

F R O M T H

E C O A S T

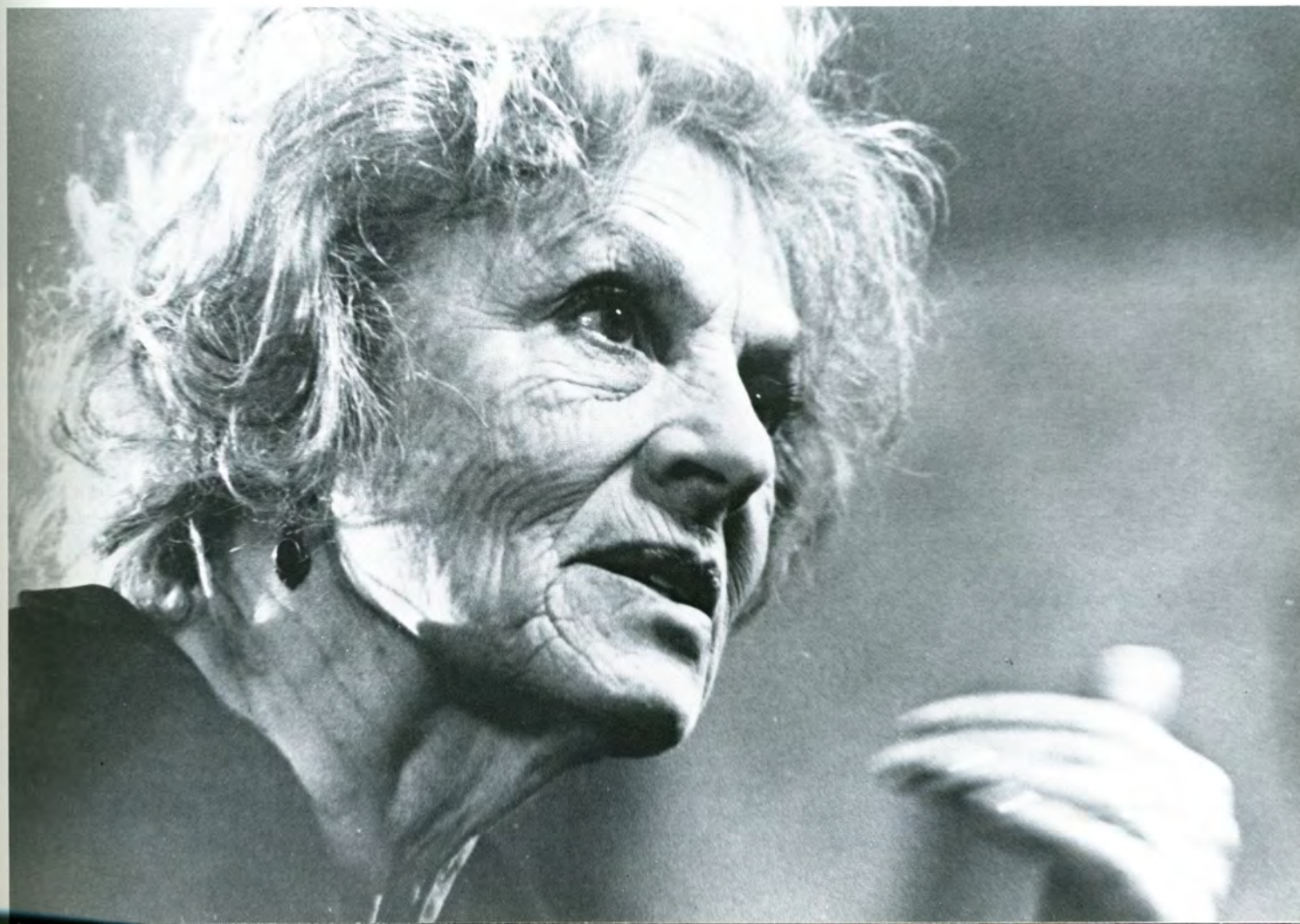
BY MARK O'NEILL

# VANCOUVER IS NORTH OF PITTSBURGH

WHILE VISITING U.S. film and television producers continue to find Vancouver an efficient, economical place to shoot, British Columbia's indigenous industry tends to lag behind. There's no shortage of aspiring scriptwriters, but local filmmakers still find it difficult to put production deals together.

**North Of Pittsburgh** is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. The \$1.7 million feature is a road movie with a lot of heart. Produced by ACME Motion Pictures of Vancouver, it's the

Viveca Lindfors



story of a low-budget, inept drug runner and his grandmother. In the opening scene, Tony Andretti (Victoria-born Jeff Shultz, who also wrote the screenplay) is speeding from Pittsburgh to Sault Ste. Marie to visit his dying grandfather. Before crossing the border, he's supposed to deliver a bundle of what turns out to be heroin. Although he makes it in time to day goodbye to 'Nonno' (Robert Clothier of *Beach-combers* fame), the drugs go astray. The intended recipient

Tony figures the only way he has a hope of paying off the drug debt is to help his grandmother collect some cash. The papers required to file a claim are in Pittsburgh, so the two jump into Tony's unreliable car and head south.

Martin and producer Kim Steer were thrilled when Lindfors agreed to do the picture. "She has a sense of strength about her," says Martin, "a sense of herself, and we wanted Rosa to be stronger than in the script. As it turned out, she

Pittsburgh, it seems, looks a great deal like Vancouver.

"We went to great lengths to create an eastern feel," adds Martin, "which is why we had to do 37 locations in 23 days. It was challenging since we could never shoot north because of the mountains. But in the end we managed to get a look which has even fooled a few people from Pittsburgh." Tony and Rosa's trek also provided a wonderful opportunity to showcase Vancouver's growing pool of actors. "We happened to schedule our shoot at a time when not much was happening," says Steer, "so we got our first choices of both cast and crew." (As well as a collection of cameos by Vancouver's best. Martin's father, Dick Martin from *Laugh In*, also makes an appearance.)

*North Of Pittsburgh* is now at the difficult distribution stage. It's been to Berlin and Cannes film markets. Steer and Martin are hoping it will be picked-up by the major North American festivals. In the meantime, they're working on three possible new scripts. "We're moving more toward stuff that Hollywood would never do," says Steer. "*Matinee* could have been produced there. *North Of Pittsburgh* maybe. But now the scripts we're looking at are further away from a mainstream story. That's the niche we're trying to fit into."

"One screenplay is an ensemble piece set in a truckstop over one night," adds Martin. "It's about a bunch of people trying to find their dreams with varying degrees of success. Another is set in a rooming house with a group of very strange characters who are on the edge with various mental disorders. They come through trouble and strife because they don't know what they are doing. The other is right off the wall. It's about someone building a life for himself in a garbage dump."

While Steer and Martin don't know which project will fall into place first, there is one consistent element they're keeping in mind after *North Of Pittsburgh* experience—they all take place in basically one location. **11**

Mark O'Neill is a freelance writer and broadcaster. He reports on film and other topics for CBC Radio's *The Arts Report*.



**Viveca Lindfors and Jeff Schultz**

wants a refund or else he'll do serious damage to a terrified Tony.

"It was one of things that intrigued me about Jeff's script," says director Richard Martin, who wrote and directed the 1989 B.C. feature *Matinee*. "It starts out like Cheech and Chong, as weird as the 70s. What can you say, Barry Manilow was top of the charts—the world had hit rock bottom, but I think there's still a fascination with it." Martin says he realized the low-life beginning of the film was risky since audience might walk out in the first five minutes, "but if they hang in long enough, it's a different story."

The difference kicks in when Tony discovers that Nonno's widow, Rosa (the Swedish-born American actor and playwright, Viveca Lindfors), plans to apply for compensation; her husband died of black lung disease as a result of working in the coal mines around Pittsburgh.

was better than what Jeff had in mind." Steer, who worked with both Martin and Shultz on *Matinee*, agrees. "In the original draft, Rosa was sweet, but when we discussed changes, Jeff agreed he'd like a stronger woman as well. Now she's an ornery, cranky grandmother."

Tony and Rosa's quest turns out to be a great deal harder than either could have imagined. Their paper chase extends far beyond Pittsburgh and into the lives of sundry distant relatives and other colourful characters. "There were way too many locations," reports Steer. "We moved at least once a day. Most of it was shot in Vancouver with two days of second unit in Pittsburgh." Even that wasn't easy. Major urban renewal in the Pennsylvania city has wiped out much of the industrial backdrop the film needed. Modern