

CBC, Canada Leslie Haller

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Entretien avec Leslie Haller

Executive in charge of production, Arts and Entertainment Department, CBC Television (1981-2010)

28 mai 2019

Marie-Odile Demay >

Leslie Haller, you were the executive in charge of production in the Arts and Entertainment Department at the CBC television network. Please describe your career trajectory in producing performing arts programs for television.

Leslie Haller >

I began my tenure at CBC in 1981 and concluded it in 2010. Since then, I have been engaged in independent work, including the production of several films. The most significant project I have undertaken since leaving CBC is a documentary film entitled *Blind Spot: Moments Unseen*, which was broadcast on the CBC Documentary Channel in 2015. I served as both producer and participant in that project, which involved taking three visually impaired Canadians on a journey through Argentina, including a ride through the Andes. The film's premise was that it is counterintuitive to take someone without sight to a place that is visually beautiful. However, we found the experience much more rewarding, seeing it through their eyes. There is a tendency to rely heavily on visual descriptions of things. Our visually impaired participants allowed us to experience the environment through other senses. It was a truly positive and transformative experience.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Do you believe there is a tendency to undervalue the creative aspects of a producer's role?

Leslie Haller >

I have always considered myself to be more of a creative producer than a media administrator. Even during my tenure at CBC, where I served as the executive in charge of production, I always considered myself to be a creative producer.

Marie-Odile Demay >

During your three decades at CBC, you were responsible for numerous outstanding programs. What are the key attributes of an effective arts program? Could you provide a few examples?

Leslie Haller >

While preparing for this interview and considering outstanding arts programming, I took a moment to reflect on my initial thoughts when you posed that question. The first art program that came to mind was *Peau, chair et os* (1995), a choreography by Gilles Maheu with the Carbone 14 dance company, directed by François Girard, who had recently completed

Le dortoir (1991), also with Gilles Maheu, and *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1993), both with Rhombus Media. But *Peau, chair et os* was an in-house production commissioned by CBC for *Adrienne Clarkson Presents*.

From the 1990s until 2010, I held the positions of associate director and producer at *Adrienne Clarkson Presents*. I also had to switch back and forth between different roles and was involved in many of the shows produced for *Adrienne Clarkson Presents*. So I was aware of productions I was not directly involved in, and often contributed to tapings and studio sessions when appropriate. However, this particular show was not one in which I was directly involved. I was, though, able to visit the studio to observe the production and was impressed by what I saw. The production was notable for its innovative approach, with a set design that incorporated moving parts and dancers who followed a specific storyline with precision. All of this was adapted for television. That was one aspect of the project. However, the aspect of the dance special that left the most profound impression on me was when I watched it at home after its completion. I found myself so engaged that I was unable to sit down. I was so taken aback that I stood in the middle of the room and watched it with my hand over my mouth. It is truly remarkable. I was reflecting on the impact that some individuals have on the world around them. The *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* series placed a strong emphasis on the creative process of the artists themselves and the creative process in general. *Peau, chair et os*, in particular, proposed an innovative approach to performance.

Upon joining the CBC, I had the opportunity to work with Norman Campbell, a prominent Canadian director, producer, and composer of ballet and performing arts programs for television since the 1950s. At that time, he was the leading figure in the art show genre. He primarily conveyed the on-stage action to the television audience. This resulted in a live, filmed transfer of the stage production from the studio to the screen. Campbell also introduced live performances into the studio setting and I recall him mentioning the dancers moving between studios and sets during commercial breaks. For example, he produced a 1993 adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* featuring prima ballerina Veronica Tennant in the role of Juliet. In subsequent years, the CBC team began filming directly at venues like the Stratford Theatre. This allowed them to capture the live performance and edit it for broadcast. While this represented the action on stage accurately, it lacked the excitement typically sought by audiences. However, when the camera becomes an active participant in the performance, as Girard did in *Peau, chair et os* and later works, it greatly enhances the viewing experience.

Marie-Odile Demay >

The outcome of a film created from a live stage performance will be significantly different.

Leslie Haller >

That is correct. This results in a genuine cinematic experience. Additionally, I recall that François Girard's direction of the dance performance featured notable camera movement. Rather than simply depicting the movement on stage in a static manner, the camera was also integrated into the movement itself. It had a significant impact.

His 1993 film *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* was a notable departure from the conventional biopic format, as it did not adhere to a linear narrative from birth to death. Girard deconstructed Gould's life into dramatized segments and yet the film was ultimately a straightforward retelling of his life story. Instead of relying on archival footage and interviews, the film employed a hybrid approach, weaving together factual elements with a fictional narrative to present a comprehensive account of Gould's life. At the time, it was a pioneering approach, and the sound work was exceptional.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Could we consider François Girard's films from that period to be an exemplary benchmark for Canadian art films?

Leslie Haller >

Indeed. His work was well received by a wide audience, despite its niche appeal. Another noteworthy program was *Souvenir of Canada* (2005), which profiles Canadian writer and visual artist Douglas Copeland. It was also structured as a work of fiction about the artist's life. It was not as "vignette" as *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*, but it encompassed a diverse range of formats, including documentary, dramatization, and insights into the artist's creative process. Additionally, the program included footage of Copeland creating his art. I found the production to be of an exceptionally high standard. The film was directed by Robin Neinstein and produced for CBC by Media Headquarters Films & Television and the National Film Board of Canada. It had its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival.

Souvenir of Canada was an adaptation of a book by Douglas Copeland about things that are quintessentially Canadian. For example, the cereal box with both French and English, or heavy beer bottles. The film incorporated these and other quirky Canadian references while telling Copeland's story through dramatization, interviews with his father, funny sketches, Copeland making an art piece, and his voice telling the story. All these elements were integrated into the film in a well-balanced manner.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Was this approach considered innovative at the time?

Leslie Haller >

Indeed, it is an endearing film that encapsulates Copeland's persona, ingenuity, and distinctiveness.

Another noteworthy production that I want to mention, because I am afraid it is at risk of being forgotten otherwise, was the telefilm adaptation of Yann Martel's book *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, created for *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* in 1994. This production was a significant achievement of Robert Sharon, an in-house CBC producer, who later became the executive producer for *Opening Night*. The production was filmed in a studio at CBC. The production team employed innovative techniques to dramatize the novel, utilizing special

effects that were more challenging to implement at the time, in the early 1990s. The technology was still in its infancy, and I recall that there were numerous technical challenges to overcome. It may not have the same visual impact, as I recall it, but it was groundbreaking for its time.

The narrative revolves around two protagonists. One character discovers he is HIV positive and is facing the end of his life. Subsequently, his friend visits him in the hospital. To pass the time, they recount stories about a fictitious family, the Roccamatios. The narrative alternated between scenes in the hospital room with the two friends and scenes featuring the Roccamatios stories. The production team used green screens to effectively present the two concurrent narratives. While the production may appear amateurish in the current context, it was executed with great precision and attention to detail.

More importantly, the film made notable contributions to social awareness. The two friends engaged in a joint enterprise to construct compelling narratives, exploring and interpreting the nuances of each life story in a way that reflected the gradual deterioration of this friend's health. The film reflected his evolving emotional state and mental processes as he grappled with the reality of his illness and the inevitability of his death. At the time, in the early 1990s, when the AIDS epidemic was near its peak, it was crucial for films to address these challenging topics in a socially responsible manner.

Marie-Odile Demay >

It is often observed that the arts are at the forefront of technological development and are able to anticipate and highlight significant social changes.

Leslie Haller >

Yes, they are also providing insight into areas that we are not fully aware of and educating us about them.

The next project on my list was also commissioned for *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* and builds on the same concept of public broadcasting's role in social advancement. The opera titled *Beatrice Chancy* was first performed in 1999. It starred the Canadian soprano Measha Brueggergosman and was based on a libretto by Canadian poet George Elliott Clarke. The production featured an impressive, predominantly African-American cast, which was a daring move at the time. At the time, Brueggergosman was a relatively new talent, just starting her career. It was a rare undertaking to present and adapt a modern Canadian opera for television. Moreover, the topic of black slavery in Canada, particularly in Nova Scotia, was not widely known at the time. The stage production was adapted for the screen. To create the production, a small village was constructed at the CBC Halifax Studios in Nova Scotia.

Marie-Odile Demay >

That is very impressive. What were the ratings of that kind of production?

Leslie Haller >

Arts programming has never been a particularly highly-rated genre. While *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* performed moderately well, I believe this was due to the fact that it was a series that viewers had come to rely on.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Was the success of *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* due also to its focus on Canadian art and artists?

Leslie Haller >

Indeed. It was clear to viewers that if they watched this series consistently, they would see something interesting and learn about the arts in Canada. In response, during the 1990s, CBC programmed *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* (1988-1999) and *Sunday Arts Entertainment* (1989-1998), followed by *Opening Night* (2000-2005). However, there is currently no more dedicated weekly time slot for arts programming at the CBC. Instead, CBC has focused on occasional specials and, more recently, large-scale online programming, including some performing arts mainly filmed live.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Do you have any favorites from Rhombus Media?

Leslie Haller >

I recall another Rhombus production, *Prokofiev by Two*, which aired in 1990 and was directed by Barbara Willis Sweete. The program was created to commemorate Prokofiev's centenary in 1991 and presented a double feature of the composer's most significant works: *The Classical Symphony*, composed in 1917, and excerpts from *Romeo and Juliet*, written in 1935. The two pieces were distinguished by their vivid imagery, which was often highly stylized and fantastical. The one-hour special featured maestro Charles Dutoit and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, as well as a specially created dance piece for the screen. I distinctly recall viewing this program with my daughter. At the time, she was still quite young and was completely absorbed by the narrative and the strikingly stylized and fantastical imagery. I recall that I found this particular production appealing because it allowed viewers to observe both the ballet performance and members of the audience in the studio. This is a technique that Barbara frequently employed, integrating the audience into the narrative. She would then focus on one audience member and then another for the subsequent scene, incorporating their presence into the storyline.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Do you believe that the *mise en scène* for the screen altered the narrative of the ballet?

Leslie Haller >

I would say it was an added value to the initial storyline. It provided commentary on the role of the audience in the performance. From our perspective in the living room, we were able to identify with the spectator and feel a greater connection to the characters and plot. It also established a new standard for portraying the audience. The series was produced in conjunction

with the *Adrienne Clarkson Summer Festival*, which preceded the *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* series by a couple of years. This is how the Adrienne Clarkson weekly series got its start. I believe each episode was quite lengthy. The format was similar to that of the *Sunday Arts Entertainment* series, with multiple sequences in each episode. On occasion, a single, extended special would be broadcast.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Was the content consistently original, or were some acquisitions included?

Leslie Haller >

Some acquisitions were made, but the majority of the content was original, with the remainder consisting of replayed past CBC productions. I also recall a skating show produced by Insight Productions, entitled *You Must Remember This* (1994), which featured legendary Canadian figure skater Kurt Browning. He performed the Gene Kelly *Singin' in the Rain* routine on ice. That particular production stands out in my memory because it was not simply another skating show on an ice rink, which was a popular format on CBC at the time. The scenario and strong film direction brought the stage performance closer to the style of a film. Despite filming a live performance on ice, the production was set in a studio with sophisticated set design, lighting, costumes, and exceptional camera work.

Marie-Odile Demay >

What are your thoughts on *The Met: Live in HD* transmission from the stage?

Leslie Haller >

I believe it is a great initiative. When the Metropolitan Opera first initiated this program, I considered it an excellent idea. While the opera is enhanced with close-ups and editing for the benefit of the viewer, the result is that the viewer is able to experience the opera in a way that is similar to that of an audience member at the Metropolitan. This is the key benefit of *The Met: Live in HD*. The distinction between our variety special, which features a series of live performances captured on film and subsequently edited for broadcast, and *The Met: Live in HD* is that the latter is presented as a unified live performance and transmission.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Is it because the act of live transmission and editing is an integral part of the live experience?

Leslie Haller >

Yes. That is correct. I recall my initial experience attending one of these events and feeling as though I was an integral part of the proceedings from the outset. This is not precisely what we typically do on television, although the CBC has previously broadcast live events, such as ice-skating specials or operas. With time and experience, we learned to film performing arts not only from the stage but with the intention of making them more cinematic. We have produced a variety of formats, from *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* to elaborate studio productions such as *Peau, chair et os* and the Kurt Browning specials.

In the field of opera, Larry Weinstein's films, including *Burnt Toast* (2005), a series of eight comedic mini operas depicting the stages of a romantic relationship in contemporary settings, are particularly noteworthy. Weinstein's opera special, featuring original music and libretti, appealed to a broad general audience. The production was successful in attracting a new audience to opera, thanks to its combination of humor, wit, and excellent performances.

In addition, I reflect on some of the contributions of producer Veronica Tennant, who is an intriguing figure in the industry. She has a background in dance, previously serving as a prima ballerina with the National Ballet. She then transitioned to a role as a producer of arts programming at CBC and, later, as an independent producer. She introduced a fresh approach to the visual style of dance films. She had a unique ability to connect with the movement from an insider perspective, which set her apart from other directors.

Amongst her other productions for CBC, she directed and produced *Karen Kain: Dancing in the Moment* (1997) for *Adrienne Clarkson Presents*, where Kain, dancer and later director at the National Ballet of Canada, dances with one of the company's principal dancer, Rex Harrington. Tennant also produced *Margie Gillis: Wild Hearts in Strange Times* (1996), with American opera singer Jesse Norman who accompanies the dance by Gillis. These examples demonstrate effective methods for integrating dance into a studio setting, effectively transforming the filming of dance into a unique art form. The cameras were an integral part of the cinematic creation process, and the storytelling was much more intimate than that of a stage production.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Could you identify a common thread running through all the films you mentioned?

Leslie Haller >

I would generally say that these films appeal to me as an audience member, encouraging a sense of involvement and investment in the storytelling, and a closer connection to the art form. Furthermore, there is an emotional investment, which fosters a sense of connection with the on-screen content, eliminating the traditional barrier between the audience and the program. The audience feels a sense of participation and connection to the narrative.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Could you comment on the representativeness of the films you selected as typical of a specific period, namely the 1990s and early 2000s, which were characterized by a greater degree of experimentation?

Leslie Haller >

I believe that to be accurate. During the 1990s, films about art were more innovative and creative. It is likely that this is due to our pioneering work in developing diverse approaches to representing the arts on television. It is now a more common practice to create films of this nature.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Could you please elaborate on where you find innovation in arts programming nowadays?

Leslie Haller >

That's an interesting question. I personally don't find a lot of innovative programming on television these days. Perhaps due to my recent shift towards live theatre, I am experiencing a heightened sense of connection with the on-stage performances, which seems to be more immediate. With the exception of *The Met: Live in HD*, I am not actively seeking out innovative programming on television. The majority of these offerings are documentary-style profiles of artists and their work. While these are engaging, they do not necessarily represent a significant departure from traditional approaches. It is the artists themselves and their artwork that I find most innovative, rather than the medium of film.