

# The big fizz

>> Filmmaker Irene Angelico takes on corporate giant Coca-Cola



THINGS DON'T ALWAYS GO BETTER WITH COKE

PHOTO BY GUNTHER GAMPER

by MATTHEW HAYS

The next time you take a sip of cola, think about this. All that syrup, acid, sugar and god knows what else isn't just a beverage—it's an institution. If a documentary about what exactly lies at the heart of Coca-Cola Corp. sounds dull, you may be surprised this season. The Montreal filmmaking team of Irene Angelico and Abbey Neidik have created a three-part, three-hour examination of one of America's largest companies, to air tentatively this March on the CBC.

*The Cola Conquest* (formerly known as *The Big Fizz*) examines Coca-Cola, from its humble beginnings (intended as a solution to morphine addiction) to its mega-multinational status as the official sponsor of the 1996 Olympics. Director Angelico has laced the doc with a vast array of information: Martin Luther King, Jr. once urged a boycott of Coke by blacks because of the company's terribly poor record of hiring racial minorities; our contemporary image of Santa Claus is due in large part to Norman Rockwell's paintings, commissioned by the company to sell their drink; President Nixon helped get arch-rival Pepsi its monopoly over distribution in the Soviet Union while he was in the White House, one that would last until Glasnost some 20 years later... the cola facts go on and on.

But *The Cola Conquest* isn't mere trivia. Angelico examines the political, social and religious overtones that the beverage has come to embody. At the end of the 20th century, Angelico concludes, Coca-Cola has come to symbolize both America and capitalism. In the third part of the series, titled "Coca-colonization," the film explores perhaps the most disturbing elements of Coke's imperial forays into the economies of developing nations. And no doc on Coke would be complete without an examination of its century-old battle with arch-rival Pepsi, and the politics that accompany it (because Pepsi was cheaper and drunk more often by the poor, it was known as "the Nigger Cola" in the U.S. It also became the pejorative nickname for the Québécois).

"We have no idea how present Coke is in our daily lives," says Angelico from her expansive Parc Avenue offices. "Walking down the street, going to a movie, watching TV—not just the advertisements,

but even the product placements. Coca-Cola has gone beyond being a product and become an icon in our lives."

Angelico's film, produced by her and Neidik's company, DLI Productions, came about when a friend of theirs announced his intention to write a book. "He was bouncing around a bunch of ideas and a book on Coca-Cola was one of them. I told him that if he wrote the book, I'd be interested in doing a movie on it."

The friend was Mark Pendergrast, and his book, *For God, Country and Coca-Cola: The Unauthorized History of the Great American Soft Drink and the Company that Makes It*, drew accolades when it was published in 1993. Angelico and co-writers Howard Goldberg and Paul Cowan use Pendergrast's book as a point of inspiration and update the further adventures of the corporation throughout the film.

While *The Cola Conquest* has an irreverent aura about it, it is not, Angelico insists, a broadside against Coke. "This is not an attack on Coca-Cola. We've tried to give them credit where they deserve credit. It's not like *Roger & Me*—it's not a left-wing filmmakers' attack on a corporation. It's not us vs. them. But it's not objective reportage either. We looked at what we think the history is, from our point of view."

Angelico says much of the preparation for the film, which includes numerous hilariously retro clips of TV ads for Coke, came in the form of lengthy consultation with lawyers. "Trademark and copyright are areas that are very fuzzy and there's an awful lot of different interpretation around them. It's not as clear-cut as other parts of the law. The other thing is, corporations are extremely well protected. It's much easier to comment on government than it is to comment on corporations, which I think is very dangerous in a democracy. They're much better protected and everyone is afraid from the top to the bottom, from the broadcasters to the people who own the stands on the street.

"It's OK to use the ad footage as long as you're commenting on it. That's the law here and in the U.S." Thus one of the most intriguing bits of editing in *The Cola Conquest* comes when shots of Coke's

late-'60s Global Village-esque "I'd like to teach the world to sing" ad campaign are juxtaposed with footage of anti-Vietnam war protests by youth of the time.

Angelico, whose extensive award-winning documentary background began with a gig at the NFB's now-defunct women's Studio D, says backing for *The Cola Conquest* turned out to be surprisingly simple. "This film was an easy sell. Coke as a metaphor for America was something people saw right away. We wrote a proposal up, met with an official from [Britain's] Channel 4, and after a 45-minute lunch had \$450,000 in backing and a commitment. They wanted us to start right away." That was almost three years ago, and since then the CBC has come on board as well. Angelico says the final budget, \$1.8 million, isn't quite as much as they'd hoped, but has managed to suffice.

"With past films we're used to the phone company threatening to unhook the phone," she jokes. "This was a bit easier."

With extensive research into Coke's history and influence, Angelico says one of the major revelations for her was just how much the company is feared and revered. "I had no idea how pervasive the power and influence of corporations are. When the city of Atlanta was preparing for the '96 Olympics, much of the land needed was bought up by Coke, in a rather bad neighbourhood, and one of the buildings destroyed was a homeless shelter. Nobody was willing to go on record to talk about what was going on. Someone spoke very well and with great anger about what was happening, but when I asked him to go on the record, he said no way, because Coke would come and take his stand away. Which they wouldn't do, but that was his perception. Many people at all levels declined to be interviewed, saying they would only do so if they got the OK from Coke.

"The same thing happened with a U.S. broadcaster. They loved the film, but they said if there's even a .5% chance that they'd have trouble with Coca-Cola they weren't going to take that chance. That amazed me, the power of that influence." ☉