



**all stills from  
Paint Cans:  
top left and  
bottom, CHAS  
LAWTHER as  
high-level  
bureaucrat,  
Wick Burns;  
right, ANNA  
MARIE  
MACDONALD  
as Inga Von  
Nerthus**



**The writing of  
the novel  
represented a  
cathartic effort  
by Donovan to  
escape the  
political,  
financial, and  
artistic con-  
straints that  
are part of  
being a film-  
maker in this  
country**





# Paul Donovan's Paint Cans

## Fear and Loathing in the Canadian Film Industry

by  
Donna  
Lypchuk

**P**AUL DONOVAN'S *Paint Cans* is a brilliant novel (published by New Star Books of Vancouver two years ago) that nobody in their right mind thought could be a Canadian feature film, despite its witty, well-drawn characters, solid structure, interesting moral dilemma, and surprise ending. It seemed the height of absurdity to imagine that one of our staid, self-conscious government agencies would actually fund an acidic exposé of itself. It is a bit like asking, "Will you pay me to throw this cream pie in your face?" The director of five well-funded feature films (*Buried on Sunday*, *George's Island*, *Def-Con 4*, *The Squamish Five* and *Siege*), Donovan could well appreciate that he might be perceived as biting the hand that feeds him.

Of course, this perception is an example of the very kind of "political" judgement that Donovan satirizes in *Paint Cans*. The novel adds bark to Donovan's bite, claiming, as he does, that Canadian filmmakers are subject to the perverse personal whims and arbitrary decisions made by the Canadian arts bureaucracy. I can't help thinking, however, that some people have missed the point of *Paint Cans* among all the fear and loathing it has created; basically, Do-

novan is saying that nobody, whether you're a bureaucrat or not, can escape making subjective, moral judgments about works of art. Making subjective, moral judgments, of course, is not an admitted part of anyone's job description, especially in the government, but making subjective, moral judgments is... well, it's called politics.

Donovan's portrait of Wick Burns, a high-level bureaucrat at the Canadian Film Development Agency, is an empathetic one, showing how his denial of personal responsibility for the "creative decisions" he makes on a daily basis are political acts not moral ones. It is this constant denial of the self that causes Wick Burns to decay morally to the point where he is inspired to commit murder. Yet, ironically, the true villain in the book is Donovan's spurned filmmaker, a character named Vittorio Musso, who, like the art film he represents, is totally amoral. There is nothing scarier than an amoral, hungry monster who will stop at nothing to get his way, and that is the psychological horror that simmers in the subtext beneath *Paint Cans*' wry humour. The grand theme of the book (and film) is the alienation of the individual – a double-edged sword that takes swipes at both artist and



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bureaucrat. It is about how art and politics don't mix, and how there is no escape from subjective, moral judgments, whoever you are.

The writing of the novel represented a cathartic effort by Donovan to escape the political, financial, and artistic constraints that are part of being a filmmaker in this country. Donovan admits that his previous films do not necessarily represent "what would come naturally." Like so many other Canadian films, they are, for various reasons beyond the control of anyone, "less than they could be." To put it more directly, Donovan describes most Canadian feature films as being, "an imitation of a larger European orthodoxy, guilty of the worst excesses and being nothing more than proto-intellectual exercises landing on the minefield of stupidity." No longer wishing to be part of the system, Donovan took time off to write *Paint Cans*.

Like a lot of working filmmakers, Donovan believes the problem of self-censorship is a flaw in the script development stage that no amount of fine-tuning can fix up. If there is a lot of money involved, filmmakers and writers will tailor their scripts to please whomever is holding the money. It is naive to think that human beings will act otherwise. For Donovan, writing *Paint Cans* was a novelty from which he derived most personal satisfaction from an artistic viewpoint. At the same time, he knew that the book was a risky career move. This is exemplified by the farewell-to-all-that-type quote by Milan Kundera that prefaces the novel: "A writer destroys the house of his life and uses the stones to build the foundation of his writing."

Despite his fears that *Paint Cans* would be treated like some kind of foul literary fart exploding on Canada's politely politically correct arts scene, it was well received by the public as well as the critics. Jay Scott wrote it was, "an accurate, acerbic dissection of our indigenous way of life," and ironically, the book was received graciously by the very organizations that it purported to parody. Ivan Fecan, then head of CBC-TV programming, suggested that Donovan consider making it into a feature film. The head of Telefilm Canada, Pierre DesRoches, also liked the book but, in that strange way that truth has of mimicking fiction, subsequently Telefilm did not put money into the script. Donovan, at that point, decided he would fill the "new house of his life" with mirrors and beyond all odds, produce and direct his own version of *Paint Cans*.

Made for a mere \$765,000 cash (secured from FUND, SuperChannel, CBC-TV, Nova Scotia Film Development Corp., and the NFB's Atlantic Centre), *Paint Cans* was shot in Toronto, Halifax and Cannes, using some leftover stock and a tiny crew that was minus a few indispensable members such as continuity and a second costume person. Donovan was also able to find a lot of free locations, especially in his home business base of Halifax. Some of the most beautiful scenes in the film are shot in a abandoned medieval village that was destroyed in a recent earthquake in Italy.

Although Donovan had no problem dealing with the reality of putting together such a low budget film, claiming, "it was fun, one of the most relaxed, pleasant projects I have ever worked on," he is less enthusiastic about dealing with the reality of the film's release, which is scheduled to begin right after its screening at the Toronto International Film Festival. Asking himself such typical Canadian-producer-type questions as, "Are Canadians going to come out to see a film with no recognizable stars in it?" Donovan can only ruefully speculate on *Paint Cans'* success in commercial release.

Despite the fact that these kinds of low-budget labours of love are rarely lavished with mounds of box office cash, there are some absolutely stellar performances in *Paint Cans*. Comedian Chas Lowther, known to Torontonians as Chuck the Security Guard from Citytv, is perfect as the eternally oppressed, hen-pecked and sexually repressed Wick Burns. Lowther's spooky characterization captures both Wick's wicked and poignant sides. It's like watching a living, breathing Edward Gorey cartoon. Don Francks turns out an equally genuine performance as Wick's cantankerous, war veteran father, tempering his cold demonic caricature of a wrathful Zeus with the pathos of a selfish old man. Playwright Ann Marie MacDonald is wonderful as Wick's first love interest, playing the beautiful, yet pragmatic aging actress, Inga, with a comic spark that explodes on impact when she encounters Wick's bigoted father. Paul Gross' disgusting impersonation of the power-mongering film producer Morton Ridgewell is disturbingly accurate, as is Oliver Lex Gigors' impression of Wick's stupid, hoser brother. Jeff Michael McManus, who Donovan describes as a "grossly under-utilized Toronto actor" is banality incarnate as Vittorio Musso, the

spacy filmmaker who is so nice you just love to hate him. Robin Steven, who also starred in Donovan's *The Squamish Five*, gives a stunning performance as the betraying, lying member of the media who uses Wick's dogged appreciation of her sexual attributes to persuade him to make her boyfriend's film.

The film has savagely funny insights

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which put Donovan in league with such Hollywood satirists as Robert Altman and Billy Wilder. *Paint Cans* opens with a Perry Como tune and WWII footage of RCAF bombers, dropping bombs, making an obvious parallel between "making films" and "bombs." We are introduced to Wick's petty, miserable little life as the evolutionary answer to the dinosaur – once dinosaurs ruled the earth, then the church, then the military, now the bureaucrats. Through the clever use of flashbacks and fantasies, we are then introduced to the four major relationships in his life – his boss, his uptight ex-wife, his stupid little brother, and his father.

Right off the bat, Donovan makes it clear that a large part of Wick's problem comes from those "friends of the public purse," the filmmakers whom he has to deal with on a daily basis, including his old pal Musso, who steps into his office to pitch his meta-film, *Paint Cans*. Hilariously, Wick offers to fund it with meta-money. From here, Donovan goes on to send up script readers; lousy pitches from bad filmmakers; screenings of bad art films; the decor of the restaurants which privileged bureaucrats frequent; the idea that no matter how important you are, you can still be humiliated by your family; trendy names which artists give to their children (such as Tartufo);

what goes on behind closed-door meetings; bilingualism; how artists are rejected by bureaucrats; how bureaucrats back-stab each other; how producers politically strong-arm bureaucrats into backing their films, etc., etc.

After watching *Paint Cans*, one is not surprised that Donovan has found such fertile ground for humour in the

Canadian film industry. It seems so full of manure that anything can grow – except good films. What is just as funny, however, is Wick's personal life. *Paint Cans* is about a guy who just can't seem to get laid and whose weakness for one woman leads him into a sexual pursuit that ends in a kind of "Death in Cannes."

Aside from feeling blessed about the small miracles that enabled the production of *Paint Cans* to take place, Donovan is happy the film was made in Canada. For him, moving to Los Angeles is never an option. It is a place where subjective, moral judgements are cast over films "like fishing nets over helpless dolphins." Donovan also says that, "In some ways, *Paint Cans* is the reverse of *Goin' Down the Road*. A bunch of Torontonians came to Halifax to make a film about Haligonians." This just goes to show that no matter how irreverent a Canadian filmmaker is, he still can't resist comparing his latest film to *Goin' Down the Road*. It's a phenomenon that mysteriously occurs to all Canadian filmmakers at some time or other – and something that I wish Donovan would have satirized in *Paint Cans* ●

Donna Lypchuk is a Toronto freelance writer and regular contributor to the *EYE* weekly.