

# INTERVIEWS

**Robert Morin  
Francis Damberger**

From Quebec and Alberta come two "new" filmmakers who, by remarkable coincidence, received four Genie nominations each for their first features. Quebec's Robert Morin (who has a background in video) wrote and directed *Requiem pour un beau sans-coeur*, which was nominated for Best Motion Picture of the year and won the Best Canadian Film Award at Toronto's Festival of Festivals, and Alberta's Francis Damberger (who has a background in theatre) wrote and directed *Solitaire*, which won for veteran Canadian actor Michael Hogan Best Supporting Actor. It is indicative of the failings of the distribution and exhibition system for low-budget, homegrown films in this country that neither director has seen the other's film or even knows about each other. Take 1 is pleased to introduce two of Canada's "up-and-coming" directors.



Gildor Roy in *Requiem pour un beau sans-coeur*

**Morin** We wanted to push further the cinéma direct experience, which was the most important form of filmmaking in Quebec in the 60s and 70s. But going further meant looking inside people's heads, to see their dreams.



Paul Jarrett as the Cowboy Kid and Sam Bob as Norman Manyheads in *The Road to Saddle River*

**Damberger** For me, making *Saddle River* was a vision quest. I had a powerful spiritual experience with native elders at Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, in southern Alberta.

# Francis Damberger From Solitaire to Saddle River by Valerie Gregory



WACE OZEWOFF

**TAKE ONE** What's the most important thing you learned since you began *Solitaire*, and the feature you just finished shooting, *Road to Saddle River*?

**DAMBERGER** That I'm usually right. We (cast and crew) needed more time for preparation and pre-production, to explore and discuss things together. It was a very typically Canadian experience—to rush filmmakers into making their first films. There's always a fear the money will dry up, but my feeling has always been that if you don't have the money, you should have the time.

**TAKE ONE** How did the experience of making the two films differ?

**DAMBERGER** *Solitaire* was three actors and a crew in one indoor location in Edmonton. *Saddle River* was a much bigger job. We drove seven- to eight-thousand kts in a five-week schedule, dealt with all kinds of weather and animals (cows, horses and even a buffalo), shot 220 scenes with a lot of actors—all on a very limited budget (\$1.5 million). This film turned out to be the whole tamale for me. Just when everything seemed hopeless, something always happened to turn it around. I went through an awful, draining experience. I wish it hadn't happened that way but now I'm prepared for anything.

**TAKE ONE** You've said that at one point *Saddle River* was in jeopardy and you were ready to give up. What kept you going?

**DAMBERGER** For me, making the movie was a vision quest. I delved into native religion a bit in the script and then I had a powerful spiritual experience with some native elders at Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, in southern Alberta. I was crying but I felt this incredible energy. An elder gave me a bundle of sweetgrass and told me to keep it with me and rub it on my body whenever I felt weak. It even helped with the persistent lousy weather in Drumheller on the re-shoot. I still carry it with me sometimes.

**TAKE ONE** You've made a drama (*Solitaire*) and now a comedy (*Saddle*

*River*), both set in Alberta. What is it about writing and working in the West that appeals to you?

**DAMBERGER** Well, first, it's my home (Damberger was born and raised in Tofield, 30kms southeast of Edmonton), and second, there's a lot of good stories to tell using the imagery and style of the West that haven't been told yet. I'm comfortable working here. I guess it's my background in the theatre, but I have a dream of getting people working together on a regular basis. Sort of a family that learns together. It's maybe easier to accomplish this in a smaller place. I have worked with two people—cinematographer Peter Wunstorf and composer Michael Becker—on both my pictures and I hope they'll be with me on my next film, *Pictures from Valhalla*.

**TAKE ONE** What has happened to the Alberta film community?

**DAMBERGER** I've made the only two features in the province in the last two years. Calgary is doing better than Edmonton with outside projects. Alberta is going through a transition period because some of the best filmmakers have left. Even so, there's a lot more work and talent here than people think.

**TAKE ONE** As an active filmmaker, what is the biggest obstacle you have to overcome to get your films made?

**DAMBERGER** This isn't a problem unique to me. I consider myself a young guy (Damberger is 35), but I'm getting tired of being told I don't know what I'm doing. I think the best films are made by writer-directors, independents, but in this country everyone wants to impose a bureaucratic structure on you. I'm not sure producers and bureaucrats care much about

writers and directors. The development process is a token kind of thing. I made *Solitaire*, a 35mm feature, for \$650,000. How many people could have done that?


**TAKE ONE** *Solitaire* was nominated for four Genies and won one for actor Michael Hogan. Yet, it was rejected by the Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver film festivals. Do you understand why?

**DAMBERGER** I don't want to come across as a Toronto-basher because I'm not. But people aren't nurtured or recognized unless they fit into certain categories. Art films or sensational subjects seem to be what festivals want. *Solitaire* was well-reviewed for the most part at the Los Angeles film festival last June and at Stockholm. The TV festival at Cannes picked it up and they only choose 10 or 12 a year. So I don't know what reasons the Canadian festivals had for turning it down, except that they just didn't like it.

**TAKE ONE** How would you best describe the movies you make?

**DAMBERGER** The trick and the challenge is to create a film that's unique but still accessible. *Road to Saddle River* is the kind of film your aunt could watch but at the same time it's pretty strange. People will want to see where the character is going. *Solitaire* succeeds in its own way, although it was tough because it was all in one room. My writing isn't arty or pretentious, but I do try to make the characters real and appealing.

**TAKE ONE** What do you want to do next?

**DAMBERGER** I kind of hung onto my first script, *Pictures from Valhalla*, which I still think is the best thing I've ever written. I want to do it next. It's set in Edmonton in 40 below weather, so it should be relatively easy to shoot. And then I have a love story in mind about a travelling prophylactic salesman. Finding and keeping companionship seems to be a big problem these days. It's a very interesting and difficult subject that I can't wait to tackle. 

*Valerie Gregory is a film critic for the Edmonton Sun.*