

English-Canadian *Films of the*

1950s

by Peter Morris



Oedipus Rex

Oedipus Rex (1956) is technically a feature film, but it is simply a photographed version of the stage play as directed by Tyrone Guthrie at the Stratford Festival, Ontario. It was only in 1957 that feature-film production was undertaken in any meaningful way. In Toronto, between 1957 and 1959, three directors made "first features," then second ones, creating something of a mini-boom for the film industry and heralding the major growth that lay ahead in the 1960s. Director William Davidson and writer Norman Klenman made *Now That April's Here* (1958) and *Ivy League Killers/The Fast Ones* (1959). Sidney Furie, a then 24-year-old writer for CBC television, originally designed *A Dangerous Age* (1957) as a television drama before deciding to transform it into a feature film. It was shot with a non-union crew during one week on location and four days in the studio. It was shown at the Cannes and Venice Film Festivals and was well received by British critics. The film's theme of young people rejecting the system—though ultimately not its values—was echoed in Furie's second feature, *A Cool Sound from Hell* (1958) which, like the first, Furie also wrote and produced. More technically polished than his first, it also received favourable reviews abroad and helped establish him as a director of promise. However, when it, too, received minimum critical attention and virtually no release in Canada, Furie left to work in London. He has rarely worked since in Canada.

Julian Roffman was the most experienced of the three filmmakers involved, having begun his career on *March of Time* in the 1930s and later working at the NFB during the war. He had also worked in television in New York before returning to Toronto in 1954 to establish his own company, which made numerous commercials, sponsored films and

television documentaries. His first feature, *The Bloody Brood* (1959) was deliberately designed for the drive-in and double-bill market. It's a crime melodrama involving the then fashionable movie beatniks and an older brother's solving of the murder of his younger brother who had been fed ground glass in a hamburger. Though the story is barely credible, it's deftly directed, edited and acted as competently as the plot allows. The three lead performers (including a young Peter Falk) were all American, as was the cinematographer, Eugene Shuftan. Although the U.S. release was delayed because the film was refused approval by the authorities for the Hollywood code, it finally did reasonably well at the box office. Roffman later made *The Mask/The Eyes of Hell* (1961), the first and only 3-D feature made in Canada. This large budget—\$300,000—horror film was moderately well received, both critically and commercially on its initial release. Roffman's later career was as producer or executive producer on such films as *Explosion* (1969) and *The Pyx* (1973).

There were other features made at the time whose makers impress one at least by their ingenuity, audacity and persistence if nothing else. For example, Arthur Kelly made three short features, *This Most Gallant Affair* (1958), *The Abbey on Monte Cassino* (1960) and *The Samaritans* (1961). These films, which mixed documentary and fiction, were not well received by Canadian critics but were commercially successful. Lindsay Shonteff established his later filmmaking career in Britain and the United States by making a cheap Western, *The Devils' Spawn/The Hired Gun* (1959), a film he edited in his own home.

TAKE ONE