



Memories of Maria

A Contribution
to the Discussion on "The Image of the
Working Class in Canadian Media"

BY ALLAN KING

Let me begin by saying what a pleasure it is to be able to review and discuss this film with you. A quarter of a century has passed since it was made and yet the dialogue, gestures and images are as vivid in my memory as my delight in the many gifts brought to it by its talented cast and crew. It was a very special time and most of us working on the film were keenly aware of it. I'll talk about that in a moment but first let me call to mind what the working class as an image meant to me.

I had little sense of an image of the working class in the Canadian media but I have vivid memories of my first notions about the working class as a child growing up. They were mostly fearful. The worst fear, imbued in me by my mother, was of falling into the working class. Born into a very large Quebec-Irish farm family, my mother was forever grateful for having escaped the farm at fifteen. She became a highly proficient secretary, married a pharmacist-turned-cosmetics salesman, and moved into the upper-middle class Vancouver district of Kerrisdale, on the west side of town. Groceries from the Fraser River delta were delivered up the back lane in a Model T Ford by a "Chinaman." A "Hindoo" delivered sawdust, which most folks burned in their furnaces. We later learned that they were properly called Sikhs and all had the same last name, Singh. In our minds they all carried long knives – just like Punjab in *Little Orphan Annie*. Those were the ethnic pigeonholes we put people in then; I learned better a little later on.

As the Depression struck, we fell, moving almost every year, but never crossing the imaginary line marked by Cambie

Street to the east of Kerrisdale, much less that of the Main Street boundary. East of Main was where the working class lived. Mind you, they were given credit for a certain dignity, especially after protesting their poverty in a demonstration at the Post Office. That, and the Regina riot, became two of the cherished legends of my youth, but while we might help the working class and sympathize with it, no one thought of joining it. The closest we came was the lower east corner of Kitsilano where I found myself in a school, named after Henry Hudson, where the population was one-third Japanese, one-third Sikh and the other third – I was sure before I actually met them – would prove to be working class. It turned out they were kids just like myself.

The school was supposed to be the toughest in Kitsilano. But, as I soon discovered to my pleasant surprise, there was no corporal punishment. This was unusual. Academic standards were high, and kids better behaved than in the other two, supposedly better-class schools in the district. I'd been to them both. The Japanese kids – among them two of my best friends – disappeared one weekend, carted off on the famous Sunday afternoon of December 7, 1941. Racism became permanently infamous in my psyche – though not removed. It's never totally removed from anyone in my experience, but it was dramatically altered.

The strength of the working class took a dramatic and even a heroic turn with the war – the Second World War, that is. The shortage of labour created a powerful lever in working-class hands. Unions, which had been busted in the Depression, gained greater strength and new ones flourished. As adolescents, we eagerly read the novels of John Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* being much preferred for its doctrinal rigour to the sentimental *The Grapes of Wrath*. "Uncle Joe" Stalin and the Communists were admired for their heroic battle against the Nazis. As we moved into university, we avidly read histories of the revolution and struggled to summon up enough daring to join the Communist Party rather than the wimpy Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, as the social democrats were then called. But few of us dared. Certainly not me!

There was also a virile vigour attached to one's sense of the working class, in contrast to the overly polite frigidity of middle-class life. A masculine model was especially important to me personally as, after the age of six, except for a year, I had grown up separated from my father. Manliness was exemplified, in our class, by a hearty handshake. A man whose hand was "as limp as a fish" was particularly despicable among the salesmen and their families in which I grew up. However, real grit, we knew, thrived among hockey players and the farming and working-class people from which they sprang. Middle-class children were afraid of working-class kids – they could fight, we couldn't – no question about it. And, I believe, we secretly knew that they and the really rich kids got the girls. Black culture now supplies the defining image of

Diane D'Aquila and Enzina Berti in *Maria*, King's film about a young Italian-Canadian whose attempt to unionize her factory teach her a great deal about strength – personal and political.



potency youngsters crave but, at that time, it was a couple of decades ahead of us. Workers were “it” when I was a kid.

And, indeed, the summer I was 15, I went off to work in a logging camp, with a dramatically sharpened sense of purpose. My mother had just remarried. The night of the wedding my new stepfather slept over at our house for the very first time. An earthquake struck the West Coast shortly before dawn – Richter scale, I don’t know – but it is still remembered in the history of the town. A few hours later I was on a ferry to the

logging camp. I studied the loggers carefully for any tips I might get on how to be manly, not realizing for a number of years that the masculinity of the West Coast isolation industries – logging, fishing and mining camps – was characterized by men who had fled their wives and led most of their lives without them. But for me, in my teens, these rugged workers glowed with a high glamour.

However, had I realized what I was doing, I would have also more fully appreciated the foolhardy courage of the mission-



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ary impulse which accompanied me to logging camp a summer or three later. Having then, as now, a passion for classical music, I took along a portable record player with a choice selection from my collection of 78rpm records – Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. I was going to bring real culture to the masses. And, do you know, no one beat me up. I was even allowed to listen to the stuff myself if I kept the volume down. I also had my second real taste of unionism in the logging camp. My first came with organizing a strike of carriers at a *Vancouver News Herald* substation when I was 17. The newspaper manager argued for arbitration and accepted our nomination of our vice-principal as mediator, never dreaming he was a socialist. We won hands down.

At logging camp next summer a row blew up after we had won what we thought was a huge victory. This would be 1948. After bitter negotiations and a near strike, the newly strong International Woodworkers of America (IWA) won a modest wage increase and a 44-hour week – six, eight-hour days one week, five the next. The company signed, then retaliated by raising the rate for room and board just enough to wipe out our wage increase. As a university kid and secretary of the sub-local, I had to confront the bosses for the workers. A mere “whistle-punk,” I was terrified. Furthermore, while the young guys wanted a strike, the older ones opposed it, and I hated conflict. However, lust – but not for violence – won out and the upshot was that we all went on a wildcat strike and took off for Port Alberni to whoop it up for a week or two. It turned out that this was the real objective of the strike and the reason for the division was between young and old. When our money ran out, we started talking to the bosses again. Crew by crew, all 300 loggers were rehired but, as the number remaining dwindled down to a few, I suddenly realized, not me. I was blacklisted and learned a lesson about solidarity. Nothing is harder to achieve.

A third lesson came in the next camp I worked in. One of the reasons we lost the wildcat strike was that the IWA split. The Social Democrats won control of the union executive from the Communists, who ran off with the treasury and formed a rival union. Both sides took turns visiting and courting us at camp. The Communists told us spellbinding stories of the perversion, debauchery and financial skulduggery of the Socialists. Who would have guessed? We could hardly believe we had so witlessly fallen into the hands of such scoundrels. Next week the Socialists came to camp and told us spellbinding stories of perversion, debauchery and financial skulduggery of the Communists. The same stories, different names. Who would have guessed...?

I returned to town and got a job for the winter at the Hudson Bay department store, determined to return to university and, in that act, I realize now, fully accepted middle-class values, at least for a time. And I began learning more about classes and groups. Whereas loggers, miners and most workers knew that only collectively could they bargain with strength, aspiring department store workers did not know this then and have trouble with the notion still. Their class identity, their ambi-

tion to climb the corporate ladder, was sufficient that such people are among the last in our culture to join a group to protect their interests. Filmmakers in the Directors Guild of Canada, for example, have never been able to decide in the 30 years of its existence whether they are in a guild or a union. And in that generation, unionism and a working-class identity began to fade. Our society, may I suggest, has become so rich and its wealth has afforded such diversity that we have given up class as a major bond with which to defend group interests. Just as religion, except in very poor countries, is no longer a stick with which to beat others, neither is class. Ethnicity has replaced both, but only in still relatively poor societies.

Nation states are also transforming. Multipolarized states cluster together – in Europe, the Middle East, the Far East and South East Asia – all in a muddle, uncertain about how best to ingratiate themselves with a hegemonic United States of America, as the historian Samuel Huntington points out. The division is now much more sharply about rich and poor. Trickle-down wealth has proved a myth, and the division is worldwide. The boundary is that of the corporate state: between those who are in it and those who are not. Wimpy little William Lyon Mackenzie King, our most despised, williest, and longest-ruling prime minister – voice of the mighty John D. Rockefeller – is ideologically triumphant at last.

Forgive me for such a long personal account and for then turning it to a political perspective. Let me turn back to *Maria* and 1975. It was a very exciting and creative time. The birth of indigenous theatre in Canada had just occurred. The director Martin Kinch, my assistant on *Maria*, had been part of a storefront theatre, which opened in Stratford to present original Canadian plays. It was set-up opposite the Avon Theatre as a challenge to all that Stratford represented. Director Paul Thompson set-up Theatre Passe Muraille on a LIP grant; Ken Gass and Bill Glassco opened the Factory Theatre Lab, and Bill went on to set up the Tarragon. Writers like Carol Bolt, George Walker, David French and Rick Salutin flourished. A new generation of theatre actors – Janet Amos, Eric Peterson, Diane D’Aquila, David Fox, Chappelle Jaffe and Brent Carver – began to get film and television work.

Maria began as a script proposal from the writer Rick Salutin to the CBC’s docudrama series, *For the Record*. The story may have been solicited by the series producers, Peter Pearson and Ralph L. Thomas, from Rick – a writer known to be interested in social issues – or he may have brought it to them. The producers of the series, in turn, had seized the opportunity offered by John Hirsch, newly appointed as head of drama, to invigorate a near moribund drama department, a department that had been the glory of the CBC at its television genesis. All of this reinvigoration began with Peter Herrndorf, of the CBC’s English Language Service. Ironically, Peter later chaired the board of Stratford after his ouster from the CBC a few years later, and both John Hirsch and Jean Gascon (who memorably plays *Maria*’s father) had earlier clashed as co-artistic directors at Stratford.

However, to the best of my knowledge, none of the CBC people were working class. Ralph, the son of Christian missionaries, and Peter, were both middle class. So was the author of the story, Rick Salutin, although of Jewish forebears. John Hirsch, too, was Jewish, but his adoption in Hungary saved him from burning with his family. Peter Herrndorf, a Niemann Fellow and M.B.A. from Harvard, was also middle class. Not that I am suggesting that one has to be working class to portray working people. But while the focus of *For the Record* was investigative journalism expressed in dramatic form from a "progressive" perspective, this perspective had certainly changed with the revelations of Khrushchev at the 20th Communist Party Congress, the crushing of the Hungarian break for freedom in 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1967.

For a number of reasons, on which I can only speculate, *Maria* got stuck in the CBC drama department birth passage, as it were. It was rescued and brought to life when, as a filmmaker taking temporary employment at the CBC, I took it up and determined to produce and direct it. The attraction was not so much about the working class as about unions, organizing them, and about broader questions of social democracy, by which I mean not socialism vs. capitalism but about mobilizing individuals in groups to enable them to achieve the goals they wished, whether within a public or private corporation or within a society at large.

I was given to understand that the piece had been rejected as being dramatically "too black and white" (let me expand the pun in a moment), and John Hirsch was startled at my choice. "It's a socialist-realist tract," he said, or something to that effect. At my raised eyebrow, he thought a moment and said, "Well, why not? We've never done a socialist-realist tract." One of John's great gifts was his nerve, and he had lots of it.

For example, as a way of getting a sense of place and its look, I've always taken lots of stills of locations and of the people in them. Exploring garment factories, shooting stills of the women working there – especially the one we chose – I was dismayed to discover that their faces simply disappeared in the wild patterns and colour of the bolts of cloth that surrounded them. You could not see the people. Now, colour had just really come in on television in Canada and no one, but no one, shot black and white anymore. Verboten! Gone! I went to see John, and described the problem and bless him, he just swallowed hard and said, "Well, black and white are colours, too, aren't they?"

And so the show is in black and white and, I must say, I think this enhances its value enormously, not simply because the actors' and extras' faces shine forth but because it also gives a certain, how shall I say, socialist-realist quality to the piece? Let me confess, too, that I never thought so highly of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the film, as after seeing a very badly scratched black-and-white print on TVOntario. Except for the ending, it then looked just like the prints of *Mother*, *Potemkin*, *Storm over Asia* and the other Russian classics I'd grown up with at the Vancouver Film Society.

The drama? Rick and I have different political perspectives, although it is my sense that we share broadly the same goals of social justice and economic equity but simply put, we would disagree on how to reach them. I don't believe in class conflict

and I believe he does. But it is a complex issue not easily answered. The nub of the matter is that I believe people effectively resolve conflicts only by putting themselves in the place of their opponent. Without the capacity to do this, large groups all too readily regress into creating scapegoats, which inevitably blocks the task of conflict resolution. At the same time, motivating and mobilizing a group without a scapegoat is not easy. Our differing perspectives, however, provided no problem in filmmaking at all.

It has always been my view that it is the director's task to serve the text. Authorship is fundamentally rooted in the script. Though it is awfully hard for directors to accept the fact, they are much more akin to conductors than composers. And, as Shostakovich pointed out, conductors much prefer dead composers. It is only this year that writers in Hollywood gained the right to be on set. And, no question, after what may have been a number of earlier struggles with the CBC script department, Rick was certainly wary as we began production. But, in fact, we had few if any disagreements and I always welcomed him on set. One of the great advantages of having the writer present is this: no matter how hard you study a text, inevitably, on the floor, during shooting, as actors work to realize the text, questions arise. If the writer is there, you can ask for clarification; if not, you're stuck. That is why I always prefer to have the writer with me.

Now, as to working-class images in Canadian film and, in particular, in *Maria*. I'm biased, of course, but I must say I am still very pleased with the look and feel of the film, the authenticity of the extras and their easy blend with the cast. The principals in the cast work together in the film as if they worked together in real life. The factory, the streets, the streetcars and traffic, all have a nice bite. But, you know, these aren't really matters for me to judge.

In the experience of making a film, a few things stand out for me. I love working with a cast and crew because they give one so much. The more I've worked, the less I direct. A wise counsel, George Miller, once pointed out to me that the director's task is to hold the concept. One thinks as hard as one can about it and then asks one's colleagues to go through the same process and, as much as possible, to discover and flesh it out for themselves, from their own experience. The likelihood of richness in the discovery is so much stronger then. You may remember what Jean Renoir reported. His father was asked why he painted from nature. He replied that with the best imagination in the world he could not imagine as rich a variety of colour, light and shade as that provided by real light falling on an actual tree. People are much more complex than we even dream of and always capable of surprising discoveries.

Thus making a film offers three great rewards to the filmmaker, at least this one. One is challenged to explore and discover further meaning in material, which inevitably turns out to be personal. And that meaning is amplified and enriched by the discoveries of those who explore with you. Finally, an audience tells you what it means for them and brings to the experience much more again. So, all in all, shooting and finishing *Maria* was a very great treat, and I enjoy it still. And it was a great pleasure showing it to you. Thank you.

TAKE ONE

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