

John



above, JOHN KOZAK directs his actors; right, the trio – DANIEL SPRINTZ, KEVIN DOERKSEN and ALISON NORTHCOTT

ON JULY 4, 1947, a motorcycle gang of nearly 4,000 bikers converged on the town of Hollister, California, allegedly taking over the town to engage in a series of full-scale brawls and looting. This incident would later inspire producer Stanley Kramer to commit the subject to celluloid, and the result was *The Wild One*, directed by Hungarian born Laslo Benedek. Criticized on release as sensationalizing its subject matter, the film would begin a long tradition of troubled youth pictures that nestled somewhere between social conscience and commercial exploitation. In defending the controversial topic, Benedek stated, "The subject isn't juvenile delinquency, it's youth without goals which doesn't know what to do with the energy it possesses."

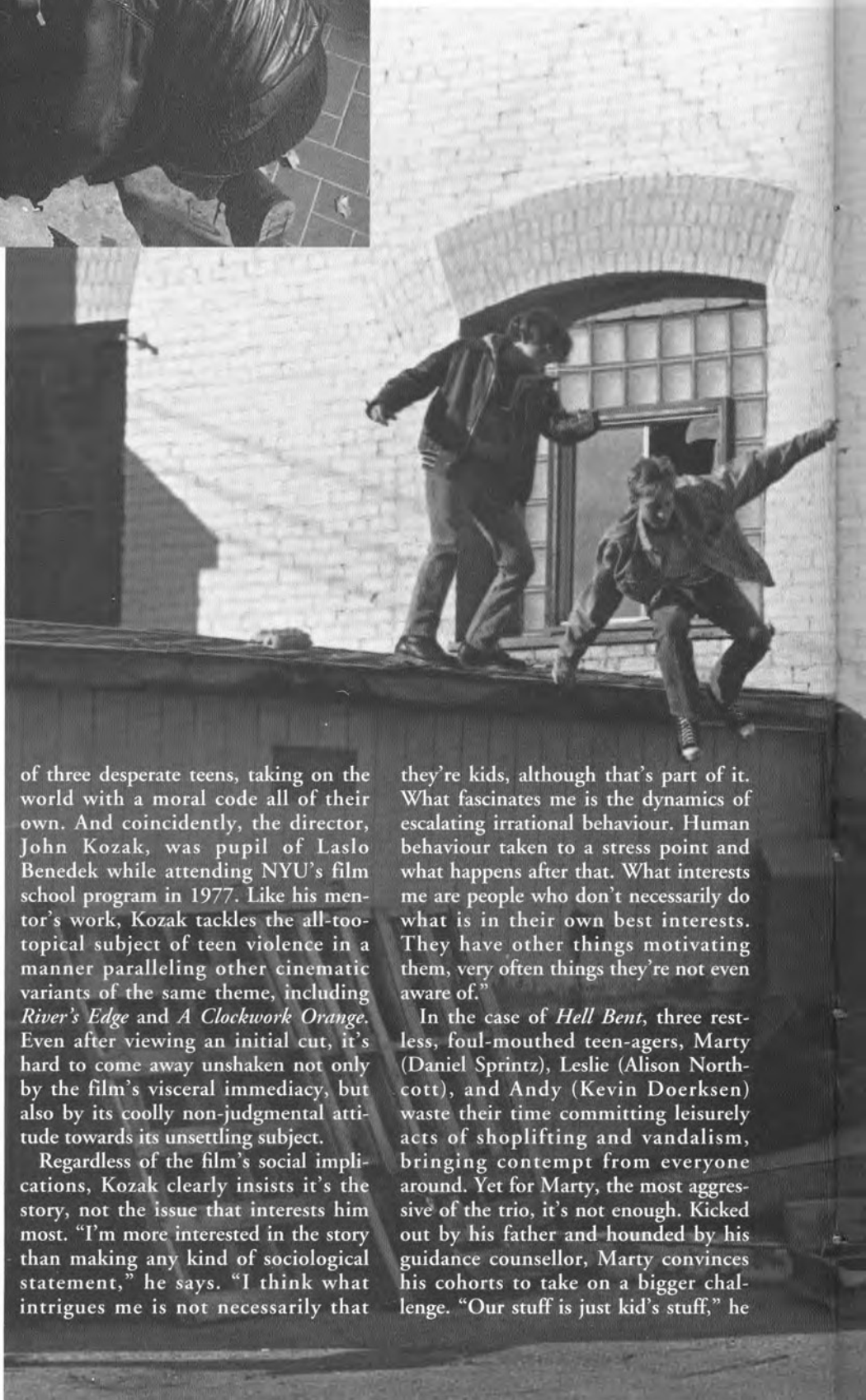
Such a statement would aptly describe *Hell Bent*, a low-budget shocker from Winnipeg, concerning the depraved acts

of three desperate teens, taking on the world with a moral code all of their own. And coincidentally, the director, John Kozak, was pupil of Laslo Benedek while attending NYU's film school program in 1977. Like his mentor's work, Kozak tackles the all-too-topical subject of teen violence in a manner paralleling other cinematic variants of the same theme, including *River's Edge* and *A Clockwork Orange*. Even after viewing an initial cut, it's hard to come away unshaken not only by the film's visceral immediacy, but also by its coolly non-judgmental attitude towards its unsettling subject.

Regardless of the film's social implications, Kozak clearly insists it's the story, not the issue that interests him most. "I'm more interested in the story than making any kind of sociological statement," he says. "I think what intrigues me is not necessarily that

they're kids, although that's part of it. What fascinates me is the dynamics of escalating irrational behaviour. Human behaviour taken to a stress point and what happens after that. What interests me are people who don't necessarily do what is in their own best interests. They have other things motivating them, very often things they're not even aware of."

In the case of *Hell Bent*, three restless, foul-mouthed teen-agers, Marty (Daniel Sprintz), Leslie (Alison Northcott), and Andy (Kevin Doerksen) waste their time committing leisurely acts of shoplifting and vandalism, bringing contempt from everyone around. Yet for Marty, the most aggressive of the trio, it's not enough. Kicked out by his father and hounded by his guidance counsellor, Marty convinces his cohorts to take on a bigger challenge. "Our stuff is just kid's stuff," he



Kozak's Hell Bent



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*the
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by Patrick Lowe

Leslie (ALISON NORTHCOTT) and teacher



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grumbles, “we should do something important.” They end up focusing their efforts on breaking into the home of a timid, elderly couple. The results, to say the least, get way out of hand. Yet, throughout the picture, there is no sermonizing nor any kind of personal redemption for these delinquents that you’d find in an NFB docudrama like *Train of Dreams* – only the facts. “No matter how crazy an act is,” Kozak continues, “there are steps that lead a person to commit it. I wanted to follow these kids for a day and explain visually, as though you were with them every step of the way, how they talked themselves into it. It’s not going back in to their early childhood to try and explain it psychologically.”

At 38, John Kozak has built himself a reputation as one of Winnipeg’s most prolific directors, including a repertoire of seven films produced through the Winnipeg Film Group. Yet, despite his local reputation both professionally and artistically, his work is almost unheard of outside of the city, overshadowed by the co-op’s more notorious efforts of John Paizs and Guy Maddin. “He’s not at all interested in what you might call this sly, deadpan post-modern style of comedy which fully emerges in Paizs or Maddin,” explains Howard Curle, a professor of film studies at the University of Manitoba, as well as Kozak’s long-time friend and sometime collaborator. “He’s different, too, from the more orthodox style of the NFB or Credo group, which are very much social problem oriented.

He’s more attracted [to subject matter] in a Howard Hawks kind of way, although Hawks would not be attracted to a film like *Hell Bent*.”

Originally, Kozak majored in religious studies at the University of Manitoba but later developed an interest in movies, having taken a few film courses and directed Super8 shorts. Along with Howard Curle, Kozak attended NYU film school, where he studied filmmaking under the tutelage of such great directors as George Cukor, Sam Fuller, and of course Benedek. “I gravitated towards Laslo. He was very story oriented, and I wanted to learn that style of basic storytelling.” For his third-year project, he directed *A Fascist Can’t Dance*, a half-hour satire of sorts, concerning the intimate frustrations surrounding a low-budget film shoot. Returning to Winnipeg in 1981, Kozak directed an impressive, often wildly diverse collection of films, ranging from fairy tale adaptations (*The Golden Apple*), to visual essays (*Roomtone*), to pseudo science fiction (*The Celestial Matter*).

Three films stand out in foretelling the more sinister themes which would figure strongly in his first commercial feature. *Running Time* is a B&W *Twilight Zone*-style escapade which details an arrogant marathon runner’s descent into a hallucinatory hell of compressed time and space. Kozak’s most acclaimed short, *Dory*, provides a tense psychological study concerning two women sweating it out in a remote farmhouse. It won

awards at Yorkton for actresses Donna Lewis and Roscoe Handford, drama, and screenplay. *Two Men in Search of a Plot*, which he co-directed with Howard Curle, is arguably his most popular film. Originally shot on 8mm, which Kozak later blew up to 16mm, it is a very funny look at two inept gangsters trying to dispose of a body. Inspired by Laurel and Hardy and Roman Polanski’s *Two Men and a Wardrobe*, it is, in Curle’s words, “a combination of 20s slapsticks and a meditation of death.”

The script for *Hell Bent* (developed by Greg Klymkiw and Tracy Traeger, the producers of *Careful*) came to the attention of Ken Rodeck, co-producer of Kim Johnston’s *The Last Winter*. “I would say it was John, rather than the script that attracted me to the project,” says Rodeck. “I was unsure, obviously because of the subject matter, whether we should proceed with this kind of dark story. However, John truly wanted to do it, so I decided to take the risk.” With funding from Telefilm’s low budget development program and matching funds from CIDO, a total budget of \$700,000 was raised for what would prove for Kozak and his crew a tight, often stressful 21-day schedule. “I found it a mad rush to get the film ready,” recalls Kozak. “Every shooting day seemed like we could have used another four hours.” Whatever the budget limitations, the end result would do most big-budget features proud, with its relentless pacing, gripping atmosphere (aided by Charles Lavack’s stark cine-

matography), and first rate performances by the picture's lead trio.

The casting was by far the greatest challenge. After going through auditions for nearly 200 potentials, Kozak then spent six weeks in rehearsal with Doerksen, Northcott, and Sprintz trying to create the characters of three very unbalanced minors. "I didn't want them to get lost in these characters. I was a little bit nervous about them maybe starting to emulate some of the behaviour. After all, this was going to be six weeks of rehearsal and four to five weeks of shooting [with them] behaving like monsters. We wanted to make sure that the kids absolutely understood the characters from a very objective viewpoint." Happily, as Kozak puts it, "these kids were so bright, they had no trouble at all."

Should this film succeed in finding an audience, there are bound to be some who'll question Kozak's motives in dealing with such degrading characters at so young an age. However, Kozak insists that he is only out to tell a story. "I'm not trying to shock anybody. I want the kids to be believable, no matter how horrible their acts are. *Hell Bent* does not lay the groundwork for why they end up the way that they are. It explains what happens dramatically. I'm not condoning what they do, but trying to understand why it happened. You may not feel empathy for the characters, but you will at least identify with their humanness."

Among other projects Kozak is considering is another horror story of sorts, *Let Me Count the Ways*, concerning two women who conspire to murder one of their husbands. It promises to be yet another excursion into the darker side of humanity, something which will no doubt continue to figure strongly in Kozak's work for some time. "He was the person who gave me Dostoyevsky to read in University," recalls Curle. "He's interested in literature that speaks on the underside of life. And I guess that emerges in a *Hell Bent*." How does John see this darker side? "I find it difficult to create a split between dark side or light side. I find that very Christian, very problematic. I think I'm dealing with human nature, in whatever directions it might take. What I find fascinating is following the dynamics of where people are taken emotionally. I don't find that dark," he reflects, matter of factly. "That's just life" ●

Patrick Lowe is a freelance writer and animator living in Winnipeg.



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