

In the Flour of

Guy Maddin

Gets Melodramatic With *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs*

By Tom McSorley

All photos by Szu Burgess, courtesy of Alliance.



Left: Director Guy Maddin.

Right: Frank Gorshin.

Twilight of the Ice Nymphs is a delirious melodrama perched somewhere between Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, Sirk's *Written on the Wind* and Fellini's *And the Ship Sails On*.

Twilight





As a result of our commitment to provide our readers with the most accurate, informed picture of contemporary Canadian cinema, *Take One* has uncovered new evidence about Guy Maddin's life and work, hitherto suppressed by the reclusive Winnipeg filmmaker, from a forthcoming special encyclopedia of Manitoban cultural history. Finally, the *real* Guy Maddin has been identified. So, before the hype and legends blur the truth once more, we want to set the record straight. Remember, you read it here first: Guy Maddin, a Winnipeg film director of Icelandic parentage, was born Guy Pierre Menard Madinsdottir, in exile, in Riga, Latvia (birthplace of Sergei Eisenstein), in November 1905. He studied theatre, literature, languages, art history and photography at the Riga Gymnasium before his family fled the Russian Revolution for Berlin. There he became an apprentice at UFA Studios, and observed such film masters as Josef von Sternberg, Fritz Lang, F.W. Murnau and others. Between 1929 and 1933, he directed a series of important experimental short films, which he now refers to as *exercices du cinema*, and four features: one silent, three with sound. These early examples of Maddin's unusual nordic surrealist aesthetic are lost forever. (He had reputedly spent several months with Buñuel in Paris in the late 1920s; and, later still, has been identified in photographs as a brooding guest at the infamous party for *L'Age d'or*, speaking to a young French filmmaker who is identified by the faded initials J.V., scratched on the photo's border.) Fleeing Germany to Canada in late 1938, Maddin could not safely bring any of his film elements with him. All traces have since disappeared, apparently destroyed during the war. Our only bibliographic evidence of these early works is found in the October 1937 issue of an obscure, regional cinema journal in Lubeck, called *Deutsches Kino*. A modest profile describes his works (roughly translated) as a "subtly hostile combination of an unseemly Mediterranean baroque syncretism with the frank psychological style of our best German helmers." Sadly, no titles are given. Upon his arrival in the Dominion of Canada, Maddin applied for employment at the newly formed National Film Board. Once hired, he was immediately retrained as a documentarian. When he inquired repeatedly about producing fiction films, he was summoned to meet Government Film Commissioner John Grierson, who informed him that Canada had no use for fiction and that he'd better return to his duty of producing images for the betterment of his adopted nation. Leave fiction to the Yanks, said Grierson. Disillusioned, Maddin toiled for 28 months at the NFB as an editor, cinematographer and sound editor, then quietly boarded a train to Winnipeg to live with distant Icelandic relatives who had settled there late in the previous century. After a modest, obscure career in banking, Maddin would return to filmmaking 40 years later in the mid-1980s, producing four fiction features. Still astonishingly youthful and boyish at the age of 91, Maddin says he does not regret the move to Canada, but he does wish he had decked Grierson when he had the chance at the annual NFB intramural hockey game. "He had his head down," Maddin says ruefully, "and I let him go by. As I recall, he scored on the play."

"What I'm doing is only what everyone was doing fifty, sixty, seventy years ago."

—GUY MADDIN

With the release of *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs*, Guy Maddin's already considerable cult status in international cinema circles from Stockholm to Sydney is certain to grow. With two short films and four very idiosyncratic features, Guy Maddin—actually born Guy Maddin in Winnipeg in 1957—has singlehandedly created an imaginary Canadian cinematic history, passing from 1920s Prairie Expressionist and Surrealist movements, to that creaky era between silent and sound cinema, to the arrival of our own colour talkies. Now he's taken us up to 1950s-style melodramas with *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs*. Of course, such a history does not exist, so Maddin invented it. More precisely, he imagined it, as I have just imagined his biography. A more accurate one might read as follows: Trained in economics, Guy Maddin left his Winnipeg bank career to become an independent filmmaker in the mid-1980s. Since then, he

has produced a short film about a dead parent who keeps hanging around the house, *The Dead Father* (1985), as well as a trio of murky, feature-length sagas: *Tales From the Gimli Hospital* (smallpox-ridden male rivalry, 1988); *Archangel* (love and amnesia in the Great War, 1990); and *Careful* (lust, incest and repression in an alpine village, 1992). He recently directed a half-hour television drama for CanWest Global and, in 1995, the short film *Odilon Redon*. Now Maddin is poised to launch *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs*, a full-coloured, full-blown melodramatic fantasy of unrequited love.

Maddin's arrival in the mid-1980s yielded a marvellous glimpse of an imaginary Canadian film history and, more seriously—with its tangled aesthetic of parody and pastiche—his films represent a reordering of ideas of temporality, a challenge to Canadian film criticism and how we actually talk about this thing called “Canadian cinema.” Our nation's cinema has been largely dominated (at least until the early 1960s) by the documentary. For most of the century of cinema, feature-film production has been intermittent at best, and feature films a structured absence in Canadian popular culture. Clearly, Maddin's films do not fill the many gaps, but in their self-conscious references to film history and, by extension, to the lack of a Canadian feature-film tradition, they do help to shape the outlines of that absence.

Stylistically, Maddin's films offer an immediate, virtually visceral sensation of temporal dislocation. Shot and assembled in cinematic codes of six or seven decades ago, his aesthetic of parody extends to the credit sequences, production company identification and even to promotional strategies. He appears to be rewriting cinema history as Jorge Luis Borges's character Pierre Menard rewrites *Don Quixote*: word for word; in Maddin's case, it's shot for shot. Yet his work seems fresh and original; it sends critics from New York to New Zealand scurrying to the latest theoretical tomes to invoke appropriate adjectives. Contradictory and paradoxical as it may seem, perhaps Maddin's primary illumination is that old and new are the same thing. This may be postmodern, it may be premodern, or, to use Michael Dorland's useful term, “unmodern”; whatever it is, it remains an open question in Guy Maddin's delightfully and disturbingly distorted cinematic universe. In his obsession with deconstructing our sense of time, the question is:

is Maddin an ersatz prairie Ecclesiastes or Friedrich Nietzsche reminding us of time's circular, recurrent, Janus face? Through redeployment of established cinematic styles (expressionism, film noir, etc.) and narrative forms (the Icelandic saga, war reportage, Greek tragedy, romance, fairy tale, melodrama), he suggest ideas of time that differ from our future-orientated Western culture. Is Maddin temporally challenged or are we? What time is it anyway?

At the moment, it's twilight. More precisely, it's forever twilight in the imaginary world of Mandragora, the fantasy setting for Maddin's latest offering. Written by longtime collaborator George Toles, *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* is a delirious melodrama perched somewhere between Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* and Fellini's *And the Ship Sails On*. It is the story of Peter, a young man released from prison who returns to Mandragora to his sister's ostrich farm. On the journey back he falls in love with Julianna (Pascale Busssières). Julianna, however, is involved with Dr. Isaac Solte (R.H. Thomson), a one-legged doctor-scientist-mesmerist. Peter's sister Amelia (Shelley Duvall) is tormented both by her abusive farm labourer Cain Ball (Frank Gorshin, yes, that Frank Gorshin) and her unrequited love for Dr. Solte. Meanwhile, a mysterious woman named Zephyr (Alice Krige) drifts through the feverish forests of Mandragora looking for a new lover, and Cain Ball agitates to buy the farm from Amelia. While both Amelia and Peter strive to capture and hold on to the ones they love, fate has other plans. In the midst of this maelstrom of desire, repression and unremitting light, these tormented characters struggle vainly against harsh, absurd forces beyond their control. It's an arresting, baroque confection of rich colour, lush musical orchestration, high-keyed performances, purple postdubbed dialogue, and huge dollops of unmistakable Canuck fatalism and alienation.

In writing *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs*, Toles was inspired by Norwegian author Knut Hamsun's novel *Pan* and by the idea of “someone who spent years imprisoned in darkness dreaming of light and who is released into a world of excess light: the land of the midnight sun, a place where too much light actually prevents clarity. The light becomes fearful and nightmarish. We tried to recreate those gorgeous, garish Douglas Sirk melodramas of the 1950s. I suppose we've moved up our journey through film history to those strange, heady years after the



Shelley Duvall as Amelia.

“George Toles actually wrote the Amelia part with her in mind; then I spent two months trying to find someone like Shelley until I got the bright notion of actually asking Shelley herself.”—Guy Maddin



Bottom left: R. H. Thomson. Top: Duvall with the ostriches. The cinema of Guy Maddin demands that film history and criticism must confront and investigate its own attitudes toward time.

"declarations of unreality," for Maddin this new work conveys genuine emotion. "I've hoped for years now to get real emotion into our projects, but the feelings always turned up 'knowing' or 'plastic.' Now, though, I have my hopes up that there is real emotion in this *Ice Nymphs* story—not weepy or feel-good emotions—but odd and off-putting mixtures like 'yearning' and 'humiliation.'" And there is plenty of both, as Amelia's love for Dr. Solte goes unrequited, Peter's love for Julianna drives him to a self-inflicted gunshot wound, and Zephyr's desire for a lover leads to self-destruction via a statue of Venus. In this world of unceasing light, all is quite dark; all that yearning, humiliation and thwarted love leads to one of the most devastating endings in Canadian cinema.

Second World War." Maddin agrees, adding that, "There's a Scandinavian austerity to the writing, but something French Decadent, too. And then George loves his Sirk, and so do I. A Norwegian-French melodrama with the Sirkian stress on 'melos'—over 70 per cent of the movie is musically scored. *Schmaltz & Drang!*"

All this remarkable, decidedly offbeat *Schmaltz & Drang* costs money. The budget for the film is approximately \$1.5 million, Maddin's largest budget to date. But, as he insists, "This script weighed in at \$1.5 million at birth; it needed to be clothed in that much money, no less and certainly no more. I didn't want more; I didn't want any fancied-up baby. No gee-gaws, no ruffles,

just an unswaddled muscle, simply clenched and ready for punching." One noticeable effect of a larger budget (and really, it's still not that large) is the intriguing casting of *Ice Nymphs*. Clenched and ready for punching indeed, the cast is a fascinating mixture of talents both Canadian and American, new and established. As Maddin says, "We were lucky enough to get Shelley Duvall. George actually wrote the Amelia part with her in mind; then I spent two months trying to find someone like Shelley for the picture until I got the bright notion of actually asking Shelley herself. Another wonderful performer, Alice Krige, whose work with the Brothers Quay I adored, projects strength and dignity. Pascale Bussières is strong, too. I've loved Frank Gorshin my whole life; it's no coincidence we worked so hard to trick him into this movie. There's also R.H. Thomson. He has a million shades of repressed yearning. I met him after he played Cyrano on stage in Winnipeg. He told me about all the different noses he's worn in his life. We clicked at that level—putty noses. I am pleased with the facial range in the cast, but even more pleased with the voices—fevered and thoughtful—very melodramatic."

Despite its self-conscious artifice—as natural to Guy Maddin as documentary to Grierson—and what Toles calls the film's various

I ndeed, Sirkian hommages and melodramatic artifices aside, *Ice Nymphs* is nothing if not Canadian. Regarding his own warped gallery of bewildered protagonists—from Einar the Lonely in that remote Gimli hospital; to Lieut. John Boles stranded in amnesiac Archangel; to Peter and Amelia spinning in Mandragora's melodramatic vortexes—Maddin is philosophical about this Canadian predilection for unfinished characters. "Yes, I've always had what you'd call 'wounded protagonists.' It's very Canadian: look at the films of Egoyan, Rozema, Krishna, et al. Our protagonists are hurt; things happen to them. Not a 'Duke' Wayne among them. Canadians have trouble with charisma in their protagonists, but we can deal with it, I think. Remember Trudeaumania?" Before tackling the daunting task of reinventing the Canadian protagonist, however, Maddin is currently finishing postproduction on two new short films he shot recently in Winnipeg.

While Guy Maddin's films are identifiable, at some level, with his Canadian contemporaries, his cinema is also unique in its detonation and recreation of forms of time. The question persists: what time is it? Hard to say. From *Ice Nymphs* stretching back to *The Dead Father*, the cinema of Guy Maddin demands that film history and criticism must confront and investigate its own attitudes toward time. How is time and history imagined and constructed? How do our conceptions of time shape our critical approaches to that peculiar form of time known as the movies? His films challenge our cultural conceptions and constructions and how they shape our critical response. Relevant to any discussion of Guy Maddin's work is Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes's observation that "a writer but does conjugate the tenses and tensions of time through verbal means, and his scope is dismally reduced if he, too, in order to synchronize with the ruling philosophy of modernity, must keep step with the indiscriminate rush toward the future, disregarding the only fullness in time: the present where we remember and where we imagine."

Guy Maddin refuses to "synchronize" by imagining a cinematic past in a country whose screens have been and are still almost totally dominated by images made elsewhere. He has also paradoxically reminded us to remember, before the mustard gas erases or the avalanche buries or lovers leave us stranded on our lonely ostrich farm, the possibility of the future dream he and others are enacting now: a Canadian cinema. ■