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Photo: Jonathan Wenk

**Matthew Ferguson in *Lilies*:
A superb visualized treatment of
murder, catholicism and gay romance
in pre-WWI rural Quebec.**

WINTER TALES

"Now is
the winter
of our discontent"

Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Act I Sc. I

Marc Glassman

Well before the snows began to fall, a chill was in the air. It was there at Roy Thomson Hall when honoree Atom Egoyan felt compelled to remind a Toronto Arts Awards audience that he would never have made his films if the now-neutered Ontario Film Development Corporation had not supported him. It was there at the National Arts Centre when Israeli animator Tsvika Oren, a curator for the Ottawa International Animation Festival, decried the tremendous cuts suffered by the National Film Board, pointing out that he and many other people throughout the world received their first, extremely positive, impressions of Canada through the films made and distributed by that now-hobbled institution. It was there at the Metro Convention Centre's John Bassett Theatre when Greg Gatenby, Artistic Director of Toronto's International Festival of Authors, received a tremendous ovation for denouncing Ontario's culture Ministry's refusal to grant much needed moneys for his annual celebration of fine writing.

Is the cultural elite just reacting in a vain attempt at self-preservation, or is there more at risk than next year's crop of films and books? While considering this year's harvest, I had the distinct feeling that the angst of being a Canadian was affecting the flavour of our cinema. It seems probable that the policies of Harris' Ontario government and Chrétien's feds will spell an end to a dream of Canada that many of us grew up with, one in which we could offer education, shelter and medical care to all while still rewarding those who worked to "make it" in classic capitalist style. Call it socialism with a human face or plain old Trudeau social justice. Both phrases

are denounced as irrelevant or old-fashioned by a new breed of cost-cutters and debt controllers whose only vision of government is based on the bottom line, and whose philosophy is a revival of Social Darwinism.

If "only the strong survive," surely the hopes of a multitude of citizens will be affected, not just those who have been fortunate and gifted enough to work in Canada's cultural industries. Perhaps that's why Ontario's Days of Action have attracted hundreds of thousands of supporters; it seems that some of the people are not persuaded by a government that is less interested in democracy than in their self-defined "common sense." It surely isn't Tom Paine's "common sense," nor is it that of film director John Greyson, who was arrested for leafletting his own screening of *Lilies* with "propaganda" in support of the Days of Action.

Lilies is just one of seven films screened this year that was based on a piece published originally by Coach House Press. Another, *Swann*, a "literary mystery" adapted from Carol Shields's novel by former Coach House president David Young, actually features scenes shot at the Press. The publishing artisan played by John Neville is clearly a homage to the dedicated printers and impresarios who run Canada's small presses, although Stan Bevington, the originator of the Coach House Press, who still maintains a profitable printing company under the same name, apparently pointed out that Neville's fingernails were far cleaner than those of any publisher he knows.

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It's a measure of the times that, despite the mystique that Coach House had acquired as a writer's press, the publishing house had to close its doors this summer. During its 30 years, the Press had established an enviable reputation for discovering and fostering the talents of a host of poets, playwrights, and novelists: Anne Michaels, Jason Sherman, Anne-Marie MacDonald, Dionne Brand and Dany LaFerrière, to name a few. Possessing a national vision, Coach House had become renowned for its translation of Quebec's literature into English. At least the two solitudes of avant-garde literature were breached due to the Press and its award-winning translators. Not only LaFerrière, but such notables as Nicole Brossard and Robert Lepage have been left without a publisher in English Canada. The film world in Canada can ignore Coach House's demise at its own peril. Other films bearing Coach House's imprimatur and premiering this year include *House*, from a play and additional materials written by Daniel MacIvor; *The English Patient*, based on a novel by Michael Ondaatje, past editor, board member and poet; *The Cockroach That Ate Cincinnati*, based on a play by Alan Williams published in the anthology *Solo* and *Kissed*, from a Barbara Gowdy short story that appeared in the anthology *The Girl Wants To...* And if Coach House had not been forced to lock up its operations, the screenplays of *Le polygraphe*, Robert Lepage's second feature, and David Cronenberg's *Crash* would have been published this fall.

Coach House Press died because grants from the Ontario provincial government had been cut by 73 per cent. For a small press that existed like Blanche Dubois, on the kindness of strangers, the appearance on the cultural scene of a former golf pro from North Bay turned out to be a fatal blow. Just like a classic spousal abuser, Mike Harris felt the need to blame the victim, castigating Coach House's president Margaret McClintock for her lack of financial acumen in light of the fiscal responsibilities that all Ontarians have to face up to in the 1990s.

McClintock could only reply, vainly, that she had upped her revenues and increased her worldwide distribution while operating in what is essentially a cottage industry. Similar arguments are no doubt being made to the bankers of independent film producers throughout Ontario. With the Ontario Film Development Corporation reduced to a glorified regional locations office, the financing of films in this province has gone from being problematic to nearly non-existent. It seems as if the whole English language film industry is in turnaround.

Live girl meets dead boy in Lynne Stopkewich's *Kissed*.



Given the state of national paralysis, due to the near-majority separatist vote in Quebec's referendum coupled with the neo-conservative policies of the federal Liberals and Ontario's Conservatives, it is interesting to read the films produced in Canada this year as reflections of our national discontent. Like the film critics who used to write about the cinema of the former Eastern Bloc countries, it is tempting to see our films through a prism of political difficulties. Just look at this season's titles: *Le polygraphe* (try and make our politicians take one); *Crash* (where we're headed); *Kissed* (Quebec's final smooch with Ontario); *Joe's So Mean To Josephine* (how the Anglos feel about their "French cousins"—and vice-versa; or, how Ontarians feel about Mike Harris).



Bruce McDonald told Valerie Pringle on *Canada A.M.* that his current release, the fake "punkumentary" *Hard Core Logo*, was actually about national unity. When asked to clarify the remark later that day, McDonald simply gave another journalist his "aw shucks" grin and pointed out that it was up to the film critics to come up with the interpretations; he'd already made the film. Fair enough. How about Billy Tallent, the guitar ace with a future career as a rock star State-side as a separatist québécois and Joe Dick, the tough-guy-romantic lead singer of the band as a member of the now desperate forces for national unity? Then the film's slogan "grasp the evil" could be about separatism...

One can play the Canadian interpretation game with nearly every film released this season. How about *Long Day's Journey Into Night*? Sure, it's supposed to be about a dysfunctional American family; Eugene O'Neill and his own father, mother and brother are meant to be the models for this tragic portrait of a hopelessly lost quartet who can't help destroying the ones they most care for...But consider it from a Canadian perspective. Jamie, the oldest son with "the map of Ireland on his face," having seen all his dreams dashed, has become a hapless drunk. Could this be a metaphor for our own Maritimes and Newfoundland? Edmund, the younger boy, holds the hopes of his family in his hands, but he is ill with consumption and might not survive. British Columbia, anyone? Mary, the mother, raised as a strict Catholic, has retreated from the family into a drug-induced state where she obsessively returns to injuries done to her in the past. I know that it's an English Canadian perspective, but doesn't that sound like

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Quebec? And James, the flawed patriarch, penurious, demanding love from the rest of the family—isn't that Ontario?

Leaving the arcane interpretations aside—and what could be more arch than O'Neill's American tragedy reconfigured for Canada—some films do say something about Canada. *Hard Core Logo*, which concludes McDonald's rock'n'roll road trilogy, is adamantly placed in the Canadian West. Maps are shown in the film indicating the band's progress across the prairies and dialogue is actually devoted to the kinds of audiences that a punk band might expect to encounter in, for example, Calgary. Pretty gutsy for a film that is meant to be sold to the United States. McDonald and his producers, having survived the disempowering of the OFDC and a subsequent move to B.C., evidently are willing to take the chance that Americans will enjoy seeing something slightly foreign on the screen.

Kissed, another film financed and shot in British Columbia, was the good news story at this year's Toronto film festival. Lynne Stopkewich won accolades for her audacious first feature which relishes the complications surrounding the love affair of a necrophile and a medical student. The narrator, Sandra, a death-obsessed undertaker's assistant, is by turns outrageous, dead-pan and darkly comic in her descriptions of love between the living and the dead. Stopkewich takes author Barbara Gowdy's conceit one step beyond mere scandal: with a romantic flourish, she justifies the love that the student bears for Sandra and which prompts him to make a suicidal gesture.

Stopkewich encountered Gowdy's story "We So Seldom Look On Love" in an anthology edited by Lynn Crosbie centering on erotic tales for women. She bought the book, in part, because Crosbie had been a friend in Montreal; that Stopkewich purchased *The Girl Wants To...* in Toronto and made her film in B.C. makes the back story quintessentially Canadian. So does the gentleness of the protagonist: as played by Molly Parker, Sandra is a uniquely charming necrophile. The subversive charm of the film—and the idea—speaks volumes about a country peopled with folk who have traditionally been willing to accept the eccentricities of their neighbours.

Of course, Stopkewich goes "too far" in *Kissed* but so does Cynthia Roberts in *Bubbles Galore*. Like Stopkewich, Roberts is an ex-Montrealer who has found her place in a new scene. Toronto is Roberts's beat, particularly that part of Hogtown that is populated by denizens of the night. Sex trade workers, musicians, poets, theatre people and comics form the repertory company for Cynthia Roberts and her partner Greg Klymkiw. *Bubbles* revels in collisions between theatrical acting and porn performance, between narrative filmmaking and an experimental art approach and between drama and farce. It contrives to make Toronto sexy, and for that belief, it deserves applause.

Filmmakers in this country rarely adapt theatrical productions—a surprising anomaly in a nation well known for such prestigious festivals as Stratford and Shaw. Since the Tyrone Guthrie production of *Oedipus Rex* was filmed in 1955, have any Stratford plays seen the screen before this year's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*? Perhaps 1996 will be a bellwether year; certainly some of the finest films produced here recently have been based on theatrical performances. *Lilies*, *House* and *The Cockroach That Ate Cincinnati* join Wellington's adaptation of O'Neill's masterpiece in the small body of theatrical works that have inspired filmmakers to produce a feature.

Of this current crop of films *Lilies* is the most cinematic. While it is clear that the budget for John Greyson's film far exceeded that of, for example, *Cockroach*, one can hardly cavil at the cost of his adaptation of Michel Marc Bouchard's play. The resultant film is a

superbly visualized treatment of murder, Catholicism and gay romance in an exotic, rural, pre-World War I Quebec. Initially set in a prison in 1952, the plot revolves around the idea of capturing the king's conscience—only in this case, the king is a bishop who was responsible for the death of one boy and the imprisonment of another 40 years before. Using the device of an all male prisoners "cast" of doubles who play the women and men of 1912, *Lilies* boldly moves between the past and present, weaving a hypnotic and poetic tale. Is John Greyson's film political? Any piece that posits a bishop of Quebec as a repressed homosexual better have reasons for doing so; in this case, it would be hard not to feel pity for all the characters in what is a finely realized theatrical and cinematic work.

Questions of politics surround Pierre Hébert's astonishing *La plante humaine*. An intriguing mixture of animation, video and fiction film making devices, the film recounts the simple tale of M. Michel, a retired and widowed librarian, who is spending his declining days watching television, walking his dog, reading books and visiting his wife's grave. The film effectively indicates the process of human thought through Hébert's quicksilver, rapidly drawn, animation technique, which allows viewers to "see" what Michel is thinking. With the death and destruction of the Gulf War being broadcast, Michel only has time to think of global issues—and highly personal ones. Perhaps that international perspective will keep Quebec in Canada—*qui sais?*



With the demise of the OFDC as a true funding body, strategies for making films in Canada have changed considerably. The Councils, the NFB, broadcasters, and Telefilm can be counted on to help to a certain extent but if your purpose is to make truly innovative films, the pickings are slim. While the Egoyans and McDonalds may end up emulating Cronenberg and Jewison and produce films in Canada with Hollywood money, the chances for others are less obvious. Four interesting films passed my way in the past few months by directors who have achieved critical renown for past, shorter work. Richard Kerr's *the willing voyeur...*, Steve Sanguedolce's *Away*, Ann-Marie Fleming's *Automatic Writing*, and Nik Sheehan's *Symposium* are all risk-taking ventures that attempt to traverse the terrain between narrative, home movie, documentary and experimental filmmaking. None is totally successful—but each of these films deserves serious attention and an audience. Will they receive that consideration in the hard-nosed, hardening of the arteries atmosphere of the late 1990s? Like much that one can say about films and filmmaking in Canada, that question is, inevitably, political. ■