2 Copies

February 28, 1973

To: JPK
From: LBS

Re: Evaluation of CHOICES Films

What I shall tryto do here, in the last moments before I turn to packing for New Zealand, is to get down on paper ratherhastily the substance of our talk yesterday about our film experience. What this amounted to~~eventually~~ essentially was an elaboration on two points which Bill made in his January 15th report to you, and of a third point about which I expect he will be writing to you shortly. When I get backto New York I hope to go into the whole matter more comprehensively.

As Bill noted in his memo, if we ~~XX~~ had the chance to start all over again I still wouldn't know whom to recommend to do the films. And, in fact, when Carol Taylor of the Audubon Society came seeking just such advice last week, this is what I was forced to ~~XXXX~~ tell her. But we did talk for quite a while and she did seem to find helpful my advice based on RPA's experience.

What this amounted to mainly was the caution that when you are viewing film with an eye to hiring a producer you must look far beyond what meets the eye. Film-making is a team project, and thecredits that roll by at the end are at best a very proximate indicator of who was really responsible for that particular combination of images and sound you have been taking in. The man who is showing ~~XXX~~ the film to you will probably be wearing the hat of executive producer -- i.e., businessman and promoter. He may be equally or even more comfortable wearing other hats--director, writer, editor; butin fact it is ~~XXX~~ extremely difficult in a large-scale project to combine these functions with the chores of ~~XXX~~ an executive producer. So if this is the role he means to play, what is really important to determine is the identity and the quality of the men who are going to be working with you day by day to translate your ideas into a film. And this, for an outsider -- especially for a client fresh to the world of film -- is not easy information to come by.

Nor is it easy either for an outsider unfamiliar with the organization of the film world to judge what he is really buying for a particular sum of money. For example, the two most serious competitors for our job were something over $100,000 apart in the prices they quoted. The difference here was mainly in the amount of administration and coordination felt to be necessary on a project of our scope, and in the number of specialists it was felt would be required. For the extra $100,000 what we were promised was a man who would spend full time monitoring and coordinating the production of the five separate films, plus a full-time writer-researcher on each film. For the lower figure, the executive producer would double along with the producers as writer on all the films and at the same time be responsible for the coordinating role. In both instances we were promised a coordinating editor as well--and on the team we chose this was supposed to be John Carter, "the best in the business". But in fact we never saw John Carter after our first meeting, and though all the editors worked under the same roof it was pretty much on a competitive basis, with each trying to get the best shots for his own show and exhibiting little concern for the requirements or the quality of the project as a whole.

Again, a great deal depends upon the particular combination of talents possessed by the individual men who take on the job. By and large, the producers on our films were not very competent as writers--certainly not for our sort of material; but that does not mean it would be impossible to find a producer who was. Not do I believe that the kind of chaos which wasted so much time and money on our project is necessarily a reflection of cost-cutting. Knowing quite a bit about the nature of that waste, I do believe that in the right hands films of genuine distinction could have been produced well within the budget quoted.

But since even now after two years I cannot say for sure who might possess these "right hands", I agree completely with Bill that the best bet would be to have a man of recognized stature in the film world working with you, theclient, from beginning to

end -- first to help in recruiting the right talent for each of the various jobs to be done and then to oversee their work and keep it moving smoothly on the right track. No executive producer will welcome this kind of supervision if he can avoid it, but it was pretty clear that none would turn down the job on that account either, and in fact that they would have respected usaa great deal more had we had the perspicacity to make this move.

My only difference with Bill on this point is one of emphasis, and even that may be simply a matter of semantics. Where he talks of "watching costs and efficiency" -- essentially an auditor function -- I see the function of this expert more as one of organizing the effort from the start in such a way as to assure the quality desired at minimum cost. While there are fixed union rules for each craft operation involved (camera work, editing, etc.), in an industry as subject to uncertainty as this one special arrangements can always be made inexchange for a guarantee of steady work on a major project. Such arrangements with the right people can work out to everyone's advantage, but with the wrong people they can be the falsest kind of economy. One of the reasons that the editing of the housing film went so long and so far up a false trail was that Paul Stein (as I was given to understand) had agreed to take the job on a fixed fee rather than on a time basis, which made a change in mid-stream an expensive proposition. Similarly, a good part of the dissension between the executive producer and the producer on that film was that normally the producer-director expects to have a major say in choosing the men he works with, but in this instance he found himself saddled with a cameraman and an editor both working under special arrangement with the executive producer -- and both by-passing his directions in the knowledge that he had no power to fire them.

My point is that with a coordinator who really knew the ropes on our side many complications such as these could either have been avoided altogether or ironed out much more quickly.

But I agree with Bill that this expert of ours would be essentially a technical man; a man capable, certainly, of understanding the points we wanted to get across, but not expected to interpose between us and the film team in matters of content. So how do we get the film team really and truly to engage that content -- or, more accurately, in trying to ~~XXXX~~ pick the right men for the job, how do we satisfy ourselves that they actually have engaged it and are ready to go on from there to make a contribution in their own special area beyond what we ourselves might make?

Bill's feeling is that we would have been better off had we focussed our initial effort upon the requirements of the television programs rather than upon those of the books, and then built the books up later. In other words, just the reverse of the process we followed. Given the particular team we ended up working with I think he is probably right; but in effect what this would have amounted to was playing earlier the role we eventually had to come in and play in the end as a rescue team. Thinking in more general and ideal terms--i.e., assuming it to be possible to find film men prepared to deal sympathetically and intelligently with our material--I'm not sure we wouldn't be best off following the route we did, though perhaps a bit less pedantically. That is, we lay out the points that have to be made and leave it to the film people to translate these into their medium.

But to be sure they are indeed capable of translating it we must demand that they tell us not simply what they mean to say on their sound track but also what they mean to show -- how through a fresh and imaginative combination of picture and sound they propose to arrive at a presentation appropriate to their medium and its large audience which enhances rather than diminishes our meaning.

Maybe this is asking for the moon, but that's what I would be shooting for if we ever try it again.

Sincerely,

Louis B. Schlivek