

T G r u e

t M A D F O r m

BY GEOFF PEVERE

“There shall be dancing.

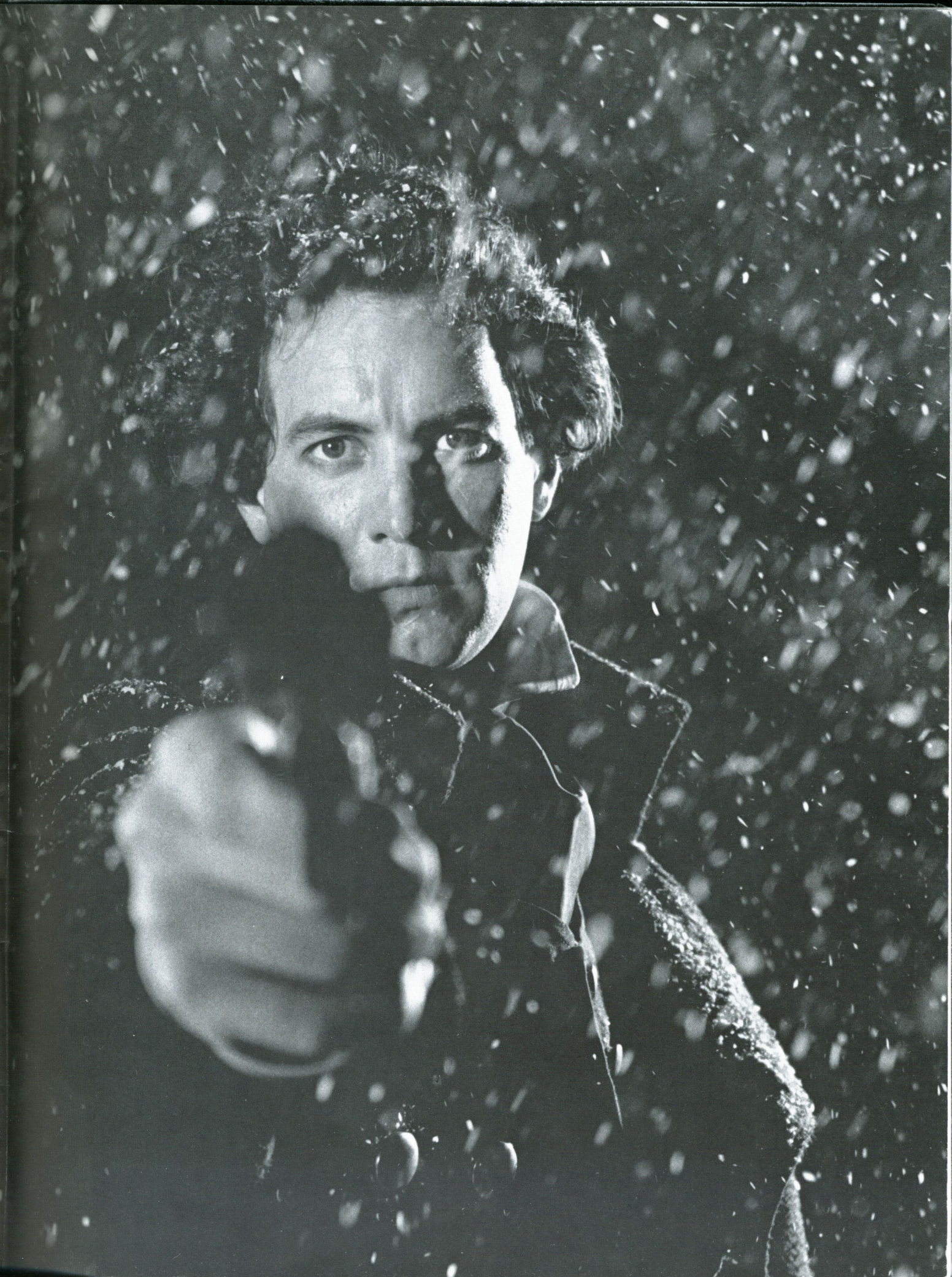
Lower the sheepskin!”

Careful

PROLOGUE: TORONTO, 1988.

IN A SMALL—real small—screening room in the former National Film Board offices on Lombard Street, the three members of the Toronto Festival of Festivals’ Perspective Canada selection committee are screening a short feature. Only seventy-six minutes long, the film is the first feature attempt by a thirtysomething Winnipeg filmmaker named Guy Maddin whose only previous short, *The Dead Father*, had been selected to appear in the 1986 Festival. The film is an exercise in low-budget, no-holds-barred strangeness called *Tales From the Gimli Hospital*, and shortly after it’s finished a vigorous debate begins. Among the committee members, reaction ranges from enthusiasm (“brilliant”) to indifference (“I didn’t get it”). Operating on a principle of unanimity or nothing, the committee eventually turns the movie down.

It will be a decision that will contribute greatly to the developing renegade reputation of Maddin, and it will figure promi-



nently in the discussion of his work as *Gimli* begins to build a modest cult rep in places like New York city. Practically every time he writes about the director, for example, Maddin-booster and *Village Voice* film critic J. Hoberman will invoke the Toronto rejection, perhaps as a means of indicating just how misunderstood Maddin is even in his own country, or perhaps as a means of indicating how un-hip the Toronto Festival is. Whatever the reason, the incident ultimately works in Maddin's favour. It ends up playing a key role in his burgeoning mythology as the country's leading quirkmeister (and will be featured prominently in his press resumé), and it will certainly open doors. Two years later, Maddin's second feature, *Archangel*, will be selected for the Festival of Festivals. In 1992, *Careful* will also find a welcome in Hogtown.

"A memory strays into my head, famished and pleading..."

Careful

Not merely one of this country's impressive filmmakers, Guy Maddin may also be our most inscrutable. Cloaked in thickening layers of industrial noise and dust, the Winnipeg-based filmmaker's work bears a sense of bargain-basement artifice like an unpolished metal, and constantly stresses its own status as a decaying material object. Proud as they are of their vaporous ephemerality, you could call Maddin's films post-modern, which might suit their maker. If the term itself is obscure and offputting, so—let's face it—is Maddin's aesthetic. Part of the frustration, not to mention the considerable power in the work, is precisely this: it seemingly works *against* interpretation, or at least strives to make interpretation as enticing a task as tackling the slippery ice-glazed cliffs in *Careful*.

Since Maddin's work dresses itself as garbage, one feels like something of a scavenger simply for wanting to pick one's way through it. And since it fairly revels in its own status as cultural refuse, it seems so, well, uncool to take it seriously. Yet, take it seriously we must. For not only does one stand to learn a lot about a person and their culture from their garbage, Maddin's garbage is infinitely more interesting and ultimately more ordered than most.

"It happened in a Gimli we no longer know."

Tales From the Gimli

Hospital

Not, however, at first glance. On the contrary, approaching Maddin's work initially feels like seeking order in a place where randomness and chaos rule, like an industrial compost heap. Yet, what impresses initially is the staggering thoroughness of



the disorder, the delirious disharmony of formal and narrative elements, the near-sensual abandon to vulgarity and sloppiness, and the sheer exuberant amateurishness of it all. Beneath this one begins to discern, if not order—that will come only with repeated viewings—then its advance messenger, contradiction. For Maddin's work, if nothing else, is a series of elements locked, much like the clumsy duels he loves, in the form of head-butting, dialectical opposition. If the films themselves often seem to be crackling and wheezing their way through the projector, and often feel as though they might melt or unspool at any moment, it's tempting to read this as a form of diegetic self-immolation. Like the dumb, ritualized masochism so common to their worlds, Maddin's films seem determined to tear themselves apart. Yet, to consider this apparent nihilism as just that is to miss something crucial. In Maddin, all this chaos is the symptom of something big indeed: a social order made pathologically neurotic not by disorder, but by a compulsive drive for order itself. Garbage perhaps, but garbage with a cause.

"It became apparent that my father wasn't dead in the traditional sense."

The Dead Father

For example, while the honing of Maddin's raw but immense talents in the short distance between 1985's *The Dead Father* and 1992's *Careful* is impressive, these loose-limbed narratives are decoys for an equally impressive consistency of theme. All



ABOVE: CAREFUL
Johann (Brent Neale) and Grigorss (Kyle McCulloch)
scrub themselves.

RIGHT: TALES FROM GIMLI HOSPITAL

BELOW: CAREFUL
Zenaida (Gosia Dobrowolski) takes a bath.



tales of radical alienation (otherworldly as his muse may frequently seem, Maddin is nothing if not Canuck), each film hinges on a crisis of perception: namely the way the protagonist, usually played by the wholesomely bright-eyed but glazed Kyle McCulloch, comes to realize he's got no idea what's going on around him. Worse, there's usually a lot going on. In *The Dead Father*, a dark, suburban Oedipal struggle in sitcom drag that fascinatingly anticipates the arch-familial intrigues of *Careful*, it's a young man's attempts to deal with the presence and demands of his inconveniently undead dad. It's not that pop is reanimated that troubles the hero of *The Dead Father*; it's that in death, as in life, he's still such a hard guy to please.

In *Tales From the Gimli Hospital*, it's the crisis faced by Einar the Lonely, a troubled fish-smoker who finds himself, bedded alongside the immense Gunnar (Michael Gottli), incarcerated in the feral, barn-like confines of the Gimli Hospital. Ignored and feverish, Einar watches the comings and goings of the hospital with churning feelings of anger, confusion and desire. In the film's most pointed expression of Einar's plight, the young man lets fly a bloodcurdling (if typically post-dubbed) scream and still fails to rouse the interest of the spectrally white-clad, lushly-lipsticked nurses. Poor guy, he's been sent for care in a place where no one does.

**"Your father said he'd drive
me to the aerodrome. Have
you seen him?"**

"He's dead."



CAREFUL: Frau Teacher (Jackie Burroughs) lectures Grigoriss (Kyle McCulloch) and Johann (Brent Neale).

CAREFUL: Zenaida (Gosia Dobrowolska) is courted by Count Knotgers (Paul Cox).



"I can see that. Nothing seems to be going right today."

Archangel

Archangel, Maddin's most complex, elusive and dark film, also represents the most radical expression of this acute perceptual discombobulation. Amnesiac, one-legged and suffering from mustard gas delirium, Canadian army Lt. John Boles (McCulloch) limps across WW1-ravaged Mother Russia in search of a lost lover. Existing in a state where memory and impulse hold equal dominion, the tranced-out Boles is drawn from one tragic misapprehension to another. Roused occasionally to clarity by a fleeting sense of national duty he can, like a sleeper dimly perceiving outside stimuli, just as easily collapse back into stupefied reverie. Not that he's alone. In *Archangel*, which was released in Toronto almost simultaneous with the outbreak of the Gulf War, anyone seems capable of instantaneously losing grasp of any sense of whom, what or where they are. In Lt. Boles' shell-shocked world, either amnesia is catching, or that incessant, hypnotic bombing is strafing the surface of consciousness itself.

"I'm the one who struck you in the head with a rifle butt the other night."

"Really? I'd think I'd remember that."

Archangel

While *Careful*, Maddin's first colour film (imagine Timothy Leary's *Munchkinland*), is the director's most approachable story (one hesitates to say *accessible*) it, nevertheless, remains in the murk where consciousness itself is a diminishing resource. Oedipal to the max, *Careful* suggests a community virtually built on the slippery precipice of misperception. Set in an archly-generic village in the Swiss Alps (somewhere near the point where Heidi and Ibsen merge), the story follows the fated journeys of two brothers, Johann (Brent Neale) and Grigoriss (McCulloch again), toward certain and utterly fatuous self-destruction. Staunchly loyal to both their mother and their vocation (they attend the Butlers' Gymnasium, presided over by a wickedly thin-lipped Jackie Burroughs), the two men are exemplary citizens of what may be called Maddin's world, a place where most forms of social, political and religious organization, erected as they are on a creaking foundation of denial, are as ridiculous as they are powerful.

In *Careful*, more than in any other of Maddin's films, society itself is seen as a rather pathetic attempt to keep natural impulses at bay, a process which necessarily nourishes a wallop-

ing case of perceptual discord. For society to work at all—and, in Maddin's films, it frankly doesn't—everyone must agree not to feel what they feel, not to see what they see, and certainly not to say what they mean. Or, in *Careful*'s case, not to say much at all. In this mountain community, where animals have had their vocal chords severed to keep them quiet, even the slightest noise threatens to bring down an avalanche. Needless to say, a precarious arrangement and one that demands both unremitting repression and constant vigilance for the ever-present possibility of snowbound apocalypse. In *Careful*, Maddin's most refined and audience-friendly movie, the aware perish and the oblivious survive.

“Oh, Clara, you're a wild one!”

“So are the reindeer when summer is come.”

Careful

In some ways Maddin's work may seem yet another expression of that most careworn of Canadian narrative concerns: the individual chronically alienated from society. And to a certain extent it is. In their interest in people in a state of terminal withdrawal from their surroundings, or their delineations of cruel, indifferent social orders policed by the agents of repression and denial (not to mention their bad weather), Maddin's films can be quite easily situated within what may rank as the predominant thematic tradition in English-Canadian movies. Tracing the line from the doomed teens and working class losers of the sixties and seventies, to the more chicly deadpan disaffection of Bruce McDonald, Atom Egoyan or David Cronenberg, Maddin's films can certainly be seen to belong to the persistent Canadian tradition of alienated individuals, or not at all. (Now, that's alienation.)

“Strangled by an intestine!”

Archangel

Part of the problem, of course, is that this tradition is deeply rooted in the discussion of theme, and theme in Maddin's work is merely like jars of paint. Crucial to the picture, to be sure, but hardly the whole thing.

First and foremost, what either impresses or repels you about Maddin's work is its singular sense of form. Possibly the most stylistically inventive feature filmmaker working in the country today, Maddin makes films in which form isn't merely reflexively foregrounded. He makes films that take the form (or forms really) as their subject. Thus, if his style strikes one as offputting, there's little recourse but rejection. Here, style is subject.

Significantly, though, it's not a matter of style deployed as a means of asserting authorial voice (as the chilly precision of

Egoyan or Cronenberg suggest), or even as a way of establishing an ironic distance from the drama. If anything, Maddin's use of form(s) serves to mute the presence of the filmmaker's sensibility, to literally bury it (and us) beneath an avalanche of references, allusions, and the briefly re-animated corpses from film periods past. Steeped in the seemingly ancient conventions of silent films, operetta, teutonic legend and heroic mythology, and deploying images that evoke sensibilities ranging from James Whale to Andrei Tarkovsky, from David Lynch to Ed D. Wood Jr., Maddin's films feel like the nocturnal fevers of some film-pickled collective unconscious, or like film history disinterred and unceremoniously plowed into a single heap. They seem less the product of a single imagination than of an entire culture's. A culture that shares something fundamental with the lost souls who stumble their way through Maddin's movies; a culture that's having a hard time remembering who it is and where it's been. Thus the luxuriant, disorienting feeling of déjà vu that one experiences watching these movies. They are at once dimly familiar and utterly strange. You know you've been there before, but have no idea when or even where “there” is.

“I'm making gooseberry pie.”

“My favourite! And a brimming mug of cow-warm milk to go with it.”

Careful

Yet, as effectively weird as Maddin's movies are, there's much more at stake than weirdness. Apart from the considerable visceral impact provided by the director's deft manipulation of long-buried conventions and codes, form is what the films are essentially about. In the same way that Maddin's emphasis on the material construction of his films constantly works against any possibility of our immersion in their narratives (as if these flamboyantly phony narratives invite immersion by any but the most Boles-like among us in the first place), their constant hewing of our concentration to matters of form insists we consider the role and meaning of form itself.

And I mean insists. Apart from the bargain-basement elegance of the jerrybuilt sets (Maddin's films are almost entirely studio bound), the relentlessly non-psychologized performances, and the shimmering, high-contrast lighting and lenswork throughout, Maddin enlists a host of other means to keep us as emotionally distant from the dramatic spectacle as possible. Significantly, most of these have to do with the sheer mechanical nature of the processes of filmmaking and viewing: sudden jumpcuts that suggest missing frames; roars, hisses and scratches on the soundtrack, as though the film we're watching is as physically deteriorated as it is dramatically archaic. There probably aren't five minutes of Maddin's work that don't contain some kind of jarring reminder of the sheer mechanical fal-

libility of the spectacle we're watching. Call it Brechtian or call it post-modern (or call it, as many likely do, insufferable), but whatever you call it, it's crucial—as crucial to Maddin as latex ick is to Cronenberg.

**“Up into the dewy wreaths,
above the snow shoulders
of Quilici...”**

Careful

Ironically, perhaps, the motivation for the constant material emphasis in Maddin's work may be found in precisely those archly antiquated narratives the director seems hidebound to prevent us from suspending our disbelief in. While they are as arcane and elusive as lost or unfamiliar cultural languages inevitably are, there is a deceptive consistency to the ways the stories unfold. Drawn to stiflingly repressed cultures (a trait which makes him a lippy, distant relation to such specialists in freeze-dried spirituality as Carl Theodor Dreyer, Robert Bresson or Ingmar Bergman), Maddin's films are fascinated with the often cruel and desperate means cultures employ to keep what terrifies them in check.

In centering his stories upon individuals who have found themselves unceremoniously dislodged from the sphere of rationality, Maddin also tells stories of people who suddenly become aware of not only what a culture is working so hard to repress, but whose newly sprung desires unleash precisely those things whose containment a community's survival may depend on. In *The Dead Father*, for instance, dad's bizarrely stubborn refusal to lie down and act dead is nothing less than unresolved

TALES FROM GIMLI HOSPITAL

Oedipal tensions between father and son sitting up and saying “we're back!” In *Gimli*, the source of Einar's delirium finds perversely displaced expression in the film's climatic, penultimate buttock-clinching wrestling match between Einar and Gunnar. *Archangel's* amnesiac Lt. Boles, possibly the most complex of Maddin's characters, senses practically nothing of his past except a lost lover's name (“Iris!”) and the abiding residue of profound patriotic duty. In other words, in the absence of any sense of history, personal or otherwise Boles, like Ronald Reagan, finds refuge in the comfort of ritual itself. For him, playing soldier, fighting enemies, and making war is necessary precisely because it needs no explanation to be meaningful. Its meaning and its solace is its form.

**“How sweet to die for one's
country!”**

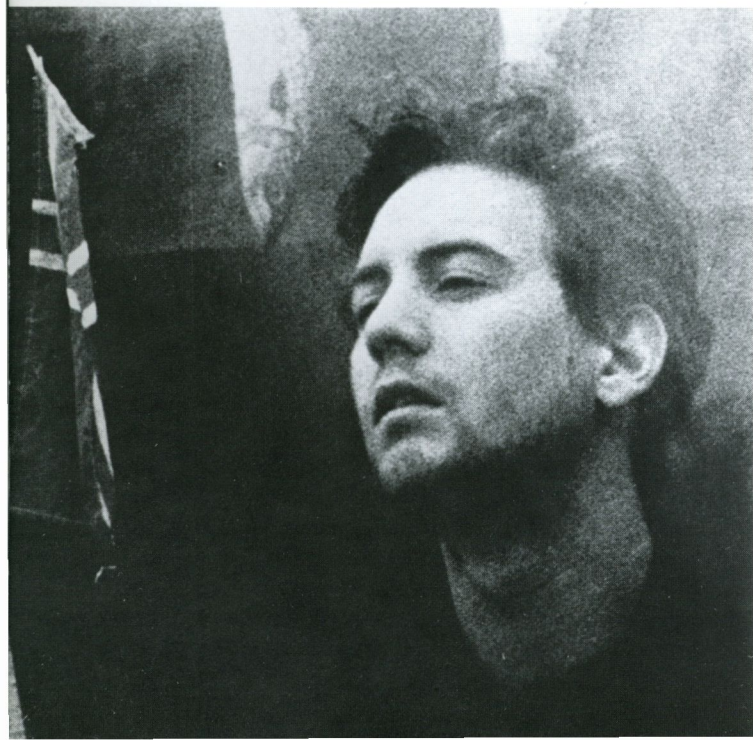
Archangel

In Maddin's work, generally form and ritual offer means of escape, and structure promises retreat from chaos. Much like those insistent reminders of the medium's mechanical nature, ritual acts are everywhere. In *Gimli*, storytelling itself acts as a way of putting form to the psycho-sexual chaos that churns just below the characters' dumfounded demeanour, just as Einar and Gunnar's bizarre buttock wrestle must be interpreted as a ritualized displacement of pure, frustrated sexual energy. In *Archangel*, war itself represents a form of structured, socially acceptable butchery. In one scene, Boles insists on whipping Geva, the young boy living in the barn where the soldier is billeted. Proclaiming that the meting of corporal punishment is man's work, he takes up the task of punishing the boy (whose infraction has been minor) with barely contained relish. For Boles, the ritualized beating clearly offers temporary ventilation for buttoned-down impulses. Later, in a remarkable montage sequence scored to the distant thump of artillery fire, much is made of the latent association between war and male sexuality as Geva, frightened, climbs naked into Boles' straw bed.

**“Freighted with immense
psychic history...”**

Archangel

Careful, Maddin's most direct delineation of the social consequences of sexual repression, is not coincidentally the film most obsessed and rife with forms of ritual. Duels are fought with an absurdly correct observation of form; butlers attend a type of Marine boot camp; and in a very funny sequence, even tables are set with fascist precision. Even in the moments when what is repressed threatens to erupt—as in the primal Oedipal moment when Johann threatens to ravish the mother he's just doped senseless—form and ritual prevails. Having laid her out with a violently violet “love potion,” Johann creeps up on her





ARCHANGEL: Kathy Marykuca and Ari Cohen

slowly with an enormous pair of sheep shears, and with excruciating deliberation (enhanced by amplified sound of fabric slicing on the soundtrack) proceeds to snip his way through her bodice. So repressed and ritualized is Johann's dementia, it can't even express itself spontaneously. Later, in a scene that would do Luis Buñuel proud, after Grigorrs effectively seals his doom by killing a nobleman in a duel, the distraught young man carefully and senselessly lays the corpses of freshly-shot geese in two symmetrical rows.

Maddin's world is thus a world where form itself is an act of desperation, our conditioned means of keeping natural but disruptively anti-social impulses safely (or so we think) beneath the surface, and of keeping acts of individual desire within "community standards." It's the order we give to chaos, the thin envelope of "civilization" we wrap around our otherwise animal natures. In Maddin's world, not only is the process dangerous and absurdly funny, it's also hopeless. If the fragile social orders of his films ultimately prevail, it certainly isn't due to any innate integrity, but to sheer stubborn obliviousness. Eventually, the snow will come tumbling down, and the bombs will find their way to our straw beds, because the means we've devised of shutting out what we fear merely makes those fears stronger.

Which, whether you swallow this world view or not (and I do), certainly pulls all that other formal stuff, the stuff of filmmaking itself, into somewhat sharper focus. In the same way that the stories told in *Gimli* act as a way of structuring chaos, so the medium of movies itself has provided an incalculably important function of displacement and denial in twentieth-century culture. In Maddin's films, when we think of movie "form," we must not only think of the material conventions of filmmaking, but of filmmaking as a "form" of social ritual, as a way of processing what terrifies us into safer, more familiar and

socially acceptable "forms," a kind of table setting over our psyche. Thus, if Maddin's films seem to emphasize the fragile, constantly deteriorating nature of their medium, if they seem as if they might spin off the projector at any moment, they're doing more than having a post-modern good time. They're reminding us of the forms we use to keep chaos at bay and how thinly stretched they are across the face of our own fears.

"Lower the sheepskins.

We'll have music!"

Careful

POSTSCRIPT: TORONTO, 1991

I am contacted by Greg Klymkiw, a long-time Maddin associate and Winnipeg-based independent producer. He wants me to take a look at Maddin's script for the proposed *Careful* and offer my comments. I'm intrigued and accept the offer, despite (or perhaps because of) the underlying ironies. Such as the fact that I will be acting as story editor for a filmmaker with the storytelling instincts of a cubist; or the fact that I was a member of the Toronto selection committee that turned *Tales From the Gimli Hospital* down. I interpret it as another example of Guy Maddin both honouring form and booting it over the cliff. **T I**

GEOFF PEVERE is currently the host of CBC-Radio's program about media and popular culture, Prime Time.