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Candid emotion makes film on business jet stimulating

By Stephen Gauer

JOURNAL REPORTER

To the strains of an Baroque string concerto, a twin-engine business jet soars across the Mojave Desert while the camera tracks every roll, dive and wingtip flutter. If it's possible to turn a piece of sophisticated machinery into a love object, then the camera has succeeded — by consummating the romance in front of our very eyes.

The plane we're watching is the Challenger. It's built by a Canadian company called Canadair, which gambled millions upon millions of dollars, most of which were supplied by the government, on the notion that a market existed for a very fast, very efficient business jet. The gamble paid off brilliantly.

First flights

The gamble is the subject of an NFB documentary, *The Challenger: An Industrial Romance*, airing tonight on the CBC at 8 p.m. The one-hour special, written, directed and narrated by filmmaker Stephen Low, is an intimate portrait of the conception, birth and first flights of the plane.

REVIEW

TELEVISION: *The Challenger: An Industrial Romance*, tonight at 8 on CBC

Success stories in the Canadian aerospace industry are so few and far between that it's worth paying attention to the Challenger. The original concept came from American aerospace wizard Bill Lear, who created the Lear Jet back in the 1960s but had trouble getting support in the U. S. for a new design. He turned to the Canadian government for support. The government had just taken over the failing Canadair company from an American firm; the Challenger project was a chance to revive the company and keep skilled talent in Canada.

Chief designer Harry Halton lay near death in a hospital when he was brought in to work on the new plane. Three years later, when the plane made its first flight, Halton's wife, tears in her eyes, turned to the camera and credited the project with saving his life.

That kind of candid emotion makes the *Challenger* film something more than just a documentary record of the birth of an airplane. The NFB camera crews have an incredible ability to capture all the telling moments in a story, without ever intruding on the very action they're trying to film. Whether it's Halton discussing certain design characteristics of the plane, or a salesman explaining the slick ad campaign used to sell the Challenger to American buyers, the cameras allow the subject to do their own dramatizing, to reveal themselves to the viewer.

Beauty and grace

The NFB has refined these documentary techniques to the point where technique has become invisible. Low tells the story in a rather casual, off-hand manner; he's not a polished narrator and at times the tone of his voice is unpleasant. He lets the subjects in the film do the boasting — "The Challenger is the greatest idea ever built with Canadian money," says the company president, Fred Kearns — and lets the camera convey

the beauty and grace of the airplane itself.

And along the way, we get some insight into modern marketing practices, as the Canadair salesmen plot their sales strategy, and we see some of the dynamics at work in creating a multi-million dollar aircraft. The pressures on the Challenger team were enormous — to get the needed financing, Canadair had to find 50 customers for a plane that was still on the drawing board — so it makes sense that Low devotes so much footage to the first test flight, and those brilliant scenes of the Challenger going through its paces above the California desert.

The Challenger is a success story. So is the NFB. The matching of one with the other is close to perfect. And Low's one-hour film is proof that industry and romance aren't necessarily antithetical concepts, even if admiring a sleek jet aircraft seems like an adolescent pursuit. Those final 10 minutes should stimulate the air-born fantasies of everyone in the audience.