



# Peter Desbarats . . . man on the move

By Tony Lofaro

No two days are alike for a television journalist.

But Peter Desbarats, Chief of Global Television's Ottawa Bureau thrives on the daily spontaneity and excitement of covering the political scene in Ottawa.

"Today is about an average busy day," he said on the day of his interview. His daily routine is fairly unpredictable and hectic, like today as he covered the first televised hearings of a Senate committee into the lessening of penalties for drug possession.

After some film is shot on the hearings, it is sent out to be processed. Meanwhile, Desbarats returns to the Global bureau at 150 Wellington Street to write the script. When the processed film comes back, Desbarats must then time and read the script over the edited film.

After that is completed, the film is shelved until it is used on the evening newscasts. But, before the first newscast, Peter Desbarats has some free time, so he usually tries to relax.

"If it's a long day, I usually like to go over to the Skyline Hotel pool to relax," he says.

But free time is something he doesn't have a great deal of. His day can sometimes last about 12 hours, like today, and with that schedule, it doesn't allow much idle time.

Peter Desbarats is already an accomplished author, having written two books, *The State of Quebec* and *The Canadian Illustrated News* (a publication founded by his great-grandfather, George Desbarats, who lived in Ottawa and served as Queen's Printer).

He is currently finishing a book on Rene Levesque, which he hopes to complete before the next Quebec election. Desbarats chose to write about Rene Levesque because he describes him as "an honest politician, hard-working, enthusiastic and a interesting character in Quebec."

Besides this, he has also written a number of children's books, one of which, *Gabrielle and Selena*, has been made into an animated film. He also edited a collection of Labrador Indian legends, entitled *What They Used to Tell About*.

Another current project is a hour-long radio script for the CBC *Bush and Salon* series. It is based on a diary his great-grandmother kept during her years in Ottawa telling about "terribly boring" evenings at Sir John A. Macdonald's home.

But Peter Desbarats is mainly known for his Global anchorman duties, which he shares with Peter Trueman. He enjoys his role of anchorman because he says it gives him a freedom and opportunity to comment on the news.

"Personally, I find writing my own copy and commenting on the news more interesting than just reading someone else's copy," he says. "My job gives me a chance to make my own evaluation of the news," he adds. "On other networks, the newsreader is still a rather bland figure who is obviously reading material that other people have prepared for him."

The reaction to the hour-long newscast has been extremely favorable. He has received numerous good comments about the program and one viewer complimented him and the Global news team because they made the news seem more lively.

"You have to compete for the viewer's attention, so you must have an interesting and good newscast," says Desbarats. Recently, The Citizen TV critic Frank Penn heralded Global's news as "one of the brightest and most useful innovations to be brought to the Canadian television screen." Penn also added, "Peter Desbarats and Trueman form an uncannily complimentary duo and make up one of the best news teams on the screen."

But what are the pressures of a television journalist? Peter Desbarats says "there is a time pressure in television and everyday is a task." He maintains the technical side of television is very time consuming — right from the time the story is written, the film shot and edited and until it reaches the screen.

But he enjoys the pressure of television and sees no difference between working to a deadline for television or newspapers. Desbarats knows well the pressures of the newspaper world, having worked for several Canadian newspapers.

He was born and raised in Montreal and he decided to enter journalism because "I knew in school I had an ability to write."

He first joined the Canadian Press in Montreal and then moved over to the Montreal Gazette and then the Reuter's wire news agency in London. He came back to join The Winnipeg Tribune as their legislative reporter. He admitted that those four years at the Tribune were the best experience for him.

In 1960, he came back to Montreal to work for The Star as political and feature writer. In 1966 he was the editor of the

short-lived, *Parallel* magazine, which he describes as a 'Canadian' Ramparts magazine.

He then became host of a CBC program called *Hourglass* — a nightly public affairs show produced in Montreal. In 1970, he came to Ottawa as the Ottawa editor for The Toronto Star and was a nationally syndicated columnist.

He joined Global in the fall of 1973. Since the first Global newscast on Jan. 6, 1974, Desbarats has received a considerable amount of TV exposure which he says is important to build a rapport with the audience.

Now that Desbarats has become solidly entrenched as the co-anchorman on the nightly news, it has meant moving back to Ottawa which he wasn't fond of. "I hated Ottawa in my first year here, but now I have come to appreciate the city, particularly the Glebe where I live. I've also rediscovered skiing and skating since moving to Ottawa," he adds.

He fancies himself as a gourmet cook and he does a lot of cooking at home on weekends. But he criticizes Ottawa's lack of good restaurants. "There are a couple of good restaurants in Ottawa, but they are too expensive. You can eat just as much and less expensively in Montreal," he said.

He enjoys reading science-fiction novels and is somewhat of a theatre buff, having acted in several lunch-theatre productions in Montreal. He is also the author of a play entitled *The Great White Computer* about the destruction of the computer by black students at Sir George Williams University.

Peter Desbarats is a stable performer and has now become a permanent fixture on late-night Canadian television. His style is low-key, direct and pleasant, but at times he does manage to crack a chuckle or throw a laugh our way. His professional journalistic abilities are more than evident as he comfortably alternates between newscaster, interviewer or commentator on the news program. He is content working at Global, because it gives him an opportunity to grow with the network, which is spreading westward, with plans for more stations in the future in Winnipeg, Edmonton and Vancouver.

As for Peter Desbarats, he would also like to grow as a writer and possibly do more freelance writing. "Because of the aspects of my job, I don't have a lot of time to write, but I enjoy writing and I would like to spend more time at it."