



# DEAD RINGERS

AN EXCERPT FROM  
**BRAVE FILMS, WILD NIGHTS:  
25 YEARS OF FESTIVAL FEVER**

**By Brian D. Johnson**

# E GOYAN, ROZEMA, MCDONALD, MCKELLAR, METTLER, MANN.

In the late 1980s, they emerged as the new wave of Toronto filmmakers.

The Gang. They had all grown up with the festival, and at various times each of them would find a place in its spotlight. They worked with each other. They appeared in each other's films, read each other's scripts, screened each other's rough cuts. And with David Cronenberg serving as mentor, they formed a creative community that would dominate English-Canadian cinema until the end of the century.



Atom Egoyan with David Cronenberg

The first time Atom Egoyan and Bruce McDonald premiered films at the festival, they showed them on the sidewalk. It was 1982. The festival had rejected Egoyan's *Open House* and McDonald's *Let Me See*, short films that they had made as students at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. "We were crushed," recalls Egoyan. "So we rented a generator and got a 16mm projector and set it up on the sidewalk outside the University Theatre. We were told to move it, and ended up one store down from the ticket window." Atom and Bruce wore tuxedos and white gloves. As it got dark, they began rolling their films, hoping to catch the crowd coming out of the Fassbinder gala. A couple of cops came along, looked them over, then grinned and said, "We're going for a long coffee break." Figuring they didn't have much time, the filmmakers phoned Citytv, and Jeannie Becker showed up with a camera crew. A festival staffer came by and gave them a fistful of free passes. That year, Atom and Bruce saw their friend Peter Mettler, another Ryerson film student, get his feature debut accepted in the festival. "We were all so impressed—I'll never forget the thrill of having someone you know in the festival," recalls Egoyan. "At that point," says McDonald, "getting a film into the festival was the only definition of success. I was pissed when mine didn't get in. But we probably got more press out of that sidewalk screening than Peter did."

Mettler was 24. His movie was *Scissère*, an experimental feature made for \$14,000. During the early years of the Toronto festival, he had worked as a limo driver. He'd landed the job by meeting a Canadian coterie at the Cannes festival, where he bummed

around as a wannabe filmmaker, sleeping on the beach and sneaking into movies with a fake pass. As a limo driver, Mettler enjoyed a privileged relationship with filmmakers and stars. "I'd babysit them and get them their drugs and take them to parties—whatever they had to do," he remembers. "I was a pretty boy, and I turned down several offers to get into bathtubs and beds." Mettler has surreal memories of the festival: steering Henry Winkler through a sea of fans who had plastered love notes all over the car windows; driving Robbie Robertson to strange places late at night with strange women; scoring dope to help Peter O'Toole stay off the booze, then watching him smoke it at a party in the Forest Hill home of the American consul.

Four years later, Mettler was on the other side of the looking glass, drawing critical raves for *Scissère*—a non-narrative collage of sounds and images focused on a young man deciphering the world after his release from a mental hospital. He also served as cinematographer for Egoyan's feature debut, *Next of Kin*. Egoyan was so thrilled when it was selected for the festival he still has the answering-machine cassette on which programmer Peter Harcourt gave him the news. The premiere itself was anti-climactic. The audience was packed with friends of John Frizzell, who had shown up to see *Neon*, a short film he had scripted. After *Neon* played, Frizzell left the theatre to host a party for it, and more than half the audience left with him. "John had this image of me from '84 of having this corduroy suit and ridiculous haircut," Atom recalls. "He was the doyen of the cool scene and he didn't want anything to do with me." But when

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## Peter Mettler's *Scissère*

Egoyan returned to the festival in 1987 with *Family Viewing*, and heard Frizzell's unmistakable laugh cueing the audience to the film's dark humour, he felt he'd made it. "That night was electrifying," recalls Egoyan, who went on to win the prize for best Canadian feature. "The whole climate of independent film had changed. People had begun to sense there was a gold rush. It was five years after Bruce and I had set up a projector outside, and suddenly we felt very much inside."

The 1987 festival marked a turning point for Canadian film. Fresh from acclaimed premieres in Cannes, Jean-Claude Lauzon and Patricia Rozema presented their debut features, *Night Zoo* and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, to resounding enthusiasm. *Mermaids* opened the festival, and there was a sense that its success stood for more than a single filmmaker. It is, after all, a story of an artist struggling for recognition within the cultural establishment—a photographer, played by Sheila McCarthy, working as girl Friday for a cold-hearted gallery owner. And as this skit-fish dreamer takes flight into a world of unfettered imagination, it could just as well be Rozema leaving behind the sad baggage of the Canadian film industry. *Mermaids* was not some producer's hyped concoction, but a breakthrough for a new generation of directors who were changing the rules.

It was a supportive community. Rozema remembers seeing *Next of Kin* and having "the sensation that there was another kind of Canadian cinema, a personal voice that dared to break from the formula." She didn't know Egoyan, but she phoned him in Victoria, where he was on vacation, and found out all she could from him about making movies. Rozema did the same with Mettler. "People were always bringing his name up. He was one of the guys everyone was talking about." She also connected with Cronenberg, working as third assistant director on *The Fly*: "That taught me a lot. I learned that you can be absolutely gracious on set and get everything you need, which is not what I experienced working on more Americanized features."

David Cronenberg was the first Canadian director to be lavishly showcased by the Toronto festival. In 1983, it mounted a complete retrospective of his work up to that point, including *Stereo*, *Crimes of the Future*, *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *The Brood*, *Scanners* and *Videodrome*. Meanwhile, Cronenberg programmed Science

Fiction Revisited, a selection of 35 films that did not fit conventional notions of sci-fi. *The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg* was published the same year. Edited by Piers Handling, this book of opinionated essays—which included Handling's "A Canadian Cronenberg"—revealed that the director had become the most fiercely debated subject in Canadian cinema.

Martin Scorsese provided the commentary for the retrospective in the programme book. He first encountered Cronenberg's work at the 1975 Edinburgh Film Festival, which had opened with *The Parasite Murders* (*Shivers*). "I thought I didn't like it," said Scorsese. "But a year later, I found myself thinking about it and talking about it to anyone who would listen. To be blunt, there were a lot of people who wouldn't listen. Cronenberg was a strange name, and my

friends were dubious about Canadian cinema anyway. Still, I kept talking, maybe as a way of exorcising Cronenberg's images. Well, I've never exorcised any of them. The last scene of *The Parasite Murders*, with the cast going out to infect the entire world with sexual dementia, is something I've never been able to shake. It's an ending that is genuinely shocking, subversive, surrealistic and probably something we all deserve."

In 1978, when *The Last Waltz* screened in Toronto, Scorsese tried to connect with this bizarre Canadian. He said, "I told my friend Robbie Robertson, who was at the Canadian Film Awards as a juror (a pretty amusing concept in itself), to invite Cronenberg." After Cronenberg didn't show up, Robertson told Scorsese "they couldn't find him." Now, as Cronenberg recalls, "I do remember Scorsese being in town and there was some deliberate sleight of hand so that I wouldn't get to meet him. I'm actually not paranoid, despite my movies. But there was a moment when they didn't want me out there representing Canada...I was too disreputable." (They? It's hard to imagine now. But at the end of the 1970s, Cronenberg had not won the respect of the Canadian film establishment; his reputation still hadn't recovered from the infamous broadside by *Saturday Night's* Marshall Delaney—a.k.a. Robert Fulford—depicting him as the B-movie

## Atom Egoyan's *Speaking Parts*



"We had a pleasant dinner, even though there was a certain tension on my part, probably originating in my expectation that David's veins would run open and his head would explode."

**Martin Scorsese**



David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly*

pariah of public film financing.) Eventually, however, Cronenberg looked up Scorsese in New York and they became friends. "The man who showed up at my apartment looked like a gynecologist from Beverly Hills," recalls Scorsese (in an oddly prescient reference to the man who would make *Dead Ringers*, featuring a twin gynecologist named Beverly). "We had a pleasant dinner, even though there was a certain tension on my part, probably originating in my expectation that David's veins would run open and his head would explode. Later, as a birthday gift, David sent me a copy of the uncut *Brood*. He said it was his version of *Kramer vs. Kramer*."

In the landscape of Canadian cinema, so imprinted by the realism of the documentary tradition—and its subjugation of the self to landscape—Cronenberg's work was a seismic event. His horror always comes from within. Reflecting on *Rabid* and *Shivers* in "The Word, the Flesh and David Cronenberg," an essay in *The Shape of Rage*, John Harkness wrote: "These are not horror films that delight in dark corners concealing lurking menace. Instead they are composed around rigidly controlled visual frames and taut Apollonian environments—sterile modern apartment buildings and hospitals, clean Canadian shopping centres and subways." But for Cronenberg, the operative landscape is the flesh. And on some level, all his movies concern eruptions of the flesh, itself a metaphor for the uncontrolled mind, for unconscious desires and fears. Treating the human body as a mutation in progress, Cronenberg dramatizes the intercourse between biology and technology as an existential mating game. In his early horror films—*Shivers*, *Rabid* and *The Brood*—the id literally explodes from the body in creature form. But later he abandoned genre films to create tragedies of sexual identity—*Dead Ringers*, *M. Butterfly* and *Crash*—which explore fantastic scenarios within the bounds of existing technology.

In programming *Science Fiction Revisited*, Cronenberg foreshadowed his move away from the horror genre to less obvious forms of sci-fi. He included titles such as *Taxi Driver*, *Don't Look Now*, *Duel*, *Performance*, *Hour of the Wolf*—and *Satyricon*, which Fellini had described as a science-fiction film projected backwards into an almost unimaginable past. "The idea of what people think is real on film is a joke," says Cronenberg. "How real is it? Coloured light on a screen. So let's get a little more meta-physical about it." He did a lot of research to create the programme; his criteria were "totally subjective," he adds. "It was just an ambiance. *Don't Look Now* or *Taxi Driver*—how realistic are those films? They're not. To me alternate realities and alternate societies also count as science fiction."

Cronenberg's Rubicon was *Dead Ringers*, which opened the 1988 festival. It was his first horror movie that was not a horror movie. And it changed the course of his career and that of its star, Jeremy Irons. Cronenberg proved that behind the shock-meister there was a legitimate artist, while Irons proved that behind the dashing good looks there was a serious actor. Together they mustered the nerve and the talent to pull off a movie about drug-addicted, suicidal, twin gynecologists.

Of the Mantle twins, Beverly is the sensitive one who works in the lab, "slaving over the hot snatches." Elliot is the slick bastard who makes the speeches and softens up the women. Irons creates them as distinct characters even though they're joined at the hip—or the head at least—as Siamese psyches. Geneviève Bujold's Claire is the actress who comes between them. The movie plays as a darkly comic descent into hell. Sliding into druggy paranoia, Beverly sees mutant women wherever he looks. With missionary zeal, he has a sculptor forge gynecological tools in surgical steel, devices that look like medieval torture instruments, or modern art objects. In the operating theatre, the director appears in a cameo among a team of doctors who wear red gowns, like cardinals of some carnal church. *Dead Ringers* is not just about twin gynecologists, but twin directors. Cronenberg has always been fascinated with the Other, and here he draws a scalpel through the soft tissue connecting his dual identities: the scientist and the poet.

Like the Mantle twins, comedy and tragedy are conjoined. As the medical and sexual horrors unfold, dry English wit is the dominant mode. But in the end, comedy's mortal coil is shuffled off. Tragedy is all that remains as one twin disembowels the other, falls asleep, then takes a walk. At that moment, Cronenberg executes one of the saddest landscape shots in Canadian cinema, panning from a concrete building, past a grey line of skeleton trees, an old church and a spiral parking structure, to a Plexiglas phone booth. Beverly dials, hangs up after hearing Claire's voice, then walks back into the building to kill himself. Inside, in the ruined lab, in the aftermath of the twins' birthday-party suicide pact, the camera lingers over congealed surfaces—operatic falls of candle wax—until it comes to rest on the entwined, naked bodies of brothers in arms: the Pietà meets Narcissus.

Cronenberg recalls the opening-night premiere as being "pretty intense." Bujold was especially nervous. "She was sitting next to me and holding my hand. She was terrified—she's an emotional girl. I remember her just hanging onto me, with [his wife] Carolyn on the other side." Premiering a movie as disturbing as

Dead Ringers to a corporate audience on opening night was cause for some concern. "I was worried, but it actually went over rather well," says the director. "I was very happy with the movie. I knew it was very emotional, which a lot of my movies aren't in the traditional way. Even though Jeremy's performance has often been criticized as cold and aloof, I had an inkling this could be a breakthrough for him."

As for Cronenberg, the festival has played a vital role in his career. It was there in 1984 that he first met British producer Jeremy Thomas, who helped him bring *Naked Lunch* and *Crash* to the screen. "He was with some Rastafarian friends," recalls Cronenberg. "He was a little stoned—he was in party mode. But he definitely had his eye on me as someone he wanted to work with. We talked about *Naked Lunch*. He's the one who connected me with William Burroughs. And we first talked about *Crash* at the festival." The festival also launched *M. Butterfly*, although it was not one of Cronenberg's best-received films. At the opening-night premiere, he says, "I remember we were sitting behind Kim Campbell, who was the prime minister at the time, and she was in tears by the end of the movie. I thought it went very well. But then I started to hear rumblings that people didn't like it. That was my first inkling that the movie would have trouble. We didn't have critical support, and Warners just dropped it. I remember I was very worried about *The Crying Game* because people would say Jaye Davidson was a better woman than John Lone, and that became the focus. Little did I know that *Farewell My Concubine* would also appear. How often do you have two movies about homosexuality and the Peking Opera?"



Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Un zoo la nuit*

Don McKellar was working as a theatre manager at the festival in 1989 the first time he met Cronenberg, who was chairing the Canadian film jury. Cronenberg came running out of the Uptown One and started yelling at him. "This is appalling to have Canadian films projected in such poor quality," he said.

"Sir, I couldn't agree with you more," replied McKellar.

In fact, the air-conditioning was broken, there was a hole in the screen, and although McKellar didn't tell this to Cronenberg, there were raccoons in the house. Yes, raccoons. "The Uptown was literally falling apart that year," says McKellar. "And the projectionists were a disaster. Projectionists...how should I put this? Well, to be charitable, as a profession they are prone to alcoholism."

The festival has had its share of disastrous screenings. One night at the New Yorker theatre, in 1986, German director Cristel Buschmann's melodrama, *Now or Never*, became even more melodramatic when part of the ceiling caved in during a torrential downpour. And on the opening night of Perspective Canada in 1989, Atom Egoyan was horrified to see that the reels of *Speaking Parts* had been stuck together in the wrong order by the lab. He was beginning to wonder if the film was cursed: after watching it literally melt on the screen at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes, he'd run up to the booth to find celluloid spooling onto the floor and flames shooting out of the projector. In Toronto, Egoyan begged the audience to be patient, then rushed home in a taxi to get another print. "It was a hot, humid night," he recalls. "I went barrelling downstairs and found a cab. This Rastafarian guy was driving, and I kept imploring him to go faster. I told him 800 people were in a theatre waiting to see my film. Of course, he thought I was delusional—'Yeah mon, 800 people.' We finally got to the house, and I threw the other copy into the trunk. At that point, I think he sensed that I wasn't completely crazy. When I got back to the theatre, I was shocked that people had waited. There was this round of applause when I walked in. I'd thought it was going to be a really glamorous night. I'd thought I'd arrived. And I ended up being drenched in sweat like a pig."

McKellar spent that festival engaged in a running feud with a new Famous Players district manager, until finally getting himself banned from the Uptown. But on the closing night of Perspective Canada, McKellar returned to the theatre and marched triumphantly past the manager—as the writer of Bruce McDonald's feature debut, *Roadkill*, in which he plays an aspiring serial killer. The film, a black-and-white comedy about a rock band going AWOL in northern Ontario, was finished just in

Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*



**The *Roadkill* gang: Bruce McDonald, Don McKellar and Valerie Buhagiar**

the nick of time. McDonald delivered the print to the theatre straight from the lab. After the premiere, he partied until 5 a.m. Then someone dragged him out of bed ordering him to go to the awards brunch, where he listened in disbelief as Cronenberg's jury awarded *Roadkill* the \$25,000 prize for best Canadian film, beating out Denys Arcand's masterpiece, *Jesus of Montreal*.

For Arcand, who took the International Critics' Award, the abyss between English- and French-Canadian cinema must have seemed wider than ever before. But there has been an unofficial tradition of giving the Canadian award to novice directors who tend to blurt out bizarre acceptance speeches. Besides, McDonald looked like he could use the money. Hungover and dishevelled, with a cigarette in his hand, he clutched the prize and said it's "gonna buy me a big chunk of hash." What did he spend it on? Well, among other things, McDonald now recalls that he "did buy a nice big chunk of black hash...and a black winter coat." The prize also helped McDonald sell his movie to Germany, Japan and Australia. "Without a lot of marketing and distribution," he says, "a prize is enough to turn a mutt into a show dog."

McKellar, meanwhile, quit the festival staff at the end of that year. He has since written or directed half a dozen films that have shown at the festival—including two with performances by Cronenberg, who plays a porn magazine addict in *Blue* and a gas company supervisor in *Last Night*. If anyone has served as a common denominator among Toronto filmmakers, it is McKellar: as a director, actor or writer, he has worked with Cronenberg, McDonald, Rozema and Egoyan. Which is oddly fitting, considering the years he spent trying to accommodate filmmakers in

his self-described role as "a glorified usher" at the festival. "My first experiences with almost everyone in Canadian film," he says, "was with them panicking or running out of the theatre with some problem."

He also had some odd brushes with celebrity. The premiere of *The Princess Bride*, McKellar recalls, "was one of the first times we had a big influx of Hollywood publicists. They gave me instructions about how Andre the Giant had to be handled. He required a chair exactly double the size of a normal theatre seat. We had to build it—this big bench made of orange vinyl. They warned me he was very big, and he was. His hand was the size of my head." At the premiere of Gus Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy*, to avoid the crush at the Varsity Cinemas, McKellar had Matt Dillon and Kelly Lynch delivered to the loading dock. "It was more like a garbage dock," he recalls. "They rolled up in a limo. I was waving at them from behind a dumpster. They were all dressed up and I led them through this minefield of refuse, apologizing all the way. I told them it was just a short ride up the freight elevator. Then it got stuck between floors. We weren't stuck that long, but the audience was waiting, and there I was making small talk while trying to reach someone on the emergency phone."

Sometimes, it's the star that gets stuck. Or stuck up. McKellar had an especially hard time getting Richard Gere onstage to introduce the premiere of *Miles From Home*. Gere was more interested in tinkling away at a piano backstage. "He was playing this really irritating jazz tune," recalls McKellar. "It just went on and on and sounded like it was never going to end. I kept going, 'Okay, we

McDonald looked like he could use the money.

Hungover and dishevelled, with a cigarette in his hand, he clutched the prize and said it's "gonna buy me a big chunk of hash."

should be going now...we really should be going.' He kept saying, 'Relax, what's the problem?' 'Well, I've got 1,250 people out there who have been waiting for half an hour.' I just wanted to slug him."

Then there were the run-ins with Garth Drabinsky—and Lynda Friendly, his PR executive and frequent companion. As CEO of Cineplex Odeon, Drabinsky controlled many of the theatres used by the festival, and, after the closing of the University Theatre, it was his idea to use Roy Thomson Hall for galas. Garth had offered his production of *The Glass Menagerie*, with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, as the closing-night gala in 1988. But he was not about to let his stars traipse into the grungy old Uptown. So his Cineplex team created a state-of-the-art screening system for Roy Thomson Hall, which eventually would serve as the festival's prime gala venue.

It was pouring rain for *The Glass Menagerie* premiere. The photographers were not allowed in the lobby, so McKellar had them wait outside the front door, promising that they would get their shots of the stars arriving at the red carpet. The stars were late. And when they finally showed up, Lynda Friendly decided to whisk them in by the artists' entrance in the back to avoid the crowd. "The photographers were really not happy," says McKellar, understating the case. "And I was very, very mad." He had another run-in with Garth and Lynda at the 1989 opening-night premiere of Norman Jewison's *In Country*. It was at the Eglinton Theatre. There was a mob outside the door. Again the stars were late. McKellar was in the manager's office, frantically manning a portable phone the size of a tank walkie-talkie, trying to contact limousines carrying Bruce Willis and Ontario's lieutenant-governor. "I was panicking," he says. "Then Garth came through the door with Lynda Friendly. They wanted to use the office. I said, 'I'm waiting for a call that's quite important.' He said, 'Do you know who I am?' or something to that effect, and he finally left in a huff." The next day Drabinsky demanded a written apology. McKellar refused to provide it, and remains

puzzled to this day as to why Drabinsky felt he had a right to use an office in a theatre that was not even part of his chain.

But it would be understandable if he felt he had the right to throw his weight around. In providing his theatres as an exhibitor, and his films as a distributor, Drabinsky played a vital role in giving the festival a home and establishing its prestige. Although he rubbed a lot of people the wrong way, the festival may not have survived without him. Besides, when you hear war stories from the front lines of the festival in the 1980s, you have to remember the atmosphere of those premieres, which was often one of barely controlled hysteria. "People would just go insane about seeing a movie," recalls McKellar. "They would use any excuse. They had a friend inside. They were sick. Could they please use the washroom? One lady tried to push her way through me. Another was in hysterics because she'd broken a nail."

Keeping people from entering a packed theatre is one thing. Trying to get them out once they're in is another. That was the situation at the premiere of *In Praise of Older Women* in 1978. And it happened again, on a smaller scale, in 1989. McKellar got a call that there was trouble at the Royal Ontario Museum Theatre. He arrived to find people sitting in aisles and on top of each other. Ushers using counters at two separate entrances had let in twice the capacity of the room by mistake. McKellar was trying to clear people out. I'd managed to get in by tagging along with the director, whom I'd met on the street, and I wasn't about to leave. It was the first time I'd ever seen McKellar perform. I remember him looking terribly officious as he stood in front of the crowd and asked in that shy, halting manner of his, "Would some of you please leave?" No one moved. The occasion was the premiere of a funny little movie called *Roger and Me*. •

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Patricia Rozema

