O Canadian Film, We Stand on Guard for Thee:

Peter Rowe's Popcorn with Maple Syrup and Jill Sharpe's Weird Sex and Snowshoes

By Maurie Alioff

Two new documentaries, both with television air dates in the fall, offer strikingly different takes on the slippery subject of Canadian film. Jill Sharpe's *Weird Sex and Snowshoes* is a one–hour documentary inspired by *Vancouver Sun* film critic Katherine Monk's book of the same title. Peter Rowe's feature–length *Popcorn with Maple Syrup* favours populist chronicle over cultural analysis in its survey of major personalities, events and turning points in Canada's movie history.

Subtitled *And Other Canadian Film Phenomena*, Monk's 357–page tome, published in 2001, consisted of thematic essays, biographies of directors associated with themes probed in the book and mini–reviews of 100 milestone pictures. At the end of each review, Monk itemized the typically Canadian themes and motifs in the film. These include anti–heroic protagonists, dysfunctional relationships, an obsession with death, and, of course, strange sexual cravings. After all, the Canadian canon includes a movie (*Kissed*) about a necrophiliac corpse–humper. Sharpe's tight little documentary, subtitled *A Trek through the Canadian Cinematic Psyche*, only hints at the numerous lines of discussion in Monk's book. In fact, Sharpe said during an interview that her film is intended to be more a "celebration of Canadian film" than head–scratching exegesis.

To set up its cheery tone, *Weird Sex and Snowshoes* opens on bemused and bewildered filmmakers trying to define Canadian movies. For Norman Jewison, they're "kind of perverse…really sick." Guy Maddin calls them "sneaky and two–faced." Surprisingly, Atom Egoyan is tongue–tied, a little gag that pays off near the end of the documentary when he comes up with a definition that serves as the movie's final word. Loaded with clips from dozens of pictures, *Weird Sex* strives to counter widespread public perceptions of Canadian cinema. Sharpe, working closely with producer Gabriela Schonbach and writer Dianna Bodnar, sought out movie moments that are dramatic, funny, lyrical and strange in films ranging from David Cronenberg's *The Fly* to Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjurat*. Forceful, rapid pacing boosts an impression of vivacious, sexy energy, rather than the awkward inwardness audiences expect to be condemned to if they buy a ticket to a Canadian movie.

The clips in *Weird Sex and Snowshoes* play off interviews filmed across the country last winter. The subjects are Canada's best–known contemporary filmmakers, along with impresarios and commentators like TIFF's Piers Handling and Katherine Monk herself. At the start of production, Sharpe (best known for her 2001 anti–corporate media documentary *Culture Jam: Hijacking Commercial Culture*), knew she would use Monk's book and her own insights only as "organizational principles." If a particular notion "didn't come back from the directors themselves," she dropped it. Sharpe also worked with

ideas that don't appear in the book, for instance Robert Lepage's somewhat metaphysical belief that English– and French–language moviemakers are united by the impact of northern lights on their thematic choices and creative decisions.

Lepage's idea segues into a series of brief bits that highlight various cinematic tendencies and preoccupations. We hear from Don McKellar, Mina Shum, Patricia Rozema, Clement Virgo, Guy Maddin, Anne Wheeler and others. The documentary looks at outsider heroes and survivor characters, the struggle for cultural identity in the face of what Atom Egoyan calls "real onslaughts," our documentary and realist traditions, and in the case of Maddin's oeuvre, feverish melodramas dripping with irony. Whether they are stoned punkers, drag queens, immigrant teenagers or lesbian boarding–school girls, characters in Canadian movies share a loopy viewpoint on the world. This isn't necessarily fun and games. In one of the film's key sequences, Léa Pool argues that these rebels and misfits reflect a haunting sense of exile from both place and self.

Weird Sex and Snowshoes climaxes with a section on the erotic hijinks that have raised eyebrows around the world. As Don McKellar puts it, during the 1990s, Canadian movies developed a reputation for confronting uneasy areas of sexual experience. The film's weird–sex clips run the gamut from a bare–breasted teenage girl biting off an old man's toenail in Jean–Claude's Lauzon's *Léolo* to a supremely odd moment when a naked Molly Parker mounts a dead man in *Kissed*.

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While the documentary is a sincere homage to Canuck flicks, I'm not sure about some of the premises drawn from Monk's book that are taken as gospel in certain circles. Comparing low–budget, serious Canadian films to Hollywood at its most grandiose and market–driven and then extrapolating ideas about the differences in cultural identity is disingenuous. This mindset suggests that the real Canada is so pristine it has no time for mainstream pop culture, that filmmakers who dream of genre hits have not immersed themselves in enough northern light. It also evades the fact that eccentric, artistically ambitious films with idiosyncratic perspectives are made everywhere in the world, including the USA. *Boys Don't Cry*, *Donnie Darko*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, anything directed by Todd Solondz and countless other American films display many of the hallmarks of Canadian cinema as defined by Monk. These movies flaunt their outsider protagonists, dysfunctional relationships, identity crises, intimidating landscapes, struggles for survival and challenging sexual extremes. The films by the Canadian culture heroes celebrated in Monk's book and Sharpe's documentary say as much, or even more, about an international maverick film culture than it does about our national identity.

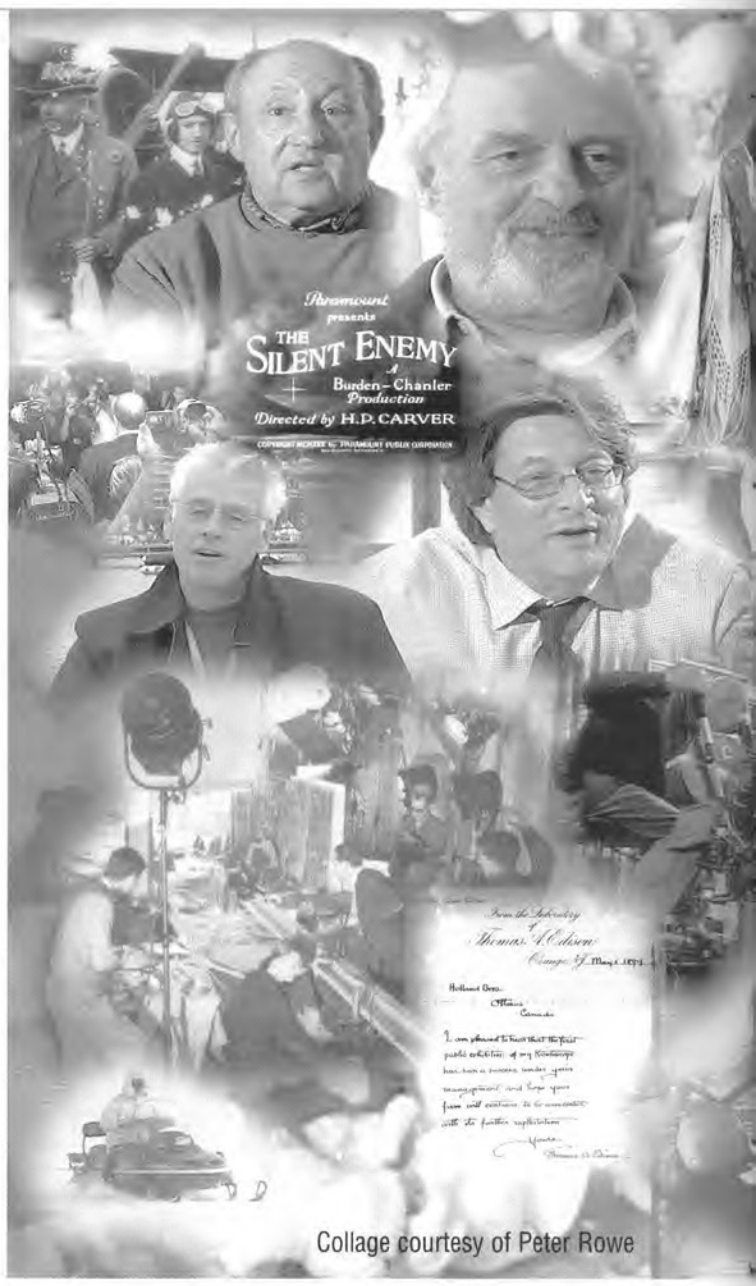
How important are strict definitions of group identity, anyway? "We would be much more interesting as people," Léa Pool says in *Weird Sex and Snowshoes*, "if we just let life run its course without always trying to define things." With its primary focus on a Canuck version of indie filmmaking, Sharpe's trek through the "Canadian Cinematic Psyche" barely acknowledges movies that predate the mid–1980s or aim at box–office success. Films like the 3–D horror flick *The Mask*, or *Porky's*, or *Les Boys*, or *Air Bud*, or *The Art of War*, or *Seducing Doctor Lewis* don't reveal anything particular about Canada or its cinema. In other words, in the limited world view of Monk and Sharpe, Canadian cinema is defined almost entirely by the likes of Atom Egoyan or Robert Lepage, not Jean–François Pouliot, Louis Saïa or expatriates like Ted Kotcheff, James Cameron or Ivan Reitman.

By contrast, veteran director Peter Rowe's *Popcorn with Maple Syrup* offers a perspective so completely different from *Weird Sex and Snowshoes* it might as well be observing

an alternate universe. Rowe says that his film, a collaboration with legendary cinematographer Richard Leiterman, "is not just about production, but everything that's part of the film business, including exhibition. I think the film history of some countries can be written by what features got made, but in Canada, that's not the case." While this breezy, information–packed film includes appearances by star directors like Denys Arcand and David Cronenberg, Rowe prioritizes intriguing, revealing and sometimes "untold stories, not the well–known, standard tales about auteur filmmakers who have a certain reputation."

Subtitled *Film in Canada from Eh to Zed*, and following a playful alphabet structure (B is for "Boom and Bust," H is for "High Hopes," U is for "Underground" and so on), *Popcorn with Maple Syrup* gives the often abstract subject of Canadian film a human face. This is not film culture as a sombre discussion of how many Canadian directors can dance on a projector beam. Nor is it a faux–Hollywood puff piece. Sidestepping an explicit analysis of indigenous film, Rowe hones in on the history, at once dramatic, tragic and absurd, which has been unfolding since the early days of the North American movie industry. Some of stories are familiar; others, less so. As Rowe shifts focus from one moment to the next, his version of events in our cinematic history comes through as colourful and vibrant, featuring unusual characters with chutzpah to spare.

Rowe, a prolific moviemaker with a career spanning numerous credits ranging from episodic television to features, says he "wanted to make a documentary that is as populist as possible." Sifting through hundreds of personalities and events, he selected the stuff most likely to hold the attention of uninitiated audiences. For instance, he points out that "the most dramatic story about the NFB was the communist scare in the late 1940s" when founder John Grierson hightailed it out of the country under suspicion of ringleading a nest of wild–eyed pinko spies. Another tense moment involved critic Robert Fulford's puritanical attack in *Saturday Night* on David Cronenberg's first shot at commercial filmmaking, *Shivers*, released in 1974. Rowe, who has known Cronenberg since his student days, says that the young and professionally vulnerable moviemaker took the influential Fulford's denunciation very seriously. "He [Fulford] was saying if this is filmmaking in Canada, then there should be no filmmaking. Not only was Cronenberg's career conceivably going to go up in flames, but also the whole [government–subsidized] film industry." For Rowe, "Allan King's *Warrendale* was a similar case." Commissioned by CBC–TV, the controversial documentary was never aired because the brass objected to the film's foul language. In fact, when the public network broadcasts *Popcorn with Maple Syrup*, it will show scenes from King's heartbreaking masterpiece for the first time.



Collage courtesy of Peter Rowe

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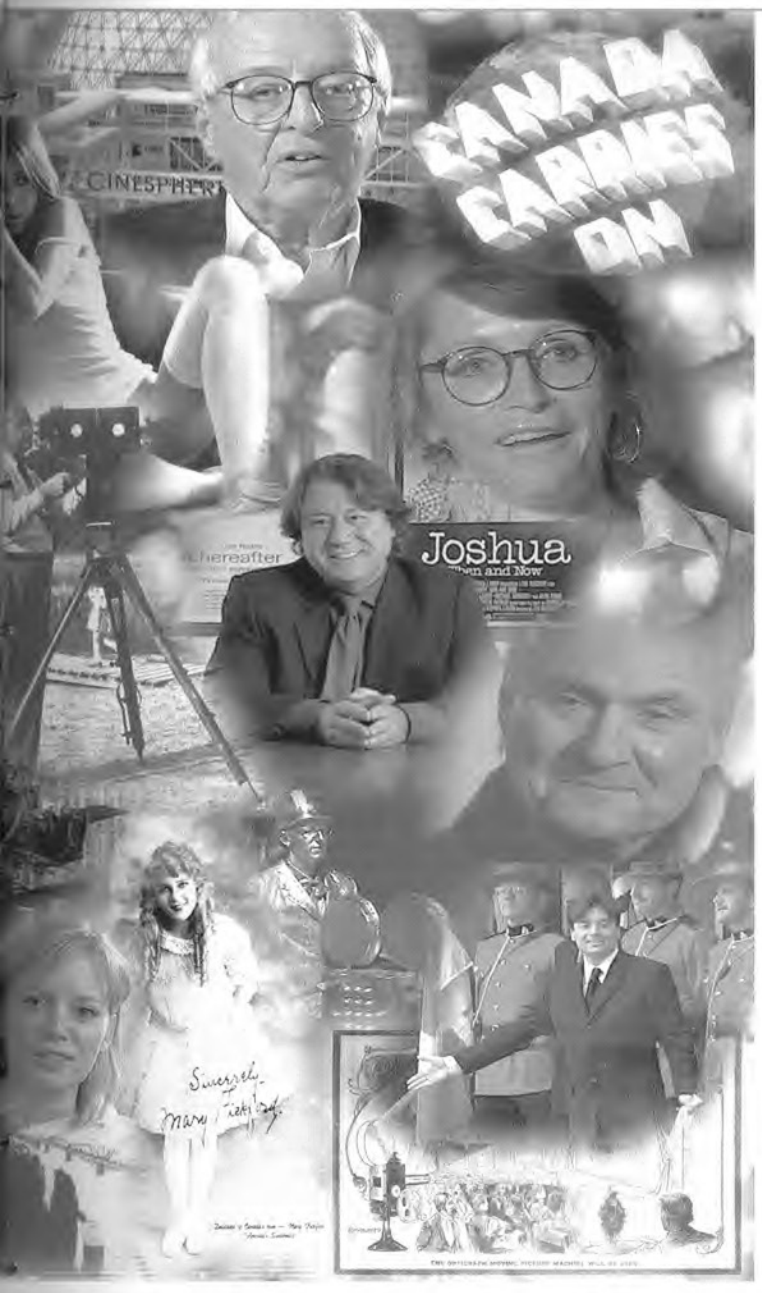

The film begins with Canadians at the 2003 Cannes festival, cuts to a suburban Toronto drive–in, and then proceeds to flip between past and present, often linking the two. We discover that the Toronto–born Mary Pickford, Hollywood's first superstar, had a disdain for celebrity matched by Toronto's Sarah Polley. A Pickford aficionado, Polley talks about being inspired by her serenely Canadian approach to closeups. As she makes the point, a magical moment reveals that the two diminutive blondes look very much alike, so much so that one could almost believe Polley is channelling her long–dead idol.

In *Popcorn with Maple Syrup*, we meet up with some smooth operators like "10 per cent Ernie" Shipman and his wife Nell (whose eye–popping nudity in 1919's *Back to God's Country* ensured the picture's success), not to mention pioneering entrepreneurs and inventors such as George and Andrew Holland, who convinced a skeptical Thomas Edison that his Vitascope projection system had a future. Producers Garth Drabinsky, Robert Lantos, and partners André Link and John Dunning (the Roger Cormans of Canada, whose firm, Cinepix, launched David Cronenberg) shaped Canadian movie culture in profound ways. Rowe argues that apart from the production of theatrical features, the "main contribution Canada has made to the world of film is structures and institutions like multiplex theatre chains, IMAX and the idea of financing films through public offerings and tax shelters." *Popcorn with Maple Syrup* tilts toward the view, expressed by Lantos and others, that the tax–shelter era of the 1970s and early 1980s wasn't as barren as it's been made out to be. Back then, recalls Rowe, "there was a tremendous kind of energy to the scene." *Shivers* and *Rabid* were profitable, as were *Meatballs*, *The Grey Fox*, *Atlantic City* and *Quest for Fire*, and movies such as Daryl Duke's *The Silent Partner* were intelligent takes on genre.

The worldwide success of IMAX exemplifies Rowe's conviction that Canadian film is about more than just making features. "People talk about how Michael Moore's documentaries have earned millions. But the IMAX films have made over $400 million. Somewhere in the world right now, a Toni Myers movie is being screened." Despite this success, it's the "press darlings" among Canadian filmmakers —the Egoyans and Lepages—who bask in media attention while somebody like Myers gets ignored by the intelligentsia, if not the filmgoing public. The most dramatic moments in Rowe's film are about ambitious Canadian movie people who triumphed and then plunged into disaster, or what Rowe calls "reduced expectations." Florence Lawrence, D.W. Griffith's "Biograph Girl," a prototypical Hollywood star and brilliant inventor, killed herself. Hunky, ambitious Budge Crawley, who thought he could have two wives at the same time and once introduced both to Pierre Trudeau, lost his business and went blind. Claude Jutra, Phillip Borsos and Francis Mankiewicz all died painfully young. Garth Drabinsky,

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who built the Cineplex chain into the second largest in North America, and the late Cinar co–founder Micheline Charest, created empires from scratch only to fall from grace.

A comic highlight occurs during an item on the Canadian Cooperation Project (1948–58), the ill–fated federal policy that encouraged Hollywood producers to ward off restrictions on their profits by sprinkling gratuitous Canadian references into their films. Rowe says that although these plugs were supposed to boost tourism, it actually declined during this period. In a clip from Anthony Mann's 1952 Western, *Bend of the River*, Jimmy Stewart and Arthur Kennedy look totally befuddled about digressing from the point of their dialogue to take note of a "bird from Canada" flying around their campsite.

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Whatever the differences in their understanding of Canadian film culture, Peter Rowe and Jill Sharpe agree on one thing—that it must be protected from the big, bald eagle that could swoop down and gobble it up for good. Sharpe finds it unconscionable that "art and culture are put on the back burner," and Rowe has a unique take on the necessity of government funding of Canadian cinema. Since Hollywood invaded us in the 1920s, Canada has been fighting a rearguard action. With tongue in cheek (but also quite seriously), Rowe contends that "Canadian filmmakers are like an army. Filmmakers and film workers are foot soldiers defending Canadian culture. Naturally, they're financed by the people of the country, and I think that's right." Joking that these foot soldiers could wear a uniform of "ripped jeans" (and, I add, carry standard–issue cellphones), Rowe emphasizes that one of the keys to victory is some kind of system, perhaps tax incentives, that encourages exhibitors to show movies made by their fellow Canadians. In a famous moment from an old Andy Hardy movie, Mickey Rooney excitedly tells Judy Garland that they can't put on a play until they find an old barn and fix it up. "We've never done that," says Rowe. Perhaps it's time we did.

Top: Guy Maddin: Canadian films are "sneaky and two–faced"

Middle: Left, Mary Pickford. Right, Sarah Polley: A serenely Canadian approach to closeups.

Bottom: Atom Egoyan with David Cronenberg: "press darlings."