

BY MATTHEW HAYS

LARRY KENT CINEMAS

1	THE APPRENTICE	730	950 R	3	SWEET SUBSTITUTE
2	THE BITTER ASH	645	920 R	4	HIGH

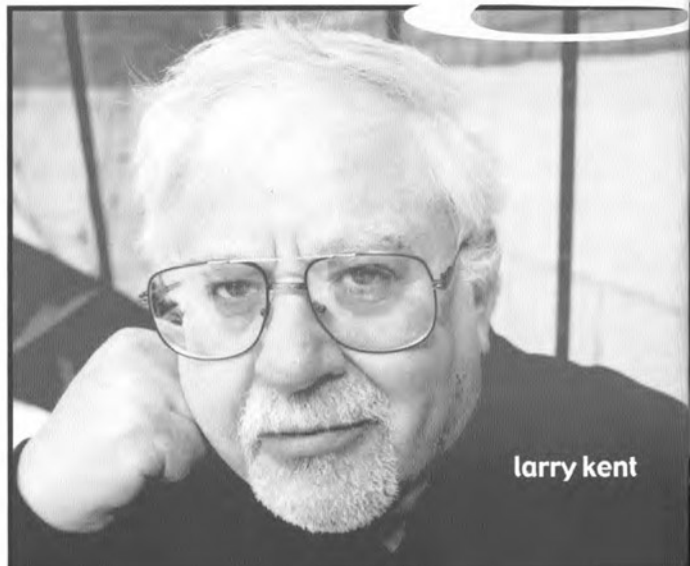
Larry Kent may well be Canada's greatest movie secret. "We're a country that doesn't really believe in ourselves," he says, sitting down to discuss his work. It may sound a wee bit jaded but Kent, now 64, has probably earned the right to assume this attitude. If there's one thing this Canadian film pioneer has been called, it is "consistently and unjustly underrated," as *Take One's* own *Essential Guide to Canadian Film* entry on Kent succinctly puts it.

In the 1960s, Kent produced, directed and wrote four fresh, unusual and sexually frank features that pushed boundaries, upset critics and had the censors tied up in knots. Born in South Africa in 1937, Kent immigrated to Canada via England in 1956 and studied theatre and philosophy at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. He wrote *The Afrikaner*, an anti-apartheid play, which was performed by the theatre department, but he found the faculty far too conformist. His reaction to the university's conservative aura would manifest itself in an anti-authoritarian streak that would run throughout his films.

He began work on *The Bitter Ash* in 1963 with the help of friends from the theatre department. The film opens with a barely clothed couple awakening in bed, something that may not sound too risqué today but clearly was at the time. The woman fears she may be pregnant, and the couple exchange barbs about the prospect of marriage and what it means to them. *The Bitter Ash* has become notorious in Canada's film history annals for a number of reasons: it's thought to be the first feature to include a shot of a woman's exposed breast [*editor's note*: discounting, of course, Nell Shipman's innocent naked romp in *Back to God's Country* in 1919]; and it was the first Canadian feature to tour the university circuit, drawing large numbers of student viewers before a circuit of this kind even existed.

The film sold out in advance when it screened at McGill in Montreal. Male students were so eager to see the naked breast and graphic sex scenes, they broke down the locked doors and stormed the cinema.

Kent quickly followed with a second feature in 1964, *Sweet Substitute*, another film in which marriage is treated as a trap. The film includes several scenes of men plotting ways to lure women into bed. Although *Sweet Substitute* did well in the United States, Kent recalls that it was banned in Britain, where censors felt it was too racy. "It's funny to think about it now," he says, "because the 1960s don't seem that far away. But censorship was much more common then." In 1965, Kent made *When Tomorrow Dies*, in which he would further explore themes of marriage and infidelity. By 1967 he had moved to Montreal, where he completed *High*, his most experimental film. *High* is as notorious for the censorship it suffered as it is for its content. It follows the adventures of an amoral young couple finding it difficult to



larry kent

THE KENT FILES:

Basking in the Glow of a Long-Overdue, Cross-Country Tour, **LARRY KENT**, the Man behind Four Sexually Frank Films of the 1960s Looks Back on His Outstanding Body of Work



make ends meet, so they take to seducing men and robbing them. *High* is truly audacious, leaping between black-and-white and colour stock and featuring a hallucinogenic credit sequence.

The free-living, often drugged-out characters at the centre of *High* didn't please everyone, especially the provincial censors. The film was to have its premiere at the Montreal Film Festival (run by producer Rock Demers, it is now defunct), but the Quebec Board of Censors took one look at it and pulled the plug. This effectively turned *High* into a *cause célèbre*. Warren Beatty, then attending the festival with *Bonnie and Clyde*, expressed his praise for the film and condemned the censors. Film legends Jean Renoir and Fritz Lang, who were members of the festival jury, also praised *High*. That year, Allan King (*Warrendale*) and Jean Pierre Lefebvre (*Il ne faut pas mourir pour ça*) were co-winners of the festival's Grand Prix and in an act to show their displeasure at the Quebec censor board, shared their prize money with Kent.

These censorship woes didn't dissuade Kent for a moment. In 1971 he released *The Apprentice*, a fully bilingual film about a young French Canadian torn between a separatist francophone girlfriend and an anglophone model. (The film stars a young Susan Sarandon, hot off the success of the American cult movie *Joe*.) Produced by Donald Brittain, *The Apprentice* garnered rave reviews at the Berlin International Film Festival, where it was Canada's official entry.

Although Kent contends that the myth is that Canadians don't want to see Canadian films, his early experience defies this way of thinking. "There was a real boredom with

Hollywood films at the time. There was an explosion, what with the Italian neo-realists and the French *Nouvelle Vague*. There will always be a huge audience for American films, but I think there's also a huge audience of young people who are absolutely fed up. And I think they're fed up again." Last year, Kent was thrilled to learn that an unedited, near-perfect print of *High* was found in the vaults of the Cinémathèque Québécoise. This led the institution to hold a retrospective in his honour in April 2002. In February 2003, the Kent retrospective was also screened at Toronto's Cinematheque Ontario and Vancouver's Pacific Cinematheque. Back from touring his oeuvre across the country, Kent sat down with *Take One* to reflect on his work and on making films in Canada.

How does your first feature, The Bitter Ash, look to you today?

I just saw it for the very first time in 38 years. I won't look at my films after the first screening. I don't know why. I think I have a fear of them, which is strange but

interesting. But the NFB gave me the opportunity to make new masters of all of my films, so I went in with a colourist to make them visually perfect. When I saw *The Bitter Ash*, I was shocked to see how good it was. [He laughs.] For a first film, I thought it was marvellous. I had written my first play, *The Afrikaner*, but I wasn't satisfied. The theatre department was very autocratic. We hadn't yet hit the 1960s, when the students were demanding more. The influence of the Actor's Studio hadn't hit there yet. It was just people getting up and making speeches. I was eager to look for something else. In the back of my mind I'd always

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- Larry Kent, 1963-

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— Larry Kent, 2003 —

wanted to make a film. There was a student on campus that was a glass-blower. He also happened to have a Bolex and was a superb cameraman. And I asked him: "Why don't we make a fiction film?"

I wrote *The Bitter Ash*, and we just went ahead and made it. Looking back, I really wrote that from the gut. It was phenomenal that we made the film; there was no film department at UBC to speak of. We were just doing it out of the theatre department. We had no formal training. I suppose one shouldn't be so enthusiastic about one's own work. The Canadian reflex is to play down what you've done, but it's the young Larry Kent speaking.

When you upset the censors with your films, as you often did, were you trying to push buttons consciously or was it something that was organic, something that was just there in your work?

It was organic and present in the work. You have to be aware of this: if you're looking for an exploitation movie, *The Bitter Ash* is not it. There isn't enough sex. You've got to have your sex scenes every few minutes in an exploitation film in order for it to work. The censors did get upset, but you'd be very disappointed if you went to the film solely for sex. You had to wait 80 minutes for any nudity.

Looking back, which of the censorship scandals surprised you the most?

I guess *The Bitter Ash*. But that's in hindsight. Even for the U.S., the film was pretty raw. The sex in the film is not romantic. It's not fulfilling, and the after-sex scene is pretty brutal. I think those are the things that upset people.

If we'd done it in a much more romantic way, it would have been more acceptable. I think it was the fact that these two characters make love out of frustration and anger, rather than out of romantic longing. That upset people much more.

*Now filmmakers look to get censored. It's like a gift, in terms of free publicity. But back then it could do real damage, couldn't it? Absolutely. It did real damage to us with *The Bitter Ash* because it immediately marginalized the film. The public seemed to like it, but the critic from the *Vancouver Province* came with his wife, and he had a bird: "How could I invite him to see this movie?" He was horrified and thought it was a stage movie. Immediately thereafter we only played at three universities. The rest wouldn't take us. The University of Toronto wouldn't show it, nor would Alberta, Manitoba or Saskatchewan without having seen the film. With *High* we were also marginalized. When we were putting together the retrospective, I realized I hadn't seen *High* since 1967. The Montreal Film Festival wanted to show it, but the censor board in Quebec banned it. Eventually the film played all over the U.S. and Europe to great reviews. Iceland, Germany, they loved it; however, the distributor butchered it. I couldn't bear to watch it because they cut a lot out.*

*Tell me about the inspiration for *High* because I think that's a very interesting film. Some have called it the original Natural Born Killers.*

I made it in 1967. I had gone down to San Francisco where



Sweet Substitute was playing and doing very well. In the early 1960s the city was really something amazing, but when I went down a few years later, I tell you it was like Beirut. I mean it was a mess. You could see that the drugs had taken their toll and that there was a lot of exploitation going on. The final straw came when I went to a health



clinic and a very good-looking 16-year-old kid comes in—and I witnessed this—and he was holding a needle that was full of something, I don't know what, to his own arm and threatening to shoot himself up. Eventually he did. It was really horrific, and I don't know whatever happened to that kid, but it certainly knocked any romanticism I had about that period out of me.

Is there anything about the Canadian film scene today you find unsettling?

I think there's a real desire by Canadians to see Canadian films. I really saw that with these recent retrospectives. But it's scary right now, because I know that Telefilm Canada is pushing this idea of big-budget, money-making films.

They should go back and look at the tax-shelter movies of the late 1970s, early 1980s before they do that. The people who are green-lighting movies right now scare me. It's not the filmmakers.

It's the green lighters. If we're going to give money to bad films don't blame the filmmakers, blame the decision makers. We're at a great moment right now. Let's not fuck it up.

What do you think of the idea of quotas for Canadian films in theatres?

We've got to negotiate quota system in which there would be one cinema in a complex that would show a Canadian movie. That way the owners have to fill the theatre. And if they have to fill it, then the distributors will put more money into promoting their Canadian films. Not only should we make more films, we should promote them as well. That was the good thing about my retrospective trip. The films got good publicity, which was wonderful. I think that there's an assumption, a really bad assumption, that Canadians don't want to see Canadian films. That might have been true in the 1970s, but since the big wave of new immigrants from all over the world, I think there are a lot of people who have arrived who are really interested in the country they have come to. I think theatrical quotas could work to change the present situation where no one can actually see a Canadian film even if they wanted to.

When you were watching these films of yours, what were some of your thoughts on your work after all these years?

“The fact that these films were moving people to debate and discussion was thrilling for me.” – Kent



It was funny. It felt like I was watching someone else's films. I felt a great degree of distance from them. It's been so long. But, you know, I was also struck by how strong the women characters are. I was watching *Sweet Substitute* and the sex is interesting, but what is really interesting is that the mother turns to Angela and says: "You really have to find a guy and not have to work." And another character says: "I want to continue working." The film is very modern in a way, but when you realize where women were at in the 1960s, it seemed shocking. Women just don't think that way today. What was most satisfying was the back and forth with the audience after the screenings. We were showing *High* on a Monday night, and I expected no audience. It was a late show, but, instead, there was a big audience. I was thrilled. During the Q&A, someone said why don't you talk about the idealism of the 1960s, and a huge row ensued! It was wonderful, because this film was made in 1967 and it was still getting people really upset. The fact that these films were moving people to debate and discussion was thrilling for me. The nostalgia was also overwhelming. At a Q&A after one movie someone put up her hand and said: "That film was shot in my house." And I was like, "Barbara!" It was amazing. Many of the cast members from the various films came to the screenings in Vancouver with their children, who were about the ages of their parents when they were originally acting in my movies. That was very exhilarating.

Do you have any regrets?

That my films haven't been seen more often over the years; however, now that we're doing these high-quality master prints, I hope that they'll get seen a lot more. I think the films are interesting and fun on their own, but more than that, they represent a historical perspective. You're seeing an evolution through time and you're seeing what the two cities—Montreal and Vancouver—looked like back then. That alone makes them worth seeing.

This is something you and I have discussed before. Why isn't CBC-TV showing these films? In England, they show old British films on late-night television.

I don't know. It's like some kind of denial that Canada actually existed in fictional form. Fiction is a form of truth. It isn't documentary or current affairs, it's a deeper truth. When filmmakers, especially independent or alternative filmmakers, make films, their personal concerns of the moment come through. That's what makes them fascinating. That's what I want to see. When you see films

"Of all the filmmakers from the 1960s, Larry Kent is the most consistently and unjustly underrated."

- Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film

like *Winter Kept Us Warm* or *Goin' down the Road*, you realize that this is part of Canada and what it was like back then. It's interesting because this is where we live. By not showing it, I think you're pretending that Canada doesn't exist. Perhaps we don't want to admit that Canada is anything but this clean scrubbed little country that was and always is polite. To that, I say "No!"

Matthew Hays is an associate editor for Montreal's Hour Magazine and a regular contributor to The Globe and Mail and Take One.

