

A NOTE OF CAUTION

**TOMMY HUNTER ...
RALPH BENMERGUI ...
VARIETY SHOWS HAVEN'T BEEN
KIND TO CBC STARS LATELY.
BUT IN THE FACE OF UNCERTAINTY,
RITA MACNEIL SINGS ON**

By LOUISE LEGER

It's hard to believe CBC variety producer Sandra Faire and songstress Rita MacNeil have been working on the same show. After taping the first four installments of *Rita and Friends* in as many days, CBC producer and co-executive producer Faire is pumped. She talks at break-neck speed, emphatically using words like "passionate," "exciting," and responding to questions with "Well, at least I'm still alive!" and "Boy, it's a lot of work!" interspersed with bursts of laughter, an apparent symptom of elation combined with exhaustion. The ever-gracious MacNeil, in contrast, is a model of calm, a mixture of "what-will-be-will-be," humility and measured hope. "I can only do my best," she says simply and, "You never know unless you try."

Both may be responding in their own way to the knowledge that, in the world of CBC television lately, a variety show is no sure thing. Tommy Hunter was unceremoniously cancelled after 27 years of fine ratings. Ralph Benmergui lasted two troubled seasons. Still, if any team of producer and star can reverse the trend, it's this one. Faire is considered the queen of variety specials — she counts the top-rated *Anne Murray's Family Christmas*, and Kurt Browning's *You Must Remember This* among her many credits, and also produced MacNeil's *Once Upon a Christmas*, which garnered an impressive two million viewers. MacNeil's Cape Breton charm and rich vocals sell records and pack music halls across the country. And despite their contrasting demeanors they share, says Faire, a common creative vision.

By the end of this fourth night of long taping sessions at CBC studios, they share something else — aching bones. Faire is wearing a knee brace she said was required after her knee started giving out earlier in the week from all the running around she does during taping. It's almost midnight and MacNeil, who has been wearing high-heeled black pumps most of the evening, has now donned a pair of comfy flat sandals that look odd with her silky blue evening ensemble but luckily won't show on camera.

On the set, with the studio audience in place, Faire runs back and forth from a monitor to MacNeil, who bows her head in concentration listening to advice and feedback. With very little fanfare, the evening's star attraction, **Joni Mitchell**, comes out to do her two songs for the show, performing each one twice to get it just right. MacNeil sings "Bring it to Me," a rousing number from her *Thinking of You* album, backed by a large choir. Then she tells a homespun story of the importance of being there for someone in times of trou-

ble and launches into "I'll Be There." She misses a cue, forgets the story once and even pokes fun at herself for mixing up the words to the song. Then the East Coast's Barra MacNeils perform, followed by Juno-award-winner Cassandra Vassik.

It becomes obvious that, though called a variety show, *Rita and Friends* is primarily about one thing: Canadian music. There are no juggling acts, no political impersonations, no top-ten lists and no host-guest banter. The variety of guests however — including Jann Arden, Rock Voisine, the Waltons, Jeff Healey, Michell Wright, John McDermott and East Indian dance band Punjabi by Nature — makes one wonder if the show may be trying to appeal to a too-wide slate of viewers. After all, these are the days of narrowing target audiences, a network for every special interest group. But Faire is unequivocal on the show's aim. "What we're trying to say is,

"What other country has this variety of music?" There is no other place in the world where you have such diversity and we hope Canadians will come to appreciate it and love it."

Says MacNeil: "I've always said I like all kinds of music. It's nothing for me in my shows to pull out an old rock and roll number, which I dearly love to do. I'll be presenting a diverse group of talent and, where appropriate, singing with them."

Faire admits that neither she nor the CBC brass have a clue as how the show will do in the ratings. "Nobody ever knows," she

says, as if confiding a secret. "Some of the shows I was most proud of didn't do so well in the ratings, and some that I wasn't so proud of did really well. I never thought the k.d. lang or Anne Murray specials would get such good ratings. Who knew?"

And who knew Benmergui would meet such a harsh fate? MacNeil, who admits that beneath her serenity she's in shock that the show is even happening, adds philosophically, "All I can bring to this is me, just who I am. I am not going to try to be anything but myself and hopefully that will work."

■ *Rita and Friends* premieres Friday at 8 p.m.

