



Michael Greyeyes as Gooch, Adam Beach as Frank Fencepost and Ryan Black as Silas Crow in *DANCE ME OUTSIDE*: TEENAGERS FULL OF PISS AND VINEGAR

With *Roadkill*, *Highway 61* and *Dance Me Outside*, McDonald has created an unofficial Northern Ontario trilogy

The opening scene of *Dance Me Outside* keys the audience right into the film. A crow is sitting in the middle of a highway. A cool looking native guy offers the crow a cigarette, his last one it turns out. The crow leans over, bites the hand that wants to feed him the nicotine and flies off. As usual, we have to expect the unexpected – we're back in Northern Ontario, on the road again with Bruce McDonald,

Canada's outlaw filmmaker.

The commercial release of *Dance Me Outside* seems a good occasion for reflecting on where Toronto's favourite "bad boy" director has been to and where he's going. In little



Rockin' on the Road

The Films of
Bruce
McDonald

by Marc Glassman

more than a decade, Bruce McDonald has moved from showing his films on outdoor walls to being produced by Canada's "king" (or, at least, resident aristocrat-filmmaker), Norman Jewison. Although the production values for his new film are surely a cut above those for *Roadkill* and *Highway 61*, his style appears unchanged. Like the rock music that he loves, McDonald has retained in this film his funky approach to storytelling. If his route to popular acclaim has been, to some observers, "a long strange trip," McDonald appears to be both humorous and humble about such concerns.

Emerging out of Toronto's Ryerson College in the early '80s, McDonald found himself in the midst of a scene that was beginning to form in downtown Toronto. Young artists were fueled by punk and new wave music and fashion, confrontational theatre and performance art and transgressive graphics and photography. Bruce hit



The Toronto New Wave, and surely McDonald, saw themselves as iconoclasts, true to the images they were creating and not to any notion of a cultural past that was exclusively Canadian

On the road again with BRUCE MCDONALD, Canada's outlaw filmmaker

the street at the time when filmmakers like Peter Mettler, Janis Lundman, Adrienne Mitchell, Alan Zweig, and Colin Brunton started to make their first works. A space was needed where people could work, strategize and generally hang-out. McDonald was instrumental in getting the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT) off the ground.

McDonald is characteristically modest about his role in starting a co-op that now numbers over 500 members and has become an important feeder organization for the Canadian film industry. "I always do things for practical reasons," he recently recalled, "I needed a home. I'd do my LIFT stuff during the day and unroll the old blanket at night and have my little place to stay." While living at LIFT, Bruce began to cut films, most notably *Scissere* for Peter Mettler. An experimental narrative, *Scissere* was important for the neophyte Toronto film community because it was an independent feature, produced without industrial assistance at a time when seemingly only U.S.-bought and -controlled product was being made here. "Pete [Mettler] would shoot the footage on a borrowed camera, Henry [Jesionka] would process it for nothing, and I would find a place to cut it...it was just a weird kind of black market economy." The outlaw phase of McDonald's career began then, making work that had to be done – even if nobody except the filmmakers and their closest friends wanted to see it at the time.

Although McDonald directed one short film during this time, the quirky mock-documentary *Knock, Knock*, it was as an editor that he really established himself. Technically adept and creatively adaptable, he edited Mettler's astonishing and esoteric cosmic travelogue *Top of His Head*, Atom Egoyan's psychodramatic duo *Family Viewing* and *Speaking Parts*, and Ron Mann's complex pop-cultural non-fiction feature, *Comic Book Confidential*. His work on these films not

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SHADOW SHOWS; PHOTOGRAPHS FROM DANCE ME OUTSIDE BY MICHAEL VENDRUSCULO

only established his reputation as a potential director of features, it helped to create the verve and excitement around a group that was touted as being "the Toronto New Wave."

The collaborative atmosphere of the period spurred on the development of a number of young filmmakers – producers Camelia Freiberg, Alexandra Raffé, director Patricia Rozema, and others – who began to create work at the same time. Looking back on his editing days, McDonald recalls, "I didn't feel like it was a craft thing...I was given that much welcome [from the directors] in the creative process...that I felt that I was actually writing the screenplay with them... They were great role models for me, people like Ron and Atom and Peter. I thought 'well, if they can do it, how hard can it be?' Not to put them down, but, I thought, I know them. They're walking, talking people and they're out there doing it, and so can I."

McDonald took on another editing function during that time. He convinced Connie Tadros, editor and publisher of *Cinema Canada*, to let him take over an issue of the magazine, then the best publication on film in English Canada. The whole point of the issue was its celebration of the new group of filmmakers who were just beginning to assert themselves in Toronto. "Nobody else was doing it," McDonald recollects with some astonishment. "It just seemed like a complete vacuum. Nobody was really promoting themselves, their own work, or the group of people they were with." With Tadros's approval, he constructed a "fun" issue filled with funky graphics, articles written in the main by filmmakers and, most intriguingly, "portraits of everybody, all the community – they'd have their mug shot, their crime, the names of their films."

Calling it the "Outlaw Issue" was the capper for the project. It signalled the existence of a cool group of artists whose films would be exciting to watch. Urban, sophisticated and decidedly aware of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, these filmmakers did not want to make documentaries about the wheat fields in the prairies. Their work would speak to an audience of Canadians who delighted in the hip, the transgressive, the rockin', the new.

Even if all rock musicians don't maintain an outlaw image, McDonald can always take inspiration from Dylan's line, "To be outside the law, you must be honest." The Toronto New Wave, and surely McDonald, saw themselves as iconoclasts, true to the images they

were creating and not to any notion of a cultural past that was exclusively Canadian. To Bruce McDonald, in particular, the idea of the hipster, riding on a Harley, long hair and scruffy beard blowing in the wind, was surely irresistible. If that image still made him Canadian, so be it; the important thing was that at least he and his group were getting noticed.

The rebel persona – one that is radically different from that of the standard Canadian artist and is certainly anti-academic – works for him. He has made himself approachable, like a "rock guy"; he isn't Mick Jagger, but more like the leader of a bar band gone solid gold. It is an image with humour and roots. The New Wave's first proselytiser has become popular himself.

Looking back on the features that McDonald has made and the public interventions he has engineered is enlightening. The man knows how to make cool, controversial scenes in life as well as in films. *Roadkill* (1989), his first full-length film is replete with bizarre images. There's the sequence where Ramona, the would-be rock promoter who wants to learn how to drive, finds herself picked up by Luke, a hard-driving 15-year-old. He takes her to a drive-in where the local Northern Ontarians imagine the film that could be on the screen. Eventually, the teens and twenty-something Ramona end up dancing to rock music on the radio, their movements lit by the headlights of the cars that surround the impromptu dance floor. This improbable, romantic scene is neatly contrasted with such moments as the decadent "costume" party in the travelling van and the bizarre shoot-up in a rock club that nearly culminates the film. McDonald topped all of the demented imagery of *Roadkill* with his infamous acceptance speech at that year's Toronto Festival of Festivals. The winner of

the Toronto-City Award for the Best Canadian Feature and its \$25,000 prize, a pleased McDonald cheerfully announced that the money could come in handy for a nice purchase of hash. Rock and rollers understood the sentiment, but some of Canada's uptight producers and arts bureaucrats were non-plussed by the remark.

A couple of years later McDonald was back on the Festival circuit with his second rock'n'road epic, *Highway 61*



above, Shawn Bowring as Matthew, lead singer for the Children of Paradise in *ROADKILL: REplete WITH BIZARRE IMAGES*; below, *HIGHWAY 61*'s Valerie Buhagiar as Jackie Bangs: *A ROCKER DETERMINED TO GO ON A JOURNEY*



By placing his native characters in the driver's seat, McDonald was able to motor down the script's twisting road secure in the knowledge that he was "making a film with them, not about them"

(1991). The budget was up, from *Roadkill's* quarter of a million to slightly over a million, and with it came colour, more character actors, and some U.S. locations. The strategy remained the same; the action was still jiving on a highway with plenty of quirky side-show entertainment pumped in to spice up the proceedings. Valerie Buhagiar returned as a rocker determined to go on a journey. Her reasons for hitting the road are more problematic this time as is her character. Jackie Bangs is a roadie who scooped up some drugs as back payment while leaving her gig with a band. Unlike Ramona, she is hardly naive. She manipulates everybody she meets, particularly Pokey (charmingly played by the exceptional Don McKellar, McDonald's writing collabo-

Tamara Podemski as Little Margaret, Sandrine Holt as Poppy, Jennifer Podemski as Sadie and Wendy King as Lucy in DANCE ME OUTSIDE: INHERENTLY FEMINIST, WITH WOMEN CLOSING THE CIRCLE OF PAIN BY A CUNNING ACT OF REVENGE

ator), a Thunder Bay barber who blithely accompanies her and a corpse filled with drugs down Highway 61 to New Orleans.

For a Canadian like McDonald who loves music and the mythos of the road, *Highway 61* is the ultimate fantasy. On its winding path from the Canadian north to Louisiana's Crescent City, Highway 61 is the site for the birth of Dylan, the Stax-Volt Revue, Elvis's best recordings, and the jazz music of Kid Ory and Louis Armstrong. Cool scenes and characters buzz throughout the scenario: Peter Breck, not-so-fresh from Sam Fuller's *Shock Corridor*, stages a comeback as the father to an untalented group of pre-teen female pop singers; rocker Jello Biafra lampoons the authority figures he hates as an all-American customs officer; and Earl Pastko, in a brilliant performance, plays a self-deluded Satanic con-man called Mr. Skin.

Not to be outdone by his film,

McDonald staged another controversial scene at the Toronto film festival's Perspective Canada party. A group of bikers showed up to celebrate *Highway 61* and Bruce. He recalls, "I think the festival organizers were a little trembly about letting them in. But they came in and had a great time. The only thing they did there was a photo booth set up for *The Falls* [Kevin McMahon's feature documentary on Niagara Falls] and the girls were sort of flashing their wares for the camera. It was pretty entertaining."

In the three years since *Highway 61's* release, there was much speculation about what Bruce McDonald would do next. *Dance Me Outside*, the project he decided to make, is one that had more than its fair share of problems in the planning and pre-production phases. Norman Jewison optioned W.P. Kinsella's book of interlinked short stories about Native Americans more than half a decade ago. Scripts and treatments had been developed by several hands, including Native playwright Tomson Highway, before McDonald was brought on to the scene in 1992. Although there were bound to be problems in adapting Kinsella's conservative vision to a hip film audience, the story of *Dance Me Outside* was so strong that McDonald was eager to accept the challenge and

Don McKellar as Pokey in
**HIGHWAY 61: THE MYTHOS OF
THE ROAD AS THE ULTIMATE
FANTASY**



make his first adequately budgeted feature.

Silas Crow (a plum part intensely interpreted by Ryan Black) narrates *Dance Me Outside*. The tale begins at the local “rez” bar, where Little Margaret Wolfchild is “danced outside” by a white trash barfly, Clarence Gaskill (Headstones singer, Hugh Dillon). While it is Silas and his pal, Frank Fencepost (Adam Beach) who discover her dead body the next day, Sadie (Jennifer Podemski) is the one who becomes radicalized. Silas’s former girlfriend, Sadie was Little Margaret’s best friend and the leader of a “girl gang” that includes Poppy (Sandrine Holt), Frank’s occasional squeeze. While Silas occupies himself with thoughts of entering mechanics’ school down South, winning back Sadie and helping his Ma in her mission to get his sister Illianna (Lisa LaCroix) pregnant, Clarence is sent to prison for an unacceptably brief term on a manslaughter conviction. A year later, Illianna’s yuppie husband, Robert (Kevin Hicks) is integrated into the family, Gooch (Michael Greeyes) resolves his feelings for Illianna and, most importantly, Clarence is “danced outside” where justice is meted out to him. With that circle closed, Silas and Sadie come together again, in a new, mature way.

McDonald, writing collaborators McKellar and John Frizell, and the native cast have combined to create a work that cheerfully resolves a number of the issues inherent in an adaptation of Kinsella’s book. Unlike the original stories, where the character of Frank Fencepost in particular is quite broadly written, the film’s scenario tends to endorse the late adolescent coolness of the protagonists. Even when Silas and

Frank commit a great blunder, such as destroying native leader Hobart Thunder’s car instead of the one driven by the Federal agents, the audience is encouraged to laugh at the situation rather than at them. The direction consistently empathizes with the characters and their aspirations: Sadie – to be radical; Gooch – to be mature and stay out of trouble; Silas – to become a writer.

By placing his native characters in the driver’s seat, McDonald was able to motor down the script’s twisting road secure in the knowledge that he was “making a film with them, not about them.” He continues, “The idea of Indian comedy is a contradiction in terms, because the tradition in this country anyway, has been movies that are issue-driven. We thought, ‘what would be fresh for the world, for this country?’ Nobody’s really done a comedy before and it hit me, ‘why not do one with teenagers full of piss and vinegar and fill it with some of their funny stories?’ Anybody who has ever spent time on a reserve or with Indian people knows that humour is a big part of their operating agenda.”

The story-line of *Dance Me Outside* is inherently feminist, with women closing the circle of pain by a cunning act of revenge. When the tale that forms the spine for the film was first recounted to me by writer/director Judith Doyle nearly a decade ago, it seemed to me to be chillingly reminiscent of a Greek tragedy. That Bruce McDonald has been true to those elements of the story is less surprising when one recalls his previous features.

The narratives for *Roadkill* and *Highway 61* centred on two arresting women, Valerie Buhagiar’s Ramona and Jackie Bangs. While Ramona simply wanted access to things – to the mysteries of driving, sex and rock promotion – Jackie Bangs had a much more difficult road to travel. She was outside the law, but not honest; her journey to New Orleans, like that of Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper’s characters in *Easy Rider*, was based on the lie of counter-culture capitalism, the selling of hard drugs. It was only through the love of an honest man, Don McKellar’s Pokey, that she came to understand her moral dilemma. In a neat

role reversal, her hard urban style was changed by his softer rural ways. In *Dance Me Outside*, McDonald continues his embrace of the notion of “the power of women.” Sadie and her group are clearly more effective than Silas and his gang of dreamers. The new feminism is cool even to guys who like to ride on Harleys.

Dance Me Outside closes another circle. The numbers tell us that McDonald has now created an unofficial Northern Ontario trilogy. What has sent him up there three times in a row? McDonald’s reply is his usual mixture of candor and bafflement. “It’s weird. I don’t even like to go camping. We’ve never had a cottage. As a kid, I didn’t do the canoe thing. Maybe it’s just a novelty to me, the whole idea of space. There is a simple, practical reason. To get a location in Toronto is very expensive, but outside of the city, people almost pay you to shoot on their street.”

Whether he knows it or not, there is another reason for Northern Ontario to be Bruce McDonald territory. Like the pioneers and outlaws of old, he may well be looking for areas that more closely resemble frontiers than do our modern urban environments. The covered wagons and trail bosses of the old American West probably find their closest equivalents in the Canadian and Alaskan North. It is there that people can play out their desires, untrammelled by the constraints of Canadian civilization and its southern cities.

Dance Me Outside is, like all McDonald films, based on the moods and desires of teenagers. One of the unspoken ironies of the film is that Native society, which is based on a profound acceptance of the wisdom of Elders, is represented by adolescents. McDonald boldly replaces the older generation and their homilies with new groups of “guys and girls” led by Silas and Sadie. He endorses their powerful new communities much as he promoted the LIFT-based “New Wave” a decade ago.

Where should Bruce McDonald travel next? The North, Native peoples and the Road have been the sources for his “creative thievery” up to now. Perhaps he is at a turning point, like Silas and Sadie. Recapitulating their ride down South at the end of *Dance Me Outside*, should he head for L.A., Canada’s fourth largest city? Or like Silas, will any trip be a temporary one, with the “rez” still the focal point for one’s identity? Should Bruce go slick or remain a very funky indie? Only time and that road can tell ●