



Richard Cashin as Peter Cashin in a recreation of the National Convention of 1947

B u i l d i n g A S e c r e t N a t i o n w i t h M i c h a e l J o n e s

"WE REMEMBER STORIES of small states that valiantly preserved their own proud cultures, but we tend to overlook the fact that the comparison of Newfoundland with them is ludicrous. We are not a nation." Joey Smallwood, 1946
 "As a filmmaker, I think you have to take some risks. I like going after the big ideas." Michael Jones, 1992

Newfoundland filmmaker Michael Jones is about to unleash a very "big idea," an idea which defies Smallwood's arguments about nationhood while making several deep, skeptical incisions into the troubled heart of Canadian confederation.

His new film, *A Secret Nation*, is a taut, archly observed conspiracy drama about just how and why the former independent British colony of Newfoundland became Canada's tenth province in 1949. Officially, it joined after two bitter, divisive, and very close referenda in 1948 (the final results: 52.34% in favour, 47.66% against). In the swirling, darkly ambiguous conspiratorial labyrinth of *A Secret Nation*, however, questions keep surfacing: Were the results rigged by the British and Canadian governments? Were there spies in the anti-confederate camp? Who was Smallwood really working for? Is Newfoundland, as the pro-confederation

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leader and later first premier of the province suggested, "not a nation"?

What? Realpolitik in Canada?

These questions haunt the protagonist of *A Secret Nation*, Ph.D. history student Frieda Vokey (Codco's Cathy Jones), as she returns to St. John's from Montreal to finish her thesis on Newfoundland nationalism. With the death of a local politician, whose personal papers contain answers to historical speculation and implicate her father in alleged political treachery against Newfoundland, Frieda's own personal, political, and professional investigations begin to overlap. Past bleeds into present as she uncovers fact after astonishing fact about what took place in the desperate, impoverished Newfoundland of the late 1940s.

Weaving archival footage, newsreels, and actual radio broadcasts of the confederation debates into Frieda's story, Jones uses an explosive mixture of fact and fiction which makes *A Secret Nation* a potent, provocative exploration of the history of Canadian politics, and the politics of Canadian history. Imagine JFK (the comparisons are inevitable and not totally inappropriate; no, Jones has not seen it) directed by Stanley Kubrick and you'll have a sense of the visual and intellectual rigour of the film.

A Secret Nation is Michael Jones' most recent, and decidedly big cinematic idea in a career which contains some the oddest, most idiosyncratic, downright daring ideas in Canadian film. In 1975, he helped found the Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers Co-operative (NIFCO). He still works there, and is active in keeping filmmaking in Newfoundland an independent, accessible, artist-driven form of cultural expression. His early work at NIFCO includes *Dolly Cake* (1976), a densely-layered short about a woman exploited by her hungover housemates, and an imaginary film-within-a-film involving a madman and a Russian philosopher; *Codpieces* (1976), an uproarious sampler of the Codco theatre troupe's live performances; and *Sisters of the Silver Scalpel* (1981), a mock-documentary about a research team on an expedition to Newfoundland to study an endangered species of nun. Each displays Jones'

inventive approach to narrative and style, often rendering extraordinary parodies and pastiches of documentary film practice, silent cinema, and all manner of post-modern, self-reflexive self-indulgence.

These stylistic and thematic elements are extended in his first feature film, co-written and directed with his brother Andy, *The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood* (1986). Begun in 1977, the film, which Michael also shot and edited, took nearly a decade to complete. *Faustus* ("made out of necessity," says Jones) is a carnivalesque retelling of the Faust myth (remember, think big!) involving Faustus Bidgood, a meek, lonely, mentally unstable government clerk who dreams of becoming the first president of the People's Republic of Newfoundland. With its interweaving of real and imaginary worlds in a narrative of almost Joycean largess, and its use of various film styles (cinema-verité, expressionism, animation), *The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood* not only detonates Canadian codes of realist filmmaking, it also registers an abiding political anger. This anger, as *A Secret Nation* demonstrates, may not remain in the dream worlds of President Bidgood forever.

During the gestation and tortured birth of *Faustus*, the versatile Jones also worked as an actor in William D. MacGillivray's *Aerial View* (1979), and in MacGillivray's first feature, *Stations* (1983), delivering in the latter one of the most understated, finely etched portraits of pan-Canadian angst in all Canadian cinema. He appears briefly in Edward Riche's hilariously deadpan *Hey Elvis!* (1987) as an expert studying what he claims is the dead King's hand. More recently, Jones has shot several short films (or "filmeos," as he calls them) used in Newfoundland theatre pieces. With titles like *Outport Lesbian*, *Grannies*, and *Ship Inn Man*, these "filmeos" occupy a peculiar niche in cinema as interactive narrative blocks in live theatre.

Curiously, Michael Jones has no real influences, cinematically speaking. His approach to cinema is sophisticated, but is guided from his own particular sense of the art. "I can't say I have any cinematic heroes or anything like that, but I do like images with bite," he says. "I

admire filmmakers who grab the camera and shoot their own stuff, take control of it, and shape it in a distinct way." More surprisingly, given the skewed fictional universes he creates, Michael Jones says he prefers invisible cutting. "I think I may be too literal in my approach, but you can add images together through editing to produce all sorts of accumulated meanings and nuances. In films, things add up and make a kind of sense."

While *A Secret Nation* is decidedly more linear than the baroque, psychological carnival of *Faustus Bidgood*, it does retain Jones' fluid approach to chronology and narrative. "I suppose my interweaving of past and present—and the past is with us in the present constantly—stems, perhaps, from the oral culture and storytelling traditions of Newfoundland, in which anything can happen. You can't be afraid of huge, difficult, grandiose narratives, even if your budget is limited, because cinema can be manipulated in all sorts of ways to shape seemingly impossible material. *Faustus* is ample evidence of that. My next film, which I'm tentatively entitling *The Secret of Life*, will have many more layers than the candy-coated history lesson I've created with *A Secret Nation*."

Here Michael Jones is being disingenuous. *A Secret Nation* is by no means candy-coated history, despite being more conventionally constructed than *Faustus Bidgood*. It is a fascinating, ambiguous journey to the centre of Newfoundland nationalism, a nationalism which appears only in absurdist glimmers in *Faustus Bidgood*. Given the current precarious state of Canadian confederation, *A Secret Nation* will undoubtedly raise the ire of historians and politicians (wait for it: Michael Jones called to account for himself on *The Journal*), and perhaps stir the grave of Smallwood, but like his intelligent and determined heroine threading her way through the historical labyrinth, Michael Jones will take that risk. **T I**

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