, having all that background, knowing how the whole thing's put together, it makes it easier to advise the director and help sound out, help everybody out.

Hutton: How about travel and location stories?

Stringer: Things happen all the time, like in Bolivia when the springs broke on the truck in the middle of nowhere, but the locals got out an inner tube and fixed it on the spot. And during that Bolivian



Stringer's early introduction to the camera.

shoot, we wanted to get a night shot of people talking in the front seat of a moving truck, but we didn't have a car mount and we knew we couldn't do it from another vehicle. We got away with shooting it static by—to give the impression of reflected street lights passing over the windshield—attaching a light bulb to a stick and whipping it over the top of the truck every so often.

Also, one time we were shooting a night exterior on flat Saskatchewan prairie during the shortest night of the year. There were reports that people thought a UFO had landed.

Hutton: You've done some Arctic shooting, haven't you?

Stringer: Yes, mainly short trips. I took

some footage for Polar Gas, way up near the magnetic North Pole where they were surveying, and then in the Churchill (Man.) area. I found the weirdest element to be the long hours of daylight or lack of daylight. I went up to the Mackenzie Delta once and they had two hours of sunlight so we had to do a lot of lighting up of oil rigs and stuff. I've been up on Victoria Island trying to sleep and it's daylight and the wind is flapping my tent. As for my cameras freezing, my shoots tended to be from a helicopter or a vehicle, and short of the basic principle of keeping the camera in a plastic bag to avoid condensation, there wasn't anything really unique.

One time we were shooting from a helicopter up in northern Manitoba and it



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was so cold that the camera, it was side mounted, wouldn't stay running for very long. We had to arrange a duct system, hastily made from a duffle bag, that took heat from the engine to the camera. The



Stringer(right): dealing with “ambient conditions.”

only problem, I was hot on one side and freezing on the other.

*(Richard Stringer's credits include **Spirit Rider**, a two-hour drama for CBC, PBS and BBC; **Entry in a Diary**, a 35mm feature with Kate Trotter and Michael Burgess; and numerous documentaries and commercials. He has travelled extensively in Canada and overseas, including Bolivia, Hong Kong, The Philippines, Nepal and Thailand. He has followed the Famous People Players through China and filmed the Moscow Circus in Russia.)*

—Edited by Don Angus