

# The Class of '99

## Canadian Film Centre Grads Show Off

By Paul Eichhorn



Exhuming Tyler

It's the height of the big box-office flick season. There's a lineup outside Toronto's Uptown Theatre which stretches around the block. At first glance, one might assume most of these people are waiting to see the latest Hollywood shoot-em-up. Yet after closer examination, you would notice them holding tickets to see latest Short Dramatic Films from the Canadian Film Centre.

This annual event is the culmination of a year in which directors, producers, writers and editors take part in intensive six-week labs at the Film Centre. Many of them follow this by a short dramatic film. Many program graduates have gone onto bigger things. Clement Virgo's Film Centre award-winning short *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul* led to his first feature, *Rude*. Holly Dale took her Centre experience and went on to make *Blood & Donuts*. "People have the opportunity to further themselves as film artists in the most collaborative sense possible," says Greg Klymkiw, Canadian Film Centre producer-in-residence. "For many it's their first time working with a whole crew. They make use of this collaborative situation to make the film they want. It really prepares them for the bigger crews on features to come."

The premiere of these short films has a certain graduation feel. Friends and family are on hand. Key people responsible for each film are introduced prior to the screening. During his opening remarks, Film Centre artistic director Dezso Magyar refers to all of them as "the graduating class." Certainly, they're individuals about to move onto the next level of filmmaking. Charlene Olson, who produced *Exhuming Tyler*, is a grad of the Producer Lab. After years of working in postproduction, she found that producing a short dramatic film was great primer to prepare her for a feature production. "It's nice to have a short behind me. It's like doing a mini-feature. I've learned several things I wouldn't do again. It validates you to have this experience."

Mary Lewis, who directed the short *Rabbit Punch*, admitted the program's strict guidelines were challenging. Lewis, director of the Genie-winning short, *When Ponds Freeze Over*, had proposed two other scripts that were both rejected because they didn't meet the guidelines. But in three weeks she managed, along with Directors Lab grad Jim Alodi, to get another script together about the story of a boxer and his girlfriend. Lewis and crew were the first to start shooting in

early January. She admits the Centre program presented her with many of the challenges that confront directors in the real world of tight budgets and brief shoots (*Rabbit Punch* was shot in five days). "It was a very constrained process due to the strict criteria. I found I had more freedom and time and could be more experimental when I made *When Ponds Freeze Over*." Yet, Lewis adds, the exercises she did during last fall's Directors Lab led to her coming up with the idea for *Rabbit Punch*. She built the film around the premise of a man who has a change of heart after a near death experience. She also took some inspiration from classic boxing films such as *Raging Bull* and *Fat City*. Referencing older films also helped her create a timeless quality in her short.

Charlene Olson found the shoot for *Exhuming Tyler* extremely challenging but found that the Film Centre helped open doors when it came to getting locations and crews. The shoot was intense, often beginning early morning and running into the late evening. Unlike Lewis, Olson found the Short Dramatic Film Programme let them take risks and gave them plenty of freedom. She admits her film went over budget by \$1,000 to cover the extra cost of the music soundtrack. Overall, she found the Producers Lab coupled with the film was a great learning experience. But the most gratifying part for Olson was hearing the audience's positive reaction during the Toronto screening.

Mary Lewis put her Film Centre experience to good use this summer. She directed a CBC-TV half-hour program, which she bills a comedic drama. Lewis says doors are also opening up to direct a feature in the near future. But as much as she looks forward to making a feature, she would always like to direct short films. "You can take greater risks with shorts and be more experimental." Klymkiw says Lewis, Olson and the other grads only got this unique opportunity because of the largess of corporate/industry supporters. Firms such as deluxe film, PS Production Services, Panavision Corp., Kodak Canada and many others provide much of the hard services and funds to make the films possible. Klymkiw says letting emerging filmmakers and producers work with suppliers also helps down the road. "Not only do the filmmakers get training but it lets them build important relationships within the industry."

This year's graduating class of young and enthusiastic filmmakers made films that predominantly focused on death, suicide, murder, violence and mean spirit. Klymkiw says it's only coincidental. Unfortunately, these dark topics tend to reinforce that age-old stereotype that Canadians only make films about human tragedies set in a cold, snowy landscape. Maybe it's just a reflection of the dark mood of this year's selection committee. It would be sad to think that future Canadian filmmakers are only interested in making gloomy films about death, violence and corpses. ●