



Film schools students on education

Alliance Atlantis co-founder and Queen's film grad talks about his controversial film that started it all

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Knowing Michael MacMillan's background as a Queen's film alumnus, I couldn't think of a better place than the Film House to interview the former Alliance Atlantis executive chairman, who was in town this week as this year's Brockington Visitor.

It wasn't until we started the interview that I realized the role the unassuming Stuart Street building played in the formation of Canada's largest film production and distribution company.

"We started off in this building—well the other half of the building, the addition of the second house hadn't been made yet," MacMillan said. "I would seal the entire third floor of Film House for a week to edit my films."

MacMillan, ArtSci '78, co-founded Atlantis Films in the spring of 1978 with fellow film students Janice Platt and Seaton McLean.

"By the time we were in fourth year, we had made half a dozen films. So, that's why we started our company Atlantis in fourth year, because what the heck? We were having fun doing this on the side and we were busy," he said. "One thing led to another and the darn thing grew, to make a long story short."

After leaving Queen's, MacMillan helped build Atlantis into a film and television production powerhouse, eventually acquiring Alliance Communications and becoming Alliance Atlantis in 1998. He sold the company, which boasted 13 Canadian television networks, to CanWest Global in 2007 for \$2.3 billion. MacMillan produced more than 1,000 films during his career.

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One of MacMillan's earliest films as a Queen's student, a documentary he shot as a 19 year-old second-year student entitled *The Academic Cloister*, is a commentary on the culture of conformity at university.

"We had something that we couldn't reconcile and didn't fit together in a coherent, simple whole. On one hand, that was what the university says it does, which is to encourage inquiring minds, original thought and exploration," he said. "On the other hand, the practical experience, the lecture hall, the exam hall, the structure of classes, the social structure kind of encourages people to do the same thing. Whether that was social doing the same thing, everything from orientation week to or going to the football games, I thought, 'What's the matter with this picture?' ...We then decided to make the film with quite a singular focus. It was extorting the university to do better, trying to make the experience more about original thought."

MacMillan said his involvement with the film studies community helped him form a different perspective on undergraduate education.

"My experience was the complete opposite. It was four years of pure fun in the film department. We were encouraged, allowed, permitted to do whatever we wanted and dive deep into projects and our writing," he said. "Many of our friends in other departments weren't experiencing what we were experiencing."

MacMillan has been a strong financial supporter of film and media at Queen's, donating hundreds of thousands of dollars towards such initiatives as the Alliance Atlantis professorship, which contributes towards the salary of one film studies professor and the stage and screen visiting artist fund. He has also helped subsidize the cost of production supplies such as tapes, gels and light bulbs for film students.

MacMillan said the opportunity to combine his love of film with a liberal arts education originally attracted to him to study at Queen's.

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“I could study sociology, art, English and philosophy, which I did, as well as my film classes and it wouldn’t be only a film production experience. I assumed I would get off of my ass and make films.”

MacMillan said *The Academic Cloister* cost \$3,000 to make. It was funded by fundraising and donations from local businesses and student government organizations including the AMS, ASUS and EngSoc.

“Most of the money I raised for the film was by renting Ellis Hall and showing *The Pink Panther*, which I had rented,” he said. “I showed *Pink Panther* at 7 o’clock, 8:30 and 10 o’clock that night. *Pink Panther* runs for more than 90 minutes, so I turned back the clock in Ellis Hall to pretend that it was earlier than it was. For the 10 o’clock screening, we didn’t start until 10:45. The line-ups were screaming at me and I said, ‘We’re going by this clock now.’ So I kept turning the clock back to get the three screenings that I needed. I left with 800 bucks in the cash box and that was the biggest piece of financing for the film.”

MacMillan said his position as co-chair of ASUS orientation week that year gave him the forum to show the film to a wide audience.

“You couldn’t get your packet of information in Jeffrey Hall for orientation week without first seeing the film in groups of 100 and being part of a facilitated discussion,” he said.

“Probably

two-thirds of the kids who came in that year did end up watching the film and by the time the administration caught on to what was going on it was too late—they had all seen the film and were talking about it.”

MacMillan said the University administration disapproved of the film.



“It was hard to argue with it. Clearly it struck a nerve.” he said. “They pointed out that it took a particular point of view, it wasn’t balanced. I said, ‘Yeah, that’s the whole point, we’re trying to raise contention.’”

In an ironic twist, the University commissioned MacMillan to make three recruitment films the following year, he said.

MacMillan said the experience also introduced him to his wife, lawyer Cathy Spoel, ArtSci ’78, who later became ASUS president.

“She was on a committee which was ready to review orientation week,” he said.

MacMillan said although the film wasn’t officially banned, it managed to spark debate on campus.

“For the first-year students who were arriving, the vast majority of them liked it. They thought it was kind of cool because it was poking the authority in the nose,” he said. “The upper-years who saw it by in large, thought it was on the money and had made good points. However, there was a school of thought that thought it was a self-indulgent waste of time. There was also a criticism that we had used a heavy male narrator voice in order to give it more authority.”

MacMillan said he sold 15 to 20 copies of the film to school boards and universities across the country. He said he owns a few copies of his own and the film department has one in its vault.

MacMillan said the film resonated with those who saw it long after it aired.

“For 20 years after that in Toronto, I’d be on the subway platform or walking down the street and three or four times a year, someone would be like ‘Hey, weren’t you the guy who made



that film we had to watch during orientation week?’ It was amazing how long that went on for. Obviously it rang a bell somehow.”

MacMillan’s focus is now on Samara, a non-profit organization designed to promote civic engagement he co-founded with fellow Queen’s alumnus Alison Loat in 2008.

“I’ve always been interested in public policy and politics. I was probably the only kid in East York to have Hansard delivered to the house everyday at age 11. Crazy, but true,” he said. “What distresses me is that we have developed in a country as fortunate as ours an attitude that public leadership, public service won’t make any difference. Therefore, you don’t have to vote, you don’t have to volunteer, you don’t give a shit that public affairs journalism is not where it should be. ... all of this leads to a culture or attitude where either it makes sense to solve these public challenges together or it doesn’t and I come down on the side—loudly, that it does.”

MacMillan said he hopes his new venture will be as successful as its predecessor, but doesn’t expect immediate results.

“We had this same view when we started Atlantis. We were quite willing to wait 15 years to receive our report card, if you will,” he said, adding that he also co-owns a winery in Prince Edward County