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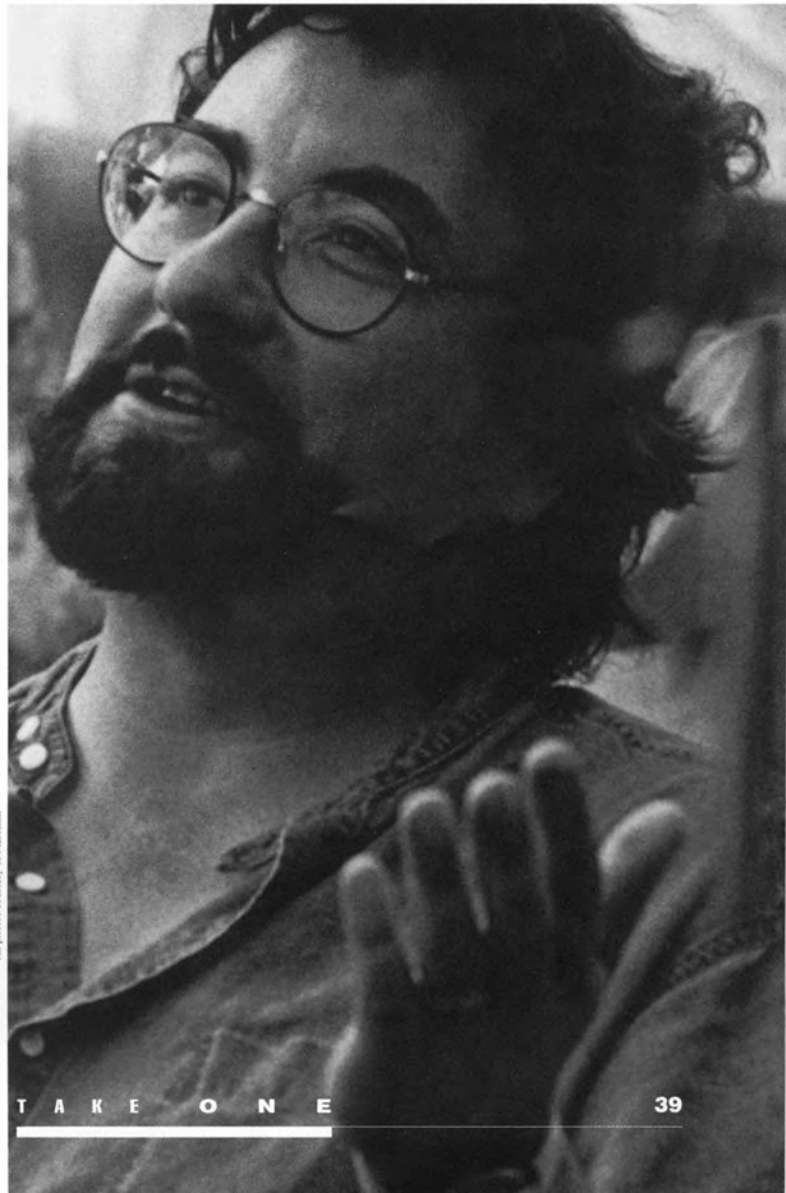
*We knew it was  
going to be good,  
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really thought.*

# OOT for the MOON

By Ian Caddell

It is one of those rare days when filmmaking looks like fun. In the middle of a North Vancouver school cafeteria, a group of young actors and extras is throwing as much food as they can at each other. Standing by are production assistants holding bags full of buns and tomatoes and anything else that might make a mess. It is a kid's dream, one presided over by *Once in a Blue Moon* director Philip Spink, who urges his actors to forget about everything they were ever told by their parents about food fights and to get into the action and have a good time.

Left: Cody Serpa in *Once in a Blue Moon*, below: director Philip Spink.



All photos courtesy of Malidillin

# ONNO

## We were hungry to get the film

**F**rom the moment that Wayne Sterloff had put the finishing touches on British Columbia Film's first New Views competition in 1991, he was arguing that the greatest benefit of the contest—which saw producer/director/writer teams try to get half a million dollars of funding by submitting scripts—could be to the losers. “Some films that might not have been chosen as winners will be chosen down the road because the scripts have been written and are available,” said Sterloff at the time. It turned out he was right. When Mina Shum and Stephen Hegyes lost out to *Impolite* for the second go-round of New Views, they recruited Rose Lam Waddell to work with Hegyes as co-producer and polished their *Double Happiness* presentation in time for a new competition called Premiere. They got \$800,000 from the National Film Board, B.C. Film and Telefilm Canada for that film, which went on to become one of the most successful box office films in the history of the western Canadian industry.

One of the also-rans was *Once in a Blue Moon*, which was submitted by producers Jane Charles and Sarah Duncan, and director Spink. As Sterloff had predicted years earlier, the script drew interest. Interestingly, it was Telefilm Canada that saw something in the script and the group's presentation. Like *Double Happiness*, which won an extra \$300,000 by losing, *Once in a Blue Moon* received \$1.2-million in funding, \$400,000 more than they would have been able to spend had they won Premiere.

Charles was working with Duncan on a script for a film called *Cyberteens in Love*, while simultaneously working at Vancouver-based Shane Lunny Productions. “Phil Spink and I were working together on a show called *Rockers* for Shane Lunny,” recalls Charles. “We were location scouting when Phil started to tell me about the script for *Blue Moon*. It was so funny that I felt that Sarah and I had to do the film. We all got together and talked about how we could make it work and then scrambled to get into the Premiere competition.”

Charles says that when Telefilm came calling, the three jumped at the chance to get the movie made. However, B.C. Film was initially reluctant to offer funding. “We met with Telefilm, and they said, ‘We want you to get the film financed without a distributor,’ but we couldn't do that because B.C. Film was not interested. So, we went back to John Taylor, and he said, ‘Okay, get a distributor on board and reapply to B.C. Film.’ We contacted Alan Morinis, and he brought Malofilm into the project. We gave Alan an executive producer credit, and he put together the financial package. Once Malofilm was in, we put our application back into B.C. Film and started the whole process over again.”

B.C. Film eventually came into the project, but by this time, the spring of 1994, Charles and Duncan were in production with *Cyberteens in Love*. “We didn't know what the time line was because we were still in production for *Cyberteens*,” says Charles. “We had to do *Blue Moon* in May because the crews are too busy to shoot it in the summer. We told Malo, Telefilm and B.C. Film that we couldn't shoot a low-budget feature in the summer.” *Once in a Blue Moon* got made in the spring of 1995. Spink says that there were moments between the application and the first day of shooting when he could have lost faith in the project. But he hung in because almost everyone who had read the script thought it had potential. “You question yourself and say, ‘Will people like it? Will the film ever be made?’ I had it all story-boarded a year before we started shooting and I thought, it's ready, we'll get it done.”

Part of Spink's confidence that the movie would be made and that people would like it, came from his experience with child actors. He had directed several commercials involving children and firmly believed that he knew how to get the scenes that feature children—a list that apparently includes most of the shots—to be the best they could be. “Sometimes, it's hard to direct kids. With children you take on extra responsibility. You have to work harder to get their confidence. They're little human beings. You can't beat the scene to death until you get it right. You can't rely on single

**New Views: The greatest benefit of the contest was ultimately to the losers.**



# made and I think it shows



Above: Deanna Milligan, right, as Emily; below: Simon Baker as Sam.

masters to get kids and adults. A lot of times when you're running into trouble it's because you're trying to do too much."

Spink has a big fan in film editor Frank Irving whose credits include *The Grey Fox*. Says Irving, "Philip gave me so many options, which is surprising with a first-time director. I've worked on a lot of movies that were not great movies, but I am proud of the work I did. I've done some of my best editing on films that were never going to be great, no matter how hard I worked or no matter how good I was. I've worked hard on *Blue Moon*, but there are so many elements that work here. I can't make mistakes."

For producers Duncan and Charles, the biggest mistake would have been to give up on the project after they lost out in the initial competition. "I don't think we would have been as careful if we had won," Charles says. "It would have been more like working in a grant situation. We had to work hard at getting the financing and the distribution on board, which made it more of a struggle. We were hungry to get the film made and I think it shows. The people who were involved know that it was a big risk for us. It was our money and we put a lot on the line. And because we believed in it, everyone else could see that it was an important project."

They still believe in it. After watching the dailies, Duncan said she found herself continually crying despite being involved in the project from the beginning. "There are so many things that are magical and Disney-like and then there are things that get you right in the heart and you cry. That, to us, is a surprise. We've been watching the dailies and crying. We knew it was

going to be good, but it's a lot better than any of us really thought. When we've watched the dailies with the crew, they've been laughing and cheering in all the right places."

Whether or not it works for audiences, Duncan and Charles say they will continue to make a movie a year. The co-producers say they feel that they'd rather keep moving than spend their lives on the festival circuit, a habit adopted by many Canadian filmmakers. "We don't ever want to be sitting in a corner at a festival years down the road and saying, 'That's our film,'" says Charles. "We have got a couple of scripts in development and we'd like to do a TV series. We realize that this isn't the end of the road. *Blue Moon* will have its moment in the sun, and then we'll move on. We hope to have something going as early as January, depending on when the financing comes through."

Philip Spink says he plans to keep moving as well. But he admits that it might be hard to find anything that strikes him on the same emotional level that the idea and final screenplay of *Once in a Blue Moon* struck him. "I see things in this film that could be improved on," he says. "But the thing for me is that it gets across the importance of love. It's big and in-your-face emotionally. It's brimming with positive emotions. Part of me wishes that I was more hip, more with it, more like Quentin Tarantino. But I realized writing this script and making this film that I really believe in things like truth, art, love, and that's the way I will always be. For better or worse, that's what this film is all about." ■

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