



this page, HELENE CLARKSON, the love-torn waitress; right, director HOLLY DALE

serves up

Director Holly Dale has the most enigmatic expression on her face as she watches David Cronenberg deliver his bad-guy

lines on the set of *Blood & Donuts*. Whether it's appreciation for the horror-movie director's acting abilities or bemusement for the scene's outcome — Cronenberg's character is killed by a vampire — is anybody's guess. For some of us gathered in the basement of an old Toronto church, however, watching the man responsible for terrifying us with his

films finally getting his comeuppance, the scene is sweet vindication.

"He's very good in it," smiles Dale months later, shooting finally over. "I think that a part of David really enjoys being the actor because he can be on the set and not have to worry about those things that directors have to worry about. It was quite exciting because

being a director, he understands acting."

Dale is more than just excited. She's elated that her first feature film is finally completed and she can't wait to have the public see it. After all, this is no ordinary Holly Dale picture. *Blood & Donuts* is her first major solo project without partner/collaborator Janis Cole, and her first



Holly Dale

blood & donuts

by Angela Baldassarre

non-documentary effort. A vampire movie, no less.

"I've always been attracted to different genres," explains Dale. "What I was attracted to about *Blood & Donuts* was that it was a fantasy tale. The way I read the script, it was set in no particular time, in no particular place, it didn't have a definition of place in this city. It was a world all onto itself."

Written by Andrew Rai Berzins, *Blood & Donuts* is one of three films being produced by the newly founded Feature Film Project, an initiative of the Canadian Film Centre. Starring Gordon Currie (*Alive, Dieppe*) as displaced vampire Boya, the film is a

strange but humorous tale about love, friendship, and survival. The movie also features Justin Louis (*Urban Angel*) as a cabbie, Helene Clarkson (*The Bambi Bembenek Story*) as a love-torn waitress, and veteran Fiona Reid as the vengeful lover.

"Underneath, this is a very tender story about trading in loneliness for friendship," explains Dale. "It's not unlike the documentaries Janis Cole and I made, where all the characters may seem like anti-heroes. In *Hookers on Davie*, Michelle – who is an outrageous drag queen, half woman, half man – inside is a very warm and wonderful human being. Thematically, I think

Blood & Donuts is in keeping with the work I've always done, trying to dispel stereotypes."

"There's a definite feminist brush stroke throughout the whole piece," says Dale, "but it's not written as a feminist project. I think as women, we do get typecast in doing *womanly* kinds of things. I was surprised when Colin [Brunton, executive producer of the Feature Film Project] came to me with this project. I would expect to be handed a nice love story or a movie about a mother and daughter."

Gender was never an issue in deciding who should direct *Blood & Donuts*, says Brunton. The only real requirement was



DAVID CRONENBERG,
the crime lord

easy life. Having left home at 15, she, like many teen-agers, learned survival on the streets of Toronto. "I don't remember why," she answers when asked how she ended up on Yonge Street. "I came from a broken home. Boring stuff like that." Dale, with the help of fellow Yonge Streeters, managed to enroll in film school at Sheridan College, where she changed her major from animation to media arts.

"I wanted to do drama," she remembers, "but I didn't know what to make a film about. My teacher said, 'Why don't you make a film about what you know best?' Not knowing what that meant, I thought it was a great idea." What she knew best was the world of massage parlours, drug-dealing and prostitution. She found in her schoolmate, Vancouver-born Cole, the perfect partner to make the film with. "We met downtown," says Dale. "We were Yonge Street kids. We both came from the same backgrounds. It was attractive to us to put a human face on people who are on the fringes of society."

Relying on personal experiences to make her first film, Dale tracks down a friend of hers who ran a body-rub parlour and who owed her \$300. "I told him, 'Let me make a film in here,' He said, 'okay.' So Janis and I wiretapped all the rooms – with the knowledge of the women who worked there, but not the customers – and we made our fist

women convicted of murder, went on to win the 1982 Genie Award for Best Documentary. *P4W* also brought international attention to Dale's and Cole's abilities to convey complicated life stories in simple, but determined ways. As the late, great Jay Scott once described them, "They grind their axes until they're shiny."

With renewed confidence, the duo embark on an even more ambitious documentary, *Hookers on Davie*, a "humanistic" look at the lives of prostitutes on a Vancouver street. The filming involved equipping the hookers with radio microphones, and holing up in a van across the street, window drapes shrouding the camera. The hookers, meanwhile, never knew when they were being filmed, resulting in one of the most dispassionate but natural pictures of its kind.

A few years later Dale and Cole decide to share with us their experiences as females in the patriarchal world of filmmaking with *Calling the Shots*, a documentary about women filmmakers in the 80s.

"We started making films at a time when it was very difficult for women filmmakers. Not that it's easy now," says Dale. "We've never been embraced by the 'institutions,' sort of speak. We have had some arm's length help from Studio D, but we have never been Studio D filmmakers or part of the Ontario Film

Board scene. Janis and I really struggled."

Although she had been making dramatic shorts, it was as a resident at the Canadian Film Centre that Dale got the desire to direct a dramatic

I think as women, we do get typecast in doing womanly kinds of things. I was surprised when Colin Brunton came to me with this project. I would expect to be handed a nice love story or a movie about a mother and daughter

that the person be a past resident of the Canadian Film Centre. "I read 160 scripts," explains Brunton, "and I had to look at all the short films that have been made – there is over 100 of them now. Weirdly enough, my two favourite short films were *Dead Meat* and *Half-Nelson*, and Steve Hoban (producer on *Blood & Donuts*) produced *Half-Nelson*, and Holly directed *Dead Meat*. I looked at *Dead Meat*, and it's got style and it's very funny. She just seemed ideal for this project. *Blood & Donuts* is very funny and very stylish."

Born into a working class family from Parkdale, Dale has not had a particularly

10-minute film (*Minimum Charge No Cover*). It was 1975 and a bit ahead of its time."

The bug having bitten, the daring duo (Dale directs, Cole writes) apply for their first Canada Council grant as soon as they're out of school. Once the money comes through, they make several shorts, including one about women in Penetanguishene's hospital for the criminally insane (*The Thin Line*), dropping the seed for their first feature, *P4W: Prison for Women*.

Screened at the 1981 Festival of Festivals in Toronto, this film, about inmates of Canada's only federal jail for

feature. "I wanted to start in drama, but I fell in love with documentary," confesses Dale. "I believe that to understand real people and real situations, documentaries work better. There's not much of a difference between being a good documentary filmmaker and being a good dramatic one, you just have to be able to understand people. You have to know what buttons to push and when to push them; you have to be sensitive to the needs of the subjects or the actors."

Dale insists that, even though Cole is not officially involved in *Blood & Donuts*, she has been the major moral

force behind it.

"When Colin gave me the script for *Blood & Donuts*, Janis was my biggest cheerleader to go make it," says Dale. "Somebody else would have said, 'What about our business and our company?' There was none of that. She's been my creative consultant throughout the whole film. Finding people like that is incredibly rare."


Indeed. But the collaboration is far from over. Although Cole is busy writing television scripts, and Dale will be going back to directing commercials, their dream project is just around the corner. "It's a feature drama based on a script that Janis is writing called *Dangerous Offender*," explains Dale. "It's the story of Marlene Moore, who was the first person in Canada to be named the Most Dangerous Woman in Canada. We met her when we made *P4W*. Janis has written a wonderful screenplay about her life in prison, about how you can't live in prison and you can't live outside of prison. A beautiful story. Marlene's dead now, she committed suicide. She didn't know how to cope outside of prison."

Inquisitive and gracious, with exotic eyes and striking cheekbones, Dale has the self-determined confidence of a person whose road to respect and success has not been easy. When asked if there was ever a moment when she thought it wasn't worth it, she utters a loud sigh. "Every day Janis and I say, 'Should we quit now or should we give it another few years?'" she says seriously. "As we get older you start to think every film is a big struggle, a lot of hard work. You have to really believe in what you want to do otherwise it's just too much hard work."

So where does she see herself in 30 years? "On a beach somewhere," she smiles. "Seriously, 30 years from now I hope I'm still alive. I don't ever want to stop living life because of films. I went through that a couple of years ago. Both Janis and I went through a period of tragedy where a number of very close people to us died and it really made us look at life and realize we were spending all our time on movies. I think there's a balance, and a very wonderful balance, that we both have now. We always take time to enjoy life. Thirty years from now I don't want to find myself stressed out making a film. I want to be making films but I want to also enjoy life." Amen to that ●

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