

**Curatorial essay accompanying the Cinema Lounge screening of George Ungar's *The Champagne Safari* on Oct 3, 2012 at Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque.**

**Rediscovering Bedaux by Kevin Nikkel**

The Genie Award winning documentary *The Champagne Safari* by George Ungar gives a fascinating historical portrait of the rebel Charles Bedaux. This is a biography of an American that takes us around the world, but the Canadian connection convinces me this is a Canadian documentary classic. This is a film that intrigues us by the scale of the protagonist, a larger than life character whose life plays as if on a stage, but whose final act ends tragically. The film is crafted with artistry, notably by the use of long forgotten nitrate footage. The film joins a precious genre of documentaries capitalizing on rediscovered archival film footage.

***Citizen Bedaux***

*The Champagne Safari* tells the story of Charles Bedaux. An American immigrant, he managed to escape the world of manual labour by advising foreman and managers on the means to greater work place productivity. He established himself as an efficiency expert in the years following World War One, first in America, and then internationally. By studying the actions and rhythms of labourers he advised factory owners on ways to improve the productivity of individual tasks. Charlie Chaplin would mock this sort of scientific management of labour in his film *Modern Times*, but it would prove to be a growth industry, netting Bedaux millions and allowing him to integrate himself into the social circles of the affluent and internationally powerful. The rise of this man, with such a grand personality, reminds one of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*. He seemed uninhibited by obstacles to business; risks were worth it and he enjoyed the lifestyle of success.

As he climbed higher in social and financial standing, he and his wife Fern supplemented their work with exotic adventure travel; even in this he sought to build a reputation. The adventure that takes central place in the documentary is Bedaux's expedition to become the first person to traverse the Canadian Rocky Mountains by off road vehicle. It would be an ambition that outpaced reality, a perfect metaphor for Bedaux's life during World War Two that Bedaux's efforts to protect his international business interests, and increase his reputation, would lead to trouble. Germany's rise to power created tensions for international business of all sorts. Bedaux found the Germans were looking to other means for generating patriotism and increasing productivity. It was during the war years that Bedaux found it necessary to shore up his relationship with the Germans, to protect his interests. In his mind he thought he could align himself with both the Nazis and with the Allied countries, without any conflict of interest.

To please the Germans, and to continue his climb for greatness, he proposed an epic industrial project, to create a railway and pipeline across Saharan Africa. It would prove to be a Faustian decision. With the fall of the German regime at the end of World War Two, Bedaux was caught on the wrong side of the war's ending. He was arrested and taken into American custody and convicted of treason; Bedaux would later take his own life. Bedaux exemplifies the extreme capitalism of this industrial era and could be considered a forerunner of the greed, excesses and collapses of many financial institutions in recent years.

### ***Epic Personality and the Canadian Frontier***

Bedaux will seem familiar to Canadian audiences because we are attracted to these iconic celebrities of the past and present. Whether a TV series on Great Canadians, or the best selling books by Peter C. Newman and Pierre Berton, we love biography, and the grander the personality, the better. Newspapers and magazines routinely cycle through articles of prominent Canadians, even more so luminaries from American popular culture. There will always be a Bethune, Trudeaus, and Conrad Black that capture our imagination.

Something happens when delusions of grandeur are fed by personal achievement and success. As outliers like Bedaux succeed, they are compelled to fix their gaze on conquering greater obstacles and reaching for greater renown. Bedaux set his sites on the Canadian frontier and his cross-country journey; the unanticipated challenge would foreshadow the final chapter of his life. His entrepreneurial goal to build the pipeline across Africa to the ocean, if built, would garner him lasting fame, and would certainly prove lucrative. This dream from the 1940s isn't that far removed from the aspirations of CEOs currently studying the Tar Sands of Alberta and drawing up legal and engineering blueprints for pipelines to the sea.

Bedaux's ambitions and his adventures are so ripe for comparison. Is he like Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*, striking out in grand style, pointing his Citroen vehicles over the Canadian mountains? His expedition is fully (and unnecessarily) equipped with all the wants these upper class travellers could anticipate, with champagne and caviar by the case. It wouldn't be the first time someone without knowledge of northern conditions would be shocked by the realities of the Canadian north. Franklin's journey in search of the North West Passage comes to mind.

### ***The Tradition of Cinematic Re-discovery***

When I first heard of the documentary, it was the story of the re-discovery of Bedaux's nitrate film that captured my attention. I was beginning my own journey of re-discovering another important piece of Canadian film history with my work on the 1920 Hudson's Bay Company film *The Romance of the*

*Far Fur Country*. Ungar's work to uncover the nitrate footage of Bedaux's Canadian journey joins the historical record of nitrate film re-discovery and restoration.

It is suspected that 90 percent of silent films are lost films. When lost or forgotten reels of nitrate film surface, it is always big news. In the 1990s, renovators of a toy shop in rural England discovered several metal milk canisters containing the negatives of the silent film pioneers Mitchell & Kenyon. In the 1978, over 500 discarded silent films from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were discovered in an abandon swimming pool in Dawson City, Yukon. In the 1990s, George Ungar, after reading about Charles Bedaux's journey and his unfinished film of the trek, began a search for any surviving film footage of Bedaux's Canadian mountain expedition. Through Ungar's efforts, the nitrate footage was brought to Canada, a cinematic time capsule of the Canadian northwest.

### ***Documentary Artistry***

George Ungar's *The Champagne Safari* is a celebrated film and worth a closer study. Before this film, the Bedaux story was documented in various biographies, but references to the moving images of the Canadian sub-arctic journey were ambiguous. *The Champagne Safari* exemplifies a too often forgotten part of the artistry of documentary film: Ungar's is a well researched and well illustrated film thanks to his securing the nitrate film reels of Bedaux's journey.

I was privileged to talk with Ungar on the phone in my preparations for this curatorial essay, and gained a new appreciation for his hard work to complete the film. Ungar was assisted by author/biographer Jim Christy for additional leads on Bedaux relatives & friends in Europe in hopes of uncovering the unfinished film footage from the Canadian expedition. The forgotten nitrate film reels had not been seen for decades, were rumoured lost, possibly destroyed by fire years ago. Initial contact with the widow of the expedition's Citroen mechanic provided one roll of 16mm B-Roll footage. Family and friends of Bedaux were initially cautious of being involved in the film, and offered few suggestions on where the nitrate film could be found. The plucky Ungar persisted in tracking down 6 hours of 35mm nitrate film in the possession of Herbert Bigelow, a longtime friend of Bedaux's wife Fern. Ungar's discovery of the film footage lead to its relocation to Canada where the nitrate was transferred to safety film by the Library and Archive of Canada.

During production, Ungar visited northern Alberta and British Columbia to retrace some of the locations of the Bedaux expedition. The documentary film crew were treated as heroes. The locals, some being former crew for the Bedaux expedition, remembered the trek, but had only seen still photos. They were elated at the thought of archival film footage of themselves and their land. The visit to these

northern communities contributes several important interviews with horsemen, giving first hand accounts of the mountain expedition.

The subarctic expedition serves as the perfect metaphor of Bedaux life. The editing effectively cuts back and forth between the journey and his business efforts. As he gets deeper into the troubles of the mountains, he is getting closer and closer to the dilemmas that emerge from World War Two. The editing packs a tight narrative, facing the challenge of extensive details to exposit. Despite the complex story, the archival footage, B-Roll and effective music choices help maintain a fluid pace. What is most striking is the measured tone given to the depiction of the controversial Bedaux. There are plenty of critical voices and dissenters for his life and work, yet the judgment of his character plays out in the decisions made at the end of his life.

### **Conclusion**

Bedaux's goal in life is to attain wealth, acclaim and prominence, yet his life would come to a bitter ending. Ungar's film brings Bedaux's fascinating story back to public memory, renewing the attention Bedaux craved in life, though certainly not in the way he expected. Bedaux's life was large, and his ambitions even larger. He is the sort of character that will always appeal to Canadians. Ungar's acclaimed documentary *The Champagne Safari* fits within our tradition of biography and documentary portraiture. There is still a mountain named after Bedaux in the Lloyd George Glacier Region of BC. A mountain of nitrate film canisters of his epic journey now resides in the Library and Archives of Canada. *The Champagne Safari* as with the various biographies of Bedaux provides a fascinating glimpse of this complex and tragic character.

### **Background on Kevin Nikkel**

Kevin Nikkel is a writer, producer, and director based in Winnipeg, Canada. He completed a Bachelor of Education at University of Manitoba and a Master of Adult Education from St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia. His dramatic, animated and documentary films have played internationally at festivals, on television and on the web. He is active in the film community of Winnipeg, contributing to *Playing in Traffic*, *Catacomb Microcinema*, the Winnipeg Cinematheque, and the Winnipeg Film Group. He is currently in development for a feature film called "*The Return of the Far Fur Country*", a documentary uncovering a forgotten silent film about the Hudson's Bay Company, stored in the British Film Institute's archives.