

BY PAUL CORUPE

TAKING OFF THE MASK



Rediscovering Nat Taylor and the B-MOVIES of Canada's Past

Rock 'n' roll motorcycle gangs, hallucinating psychiatrists and beatniks out for kicks are not usually associated with polite English-Canadian films, but these lowbrow characters were Canada's sole voice in the hostile feature film climate of the late 1950s. Muscling their way into theatres and drive-ins dominated by Hollywood product, Toronto-shot films such as *A Dangerous Age* (1958), *The Bloody Brood* (1959), *The Ivy League Killers* (1959), *A Cool Sound from Hell* (1959) and *The Mask* (1961) were thrilling audiences several years before the English-Canadian film industry's widely acknowledged official birthdate in 1964—with the release of Don Owen's classic *Nobody Waved Good-Bye*. Scantly noticed in their time and barely remembered today, these films were expected not only to crack the Hollywood stranglehold but to restore a lost cultural industry.

By 1957, the dream of feature filmmaking in Canada had all but been abandoned. Almost two decades had passed since the National Film Board, with its emphasis on animation, shorts and the documentary, had taken over Canadian film production, and there had not been a sustained attempt at creating an Ontario feature-film industry since the mid-1920s. But slowly, things were beginning to change. Disillusioned with working on innocent post-war NFB filmstrips outlining the importance of nutrition and workplace safety, many writers, directors and producers began to break away to start up their own production companies.

Although these new companies continued to focus on documentaries and industrial shorts, this shift toward autonomy left many feeling bold enough to consider breaking with the staid traditions of NFB filmmaking. Building upon the wealth of experience they gained at the Film Board, the directors and writers behind these production companies had just began to consider the possibilities

of dramatic filmmaking when they were beaten to the punch. In October 1957, 24-year-old Sidney J. Furie announced that he had completed his first feature. Originally slated as a CBC drama, *A Dangerous Age* was already in the can before many knew Furie was even trying to make a film. A coming-of-age story with a few flashes of melodrama, *A Dangerous Age* is surprisingly thoughtful and well-acted. David and Nancy, played by Ben Piazza and Anne Pearson, are teenage lovers desperate to tie the knot. One day David sneaks Nancy out of her boarding school to get a marriage licence at the local courthouse. When they are told they must file a statement of intent and return the next day, the young lovers find themselves clashing with the rules of adult society and their own marital expectations. Their second trip to the courthouse is cut short when Nancy is arrested for truancy. Upon her release, David steals a car and tries to take his fiancée back to the courthouse but the cops are quickly in pursuit. When the pair is eventually caught, they realize they aren't ready to face the reality of love in an adult world.



In his announcement of the film's completion, Furie said that he didn't see why marketable features couldn't be made regularly in Canada, optimistically predicting that he would go on to make one picture a year. Although *A Dangerous Age* suffers slightly from Furie's inexperience as a director, he had high hopes for

it connecting with an audience.

Films de France agreed to distribute the film in the United Kingdom, where it was reviewed as "distinctly encouraging" by The British Film Institute's *Monthly Film Bulletin* on its release in May 1958. But on this side of the Atlantic, it was another story. Furie did not anticipate the difficulties he would face in securing North American distribution, which eluded him at every turn.

The sudden appearance of *A Dangerous Age* may have surprised Canada's new independent filmmakers but Nat Taylor, head of the Twentieth Century Fox theatre chain, the third largest in Ontario, had been waiting for just this kind of development. As the publisher of *Canadian Film Weekly*, Taylor was using his regular column to call for government support for Canadian features. Taylor saw himself as an industry insider who could give a larger cultural meaning to the low-budget pictures that independent film companies across Toronto were now considering. Taylor knew that if a Canadian feature could be sold to a major studio it would not only be a boon to the industry; it would also strengthen his case for federal funding.

To make a low-budget film that could take advantage of this opportunity, Taylor looked to Julian Roffman, a seasoned NFB director. Roffman had co-founded Meridian Films, which housed the soundstage Furie had used on *A Dangerous Age*. In October 1958, Taylor's wife, Yvonne, formed Taylor-Roffman Productions and immediately signed on as a co-producer for *The Bloody Brood*, a beatnik crime flick. It stars a young Peter Falk as

Nico, the smooth-talking mentor to a gang of coffee-house beatniks. In his pursuit of "kicks," Nico proclaims that murder "is the last great challenge to the creative mind." When an unsuspecting messenger boy drops by his wild bongo party the next night, Nico offers him a hamburger laced with shards of glass. The boy dies and the body is disposed of. Frustrated by the slow and inconclusive police investigation, the victim's brother, Cliff (Jack Betts), retraces the delivery route in search of clues. Convinced that Nico is behind the monstrous crime, Cliff infiltrates the circle of beats and starts hanging out at the coffee house. After a run-in with a pair of strong-arm thugs, Cliff unmasks Nico not only as the killer but also as an underworld gangster masquerading as an authentic hipster.

With an emphasis on thrills, *The Bloody Brood* is undoubtedly more of an "exploitation film" than *A Dangerous Age*. Still, the tightly paced story and competent direction gives the film a level of professionalism comparable to American B-movies of the time. But despite Roffman's experience, *The Bloody Brood* is still rough around the edges and falls victim to its budgetary constraints. Harsh lighting in many of the scenes shot at Meridian's stages give the film a flat look that lacks the menacing atmosphere needed to properly compliment Falk's ominous performance.

All NIGHT parties with JAZZ and DOPE.

The Toronto beatnik scene also inspired Furie's second feature, *A Cool Sound from Hell*. A young square named Charlie (Anthony Ray) is initiated into the twilight world of "all night parties with jazz and dope" when he becomes infatuated with a blonde beatnik named Steve (Carolyn D'Annidala). Trying to impress her by buying drugs for her favourite jazz musician, Charlie inadvertently gets mixed up with both the police and a dope ring. When one of the dealers is arrested, the gang pegs the new convert as an informer and administers a vicious beating. Bruised and

bloodied, he returns to Steve only to find that she is in love with the ringleader. As a last ditch effort to cling to Steve and escape his stuffy middle-class life, Charlie tries to impress her with a skydiving stunt that ends in tragedy.

When *The Bloody Brood* and *A Cool Sound from Hell* were made at the end of the 1950s, beatniks were at the height of their induction into the pop-culture vernacular. Although the Canadian entries seem to mimic the rash of similar American exploitation flicks such as *A Bucket of Blood* (1958), *The Beat Generation* (1959) and *The Fat Black Pussycat* (1963), beatniks never had it as good as they did within the understanding confines of English-Canadian film.

The Bloody Brood fared only slightly better. Although the violence in the film mostly occurs off-screen, its implied glass-eating scene got the film in trouble with the Hollywood Code watchdogs. It was enough to keep the film out of distribution for over a year, scaring off any potential interest from the major studios. Finally, it was picked up by Allied Artists, the second biggest competitor for the teen drive-in market. After a brief first run, *The Bloody Brood* was relegated to the bottom half of a crime-themed double feature that included an added gimmick—wax figures of famous criminals in makeshift cages behind the snack bar. This wasn't exactly the fate Taylor envisioned for a film he once regarded as the "stepping stone" to a Canadian film industry.

DRUG pushers and GANGSTERS—the REAL criminals of these CANADIAN films.

In American drive-in films, beatniks are unfailingly portrayed as a dangerous threat to middle-class values. Audiences used to seeing anti-social drug addicts spouting bad poetry must have been shocked to see the beatniks in *The Bloody Brood* and *A Cool Sound from Hell* played as sympathetic, three-dimensional characters questioning the unwritten rules of adult society. These are young professionals skeptical of the status quo, and while their rebellion often brings them in contact with crime and drugs, distinct efforts are made to distance the beatniks from drug pushers and gangsters—the "real" criminals of these Canadian films.

A Cool Sound from Hell was completed in March 1959, just weeks before Furie left Canada. One can hardly fault Furie for continuing his career in England where he felt more appreciated. Distribution still hadn't been found for *A Dangerous Age*, which had only been screened once in North America, by the Toronto Film Society. *A Cool Sound from Hell* debuted in the U.K. nine months later, to only slightly less glowing reviews than *A Dangerous Age*. Today, Furie's second film is considered "lost" and may never have the opportunity to be rediscovered by a Canadian audience.

Peter Falk, right, in Julian Roffman's *The Bloody Brood*





Roffman's *The Mask*

The film was plagued by problems from the beginning. Taylor's funding fell through and Klenman and Davidson were forced to shop an unfinished version to American distributors for completion funds. Allied Artist competitor American International Pictures was interested but refused to advance them any money. Eventually the picture was finished with the help of private investors at a budget of half of what

Nat Taylor turned to another production company for his next attempt. Earlier that year, he had presented the premiere of a feature made by the producer/director team of Norman Klenman and William Davidson, *Now that April's Here* (1958). Despite its obvious Canadian content, which combined three Morley Callaghan-penned dramatic shorts, the film had received only mixed reviews. But Taylor recognized Klenman's and Davidson's talent, and in the fall of 1959 convinced them to try a movie in the same vein as Furie's and Roffman's films by committing half of the financing.

The result was *The Ivy League Killers*, which centres on a tense conflict between spoiled rich college student, Andy (Don Francks), and a leather-jacketed motorcycle gang known as the Black Diamonds. Andy's girlfriend Susan (Barbara Bricker) finds herself intrigued with the Diamonds's leader, Don (Don Borisenko). When Andy finds out, he is furious, advising her that the biker is "uneducated, and probably very dirty." But all is not as it seems. Andy spent his school year away from home committing increasingly violent crimes and is convinced of his superiority to the two-bit rebel bikers. To prove it, Andy frames the motorcycle club by robbing a dance hall in a stolen Diamonds jacket. When a bystander is killed in the getaway, the cops begin to round up the gang. But after overhearing Andy bragging about his treachery, Susan gets to Don first to help him clear his name.

Furie's films had cost. But by this time the only buyer was American television and it was five more years before *The Ivy League Killers* finally lit up a Canadian theatre screen under a new title, *The Fast Ones*.

Filmed on location in and around Toronto, *The Ivy League Killers* isn't nearly as bad as its troubled history might suggest. While the production values are almost nonexistent, Klenman and Davidson managed to make the best of a bad situation and ended up with a gritty little juvenile delinquency film that takes the defence of middle-class rebellion seen in the earlier beatnik films to its logical end. The film is a clear indictment of a quick-to-judge society that automatically construes outsiders as evil, as Andy easily manipulates the town's assumptions about the bikers to frame Don for his own ends.

The film's failure to garner studio attention meant that a breakthrough picture was yet to be made. After *The Bloody Brood*, Taylor-Roffman Productions announced several different projects, ranging from a series of films based on the works of Canadian literary figures to *Cry of the Unborn*, a potentially lurid exposé of "the baby-adoption racket." However, it was *The Bloody Brood's* unexpected difficulties with the censors that really determined its next project. With Yvonne Taylor once again acting as co-producer, Roffman started work on *The Mask*, a tamer commercial film that would offer audiences "thrills without violence, shock without brutality."

The Mask: THRILLS without violence, SHOCK without BRUTALITY.

Shot partially in 3-D, *The Mask* is a thinly veiled drug parable about Dr. Barnes (Paul Stevens), a psychiatrist who finds himself in an eerie Freudian dreamworld whenever he puts on an ancient Indian ritual mask. As he continues to experiment with the mask to explore his own subconscious desires, the doctor's grip on sanity is tested until he finds himself inexplicably attacking his receptionist. A marked improvement on *The Bloody Brood*, *The Mask* easily succeeds with a unique mix of adult themes and fairground spook-house effects. In an interactive twist, movie patrons were given a cardboard "Magic Mystic Mask" with built-in 3-D glasses they could put on whenever they heard a character tell Barnes to "Put the mask on—now!" Each of the three 3-D "trip" sequences, written and designed by veteran editor and montage designer Slavko Vorkapich (*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*), aren't shy about hurling all manner of fireballs, snakes and sacrificial knives at the audience.

Even though the 3-D trend had died out in Hollywood five or six years earlier, *The Mask* was picked up by Warner Bros. and became the first Canadian feature film to be distributed across North America by a major studio. It opened to generally positive reviews and average box office just in time for Halloween, 1961. Today, *The Mask* has achieved a minor cult film status and is considered "one of the great gimmick films" by leading B-film resource *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film*.

Insanity-inducing masks and lethal burgers may not have made much of an initial impression with Canadian audiences or critics, but they didn't go completely unnoticed. A few years after *The Mask* hit New York City theatres, an NFB-produced English feature made a big impression at the city's 1964 film festival. Initially written off as a failure by Canadian critics, *Nobody Waved Good-Bye* was later reclaimed and hailed as not only the birth of English-Canadian cinema but also a predecessor to the "loser" cinema of *Goin' down the Road* and *Paperback Hero*. Although it appeared that *Nobody* was fresh and original, to Roffman and Furie the theme of a young man trying to run away from the frustrations of his middle-class life might have seemed oddly familiar.

While there is no doubt that the sensationalistic thrills of films like *The Ivy League Killers* and *The Mask* challenge contemporary views of our national cinema—even in the late 1950s they had to contend with accusations of selling out, since it was believed they only sought to emulate Hollywood films—it was the early success and failures of Sidney J. Furie, Julian Roffman and William Davidson that proved feature filmmaking was a viable cultural industry. They were the first of a new generation of filmmakers who helped English-Canada reclaim its future by trading the snowy pass and the Mountie's redcoat for a basement coffee house and a beat-up leather jacket.

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