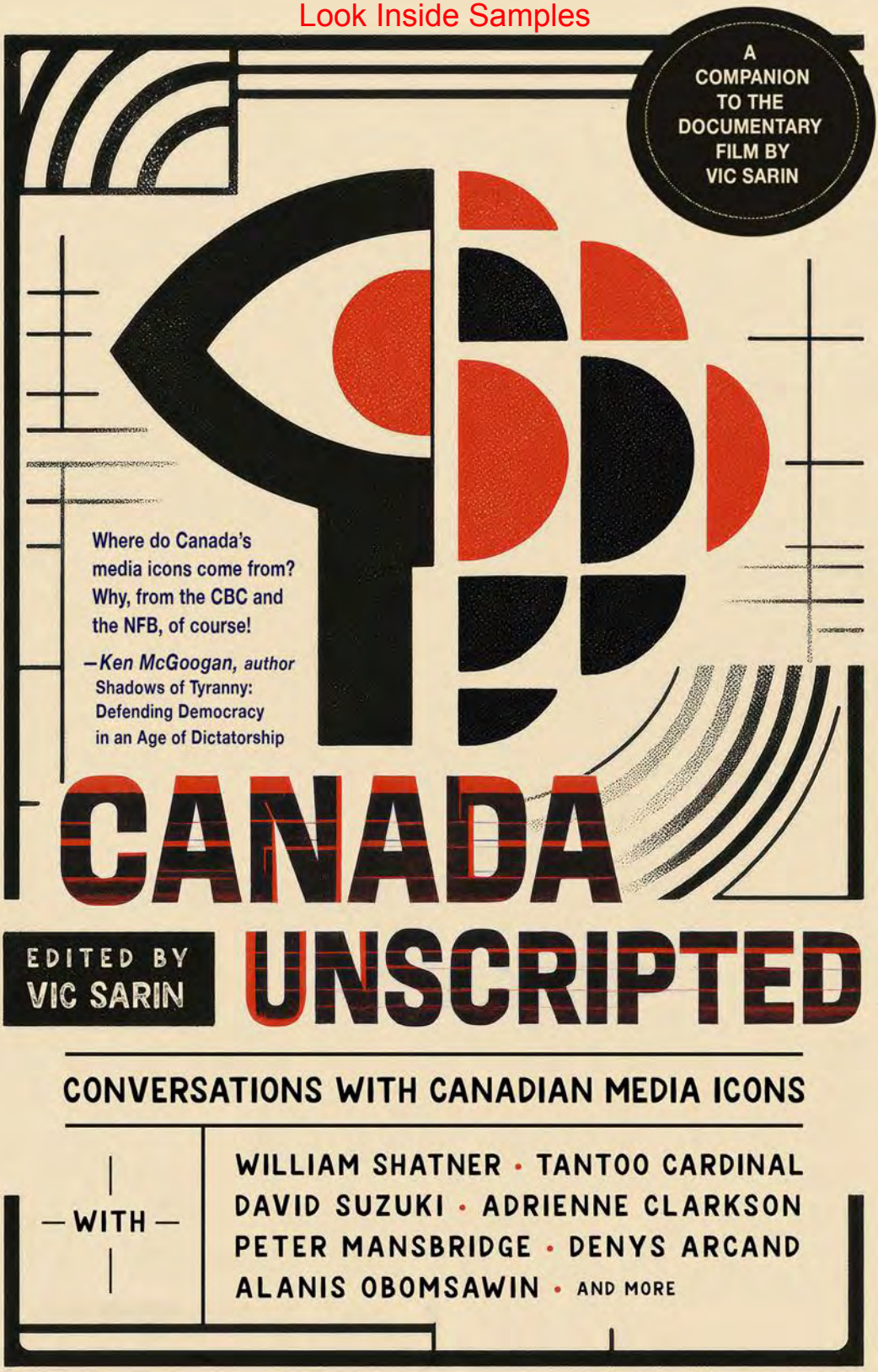

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VIC SARIN

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I hope this project helps
Canadians and newcomers alike
understand how the CBC and NFB
gave us a way to see ourselves,
to hear our own voices,
and to share them
with the world.

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Introduction

VIC SARIN

As I look back on my life, I feel deeply thankful. My journey as a filmmaker has lasted 65 years, and 25 of those years were spent at CBC. It was during my time there that my career truly began to take shape. The CBC opened the door for me, offering not only a job, but an opportunity to learn, to grow, and to work alongside some of Canada's most talented people. Later, I founded Sepia Films in Vancouver, where I continue to focus on telling stories from many parts of the world and working with people from different cultures. But none of that would have happened without the CBC's support in those early years.

At CBC, I was given freedom. Freedom to tell stories. Freedom to experiment. Freedom to work with creative people who cared deeply about their craft. Whether in front of the camera or behind it, I was surrounded by people who helped shape Canadian television and film. The producers, writers, camera crews, editors, and sound people were just as important as the actors we saw on screen. I learned so much from them. Those years built the foundation for everything that followed in my life.

One memory from early in my career has always stayed with me. In 1968, I went on my first CBC assignment around the world. Our first stop was Somalia. As we set up the cameras and equipment, a group of local children gathered around us, curious about who we were. They kept asking, "Where are you from?" I answered, "Canada." Most of them didn't know

where Canada was. Then suddenly, an older boy ran up and shouted, "Film Board! Film Board of Canada!" Even there, so far from home, people knew Canada through the National Film Board. That moment showed me how powerful stories can be. Long before many people had heard of Canada, they had seen its films.

Over the years, I came to know many filmmakers, actors, and artists who had started at the NFB. I admired the way the Film Board gave people room to be creative and try new things. Like CBC, the NFB trusted people to tell Canadian stories their own way. Both organizations believed in developing Canadian voices. They didn't try to copy Hollywood or anyone else. They simply let Canadians be Canadians.

That's why, after so many years, I felt it was time to celebrate these two special institutions. CBC and NFB have helped Canada find its voice. Our country is large, stretching across four and a half time zones, with many languages, cultures, and communities. Yet CBC and NFB helped bring us together. They allowed us to see ourselves reflected on the screen. They helped build our sense of identity.

When I started this project, my first idea was to speak with people I knew — friends and colleagues I had worked with over the years. Many of us worked side by side for decades. We often remember the stars, but behind every program there are countless people whose names you may not know — the writers, directors, camera people, and editors. Without them, none of the shows we love would exist.

But as I moved forward, I realized I needed to go beyond my own circle. The CBC and NFB touched so many lives. I wanted to hear from others, from different generations and different experiences. To my great joy, many people said yes. They were eager to share their stories, and slowly this project grew into something much larger than I first imagined. Together, these voices form a beautiful portrait of Canadian storytelling.

Originally, I had hoped to begin this work before the Covid pandemic. But like many things in life, plans changed. The pandemic delayed everything, and then I became busy with what would may be my final feature film, *The Lightkeeper*, filmed on location in Ireland. Time moved quickly. Sadly, some people I hoped to include in this project are no longer with us. Their absence is deeply felt. But I am grateful to those who were able to share their memories here.

Ever since I was young, I have loved the power of images. A single photograph or short film can say so much, even without words. No matter where we come from, we all share that same way of seeing. That's what makes film so powerful. I've always followed my heart more than my head. In the end, it's the emotion that matter, not the technology or special effect, but the feeling that stays with you long after the story is over.

When I think about the moments that last, they are never the big explosions or grand sets. It's always the simple, human scenes that stay in our hearts. I often think of the moment in *E.T.* when the boy touches the alien's finger and softly says, "E.T. go home." That small scene says everything about love and friendship. That is what storytelling is about, reaching the heart.

For me, falling in love with the camera changed my life. It became my guide and my companion. My father helped set me on this path when he gave me a gift for my 16th birthday: a 16mm Bolex camera with two rolls of Kodak film. That camera opened a door that would never close.

True success, for me, is not about money or fame. It is about the experiences: the people I meet, the stories I am able to tell, and the places my camera takes me. Canada gave me the chance to live this life, and for that I will always be grateful.

As I spoke to people for this project, I heard many wonderful stories. Some made me smile. Others touched

me deeply. One story I'll never forget came from Adrienne Clarkson. She told me how she arrived in Ottawa as a child, after World War II. Her family lived on Sussex Drive. Every day she would ride the bus past 1 Sussex Drive — Rideau Hall — never imagining that one day she would live there herself as Canada's 26th Governor General. This is what Canada makes possible.

Another story that stayed with me came from Bob McDonald. He once took Buzz Aldrin, one of the first men to walk on the Moon, sailing on his boat. You might expect a meeting with such a famous man to feel larger than life. But Bob described how simple and ordinary their time was. It reminded me that no matter how great a person's achievements, they are still human. That's the beauty of these stories. They bring our heroes closer to us.

Most of all, I hope this project helps young Canadians and newcomers understand what CBC and NFB have given us. They allowed Canadians to tell their own stories, in their own voices. They helped us learn about our country — its land, its people, and its many cultures. They gave us the gift of seeing ourselves.

When I look back at those early years, I am amazed at what was accomplished with so little technology. There were no computers or digital tools. Yet even with simple equipment, people made programs that were bold, creative, and full of heart. They informed us, entertained us, and brought us together. And they did it without relying on crime, violence, or negativity. Instead, they offered hope, humour, and a strong sense of community.

There was something magical in those early days. People worked with passion. They loved their art, their music, and their storytelling. Even though the world has changed, I believe we still need that spirit today. Too often, modern shows focus on darkness and sadness. But what lasts are the stories that lift us up and remind us of what people can overcome.

This book and documentary film is my way of remembering that time. I hope others will remember too. Programs like *This Hour Has Seven Days*, *22 Minutes*, *Wayne & Shuster*, *For the Record*, *The Friendly Giant*, *Country Canada*, *Man Alive*, *Front Page Challenge*, *Juliette*, *The Fifth Estate*, and *The Nature of Things* — these shows helped shape Canadian broadcasting. They told us who we are.

It has been my great honour to witness these stories, to share in them, and now to help preserve them. My hope is that these stories will continue to inspire future generations of Canadian storytellers, just as they inspired me.

— *Vic Sarin,*
Vancouver, British Columbia,
2025

Look Inside Samples

Chapter 2

TANTOO CARDINAL

Tantoo Cardinal is a trailblazing Métis/Cree actor whose work has opened doors for Indigenous voices in film and television. Raised in Anzac, Alberta, her memorable performances in Dances with Wolves, Legends of the Fall, Falls Around Her, North of 60, *and* Killers of the Flower Moon *have touched audiences around the world. Through each role, she honours the stories of resilience and belonging that have shaped her life and career.*

VIC SARIN: Tantoo, I want to say how grateful I am to you for giving me this time. I've followed your career for so long—

TANTOO CARDINAL: It's an honour for me too. Thank you.

VIC: When you get older, like me, it's often hard to bring back the memories. You remember the feeling, but not the details. Looking at you, everything's coming back. Our time working on *Loyalties*... it wasn't just about the film.

TANTOO: Yes, funny thing. *Loyalties* was shot right in my home territory. And now, my school is there too, just outside of Lac La Biche. About a half hour away, I've established my school—Taproot.

VIC: So you're still deeply connected with Alberta?

TANTOO: More so now than ever. I hadn't really been rooted anywhere for a long time. But I went back to where I was born—Fort McMurray. I'd grown up around there. When I turned 30, I returned, and everything was gone. Every place I'd lived had been erased, taken over by the oil sands and the industry. That was a kind of severance from my home territory. So, I began a practice of connecting with the earth, wherever I was. Wherever I lived, wherever I worked, I made that connection. Because the place I came from was gone.

You were talking about getting older... well, I think it depends on how you define it. When I got into my 50s, I started thinking about those old

dreams again. The ones that never really go away, even after being told time and again, "That's hopeless. Just forget it." No matter how many times I threw those dreams into the pile of "forget about it," they kept coming back.

And that's how I ended up establishing the school. It was something that started inside me back in the '70s, and it's only recently come to fruition. We're starting our fifth year now. It took a long time. And it changed forms in my imagination many times. But when I finally launched it, I wanted it to be something really organic. I wanted it to move with the community, at the pace of the people. That's why I named the school "Taproot," because I wanted people to have the dialogue, the language, to remember our roots—to connect with the energy in those roots, the life, the juice that's still there.

I come from territory where they knew about the oil under the land back in the 1700s. That's how long they've known. And to get at that wealth, they had to put the people to sleep. There's so much in our world that pushes us to look outside of ourselves, to measure ourselves against something external. But that's what CBC did for Canada—it brought everything into one place. As a public broadcaster, the projects, the images, the stories, they included Indigenous voices. A lot.

I remember seeing those early NFB films, and the CBC stories too. Gordon Pinsent, for example—his work was so powerful. Because he insisted on being who he was, from where he came from. Just like Chief Dan George. And even watching the Olympics—when you see the Canadian coverage, you'll hear so many accents. People are still connected to who they are. Not diluted. Not flattened into some generic "Pan-American" thing. That's what CBC, and especially CBC Radio, gave me. It grounded me in our own thoughts, our own stories, our own perspectives.

VIC: Because art has its own international language, it creates a shared rhythm, a shared melody, instead of keeping people separate.

TANTOO: I do believe that. For me, the analogy is that the language of the whales, the water, and the wind is found in the arts. Art can express what words struggle to say. It can spark thoughts, images, feelings, and even decisions without uttering a word. It touches both the participant and the observer in ways that language often cannot.

VIC: What fascinated you when you were young?

TANTOO: When I was young, we didn't have television. We had radio. I remember the Alberta school broadcasts, though I'm not sure if that's what they were called. My uncle would run home from school to turn on the radio

for the stories. That's how we got them. But my stories mostly came from the people who visited our house. When people gathered, they shared stories, in Cree, Dene, English, and sometimes this beautiful mixture with French. I grew up hearing all kinds of languages. I think that helped me become open to different sounds, different cultures. I'd imagine where people came from, who they were.

I was raised by my grandparents until I was about ten. Then it was just my grandmother. Listening to CBC Radio reminded me of those voices I was missing—those visitors from different places. You'd hear about where they came from, what people were doing down the railroad or across the land. There were stories full of character, politics, survival, and humour. It opened your mind beyond our small community. And I remember the National Film Board, too. I think they were the ones who did forestry films—forest fire prevention. They used to show them in schools and community halls. You'd get a short, a feature, and sometimes they'd bring films right into the classroom.

VIC: The Film Board helped filmmakers say what they wanted to say. I worked with many of them—Claude Jutra, Gilles Carle, John Brunton—all trained by the Film Board. It was a place to develop documentary talent.

TANTOO: Yes, I remember those short films. They'd bring them into the schools. One that stayed with me was about fiddlers: one from Quebec, one from Ontario. Real old-style fiddlers. The film followed them as they played tunes that had been forgotten in Ireland. The filmmakers took them to Ireland, where their playing helped Irish fiddlers rediscover those lost melodies. The contrast was amazing—the difference in style, how they finished a tune. And the Métis fiddlers from the North had such a ragged flourish, a raw, funky style. I felt this surge of pride watching it.

There's always been this loneliness in me, seeing what we had in the '50s—so deeply connected to the '40s, '30s, '20s—just disappear. That film was a kind of solace. It showed that someone had seen it. That it existed somewhere, even if we couldn't replicate it. These were people raised by the bush, on the land. In that kind of life, you depend on one another for everything—survival, food, company. Nobody's a stranger. Some early radio and film captured that feeling because it was still close to the roots of who we are.

VIC: Do you remember the first actual films you ever saw?

TANTOO: Yes. *Going Down the Road* and *Don't Let the Angels Fall*. I remember Gordon Pinsent most of all. And there was a series—I think it was *Wojeck*. It had an episode on heroin addiction that hit me hard. It told the

truth. I've always been grateful for work like that. Because when we grew up, we knew those people. We spoke that language. So why hide it? Why dress it up or water it down? Truth is essential. It's how you move forward. Lies just muck up the path.

VIC: When did you first feel like you wanted to be part of this magic?

TANTOO: I remember hearing Cree in a movie—*The Sheriff of Fractured Jaw*—some old black-and-white Western. It was shocking. Then I saw another film with Cree code talkers. That inspired me.

But more often, I saw non-Indigenous actors playing Indigenous roles. I didn't know how the industry worked, but I knew who I was. Audrey Hepburn—so beautiful and talented, but she wasn't Indigenous, and no one seemed to care. Rita Moreno played Indigenous roles for years... badly. And when the industry finally shifted toward authenticity, suddenly there was no room for us. All the layered, complex roles dried up.

When I started out, my characters often didn't even have names. So, I filled them out myself—with my name, my story, my philosophy. There was no place for Indigenous women in film or in Canadian history. Our existence was hidden. But through it all, there were these little cracks in the wall—people who wanted to tell the truth. Some had grown up near Indigenous communities. Some were just seekers. Whatever their reasons, they wanted to start telling real stories—and including us.

VIC: I completely agree. Honesty is the most important thing in life. Do you feel the CBC or the Film Board helped move things toward more honest portrayals of Indigenous Peoples?

TANTOO: Over time, yes. Sometimes consciously, sometimes just through cause and circumstance. In Canada, I think our Indigenous voice has had a stronger platform than in other places.

In the U.S., the Black voice became powerful. In Canada, it's the Indigenous voice. That's one of our great differences—and responsibilities. Our people did a lot of educating, whether anyone was ready or not. There were leaders like Harold Cardinal and John Tootoosis. Parents who hid their kids so they wouldn't be taken to residential school. Those children preserved knowledge, and now they're feeding it back into the culture. Despite the attempted genocide, some of that wisdom has survived because of persistence, resistance, and allies.

I know I wouldn't have made it without allies like Anne and Sharon, who wrote the script for *Loyalties*. That was a long journey. But they knew

they had to tell that story—and that there were actors who could carry it. They weren't looking to cast someone from Juilliard and put war paint on them. That was the go-to back then. I had to do some tough, painful scenes, because I didn't want them to have the excuse, "Well, there are no Native actors."

Whenever I had the chance, I took it. Even if I wasn't ready. I'd work with the team—wardrobe, hair, dialogue—because that was part of my responsibility. And most of the time, there was someone listening. Even if change came slowly... glacially... there was movement. And now we've hit a tipping point. There's so much more material, so many more voices.

VIC: Your recent success in *Killers of the Flower Moon*—do you feel like that film gave you the arc toward truth and honesty that you've always fought for?

TANTOO: It triggered a grief I had buried. That movie brought it all back. I thought we had come further than that. But there was so much ignorance in that film. And then, to be standing on the red carpet afterwards and hearing people say, "Oh, it was like a documentary"—it was horrifying. I've come through the journey of living in the brown world. That era in the film? It was a time of cultural genocide, of atrocity. And to see an Indigenous woman on screen lighting a smudge while this white man—this philanderer, woman-beater, drunk, murderer—just sat there still and serene.... That scene broke me. Because I know how long it took before someone could even light a smudge in their own home with a white man present. That was a real fight. So many people lived through that oppression.

And so there went the opportunity. The chance to tell the real story of what cultural genocide looks like. How it feels. What it does to people. Why so many women are beaten, murdered, and missing. It's not "la la la." It's not a costume drama. It's deep. It's devastating. That film was really, really hard for me. And I'm afraid my grief made me say and do things that weren't very complimentary. But I did the best I could.

VIC: You have to be honest with yourself. That's all that matters. For me, too. Honesty is the most important thing in life.

TANTOO: Just behave accordingly, right?

VIC: What was your first performance? Was it on radio? Stage? Television?

TANTOO: It was a school play in Anzac. That was my first time performing. It was just a Christmas play, but that's where I first discovered how it made me feel. And how natural it was. My teacher, Mr. Ted Walters—an amazing man—wrote the play. It was called "The Other Magi." The story was about

the fourth Magi who never made it to Bethlehem because he was too busy doing good deeds along the way. When he cast the play, he named all the girls for their roles. My name wasn't on the list. Then he started casting the boys. Still nothing. I just sat there, blues hitting hard. I thought, "I'm heading into the bush and never coming back." I was maybe in Grade 7 or 8. Possibly Grade 9. Then he cast the Magi, the lead role. And that was me.

Boom. I was back. I could unpack my emotional suitcase. And that moment informed me, and him, and the community. Everyone in town saw that show. Everyone came out. And a star was born in Anzac. When Mr. Walters registered me in high school, he signed me up for drama. But things changed. In high school, I didn't get cast in anything. I was the kid sitting at the back, observing. I wasn't pushing forward among all those white kids. Then came the school play, *Pygmalion*, and everyone had to have a part. I was one of those who just walked through the scene. So, my dream of becoming an actor went into hibernation. I graduated at 18, and I got my first real role around 20 or 21. It was with the Native Communications Society. That's where I started making 10-minute films, 20-minute films, industrial safety films. I even did a half-hour film on fire prevention. Fire was part of my early life, I guess.

But I had hope. Hope that our stories could be told. Ironically, the first play I ever saw was *Waiting for Godot*. My husband took me to see it in Edmonton when I was very young. And there was something in that play that told me—we have a place in theatre. We can write our own stories.

And come to think of it, the women from the Air Force base near Anzac used to put on skits. Homemade material. So, I'd seen what it looked like to tell your own story, in your own voice. All of that gave me something to hold onto. When I ran into organic racism, and it was everywhere, I just kept pushing through. That was the only way. Keep pushing. Over time, I realized there were places we could meet. Shared spaces. And the people who were open, who recognized our humanity, those were the people who gave us a path. Who saw our perspective, our unique contribution. And thank goodness for them.

VIC: When do you think the door started to open for Indigenous performers to play real characters?

TANTOO: The first time I got a job in mainstream media was with CBC. They did a docudrama on Father Lacombe. They thought he was a hero—this noble figure. But they didn't know the truth of what he meant to my

people—specifically the Métis. They didn't know about the land grabs. The trickery. The betrayal in Saint-Paul-des-Métis. So, there I was, playing a young "Native girl" who believed in Father Lacombe, who revered him. I had to perform that role, even though I knew the deeper truth.

It was hard. I really had to dig deep. I told myself: "There were people who truly believed in him. People who loved the priests." I performed that girl as one of those women—those who had faith, who revered the Church. That was the character I built. I fashioned her after the women I knew who truly believed. It was all shot on film, not in a studio, and everyone was wonderfully supportive. Especially my own people. They were so excited that someone from their world was getting that opportunity, someone representing them. We had Native newspapers back then, and there were articles being written. I still have a spread somewhere—me and Harry Daniels on that film. Someone saved it. It's in my archives.

VIC: Was that film with CBC?

TANTOO: Yes, it was. Jack Emack directed it. It was about Father Lacombe. That was back in 1971, I think. We shot it around Fort Edmonton.

TANTOO: It's time to share it. So much of what I lived through, younger filmmakers don't even know happened. The British mind, as you know, is very thoughtful—everything's pre-considered. I'm the opposite. I just go with a feeling. I don't think everything through. You're like those Métis fiddlers.

VIC: You mentioned your first role. Let's go beyond that. You did *Street Legal,* right?

TANTOO: Yes, I did some *Street Legal*. And I did *Spirit Bay*.

VIC: Ah yes, *Spirit Bay!* What year was that? How did it come about?

TANTOO: Goodness, I have no idea what year. I don't even remember if I auditioned. It might have just come through my agent. I travelled somewhere in the East—was it Manitoulin Island where we shot? It wasn't a Native lead. The kid was good. He was a good actor, but he wasn't Native. And you just live with that. You accept that the work is being done, that the stories are being told, and that things are moving forward. As an actor, you trade in your soul, in your spirit. That's your toolbox. You search through it and find the tools you need for each role.

Honestly, I don't remember the storylines or much about the producers. I mostly remember meeting people from the community. I recall this woman—we shot in her house—and her older daughter had some kind of health issue. That stayed with me. I never really dealt with producers. I

avoided them, to be honest. I had a thing about people who handled money. I preferred to stay away. I let my agent deal with them.

VIC: Looking back now, do you think CBC or the Film Board, or any other Canadian institutions, helped you grow in your career?

TANTOO: Absolutely. Because they created the material. They stepped out and did it. They had a mandate to tell Canadian stories—that was from the CRTC. So, there was a marketplace for it. There was space for me to work and practice my craft. A place to build a career. I was inspired by that era—the '60s and early '70s. The world was waking up. New ideas were bursting through. People were making bold statements.

In our Indigenous communities, people were starting organizations, some with only a Grade 2 education, others highly educated. But all were demanding change. Creating what was needed We have a long history of humanitarianism—people doing what they can to relieve pain, poverty, illness. And we found allies in the South Side communities—people with those same goals. Those alliances happened naturally. They helped us take the next step, then the next, and grow together.

Many of the friends I have today came from that time. Independent filmmakers. My friend Mark Slipp—we built our friendship through his editing suite, back in the "splice it" days. He invited me in, and I learned so much about the industry, about storytelling, just through those friendships, those small kindnesses from technical people.

VIC: Public broadcasting is changing so fast now. Should public broadcasting go back to their cultural mandate? Or just focus on ratings and commercial appeal?

TANTOO: People often say, "The people know best." Especially during elections. And maybe, on some energetic level, that's true. But some thought patterns need to be left behind. Like outtakes—cut them, move on. From where I come from, we don't have a big voting bloc. What I think is valuable probably won't show up in the ratings. So, I can't say it should be about overall popularity.

In any community, it's not the loudest voices that matter most. It's the quiet ones—the ones barely speaking. Those are the people the community turns to when it needs to know: "What do you think? What are you seeing?" I think our industry should work more like that. Like a community. The loud ones—they've got TikTok, they've got platforms. They'll be fine. But the quieter voices—the ones with depth and wisdom—they deserve to be seen

and heard too. Maybe that's the responsibility of those in the industry. Of journalists. You can't be lazy. You have to look deeper.

VIC: Looking back on your life and your career, what came about that you're proud of?

TANTOO: I feel really good about how Indigenous voices are finally being heard and seen across the board. I come from a time when we were voiceless. I remember arriving in the city for high school in 1965—there was nothing in the newspapers about us. Unless it was something negative: "no fixed address," "vagrancy," that kind of thing. Nothing positive. But now, we're everywhere. And yes, the hardships and the legacy of cultural genocide and colonialism are still with us, but so is the incredible resilience. I think of it as the Miracle Clan.

Look at what's happening in Indigenous fashion, in the environmental movement. There's incredible progress. People now understand that we have something to say, and that we have a deep connection with the earth. She speaks through us. She's been speaking through us for a long time, and people are finally starting to listen. There have been changes in the law. We have Indigenous lawyers now. The education system today is nothing like what it was when I first arrived on this planet in this life. And that excites me because the possibilities are limitless.

We're the missing enzyme. When the colonizers began building society, they took inspiration from the Iroquois Confederacy. Both Canada and the U.S. drew on that model. And that's good stuff. But they left out something essential: that the clan mothers decided who the leaders were. The women made the economic decisions. The decisions about the land. The men had their role, but it was the women who provided balance. That wasn't included in the colonial model. And that, I believe, is the root of so much of the sickness in society. We—Indigenous People—are the missing enzyme.

There were filmmakers who fought for us. Documentary filmmakers, all over the place, who insisted on telling stories from our communities. I did a lot of voiceover work with them. Every time I got to narrate something positive about our communities, about the land, it inspired me. It fed my taproot. You need things like that to keep going. Especially when you're burying grief. And sometimes, just when you think you're finally getting somewhere, when there's real possibility, your grief comes back out again.

VIC: What's important to you now?

TANTOO: I still want to act. But I want to act in stories that aren't limited to the worlds I've always been cast in. That means my allies, those writing and directing, will need to think of me in new ways. I'm back where I was when I started out. There was nothing. No roles, no examples, no map. Just this knowing that there was a creative force, a natural force, that had something in mind for me. I feel that again now. I don't know what's next. But I trust that creative force. I feel strong, and I'm finding the places that inspire me again.

For a while, nothing excited me. I was worn out. I didn't want anything to do with the industry anymore. I had to fight my way out of that. It was like a divorce—"Be gone, Beast!" But you save what was nourishing and carry it forward. Now, I'm creating a series—something I've never done before. It's what I want to impart, what I've seen, what I think matters now. And I'm trusting that the right people will come. People with healthy egos. Not the ones who will elbow me out of the way and say, "This is how it should be."

I want a respectful circle of creation. A space where we can do the work in a good way, and the work will be seen for its soul, not just its technical features. My friend Jay Craven, an independent filmmaker, a wonderful old socialist offered me a role. He adapted George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* into a film. Gary Farmer and I had character roles. It was political satire. It was fun. That gave me hope. A new direction. A spark.

I just want people to see me as a human being. Include me in stories that aren't necessarily "Indian stories." When you invite me, you've already invited an Indigenous presence. That's a given. But understand, we're everywhere. There's an Indigenous woman who's been to space. We have astronauts, scientists, divers, pilots. We are underground, underwater, in the air. We are everywhere in society. And I think we've reached a point where we don't need to explain "the Indian" every time.

VIC: This acceptance is happening everywhere now. Not just for Indigenous people, but Black people, Brown people, Asian people—we're becoming one world. What could Canada's national broadcasters—the CBC and the Film Board—do to help with that?

Look Inside Samples

Chapter 7

DENYS ARCAND

Denys Arcand is a cinematic provocateur whose films have stirred minds and sparked debate, both in Canada and abroad. From The Decline of the American Empire *to* The Barbarian Invasions*, Arcand brings a sharp eye to the hypocrisies and hopes of modern life. In this conversation, the Oscar-winning director reflects on his early days at the NFB, the collaborative magic of documentary filmmaking, and the intellectual ferment that shaped Quebec's cultural awakening.*

VIC SARIN: You've done so much extraordinary work, and you've brought Quebec to the forefront of world cinema. People didn't really know much about Quebec before. How did that all begin? Why did you feel it was necessary?

DENYS ARCAND: Oh, I never felt anything was necessary. I just went from day to day, strange as it may seem. I came to the Film Board by chance. I had studied history at university, and they needed someone to make short educational films about history for schools. That's how I got hired—otherwise, they weren't hiring anyone. They were full, and everyone from Halifax to Vancouver wanted to be a filmmaker. At that time, it was the only place in Canada where you could actually make films.

So I got in because I had this specialty in history. I did three medium-length films about historical topics, and from there I just moved from project to project. Honestly, each time it just happened. I had no vision of becoming a feature film director—I was doing documentaries and I was happy doing them. They were fun, and we worked in small crews of four or five people. We had two station wagons, we went everywhere, it was absolutely wonderful.Then, at some point, Jean-Pierre Lefebvre said, "Why don't you make a feature?" And I said, "Really? I don't know how to do that." I'd never even been on the set of a feature film. But I told him I knew someone

who could write. I'd met a good writer at university. We came up with a story and pitched it to a producer who said, "That's great, why don't you do it?" So I shot it without really knowing what I was doing. A woman showed up one day and said, "I'm going to be your script girl." And I asked, "What does a script girl do?" I really didn't know anything. I just filmed it the way I thought best. Then I was invited to the Cannes Film Festival, and they said, "This is a new way of shooting—a new style." And I was the first one to be surprised.

It all just kept going from there, never with a plan. I never once said, "I want to win an Oscar." That thought never crossed my mind. I just said, "Okay, that worked. Let's do another one." And then another one. It was all serendipity, really. It just happened to me.

VIC: That desire to make films—that love and passion for it. Let's go back a bit. Where did you grow up?

DENYS: I grew up in Montreal. My family was originally from a small village, but my parents moved to the city so their kids could get a better education. I went to one of the best colleges in Montreal, and then to the Université de Montréal to study history. But honestly, I wasn't that interested in history—I was more drawn to writing, theatre, and of course, movies. But movies felt so far away. They were made in Hollywood or Paris or London—not in Canada.

I loved them. I went to the movies as often as I could. I was mesmerized by the images, the storytelling. But it seemed unrealistic to think I could ever work in that world. Then I got hired to make short films, and from there I moved on to longer films. It all happened quite naturally. I didn't dream of becoming a filmmaker—I just knew I was good at writing and photography, and I was drawn to theatre. I staged plays in college, but at the time it didn't seem possible to make a living doing that. My father had made huge sacrifices to get us to Montreal and give us a good education. He was hoping for a brilliant lawyer or a successful doctor in the family. He was very disappointed when I became a filmmaker—disappointed his whole life, really. Even when I had some success, it didn't change how he felt. But I kept going anyway, almost haphazardly.

VIC: What did you do for entertainment when you were very young?

DENYS: When I was really young, I had no entertainment at all. I lived in a village of about 800 people, and there was nothing—not really. I had an uncle who was an agronomist and owned a projector with 16mm films, mostly about agriculture. They were somewhat boring, but now and then

he'd show something about a classical singer or something more artistic. So we'd see flickering images on a bed sheet, but it all felt very distant.

Once I moved to Montreal and went to school downtown, things changed. There were theatres nearby. I could go see plays, concerts, and films. I naturally gravitated to all of it and saw as much as I could. At the time, I didn't know what I was watching were masterpieces. I'd watch Westerns by John Ford or Howard Hawks and just think, "What great stories!" It wasn't until ten years later, when I read *Cahiers du Cinéma*, that I realized those films were major works of art. The same thing happened with music. Someone once told me, "There's a pianist coming from Toronto—Glenn Gould. You should check him out." I had no idea what the *Goldberg Variations* were, but I went to Her Majesty's Theatre and was blown away. It was so beautiful. So my cultural education happened like that—just following my interests and living downtown where it was accessible. That's how I refined my tastes.

VIC: What about radio? Did you listen to CBC Radio?

DENYS: Not really. It wasn't part of my world then.

VIC: So your entertainment was mostly Hollywood?

DENYS: Hollywood films, yes, but also French films. Because we spoke French, there were a few distributors that brought in films from France. There were two downtown theatres that specialized in them. So I saw a lot of French cinema, and some Italian and Mexican films as well. I remember seeing Luis Buñuel's Mexican-period films in Montreal. Don't ask me how or who distributed them, but somehow, they were shown.

VIC: Any film that left a big impression on you?

DENYS: Oh yes, tons. One that stands out is *Hamlet* by Sir Laurence Olivier. I saw it because of the poster outside the theatre. It showed Olivier with a sword, and I thought it was some kind of Errol Flynn swashbuckler. But I discovered Shakespeare that day and was absolutely astonished. The story, the final duel—it was unforgettable. And *The Robe*—do you remember *The Robe*? It was one of the first CinemaScope films. Incredible. Romans and epic storytelling. So many others made an impact.

VIC: So what drew you in? The technology, the magic of it all, or something more—the political, the social themes?

DENYS: I was just immersed in the experience. I can't say exactly what fascinated me—maybe it was the aesthetics, maybe the story, or maybe I was just dreaming about the actresses. I fell in love with some of them, especially the foreign ones like Lucia Bosé, the Spanish actress—she was stunning. It was

everything at once, really. I was just absorbing it all. I wasn't thinking about technique at all back then. Absolutely not. I was just receiving the experience like a child being told a magical story or a legend. I simply took it in.

When I got to the Film Board, that's when I started becoming aware of specific techniques, because people talked about them. I remember the Board had a print of *Triumph of the Will* by Leni Riefenstahl. They said, "You have to see this—it's horrible in content, politically repugnant—but the images, the editing... just look at that." So I did. And that's how my education began, shaped by the people around me.

I learned a great deal from the other young filmmakers—people who were much more aware than I was about who the important directors were and how they worked. I remember once, we all left the Film Board one afternoon to see *The Birds* by Hitchcock because it was opening downtown in Montreal. Everyone said, "You have to see this—look at the editing, the way the birds are introduced, the first image, the final shot…" So yes, my education really took shape there.

VIC: There seemed to be more passion for making films in Quebec—in French Canada—than in English Canada. Why do you think that is? Is it cultural? The English are often more reserved, while the French are more open, passionate. Or is it just perception?

DENYS: Hard to say. Talking about national psychology is dangerous territory, it often leads to absurd generalizations. Still, there were differences. For English Canadians, Hollywood was always an option. It wasn't too far culturally, so some of them just went south. For us, that wasn't an option, it felt out of reach. So we made films here, out of necessity. But yes, French Canadians are a bit more open emotionally, a bit more willing to experiment. I remember in the camera department at the Film Board, the British approach dominated at first: key light, fill light, back light, very classical.

Then Michel Brault came along—an extraordinary director of photography—and said, "That's not how an office looks." We were doing a shoot in a studio meant to represent an office, and he said, "Offices are lit with neon." So he flooded the whole studio with harsh neon lights. The head of the department was scandalized—wanted to fire him. But Michel stood his ground. "This is how an office looks," he said, "cold, inhuman, unflattering." And years later, Gordon Willis did the same thing in *All the President's Men*—flooded the newsroom with practical, overhead lights. But Michel had done it 10–15 years earlier. So yes, we experimented. We pushed things.

VIC: The Film Board being in Montreal… that must have been an advantage.

DENYS: Oh, absolutely. Quebec cinema was born because the Film Board chose Montreal. Originally, it was based in Ottawa. When they were deciding where to move, it was between Montreal and Toronto. By some miracle, they chose Montreal. Because of that proximity, we could slip in, find our way, get our start. That's how we became filmmakers. That's how Quebec cinema came into being. If they had chosen Toronto, maybe it still would have happened, but it would've taken 25 or 30 more years.

VIC: What was the first project you did for the NFB?

DENYS: *Champlain*, a film on Samuel de Champlain, the founder of Quebec City. It was a very, very simple film, mostly made with maps—geographical maps, old drawings—and the little we actually know about Champlain. That's what I had to work with, so it was quite basic. I made it with one cameraman and myself, and that was it. I edited it with that same cameraman. But then I needed to work with an animation camera because I had added some drawings and needed to create movement. They told me, "You've got to go to the animation department." The Film Board was like a mini studio—like a little Paramount. It had a studio, dressing rooms for actors, and also an animation department. Norman McLaren was the king of that world. The head of animation was Colin Low, and these people were extraordinarily kind to me.

I had no idea what I was doing. Colin said, "Come every day at five o'clock, and I'll give you 45 minutes of my time." And he did—for about a month. Every day, he taught me how to make the animation camera move, just because he wanted to help. He wanted to teach. It was absolutely amazing. He was a master of animation, and he shared that with me. Throughout my life, whenever I had a specific technical problem, I would go to him for help—and he was always there, always open. So there was this real collaboration between English and French people. On the level of filmmaking, we had a perfect understanding of each other.

But at the same time, for some bizarre reason—and I always wanted to make a documentary about this—if you went into the cafeteria, there were English tables and French tables. No one told you to sit anywhere. There were no rules. But you just wouldn't sit with the English people. You'd sit with your own. The same for them. We'd say, "Hi, how are you? Good, I saw your film—lovely, very good," and so on. But that was the extent of it. This was the famous "two solitudes" that Canadians often talk about. It was absolutely real. You could see it, feel it. It would have been a very difficult

documentary to film because it was so subtle. But I always wanted to make it. I thought about it for a long time, but I never did.

VIC: How much connection was there with the rest of Canada at that time? Was it a strong connection, or were there really two solitudes, as you say?

DENYS: Well, at the beginning, there were no real films being made outside the Film Board—French or English. Everything was being done there. And then these unusual characters started making films outside the Film Board: David Cronenberg, for instance, with *The Fly*. And then it all started to sprout. You still had some vague connections, but not organic ones. You'd maybe run into each other at film festivals—that's when we'd see each other. Later, when my films became better known, I'd go to the Toronto Film Festival, the Vancouver Film Festival, and the Atlantic Film Festival. That's where I made friends, had conversations. But beyond that, there wasn't much connection.

VIC: I was thinking that the Film Board being in Montreal helped French filmmakers find their voice more easily. Otherwise, it would've been harder.

DENYS: Definitely. It was a blessing for us. For my generation, the Film Board was where we learned to make films, where we discussed ideas, where we grew. We were always together—someone had just seen a new film, someone else was back from Paris with new stories. When Michel Brault, for example, worked in Paris, and Claude Jutra too—they'd come back and say, "We saw this," "We tried that," and so on. People don't realize that in the early '60s, the Film Board was famous worldwide. I remember seeing John Cassavetes, François Truffaut, Bernardo Bertolucci walking the halls. These people came to see what we were doing, because it was absolutely unique. We were working with small Éclair 16mm cameras, handheld, doing things no one else was doing. So it was a magnet for young filmmakers around the world who wanted to know, "How do you do this?"

VIC: I remember my first trip for the CBC in 1968. We travelled around the world and ended up in Kenya. Back then, Africa was still considered dark and distant. Every time we set up to load the camera, kids would come running, asking, "Where are you from?" I'd say, "Canada," and they'd have no idea. But then one kid said, "Film Board of Canada!" And I said, "Yes, that's Canada." They knew about the Film Board in the 1960s—but not Canada.

DENYS: It's true. We didn't even get a flag until 1965. The Film Board was around long before that.

VIC: The Film Board was kind of a guiding light for creative filmmakers in this country. Whose vision was that?

DENYS: I don't think it was one person's vision. It was a series of happy accidents. The Canadian government needed to make films during the war—training films for soldiers, because they didn't have enough instructors. So they brought in Scots and British filmmakers to start the Film Board. Those people taught others how to make films. When the war ended, you can't just fire a civil servant, so they kept them. What do you do with them? "Make films about agriculture." So they made films on potatoes, on avoiding insects, that kind of thing. Then someone said, "Can I make a film about my church?" And they said, "Okay." Then someone else, Colin Low, for instance, said, "There's nothing more beautiful than a horse being trained in a corral by a cowboy. Can I film that?" And they said, "Alright." It grew, slowly, organically. There was no master plan, thank God! If the government had imposed a plan, it would've ruined everything. But the people there loved film. They kept asking, "Can I try this?" and someone always said, "Okay, do it." And that's how it blossomed. That's how real creativity happens. It doesn't come from the top.

VIC: What I'm very interested to know about is the freedom you had as filmmakers in the early part. And how much of that freedom is necessary—how much do you need to be allowed to do what you do?

DENYS: Exactly. I think the secret of the Film Board was that, at the very beginning, there was no bureaucracy at all. The whole French unit, for instance, was run by two guys—two producers, Fernand Dansereau and Jacques Bobet. And under them, they had two ladies: one was the budget officer, and the other was a sort of general production assistant. That was it. There was no director of production, no planning department—absolutely nothing. So you'd go into the office of one of those two guys and say, "I've got an idea for a film. Can I do a film on lumberjacks?" "Lumberjacks?" "Yeah, it'll be about half an hour long." "How much will it cost?" "Roughly this much." "And when can you shoot?" "Next month." "Okay. Go do it." That was it. There was no need to submit your idea for script review or project assessment. It was a personal relationship. That was the deal. You just got the go-ahead. And that was the secret.

Another part of the secret was trusting the right people. And as you know, being able to judge talent is very rare. If you're a producer, can you identify someone who truly has talent? Can you find it? It's terribly difficult: in sports, in filmmaking, in everything. Can you recognize the individuals who are going to become great filmmakers? How do you judge that? How do you sense it? In those days, they just knew. I don't know how. It was magical.

VIC: From my experience with *Hue*, a film I made about skin colour, the sense of freedom has changed. The question to you is—do you think we need breathing room?

DENYS: More than breathing room! A documentary is a discovery. And you try to explain this to civil servants, and they don't understand. You say to them, "Okay, I'm going to go into the textile industry. I want to know how these people live and what they're dreaming of. I have no idea yet. So, I can't tell you. Give me money, give me a camera, and I'll go there for a year and come back." Nowadays, that would be impossible. They want you to give them a script. "What are you going to say?" "I can't tell you yet—I don't know these people." I'm going to discover them, and my film is going to discover them with you, and with me. It's a whole discovery. That's the whole idea of making a documentary. This is impossible in the field of civil service. You must know what you're doing. You must know in advance what you're going to find. But you never know. In a documentary, you're fishing for marvels. Sometimes you're lucky—you find them. Sometimes you're not—but it's still interesting. That spirit—that approach—has disappeared from the landscape. That's why so many great documentary filmmakers aren't doing it anymore. Because it's been stifled.

VIC: What made that change?

About the Editor and Interviewer

VIC SARIN

Vic Sarin, born in Kashmir, India, is a renowned Canadian filmmaker celebrated as a director, cinematographer, and screenwriter. After moving to Canada in 1963, he began a long career with CBC Television before founding his own company, Sepia Films. His cinematography credits include *Margaret's Museum, Whale Music, Nowhere to Hide, Heartaches, Dancing in the Dark,* and *Riel*. As a director, his fiction films include *Cold Comfort, Partition, Left Behind, Solitary Journey, A Shine of Rainbows,* and *The Lightkeeper.* His award-winning documentaries include *The David Milgaard Story, Hue, Keepers of the Magic, and The Boy from Geita,* which had a special screening at the United Nations. Among his honours are an Emmy Award, the Directors Guild of Canada Lifetime Achievement Award, the Canadian Society of Cinematographers' Kodak New Century Award, and appointment to the Order of Canada. He is the author of Eyepiece: Adventures in Canadian Film and Television and the audiobook Gung Ho Filmmaking.

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