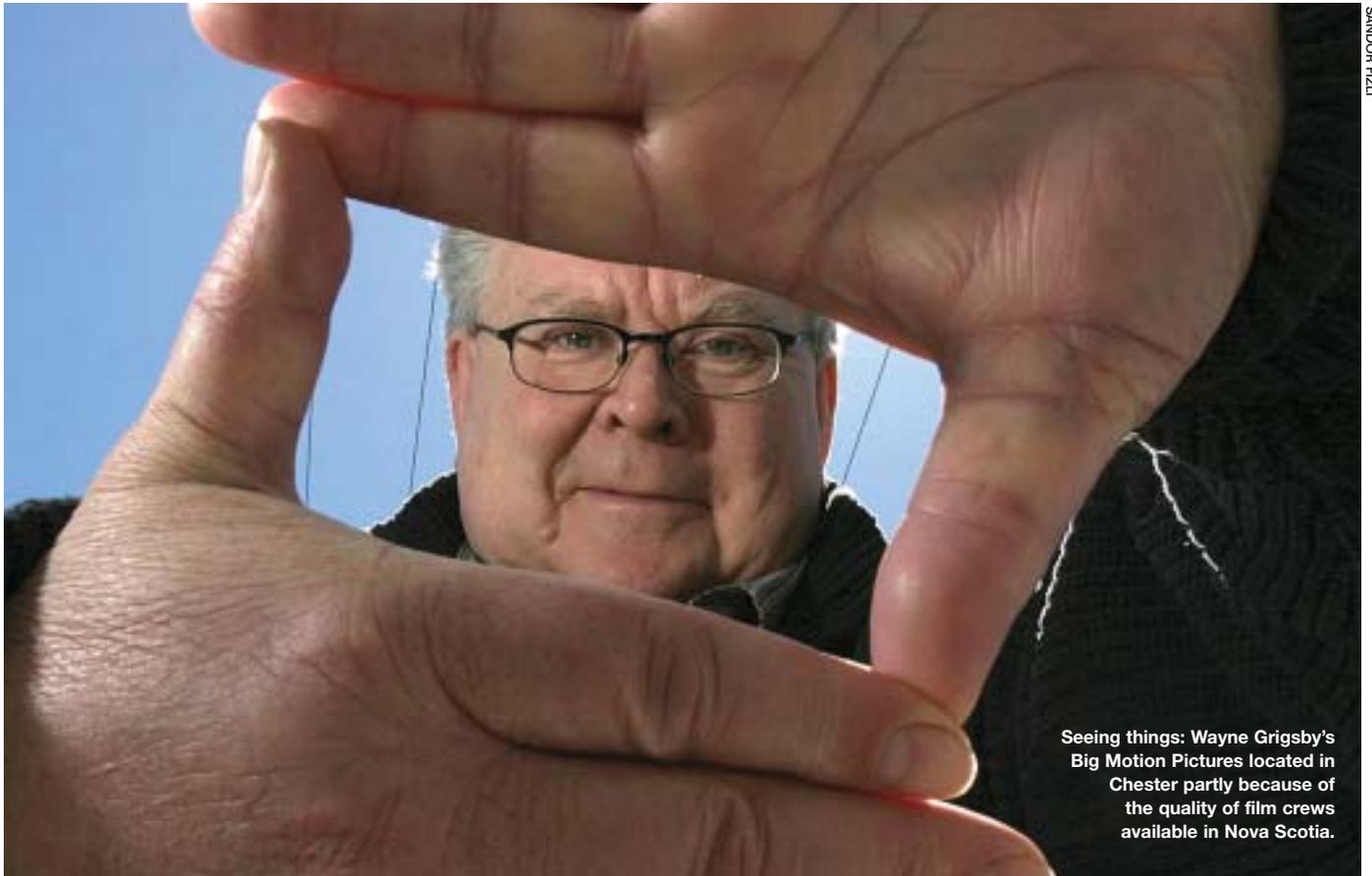


The craftsman

A filmmaking veteran has found a great place to expect the unexpected



SANDOR FIZLI

Seeing things: Wayne Grigsby's Big Motion Pictures located in Chester partly because of the quality of film crews available in Nova Scotia.

“In filmmaking you have to cope with the unexpected,” says Wayne Grigsby, a veteran writer and producer of award-winning television series. Grigsby’s credo certainly has been put to the test. *Black Harbour* was in production in the Halifax area in 1998, during the crash of Swissair Flight 111. “You realize that you’re not the centre of the universe,” says Grigsby. “A lot of us just wanted to sit down and weep, but there is a sense of ‘the show must go on.’” The show’s crew did everything they could to help with the rescue effort, and production facilities were offered to those involved.

When news of the Sept. 11, 2001, ter-

rorist attacks in the United States spread around the world, Grigsby’s team was filming in Parliament in Ottawa for the *Trudeau* mini-series; the tragic events threatened to stall production. “We knew we wouldn’t be able to continue filming for long, so we said, ‘Let’s get as much done before they kick us out.’” Grigsby found the experience poignant because the story they were filming was set during the 1970s when Canadians were faced with the threat of terrorism. The production was stalled but was able to improvise and finish more or less on time.

Now based in Chester, N.S., Grigsby has had to deal with producing during

Hurricane Juan and last February’s massive blizzard, which sent the province into a state of emergency. Although not all film productions have to deal with monumental human or natural disasters, the palpable stress of filmmaking in some ways parallels the gritty topics Grigsby writes about. “Pure entertainment is fine,” he says, “but I think there are people who believe that films not only be about the people on the screen but also about some issue that resonates with the rest of us.”

A former journalist and broadcaster from Montreal, Grigsby came to Nova Scotia in 1970 with an impressive resumé. He began his film career by co-writing the



CBC-TV movie *And Then You Die*, a thriller set and shot in Montreal. He was executive story editor for the award-winning newsroom drama *E.N.G.* and won a Gemini Award for Best Writing in a Dramatic Series. In 1992 Grigsby and his writing partner, Barbara Samuels, created and produced *North of 60*, which became one of Canada's most successful and critically acclaimed television dramas. These achievements have helped elevate Grigsby to the upper echelon of Canadian film and television production.

"Wayne is a pro," says Mike Volpe, the president of Topsail Productions Ltd. and executive producer of the wildly popular TV show *Trailer Park Boys*. "He has a great work ethic, he's a real gentleman, and, let's face it, the man can write. It all begins with the written word, and he is a master of the craft."

After *North of 60*, Grigsby and Samuels were developing a story idea that would become known as the Nova Scotia Project. "We were looking old world/new world, and from having visited in the 1970s, I said the South Shore of Nova Scotia and the boat-building industry is about as old world as you can get—and 180 degrees from California, as far as what the cultures are like," says Grigsby. "That's the reason we came." The series became *Black Harbour*, which earned a gold medal at Worldfest Arizona and several Gemini nominations, including for Best Dramatic Series.

When Grigsby arrived, he found that Nova Scotia had changed dramatically. "There was always interesting stuff going on in Nova Scotia, but what I found in the 1970s was that there was a lot of defeatism and the tone that it will never work," he says. "That always bothered me because I was struck by how rich the tal-

ent was here. There are more talented and bright people in Nova Scotia per square foot than you can shake a stick at."

In 1999, after *Black Harbour*, Grigsby and business partner David MacLeod launched Big Motion Pictures Ltd., a film-and-television-production company based in Chester. The company has been prolific, producing films such as *Task Force: Caviar*; *Blessed Stranger: After Flight 111*; the acclaimed *Trudeau* mini-series,

think the Nova Scotia government and successive governments have been very wise in how they stimulate the filmmaking economy," says Grigsby. "It rewards people who can get things into production rather than development. It doesn't limit money to local people only."

Ann MacKenzie, the CEO of the Nova Scotia Film Development Corp., thinks Grigsby's presence in Nova Scotia is a great benefit to the future of the industry.

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which won four Gemini Awards; the television series *A Guy & a Girl*; and *Sleep Murder*, starring Jason Priestly and Natar Ungalaaq.

One reason that Big Motion Pictures located in Chester is the quality of crews available in Nova Scotia. There may not be the same amount of steady work here as in Toronto or Vancouver, but Grigsby sees the depth of talent in Nova Scotia at all levels of film production a result of the province's quality of life. "Our crews all have other stuff that they're doing, which I think makes for better work," he says. "They come to work as creators rather than functioners."

Grigsby also believes the government's role is crucial—especially in Canada. "I

"Wayne Grigsby and David MacLeod are two very talented filmmakers," she says. "They are probably doing most of the high-budget dramatic programming in the area. They're a tremendous asset to the local community. They give generously of their time to our development programs and take risks in bringing in young unproven writers and directors."

According to Grigsby, it's impossible to predict the lifespan of a production company. The good news is that he has no plans to leave the province. Filmmaking may be about coping with the unexpected, but the increasing consensus of film and television professionals like Grigsby is that Nova Scotia is a great place to expect the unexpected. – JOE FITZGERALD