

It's Not Easy

A black and white photograph showing a close-up of a hand reaching into a dense pile of leaves and twigs. The hand is positioned in the upper left quadrant, with fingers slightly curled. The surrounding environment is a chaotic mix of natural debris, including small leaves, larger branches, and what appears to be a piece of light-colored fabric or paper partially buried under the leaves. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a somber and textured atmosphere.

Being Green



▶ Try this for a premise: Tom Grey is an assiduous and hard-working office employee who has made it his lifetime goal to eliminate sleep. He has developed this philosophy via "Ed's Way," a self-help guru who proscribes sleep as a waste of time. Tom naps for only two hours, but in front of educational TV programs, subconsciously assimilating their information. During the day, Tom begins to get all the more agitated around his wife, Sally, his devoted trainee, Gordon, and especially the ferns in the office. To make matters worse, his company has awarded Tom a free vacation out in the woods. Needless to say, Tom gets lost in the forest, his delusions multiply, and the natural world begins to inflict bizarre and unearthly effects on our hapless protagonist.

Welcome to the world of *Green Peril*, the outlandish feature film debut of Winnipeg filmmaker Lorne Bailey. Like the films of his Winnipeg predecessors, Guy Maddin and John Paizs, Bailey's movie possesses all the necessary ingredients for which Prairie post-modernism has become notorious: obsessive, single-minded characters; bizarre happenings; outlandish surrealism; deadpan, often violent comedy; and the token parodic touch, mimicking the visual styles of yesteryear's screens. *Green Peril* fits thematically with many other Canadian comedies, from *The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood* to *The Events Leading Up to My Death*, pitting a lone, isolated Canadian male against the familiar, but hostile surroundings. Only in this case, not only is our protagonist at odds with the environment he has inherited, but the environment is actually out to get him.

Explaining this film is one thing; trying to get Lorne Bailey to talk about it is another. Bailey, 33, is a quiet person with a demeanour not unlike David Byrne's long lost twin brother. This reticence is a bit problematic, sometimes to a point where it's impossible to get him to say anything. This much I have learned: Lorne Bailey grew up in Winnipeg and took a two-year film course at Confederation College, Thunder Bay. Returning to Winnipeg in 1983, he landed a job as an animation cameraman at Audience West, where he photographed cels for two NFB classics, *Get a Job* and *The Cat Came Back*. He also learned from director

by Patrick Lowe

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John Paizs, whose influence on Bailey's work definitely shows. "When I saw *The Three Worlds of Nick*, that was the first time I saw a visual style come out of the Winnipeg film community that had something new, a distinctive look. Also, he was an out-of-the-trunk filmmaker, producing a variety of things on a shoe-string budget, which really appealed to me." With Paizs as inspiration, Bailey produced his first film, *The Milkman Cometh*, a 20-minute comedy, shot over a weekend for \$5,000. Thanks to distributor Greg Klymkiw's marketing strategies at the Winnipeg Film Group (WFG), the short became a festival hit, winning awards at the Yorkton and American film festivals, plus garnering a Genie nomination for Best Short Film.

Milkman's plot is next to identical to *Green Peril*. Phil Kendell, a model office worker, finds his well-ordered life unravelling after becoming obsessed by the pastoral image of an evaporated milk can label. With its deadpan humour, static shots, post-sync sound and canned music score, *The Milkman Cometh* succeeds in creating an ambience highly reminiscent of tacky industrial training films of the 1970s. It also became one of the WFG's most popular shorts, at a time when the cooperative's popularity and notoriety was at its peak. "Oh, those were exciting times," Bailey chortles with mock enthusiasm. "Oh, those were the days. At that time, the whole Winnipeg independent scene was taking off like a rocket. Maybe two rockets. And it's amazing how it all just fizzled. It might have been a matter of recessionary times,

but there was this resounding quiet instead of a great boom here. Sad, but I hope it's a lull."

With the success of *Milkman*, Bailey was able to secure \$78,000 for *Green Peril*, thanks to the Manitoba Arts Council, CIDO and the NFB. It was produced with a limited crew and budget, with Bailey handling most of the chores himself. "It was essentially a feature shot on a documentary kind of scale. A minimal crew of four or five people, all of them assuming a couple of positions, using existing locations—it's the way to produce a first feature. Otherwise, it would have meant another year of financing to shoot a more ambitious project."

Bailey also worked with actors for the first time. "The story goes that I just went to the Winnipeg Film Group with a butterfly net, looking for whoever was available." He cast Roscoe Handford (from *Dory*), Pierre Naday (*The Exquisite Corpse*) and John Kozak (director of *Hellbent*), a hodgepodge of WFG personalities and filmmakers. And for the lead of Tom, Lorne recruited Kyle McCulloch, the leading man from Guy Maddin's *Archangel* and *Careful*. "Essentially, I was playing a man obsessed with eradicating sleep, so I sat down with Lorne and fine-tuned Tom Grey to be half maniac, half zombie," explains McCulloch. "And by the time the shoot was over, that was how I was in real life."

Shooting commenced in one of the hottest Manitoba summers on record. Events became all the more memorable

while filming in Birds Hill Park, when Kozak and McCulloch ended up walking into a patch of poison ivy. "My right leg got so infected that I was crippled and had to get medication," recalls McCulloch. "But Kozak got the worst because he was in his underwear. So, covered from head to toe with poison ivy, we both wanted to kill Lorne with our bare hands. But in a nice way." Kozak himself has little to say about the shoot, recalling it as "kind of interesting but uncomfortable." But as McCulloch describes it, "The whole thing became a mini-prairie version of *Apocalypse Now*. Kozak was constantly muttering, 'never get off the van, never get off the van.'" However, regardless of the pain or harsh working conditions, no one seems bitter. On the contrary, it seems that they are quite forgiving. "In spite of all the horror, it was a fun experience. I think Lorne's a warm, sweet, and dear individual, and I love him like a brother," declares McCulloch. "On second thought, change that to cousin."

With the shooting over, Bailey spent the next four months on editing and post-production, admittedly the part in which he invests the most effort. As Pierre Naday recalls, "I think he could hardly wait to get the shooting over to get in the editing room, which was really his forte as a filmmaker." However, there were also money problems. Bailey had to chase down extra financing and work as an electrician on bigger shoots. "*Green Peril* was always a spare-time project. Maybe just outside of the hobby stage," he admits. "During this production, I never salaried myself, just in order to complete it on the budget I had."

Now with the film finished, come the usual problems of finding a distributor, doing the festival circuit—in other words, getting *Green Peril* seen. "Which, I guess, is the hope of any Canadian filmmaker—to find an audience in a nation that has not so much a lack of industry, but a lack of venues for finished product. It's a condition that's been around for a long time and it doesn't seem to have any new hopes on the horizon." But as far as Bailey is concerned, if he can't make it in features, there are other routes. "Recently I stumbled across an ad for setting up your own wedding video business. I can even learn it at home in three weeks. And they're even promising *big* returns."

Patrick Lowe is an animator and freelance writer from Winnipeg.



previous page, Kyle McCulloch as Tom Grey: a hard working office employee who has made it his life-time goal to eliminate sleep; left, Kyle McCulloch and Roscoe Handford: "The whole thing became a mini-prairie version of *Apocalypse Now*"