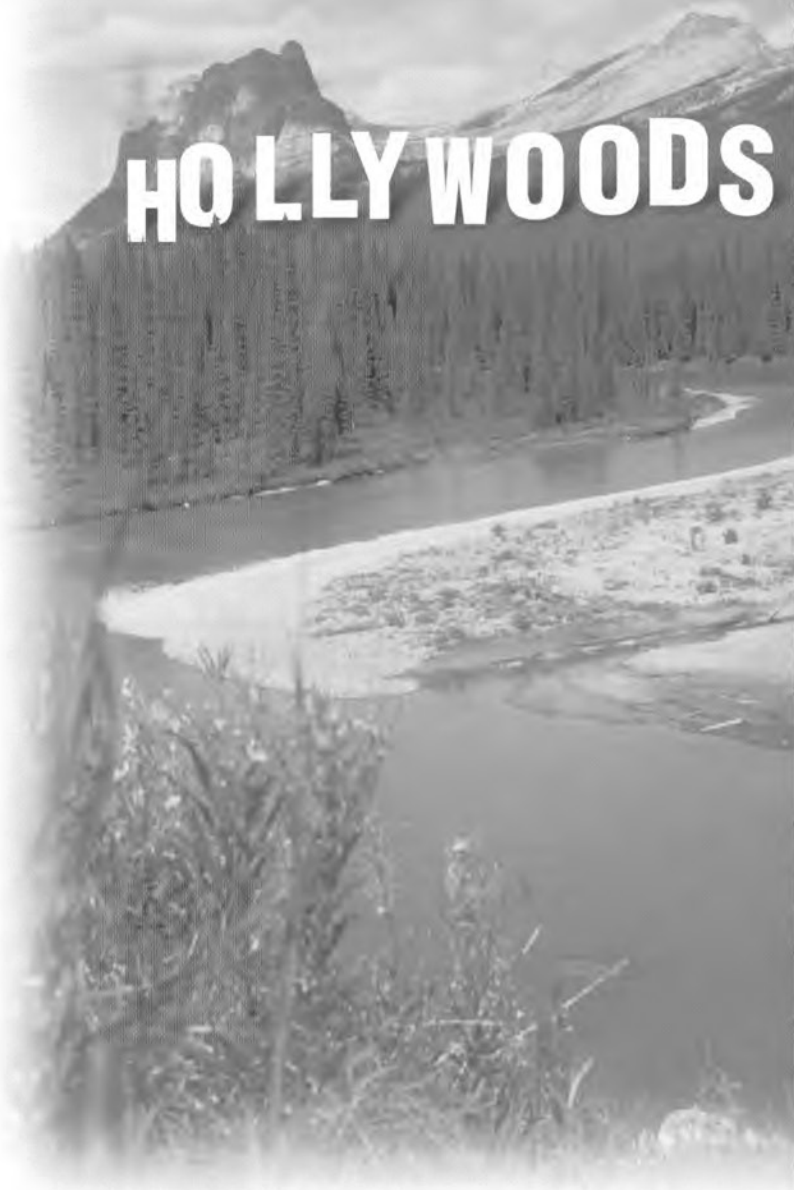


the west coast wave

An Excerpt from
Dreaming in the Rain:
How Vancouver Became
Hollywood North by Northwest

Twenty years ago, Vancouver didn't exist on any map of the film world, but today is at the heart of two. The city's American-based film industry is powerful enough to inspire loathing and threats from Hollywood, and its Canadian-based film scene is among the most acclaimed and provocative independent filmmaking communities anywhere. Vancouver's The Province movie critic David Spaner's Dreaming in the Rain: How Vancouver Became Hollywood North by Northwest, published by Arsenal Pulp Press, is the story of West Coast Canada's emergence as a movie capital, from its early days as a Hollywood studio backlot to its status as one of North America's busiest production centres for films and television series like The X-Files. It's also home to filmmakers such as John Pozer, Ross Weber, Mina Shum, Lynne Stopkewich, Bruce Sweeney and others, all of whom remain resolutely independent. This excerpt describes how the West Coast wave of independent filmmakers came about.

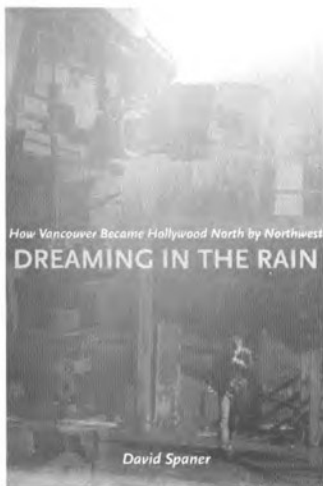
The Vancouver of 1963, when Larry Kent gathered together his friends and his cameras [*editor's note: see the previous article*], in some ways barely resembled the city of 1989, when a second University of British Columbia



filmmaking group emerged. In between, there had been a quarter-century of cultural upheaval, but Vancouver feature filmmaking, apart from the American-constructed infrastructure that was now in place, was practically as underdeveloped in 1989 as it had been twenty-five years earlier.

“There was a lot of film-industry service television. You know, *MacGyver*, *21 Jump Street*—American-style shows,” says John Pozer, who would play a pivotal role in the second UBC group. “There wasn’t really anything Canadian to touch on other than *My American Cousin* and *The Grey Fox*—two great movies. So, there wasn’t a lot of identity or a track record to build on.”

Then, in 1989, something remarkable happened at the University of British Columbia. That year, a particularly talented group that would become the heart of the Vancouver independent



film scene of the 1990s was enrolled in the UBC film studies program. The gathering at UBC and the subsequent production of the student film, *The Grocer's Wife*, were not only the nuclei for the first Vancouver indie scene, they were crucial to the development of a cross-country Canadian cinema, adding a West Coast Wave to

the Canadian film scene that had emerged in Toronto in the mid-1980s.

The Grocer's Wife would play Cannes. Even more impressive was the lineup of UBC film studies students who worked on the movie. The production involved eight future feature directors: Pozer; Bruce Sweeney (*Dirty, Last Wedding*), boom operator; Lynne Stopkewich (*Kissed, Suspicious River*), production designer; Mina Shum (*Double Happiness, Long Life, Happiness & Prosperity*), assistant director and casting director; Ross Weber (*No More Monkeys Jumpin' on the Bed*), sound; Reg Harkema (*A Girl Is a Girl*), editor; Gregory Wild (*Highway of Heartache*) and Kathy Garneau (*Tokyo Cowboy*), art department. And there were more than directors involved—future cinematographers Greg Middleton (*Kissed, Suspicious River*) and Brian Pearson (*Dark Angel*) were camera operators, and future producer Steve Hegyes (*Double Happiness, Last Wedding*) was a producing consultant.

“John’s feature caused a chain reaction,” says Sweeney. “His feature was made and everything fell like dominoes. Everyone just got their features out after that. I didn’t realize you even could make a feature until after *The Grocer's Wife*. It didn’t cross my mind. I go to UBC and just happen to meet John and then we made this film. I thought, ‘Shit, I could make one.’ But I didn’t go to school thinking, ‘I’m going to make a feature.’ That wasn’t my goal going in, but it was my goal after the first year.”

The film students who met at UBC in the late 1980s would become a close community who partied together and made movies together and by the middle of the 1990s were making films as smart and tough as any indie scene anywhere.

John Pozer was born in Kamloops, British Columbia, in 1956 and moved to Vancouver before starting elementary school. Although he graduated from the Vancouver west

side’s Prince of Wales high school, he spent much of his youth with relatives in the small towns of B.C.’s Interior. By age nine, Pozer was a member of the Equity actors union. He performed in professional musical theatre productions at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, Stanley Park’s Theatre Under the Stars and Ottawa’s National Arts Centre. After high school, Pozer moved on to UBC, studying photography, sculpture, painting and, finally, film.


The first time Mina Shum applied to UBC, she sent her application ransom-note style, with cut-out letters like the album cover of the Sex Pistols’s *Anarchy in the U.K.* “I thought they’d think it was artistic,” she says with a laugh. Maybe the UBC film program wasn’t looking for artsy kid-nappers—Shum’s application was rejected twice. But she would eventually be accepted and become one of the most renowned filmmakers to come out of any Vancouver film program. Shortly after Shum was born in 1965, her family left Hong Kong for Vancouver. At 18, Shum was already immersed in the arts—singing in the punk band Playdoh Republic and attending theatre school—when a screening of *Gallipoli* turned her toward film. “I saw that and I realized you can make art and film.”

Lynne Stopkewich was born in 1963 into an anglophone family in a francophone enclave in east end Montreal. She



was an artsy kid painting, acting, writing, making Super 8 movies. Attending Montreal’s Vanier College was a “renaissance” for her. Stopkewich became a politically active, anarchist punk rocker. She also discovered a world of foreign and art films and in 1987, enrolled in UBC’s film





studies program. “I figured I’d go to Vancouver for two years, write a script, maybe go back to Montreal and shoot it. But once I got here, everything changed. That’s when I met the gang.”

Born in Sarnia, Ontario, in 1962, Bruce Sweeney had grown up in love with the movies. “From an early age I was a movie nut. I watched the movies on the French channel. I didn’t know I was watching Truffaut and Louis Malle and Godard and all these people. I was just watching it in French and, at that point, I thought if I watched the French movies I had a greater chance of seeing some nudity. So that drew me to it initially, but then I realized how many of those images and scenes resonated later.” After high school, Sweeney, who’d been drawing and painting forever, enrolled in the Simon Fraser University art program. While at SFU, he was increasingly drawn to film, transfixed by the European movies he’d see at the Van East Cinema and the Pacific Cinémathèque. Sweeney moved on to UBC. And he switched to film. “Being a visual artist is just too damn solitary. You just have this tendency just to go out of your mind. I thought film would be good because it’s social.”

Ross Weber learned the magic of cinema growing up in Terrace, a town in central British Columbia. “We used to go to Kelowna for the summer. We had a summer shack on the lake. And my mother, I think it was every Saturday night, she’d take us to the drive-in. I must have been eight or nine, and two movies really affected me—one was *Planet of the Apes* and the other was *Lawrence of Arabia*. Halfway through *Lawrence of Arabia* I remember the northern lights came up above the screen. My mother had put us in our pajamas, right, we’d sit in the car and maybe fall asleep. The movie’s running and everybody walked outside and started looking at the northern lights while *Lawrence of*

Arabia was playing on the screen.” Weber was taking sciences at UBC when he learned he could study film on campus. “I didn’t even know there was a film program. I’d always been interested in movies and got into the film program.”

UBC has produced a long line of film directors. There were the original UBC filmmakers of the 1960s (including Larry Kent and Jack Darcus), this second UBC bunch of Sweeney, Stopkewich and Shum, and those who, while not part of either UBC group, became directors after attending the university (including Daryl Duke, Sturla Gunnarsson and Allan King). Darcus suggests the strong theatre department has had a lot to do with the narrative approach of UBC filmmakers. “When you have a theatre department, and you’re hanging around next door to it, you tend to develop a literary outlook as opposed to experimental or documentary or whatever else,” Darcus says.

Some of the better UBC filmmakers, from Kent to Pozer, were the rebels of their departments and, you suspect, would have been at odds with most any institution. Pozer had confrontations with some faculty who didn’t want him to make a student feature or use the department’s filmmaking equipment. “You know what? That’s the business of art. You get steeled up to that pretty quick. If anything, I just looked beyond the petty relationships and said, ‘You know, I’ve got a good film.’ And I think for me to finish it I needed a bit of encouragement and I got that through my friends and my family.”

What was going on in that program in 1989 that produced so many filmmakers? “Well, to tell you the truth, to blow my own horn, and I’m hard pressed to do so, but you know what? I don’t think it was the program. I think it was the summer a lot of these people spent shooting *The Grocer’s Wife*,” says Pozer.



KISSED



DOUBLE HAPPINESS



DIRTY



BRUCE SWEENEY — DIRECTOR
THE LAST WEDDING



Pozer vowed to do something no student in the film program had done: make a feature film as his thesis project. He devised a way to shoot his feature using UBC equipment. "That's the only way I'd be able to do it. I never made any of my plans publicly known because [the film program] didn't encourage features. I set a plan into operation wherein I'd be able to get all of the equipment out of the rental area. I wrote the script in creative-writing class and then I just negotiated to sign out all the equipment for the summer, when the regular student classes weren't there. It just seemed to be a no-brainer for me. I mean, why is all this equipment sitting in the room? I figured I'd sign it all out, then bring it back before school opened again."

He would not be deterred, and eventually raised money through friends and family and returned to the B.C. Interior of his childhood, to the smoky smelter town of Trail, to create his surreal, twisted look at the underbelly of the picturesque B.C. that appears in travelogues. "I tried to show something completely different than what British Columbia was supposed to be. You know, it was always waterfalls and bears and old-growth forests. And I just said, 'Hey man, let's turn the camera over here. You've got industry and sloth and greed and duplicity.'"

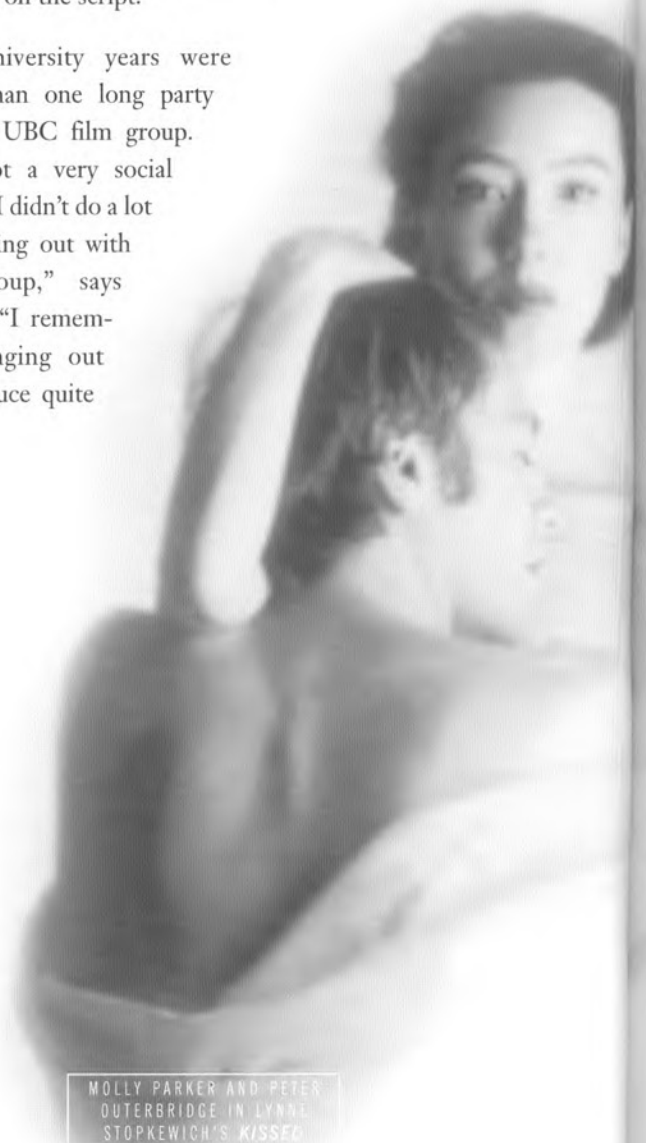
Stopkewich and Pozer were at the social centre of the UBC film scene. "John and Lynne were together and any time you were anywhere that you had John and Lynne, you essentially had the makings of a good party right there," says Sweeney. "John's parents had a cabin in the States and they would go away so we'd have people over to his parents' house," says Stopkewich, "or we'd have parties at Reg Harkema's house. He lived in this crazy house with all these guys. We'd have parties at Sweeney's house. He was living in Dunbar as well. It was great.

"Right from the beginning I remember there were people in the undergraduate program—Steve Hegyes, Greg Middleton, Samuel Berry (who's now a screenwriter in Los Angeles), Mina Shum, Reg Harkema, Greg Wild—all these people were all so passionate about filmmaking. At parties we'd always talk about movies. And it seemed like the department itself at that time was pretty West Coast—a real low-key kind of department—and a lot of these students wanted that kind of structure. These were the people who would always be breaking the rules. There were rules where only certain projects got picked to get made and a lot of these guys were, 'I don't care, I'm going to make a movie anyway even if my project doesn't get picked.' These individuals were superfocused. I'm not surprised that all of them

have done really, really well."

Stopkewich says a key moment in the making of *The Grocer's Wife* occurred at the 1988 Vancouver International Film Festival. "We got passes where you go see tons of movies and I saw, like, 50 films. It was insane, like I was going crazy. I saw Guy Maddin's film *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* for the first time. I'll never forget it. We were sitting there in the third row. We knew that the film had been made for \$20,000 and we were talking about wanting to make a feature and how do you get the money to do this. This was around the time when people were making films on credit cards and trying to do it themselves. And we just sort of looked at each other—'My god, \$20,000.' Reg Harkema was great: 'If he can do it, we can do it. Right?' And so immediately John was working on the script."

The university years were more than one long party for the UBC film group. "I'm not a very social person. I didn't do a lot of hanging out with the group," says Weber. "I remember hanging out with Bruce quite



MOLLY PARKER AND PETER
OUTERBRIDGE IN LYNNÉ
STOPKEWICH'S *KISSED*

a bit. We'd watch movies. He'd have a whole pile of tapes we'd watch—the Bergman movie we hadn't seen." "Friendships were forged," says Pozer. "Lynne and I, we had some parties. I don't really recall the partying so much as I do searching for the cut, searching for the scene, searching for the money, searching for the final mix."

Making a feature was an entirely new experience for the crew. Pozer culled from the film program. Shum was named first assistant director, although she had never been a second assistant director, and casting director because she had a degree in theatre and an acting background. "We just all went, 'Hell yeah, we'll do it,'" says Shum. "It was a 45-day shoot. John and I got in a car. We were the first two to go. We drove in his old beat-up Dart at 50 miles per hour all the way to Trail. It took us 13 hours to get there. And we scouted the place and the crew arrived a day later and we started filming. It was really exciting. The place where the crew was staying was someone's house in Rosedale.

"In one room it was Bruce Sweeney, Ross Weber and me. We slept in this room together. I remember Ross had a bum neck and I lent him my pillow. It was really all in the family. We would wake up in the morning smelling of last night's beer, we'd all make coffee, drink some coffee, go and shoot. "The experience of doing it meant that we could do it—as filmmakers." Weber, who would go on to be a film director and Genie-nominated editor, says the UBC group was characterized by a willingness to do it, rather than talk about it. "They were a bunch of people that had a lot of chutzpah, let's face it. You know, to go out and make a movie. I mean, there's a lot of talented people that just can't get past talking. Doing it is 80 per cent of making a movie, just simply doing it. I think that's a common thread in that group."

"Everyone said, 'Shoot in black and white? What are you, fuckin' nuts?'" recalls Pozer. "Well, black and white, how better to specify a narrative, rather than through some eye candy with your colour. Forget it, I'm not into it. You read the first paragraph of the script—billowy, grainy clouds of smoke over which the titles play. Well, that says black and white.

"[*The Grocer's Wife*] was the kind of an experience where people would come on set just to see what was going to explode that day. People were not only coming, they were bringing their own fucking lunch. And people would never be allowed to have these jobs: I wouldn't be allowed to be a

director, Simon Webb would never be a lead actor, Bruce Sweeney would never be on boom, Ross would never be mixing... and you would see these guys, they would get there, they would see the schedule collapse, they'd see [cinematographer Peter] Wunstorf and I trying to figure out how we were going to shoot this. We'd throw one thing away, we'd scratch something on paper, we'd type it up, pass it around, everything would change in a moment, we'd shoot something. It was a vibrant experience. I really believe everyone was there to learn, everyone was there to watch something. It was the best school that we had. And it was on the edge, it was dangerous and it was so exciting to be there."

Pozer would transfer to Concordia University in Montreal, where, along with Weber, he would complete post-production on *The Grocer's Wife*. In 1992, the film premiered and was selected for the Cannes Film Festival. "They phoned me," recalls Shum. "I freaked. I was just like, 'Yeah! We did it! Yay!'" The film would be heralded at other festivals and play theatres across Canada. More than that, it gave birth to a West Coast Wave whose impact on Canadian film has just begun to be felt. Stopkewich's *Kissed* and Shum's *Double Happiness* were major successes in the indie world. When Sweeney's *Last Wedding* was chosen to open the 2001 Toronto International Film Festival, TIFF director Piers Handling acknowledged the UBC group. "It's nice for us to recognize and affirm that," said Handling, "and to make that movement of filmmakers feel as much at home at the Toronto festival as the Vancouver festival."

The Vancouver indie scene has grown beyond its UBC nucleus but Sweeney, Stopkewich, Shum and the rest remain its heart. And the UBC alumni have continued to be friends, working together on occasion, leaving phone messages or sending flowers when a classmate is about to begin a shoot. SFU film grad Scott Smith, whose *rollercoaster* was popular on the festival circuit, pays tribute to the UBC group. "I met all these guys working on *Kissed* and *Live Bait*, so I'm sort of this SFU parasite in this UBC crowd." Actor/director Martin Cummins, whose *We All Fall Down* also played festivals, says newer Vancouver directors can't help but be conscious of the presence of the wave of indie filmmaking that started at UBC. "It's out there. And I guess on some level I'm a part of it," he says. "I feel like I know that I am. And it's a cool thing. You know, all these people that are making these movies because they want to make the movies, not because they're getting rich doing it."

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