

Post

Wave

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

By Marc Glassman

Photo courtesy of the Film Works. Photo by Ian Watson



The great and terrible thing about parliamentary democracy is that the complete agenda of a province or a country can change radically overnight. Mike Harris's Common Sense Revolution shocked Ontario's cultural communities as soon as the Tories took power in 1995. The liberal assumptions of the province's cultural industries were immediately undermined by a regime whose interests appeared to be based solely on the bottom line. Money traditionally spent on the province's periodicals and books, radio stations, and film and television industries was quickly diminished or halted altogether. The Ontario Film Development Corp. (OFDC) saw its funding reduced and its functions limited to the point where it seemed to be no more than a glorified film-liaison office.

The impact on feature filmmaking in Ontario was devastating. A system had been cobbled together over the previous decade with young filmmakers being encouraged to create features through funding provided by the OFDC and Telefilm Canada. With the provincial funder rendered mute, the number of first films, indeed any feature "art" films produced in Ontario, dropped dramatically. The province's filmmakers were left scrambling, trying to produce works with limited means, as informed members of the public began to wonder if Ontario would ever harvest another bumper crop of directors to match the Atom Egoyans and Patricia Rozemas of the 1980s.

Six years have passed and with it the first fervour of Harris's political initiatives. The economy of the province is strong and business opportunities for below-the-line film crews in Ontario have never been better. The digital revolution has

made an impact allowing self-publishing, boutique recording studios and cheaply made independent films and tapes. Do-it-yourself (DIY) is the new cry for an emerging generation of cultural producers. But will the new indie filmmakers have the same impact that the Toronto new wave did? Does a community exist among these new artists? In what kind of a political and aesthetic landscape are they making work?

Surveying the scene in Ontario today, it's obvious that the dire predictions of Harris's many opponents in the cultural fields have proven to be incorrect. Great books are still being published, CDs are being produced and performing artists are still creating scintillating works. Despite diminishing grants, a new generation of writers, dancers, painters, actors and photographers is emerging with a refreshing kick-ass attitude.

The hottest and hippest art form these days is film, so it's no surprise that DIY is strong here. Graduates of film programs such as Sheridan and Ryerson and numerous independent spirits are flooding the membership roles at LIFT (The Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto) and other co-ops throughout the province. The Canadian Film Centre (CFC), operating under the dynamic leadership of Wayne Clarkson, formerly the head of the OFDC in its glory days, has produced dozens of shorts and a handful of features by upcoming filmmakers who attend this prestigious and pragmatic learning institution. Canadian television series and MOWs provide more opportunities for local talent as do the countless American-financed films [see previous article, ed.] that are shot in Ontario every year.

So no one is starving in the provincial film world, but no new Egoyans appear to be looming on the horizon either. While filmmakers, like all artists, are getting on with their work, the lack of a nurturing environment is slowing down the progress of many important directors. Clement Virgo is one of the finest talents operating in the Canadian scene today. His short, *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul*, and feature, *Rude*, were produced through the Film Centre and given launches at the Toronto International Film Festival. Virgo recalls that in pre-Harris days, "the Film Centre developed a program called A Summer Lab where they took a bunch of filmmakers of colour from around the country and brought them to Toronto for a month. In my group were people like Mina Shum (*Double Happiness*) and Stephen Williams (*Soul*



Left: Clement Virgo. Above: Jeremy Podeswa

Will the new indie filmmakers have the same impact that the Toronto new wave did?

and Telefilm Canada would support feature-filmmaking in Ontario. The career trajectory for Podeswa was affected by the existence of the two organizations. Podeswa ran into the downside of the old OFDC/Telefilm model: "There were two kinds of films that could get made: either a large, obviously commercial film or a small, auteur film by a relatively unknown filmmaker." The young filmmaker wanted to direct a campy performance-art musical. "After *Rebel Girls* [the working title] crashed and burned, I didn't want to look for material that interested me but wasn't mine. I decided it was time to write something original that was personal to me. It wasn't so much the example of other filmmakers who were making films, it was really an internal process. I thought, 'if I am going to continue doing this, I must have a lot invested in the material.' I started to write the first draft of *Eclipse*."

Thanks in part to the atmosphere of those times, Podeswa discovered that "writing came out of me in a way that surprised me. I had always thought of myself as a director. To create a script was something that was a challenge to me but, in the end, it was not that difficult." So an auteur was born. Jeremy Podeswa's *Eclipse* was a festival hit in 1994 but, like Virgo, it took five years for him to make his second feature. The success of *The Five Senses* (for which he won the Best Director Genie earlier this year) has changed things radically for Podeswa,

Survivor). There was a definite sense of community. There was a different government in this province then and you definitely felt like you were part of a mainstream, that there was a movement to include people that had been shut out of institutions."

Virgo has spent the past five years developing a second feature film, *Love Come Down*. *Rude* had been a critical success on the festival circuit, but it didn't make money. In the previous era, he would likely have been given financing for a second try. Never a whiner, Virgo simply went off and made two very interesting TV movies, *The Planet of Junior Brown* and *One Heart Broken Into Song*, while working on his new feature, which will be released later this year. With less government support, he continued his career. But one has to wonder: how many Virgos have been shut out of a system that no longer supports Summer Labs and why did it take the director of *Rude* half a decade to make another feature?

Jeremy Podeswa is another director who, like Virgo, remembers the days when the OFDC

who now feels that his feature-filmmaking career is finally on the rails.

Peter Lynch is another filmmaker whose career began in the 1980s. The director of *Project Grizzly* started out producing "a video festival where Sony was involved. That opened up a way of looking at things corporately, while at the same time I was still tapping into government funds." Lynch was clearly ahead of his time—an entrepreneur during a period when "pure" art produced by government backers was considered to be the only serious game in town. Moving into filmmaking, "I started to go for funds for larger projects: I'd go to the OFDC and Telefilm, in the last days of the OFDC, and get some development for some ideas. Then I mixed in arts council funding and pushed further out into television, where TV could be the trigger for the whole piece." After directing and producing a number of shorts, most notably *Arrowhead* with Don McKellar, Lynch was engaged by the National Film Board to direct *Project Grizzly* and *The Herd*.

"Now I'm doing a number of projects that are in different formats," says Lynch. "One is a feature film which I've already taken to Telefilm for development. I'm exploring funding in the United States and England, with Channel 4 and HBO and others, so I can get finishing money. I don't want to rely on the Telefilm/OFDC model." Lynch is sanguine about the change of funding in Canada. He points out that although "Telefilm is incredible, and a rare thing to happen in the world now, it champions a certain kind of 'art' film. Would a young Cronenberg get funding from them now? I don't think so."

Lynch hangs out with a film community that includes documentary filmmaker Peter Wintonick, maverick new waver Bruce McDonald and young directors like the recent Canadian Film Centre graduate Chris Grismer. The director of *The Herd* is clearly an admirer of Grismer's generation of filmmakers. "They're very resilient and muscular and aren't afraid of the world. A lot of the newer generation is going towards episodic television, music videos, commercials, video art: whatever it takes to keep their chops up. It's a trade off. On the one hand, time is taken away from their feature filmmaking and developing their personal visions, but on the other hand it's keeping them creative."

But is it? Wayne Clarkson points out that "the volume of work, whether it's south of the border or here doing location stuff, MOWs or indigenous material for major broadcasters, exists on a scale that is truly seductive. One of the real talents that came out of the Film Centre a number of years ago is Alex Chapple. Alex did a terrific short film here called *The Passion of John Ruskin*. I always imagined that Alex would make a wonderful feature film. Not to slag his choices, but now he works almost exclusively in television."

The ever-inventive Clarkson is excited by the CFC's first digital feature, *Family Man*, which is in post-production. "It's an amazing process. Aside from having cost savings, when you see digital images projected, you can't tell the difference from film. I think the digital format is going to radically

change film production, especially at the first-time, low-budget end. The crews are smaller, the equipment needs are less, and you can get more shots on a given day." Recalling how the Feature Film Project at the Film Centre was launched, Clarkson's argument to the agencies was that "we could make three films for the price of one. Take that principle and apply it to the world of digital film and you can make 10 films for the price of one."

The poster girl for the new generation of Ontario filmmakers could be Ruba Nadda. This twenty-something Egyptian-Canadian has made a dozen shorts and a feature in little more than three years. Her works have been screened at major European festivals in places like Rotterdam and Venice, but she still remains little-known in Canada. Nadda's attitude towards grants is astonishing. It reflects the practical considerations of a filmmaker who wants to make work even under difficult conditions. "I hear a lot of people say that they didn't get a grant so they aren't going to make a film. But why should someone give you money if you're going to give up that easily?" She pauses, then continues, "If you're passionate about film, you must have unstoppable drive. It's competitive. It's hard. It hurts. People are gloomy about it but it's really the wrong approach. A lot of people don't have stories they're desperate to tell, but I do."

Nadda studied English literature at York University, then took a two-month filmmaking course at New York University. She returned to Toronto intent on making films. Although denied grants at first, she used her own money. Using a technical and acting crew of about 10, all of whom were either family or friends, Nadda proceeded to make films on her own terms, with whatever funds she could raise, borrow or pay for out of her pocket. "Up until a year ago," she notes, "I stayed with friends. It was a meagre existence. It was really depressing at times; I never had my own space. I was so poor." Now she works at an administrative job by day but is a filmmaker at night and on the weekends. Her first feature, *I Always Come to You*, has been submitted to film festivals for the fall.

The DIY attitudes of Nadda and others [see Chris Deacon and the Paulus Film Group sidebars] are here to stay but some questions remain. Greg Klymkiw, adviser to the Feature Film Project poses a few: "Once filmmakers make their low-budget feature, what's next? Where do they go? Do they keep making work at a similar level? Or do they make something at a higher-budget level? If so, how long will it take them to scrape the money together without provincial support? Will working with a bigger budget force them to tell stories they might not want to tell in order to get co-production dollars from another province or another country?"

Time will tell whether Ontario's post-wave of new filmmakers, less a community than strangers in a strange land, can figure out a way to create their own feature films. Perhaps without much nurturing, new Egoyans and Rozemas may emerge. But it's a tough world out there and Ontario's filmmakers will have to fight to find their place in it.

CHRIS DEACON: Genie Winner Makes Comedies

By Barbara Goslawski

Canada is not known for its comedy, at least not in filmmaking. That is, adds Chris Deacon, until recently: "I think there's a shift occurring in the Canadian film industry. As we begin to be taken seriously on the international scene, we can start to take ourselves a little less seriously and that includes widening the definition of what makes up the 'Canadian experience.'"

Deacon cites her 1999 Genie Award for Best Dramatic Short for *Moving Day* as representative of this shift. After all, she was recognized for a film atypical of this country's most celebrated work. "[What] I found encouraging," she says, "was that a comedy was deemed worthy of the highest honour in Canadian film." The Genie win also had a more personal meaning for Deacon. In that endearing, somewhat self-effacing way, typical of her female protagonists, she explains. "I've always hesitated slightly when calling myself a director, because you never quite know when you become a director.... Well, winning the Genie did it for me. I finally felt like a bona fide director. I think it has something to do with peer recognition."

In *Moving Day*, Deacon focuses on a situation that's very familiar: that age-old question of whether to commit. Trouble is that her protagonist experiences this crisis on the day that she is moving in with her boyfriend. Added to the mix is a series of typical and not-so typical moving-day mishaps that push the real toward the surreal. The situations may be somewhat extreme, but Deacon exercises the right amount of restraint, presenting them in an understated way that enhances the hilarity.

Deacon's future will undoubtedly include more comedy and she is, of course, working on a feature-film script, two in fact. She muses reflectively that, "the two features I'm working on now happen to be comedies, but I hope to make a lot of films in my life and certainly they won't be as broadly comic as *Moving Day*. That said, even the most serious of stories always have room for a little humour!"



Bed and Breakfast

A Short Film from
the Paulus Film Group



THE PAULUS FILM GROUP: Collective Filmmaking

By Barbara Goslawski

Bed and Breakfast is not your average OFDC Calling Card film. Produced by a collective, the Paulus Film Group (PFG), instead of the usual producer/director team, the film is as close to pure collaboration as one can get.

The Paulus Film Group was founded, explains group member David Greene, "on the principle that any form of filmmaking requires not only a producer, but writing, direction, cinematography, editing, art direction and music of quality and commitment for the project's success." Robert Crossman, another group member continues, "we all know our job is no more or less important than the next guy, so we cover each other's asses to the best of our ability."

It can get complicated once you try to unravel who does what. The director of one could be the cinematographer of another and so on. Generally, however, the roles are fixed. The core group includes directors Robert Crossman, Drew Mullin and Aaron Woodley; producers Daniel Hill and Eric Novakovic; cinematographer David Greene; working in association with part owners Robert Jeffrey and Paul Russell. Adding to the mix is a support staff of regulars who sometimes substitute in other roles. They include costume designer Denise Cronenberg, art director Claire Ellenwood and actors Barclay Hope and Peter Blais.

Already, PFG has created four short films, 12 music videos, three commercials and two performing arts programs, receiving a total of 19 international awards and 31 award nominations. The shorts produced thus far have enjoyed huge success worldwide, with *Dead Peoples Bums*, 1998, and *The Wager*, 1998, both pre-selected by Telefilm for presentation at the Cannes Film Festival. Not surprisingly, they also have a feature film, *The Corner*, in pre-production.

Bed and Breakfast, writer/director Aaron Woodley's second effort with the group, is typical of PFG's adventurous spirit and risk-taking attitude. Unique within the Calling Card program, it's a film that mixes live action with stop-motion animation. It is also a deeply disturbing film about voyeurism, incest and the infinite powers of the childhood imagination. Imagine a film that combines the chillingly creepy visions of the Brothers Quay and Atom Egoyan.