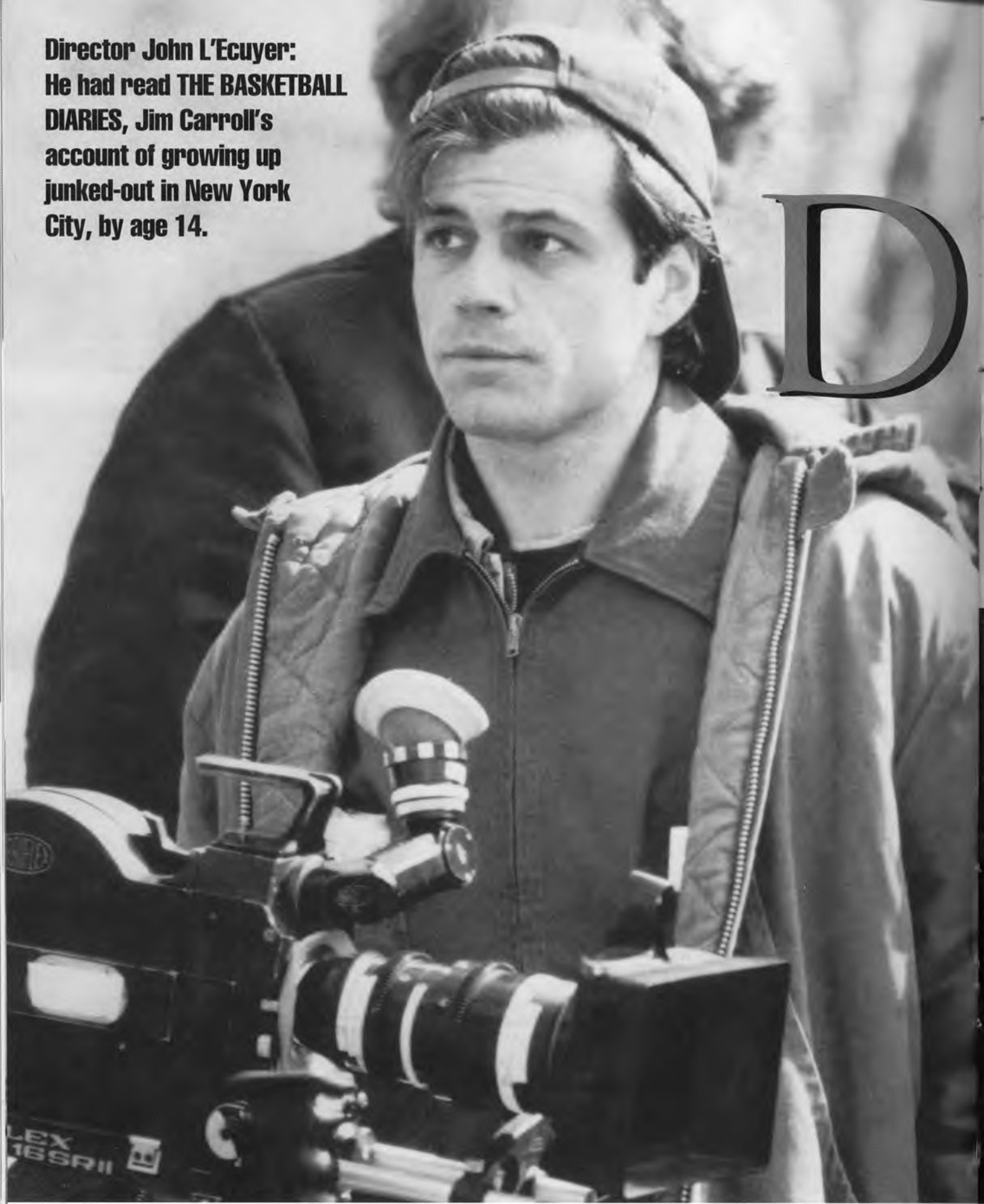


Director John L'Ecuyer:
He had read **THE BASKETBALL
DIARIES**, Jim Carroll's
account of growing up
junked-out in New York
City, by age 14.

D

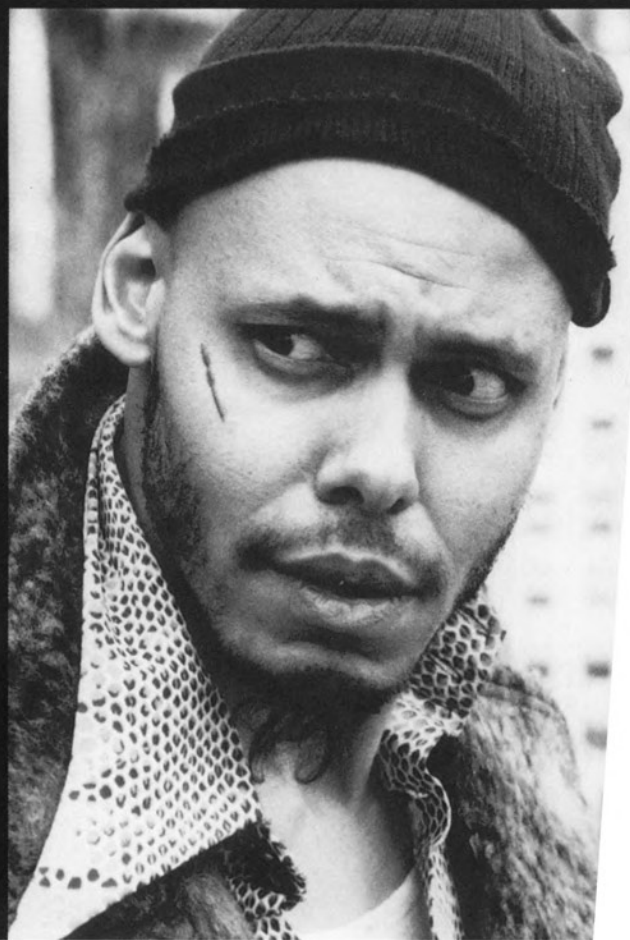


THE ISCREENET CHARM

OF JOHN L'ECUYER

By Marc Glassman

Maurice Dean Wint as Curtis: funny and sweet.



All photos: Michael Gibson

When John L'Ecuyer walks into a room, the first thing you notice about him is his eyes. Dark and inquiring, they probe the area, searching out potential stories. L'Ecuyer is short and slight of build. There's a modesty and street-wise elegance to his movements that indicate to the viewer that this is one cat who has been around the block more than once. His eyes scouting the scene bring to mind the photographer Robert Frank, who always seems to be refocusing his visual field even in the midst of a conversation. Like that old associate of Jack Kerouac's, L'Ecuyer is in constant search of the next shot, one that will perfectly encapsulate his vision.

L'Ecuyer reminds one a lot of Kerouac. Fellow Québécois, both artists have sought their fortunes in the larger anglo North American environment. Kerouac was a romantic who threw away a hard-earned football scholarship to Columbia University to hang out with junkies and poets, like William Burroughs and Allan Ginsberg, in Manhattan. The books on which Kerouac's reputation rests—*On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, *Desolation Angels*, *The Subterraneans*—would never have been written had the young "petit Jean" not ditched the academic life for a wild ride in fifties bohemia. Later generations, those of Jim Carroll's age, as well as L'Ecuyer's more junior division, often appear to be emulating the patterns of the beats in their sensation-seeking, drug-taking, neo-poetic youthful sprees.

Jim Carroll, the author of *Curtis's Charm*, the short story that L'Ecuyer has turned into his much-lauded feature film debut, achieved literary notoriety in the late seventies when his account of growing up junked-out in New York City was published in a widely accessible paperback edition. L'Ecuyer read *The Basketball Diaries* when he was 14. Not surprisingly, he found it to be a "pretty phenomenal book." Kerouac, Carroll and L'Ecuyer are all Catholic Boys: their hipness can only be read through the mixture of idealism, tormented sexuality and regret that such an education seems bound to provide. It is likely that all three have produced their art, in part, to work through the difficulties of having a strict moral education while possessing a deeply sensual drive.

L'Ecuyer has cleverly spun out Carroll's tale of drugs, voodoo and paranoia in modern Manhattan. While the story is still structured as a first-person narrative from the perspective of the ex-junkie, Jim, the film allows for more ambiguity in the character of Curtis. Is Jim's old friend merely a "paranoid, crack-addicted delusional" or does Curtis's mother-in-law really know how to cast voodoo spells? Carroll's story, essentially an extended rap, poses the question, but L'Ecuyer has the wit to dramatize it by having Maurice Dean Wint play Curtis as someone who is "outsized, but funny and sweet." The friendship between Jim, as played by Callum Keith Rennie, and Curtis becomes the focus of the tale, which now chronicles the vagaries of their relationship. Laconic and humorous, the film's charm is based on a rueful knowledge of the scene depicted in the scenario.

Curtis's Charm is clearly a highly personal project for L'Ecuyer. As he has made clear in numerous interviews, L'Ecuyer is a former heroin addict. The film's no-frills authenticity comes naturally to him as does his appreciation of Jim Carroll's prose. A native of Montreal, L'Ecuyer recounts, with ease and astonishing forthrightness, his tales of the colourful figures who drew him into that city's underground. Describing his entry into Montreal's downtown scene, L'Ecuyer is disarmingly honest—and, indeed, nostalgic.

"I was 13 when I met a morphine addict on the subway. I was doing pills back then and my girlfriend and I were thinking we were pretty cool to have all these barbiturates. We had the bag out when this morphine addict, René, and his stripper girlfriend introduced themselves to us. We went over to their house. It was one of the grand events in my life. The stripper was walking around naked in the apartment. René



Rachael Crawford as Cookie in CURTIS'S CHARM: Laconic and humorous, the film's charm is based on a rueful knowledge of the scene depicted in the scenario.

was shooting morphine. It was cooler than cool. So I thought then." L'Ecuyer pauses in his recollections. Slightly defensively, he adds, "It was a romantic image but it was all part of the hip lifestyle then. René was a writer, I don't think he'd published anything, but he was a writer and a morphine addict. Could he be the heir apparent to William Burroughs? That's what you're thinking when you are 13 or 14."

Montreal has a wonderful history of embracing "la vie bohème." While each succeeding generation creates a new scene, Montreal and its denizens always seem capable of accepting the latest trends and styles. During the fifties, when John L'Ecuyer's parents were falling in love, the nightclubs were filled with rhythm and blues singers, stand-up comics and burlesque artists. L'Ecuyer's dad, "a bantam-weight boxer, a real zoot-suit jazz club kind of guy" enjoyed that scene, as did his mother. Her favourite film, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, perfectly encapsulates the boozed-up, funky reality of the fifties and early sixties.

By the late seventies and early eighties, when their boy, John, was ready to make the scene, things had changed. "I wasn't specifically looking for drugs," recalls L'Ecuyer, "but it was very much woven into the fabric of the social life that I had come to embrace. I was doing the party circuit on [boulevard] St. Laurent. I was a punk and it all just went hand in hand. You went to see Iggy Pop and shot some heroin and then went drinking with your friends."

L'Ecuyer spent his youth, as he puts it, "staying on everyone's couch—it was a nice tour of the city." Someone who remembers him from this time recalls that "he always seemed quiet and sweet. And he always had a book with him." L'Ecuyer had read *On The Road* by the time he was 11. "It and the Velvet Underground's *Banana Album*, the one with 'Heroin' on it, were the soundtrack for my readings and my life."

Looking back on those times is something that many recovering addicts would avoid. Not L'Ecuyer; like Kerouac, he is a "Memory Babe" who "weaves reflection into the actual

time [he] was doing it." Before *Curtis's Charm*, L'Ecuyer made two short films. *Low Life* and *Use Once and Destroy* are intense, autobiographical studies, which place together tough anecdotes with short, precise portraits of junkies. Harsh, but funny, these films are suffused with regret. L'Ecuyer observes in both films that the people profiled are his family. A more dysfunctional one would be hard to imagine.

John L'Ecuyer is working on a book tentatively titled *Read Fast—Use Once and Destroy*. In it, he intends to depict more of the junkies who used to be part of his family. Recently, he spoke to an old Montreal girlfriend who confirmed his suspicion that many of his cronies are dead. Recalling one, who was shot to death during a robbery by the police, L'Ecuyer says, "He had three kids with different women. He was semi-supporting all of them. He was a phenomenal character but he's just gone. He's slipped through the cracks. No one will know of him."

Of course, his book and films like *Use Once and Destroy* may change that. L'Ecuyer acknowledges that recreating friends on paper and film is one of the prime motivations for his art. "I'm in love with them and I don't want them to be forgotten. People don't understand my old friends. They may have been misguided souls but I found them to be fabulous personalities and wonderful hearts. They just couldn't take the punishment of real living, so they succumbed to escapism. I shudder when I think of those beautiful people, who were so good to me and now they're gone."

Getting straight is never an easy task. John L'Ecuyer did it in his mid-20s. Abandoning Montreal for Ottawa, he entered a recovery program organized by three ex-junkies. Their street-wise approach suited him; after a year, he was ready to work at a community service organization. L'Ecuyer worked at an AIDS hospice. He comments, "I spent the year crying. There was so much pain. I decided to do something for myself. So I got three jobs in one summer: working at a prostitution outreach program, with a needle exchange



Wint, right, and Callum Keith Rennie: A tale of drugs, voodoo and paranoia.

group and at a drop-in centre. After four months, I had enough money to come to Toronto and go to school."

At Ryerson, L'Ecuyer made his two shorts and began to work on the script for *Curtis's Charm*. He decided to apply to the councils for money so that he could make the film. One of the great things about the recommendation systems at both the provincial and the federal arts councils is that your application is judged by peers. In this case, John L'Ecuyer not only got money, but also the vigorous support of many members of the Toronto New Wave. Atom Egoyan and Patricia Rozema became executive producers for the film. Their colleague, Sandra Cunningham, acted as the producer, assembling a superb cast of actors and crew members for the project. Ron Mann talked to Jim Carroll about the film. Bruce McDonald did a cameo role. Jeremy Podeswa was extremely supportive of the whole endeavour. In short, John L'Ecuyer became an over-night "star" in Canadian film.

Like most surprise successes, John L'Ecuyer has paid his dues. With one feature completed, it looks as if L'Ecuyer's career has really taken off. Time will tell if the public and the powers-that-be will support his intriguingly bohemian project. ■

"It was one of the grand events in my life. The stripper was walking around naked in the apartment. René was shooting morphine. It was cooler than cool. So I thought then."

—John L'Ecuyer