

# Cultural crosscurrents

## One man's opinion

by Harry Gulkin

Joshua, the hero of Mordecai Richler's recent novel *Joshua Then and Now*, yearns for an inheritance "... weightier than the construction of a transcontinental railway, a reputation for honest trading, good skiing conditions."

Richler's work and that of others in literature, theatre, music, dance and art are filling that gap. But no one can accuse the Canadian feature film industry of the intention, much less the achievement, of enriching our national cultural fabric so that Joshua's descendants need not echo his lament.

Indeed, reaction has been angry. Witness critic Martin Knelman's fulminations in the March 1981 issue of *Saturday Night*: "What could have better filled the Canadian need for self-denigration than the flowering of a schlock movie industry? The insults Canada has endured from Hollywood begin to look like petty mischief compared with the abusive treatment Canada has been getting from its own moviemakers." Reactions such as these have become commonplace.

Our film industry in recent years has been overwhelmed by formulas dimly perceived as the route to sure box office success. The relentless pursuit of these formulas is proving as futile as the alchemists quest for the formula that turns dross to gold. The elaborate system of defense erected by government to stem the onslaught of Hollywoodization has failed. Neither the point system — ensuring majority Canadian participation in films that enable investors to claim tax benefits — nor the even higher mandatory level of Canadian creative and technical participation needed to qualify for CFDC investment, has done it. Nor has the stalwart, if sometimes shrill, insistence of the guilds and unions that their Canadian memberships enjoy exclusivity or priority for employment in Canadian feature films.

The elusive quest for a body of feature films based on our experience, made by Canadians, and of sufficient quality to attract and sustain audience attention remains unfulfilled.

It should be common wisdom that to create the basis of a genuine film art in Canada we must deal with our shared experience and past, while striving for a level of quality which will make our work persuasive, accessible, and a matter of pride and pleasure for Canadian audiences. Over the years there has

been a trickle of such films: thankfully, this year's Genie Awards acknowledged *Les bons débarras*. It is the spirit of films such as these that must be kept alive and nourished within our industry so that they may multiply into a significant body of work. If the drive for excellence is sustained, we will find not only national, but international audiences.

Parallel to this there must be a turning outward to the state of the art as practised and developed elsewhere in the world. Artists of stature from abroad should be welcomed if they want to work with us. Not so that we may slavishly imitate them; just so that we can stretch a little.

**Away with xenophobic nationalism! Without the fresh blood of foreign influence Canadian film will stagnate, says producer Harry Gulkin. As if to illustrate his point Renee Perlmutter has put together an international mix of nine women to make the feature "Love".**

Born from the agony of repeated frustration and a heightened sense of cultural inferiority, the reaction to the current Canadian film scene is twofold:

1. There is a resentment towards the kind of formula films that we have been making (pale imitation Hollywood), and the circumstances that lead to their creation.
2. There is a conviction that if a film isn't 99.44/100% pure Canadian, it can't be any good; or at least, it's not what we want.

The latter reaction is not a new one. Intense cultural nationalism, almost to the point of xenophobia, has characterized much of our industry for a long time. This is sad because it is counter-productive and prompts us to turn inward, away from the richness of world film culture. It leads inevitably to insularity and to a cultural chauvinism that insists that what we say, and how we say it has an importance greater than any in creation. We can then turn comfortably away from the rich accounting of life's experience by artists elsewhere and, not so incidentally, escape comparison.

If it is any comfort, we are not alone. The Hungarian, Bela Bartok — generally considered to be one of the 20th century's greatest composers — devoted much of his life to an exploration of Hungarian folk themes that he used as a basis for

much of his work. However, when his ballet, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, was staged — an avant-garde work at the time — he was attacked for allegedly succumbing to degenerate foreign influences. Sadly, Bartok never wrote a ballet again. But he did say to his countrymen, "The avoidance of foreign influences results in stagnation."

We have not been found wanting in defining our own paths to cultural stagnation.

In the late seventies ACTRA denied British performers Maggie Smith, Brian Bedford and Margaret Tyzack their right to perform in a radio version of *Richard III* — a play in which they were then appearing at Stratford. Earlier, the union had denied Maggie Smith and American performers Melvyn Douglas and Nehemiah Persoff work permits for CBC-TV drama work.

In an introduction to a late-seventies edition of *Film Canadiana*, Peter Harcourt set out to weave an ersatz Maple sugar cocoon around Canadian films to protect them from comparative examination and analysis: "... if we could stop constantly comparing our own product with the British or American models, we might be surprised to find... that there is something on our screens to be deciphered."

This is invitation to narcissism, to incessant naval gazing, to mediocrity and sterility. It is, above all, a call to condemn ourselves forever to our celebrated Canadian inferiority complex. How else can one describe an unwillingness to compare works of art from our own country with those of other countries?

The late, esteemed theatre critic Nathan Cohen was an avid crusader for Canadian theatre, but he was utterly intransigent in his evaluation of standards of performance. For Canada and Canadians he demanded theatre equal to and better than that available elsewhere, and he unhesitatingly compared our own with the best that he knew. Our theatre community has acknowledged its debt to him.

Despite our national paranoia, some foreign artists of stature have worked here and have made a mark. The late Czech-expatriate Jan Kadar directed *Lies My Father Told Me*. Frenchman Louis Malle directed *Atlantic City*, U.S.A. The crew that worked with British cameraman John Alcott (*Barry Lyndon*) on *Terror Train*, tell of how much they learned from Alcott's economy and virtuosity with lighting, although they appear indifferent to the film's content. These foreign artists and a few others have made a significant contribution to the development of our film technique.

International artists and universal artistic values help to open a wide window on the world. If some of our current, narrow attitudes prevail we will have condemned ourselves to squinting through a periscope. Witness the dismal little sideshow that seems to have taken centre stage in the ongoing debate about the Canadian-ness of films. Canadian place names are frequently concealed or replaced by American place names on assumption

that this will make them more acceptable to U.S. audiences. Admittedly this practise is as shoddy as many of the films in which it can be seen. But does it deserve centre stage in the debate?

Regarding places and names at a more serious level, it is not only legitimate but imperative for Canadian filmmakers to deal with events in other lands as well. Rumour has it that we are affected by what happens elsewhere on the planet. Should Shakespeare have set *Romeo and Juliet* in Nottingham? *The Tempest* in the Outer Hebrides? And where should he have set *Julius Caesar*?

Regional Theatre has perhaps been our greatest satisfaction in the performing arts in Canada in recent years. *The Tomorrow Box* by Anne Chislett played the Centaur Theatre in Montreal last fall. A good play. A young Toronto woman moves to a hamlet in southwestern Ontario. Her sister from the Big City visits her. No sooner does Big Sis arrive when Little Sis breathlessly asks "... how is the CN Tower?... and the Courtyard Café?" Really? Neither the CN Tower nor the culinary/social/cultural wonders of the Courtyard Café are likely to inspire a universal, or for that matter *Canadian*, sense of wonder and longing.

We are a very young country, still wrestling with matters of self-definition. We are searching out and engraving on the national consciousness our own heroes and myths, while trying to find the forms that are most appropriate to us. In this, we should be enlisting all the positive help that we can get, through an acute awareness of international developments in our field, and by working with artists of stature regardless of where they come from.

A recent example of the international character of art can be seen by the genesis of Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*. Joseph Conrad, a Pole, became one of the greatest writers in the English language. He wrote a novel set in Africa, called *Heart of Darkness*. The novel became the basis for an American film set in Vietnam, based on contemporary American experience. Coppola's dedication to the international fraternity of filmmaking can serve as an inspiration to us all. It was he, along with George Lucas, who sponsored the great Japanese filmmaker Kurosawa, and his magnificent film *Kagemusha*. He resurrected and sponsored the showing of French director Abel Gance's epic *Napoléon*.

We impoverish ourselves when we resist the opportunity to work with foreign artists of great stature. We condemn ourselves to parochial standards when we hesitate to compare our films with films being done elsewhere in the world.

As Anne of Green Gables' teacher (a fine Canadian woman) sang, "Open the windows, let in the fresh air..." ●

Harry Gulkin has produced *Lies My Father Told Me*, *Two Solitudes* and *Jacob Two Two Meets the Hooded Fang* — all based on the works of Canadian authors.

\* Centaur management informed us that the original text read "Gatsby's." Apparently this was changed to "Courtyard Café" for the sake of prompter audience recognition.

# Cultural crosscurrents

## Ten women's experience

by Larry Moore

How would you feel if I told you that I made *Love* with Joni Mitchell, Liv Ullmann, Mai Zetterling, Nancy Dowd, Germaine Greer, Pelenope Gilliatt, Lady Antonia Fraser, Edna O'Brien and Gael Greene? Not only that, but I watched while other people made *Love*! The best part was that I was paid to make *Love* with all these beautiful and talented women. Sounds fantastic, doesn't it? Well, before you get out the Yellow Pages to call up the vice squad, let me elaborate. *Love* is a new motion picture from Coup Films. The ladies in question all had a hand in writing the script for the picture, while I had the privilege of participating in the film as 'observer director.'

The position of observer director is a relatively new one in the Canadian motion picture industry. My opportunity was made possible through a grant from the Canada Council and the gracious consent of the film's producer, Renée Perlmutter. With the increase in numbers of features being shot (55 in 1980 as opposed to 8 in 1975), greater opportunities now exist for those who want to expand their knowledge of the medium via the apprenticeship route. Presently, almost every department that participates in the production of a feature film has a position for an apprentice.

For many reasons *Love* was an interesting project from an apprentice's point of view. Perhaps the most important element of any feature film is the script. The *Love* scripts, crafted by some of the best writers of our day, represented a departure from orthodox screenwriting. The authors were free to write about whatever pleased or interested them on the subject of love. The combined and varied experience of the writers, fuelled by the opportunity to indulge their private fantasies, yielded delectable results: the scripts ranged in nature from destructive morality to high eroticism.

After the stories were combined into the completed screenplay, Perlmutter convinced Nancy Dowd, Liv Ullmann and Mai Zetterling to direct their own scripts. Joni Mitchell would perform in hers and Annette Cohen, an experienced Canadian writer, was chosen as the supervising director, who was also responsible for directing the remaining episodes. Whereas most films are handled by one director, this film was unique in that the direction was handled

by four people, all of them women. And of those four, only Mai Zetterling had had previous experience as a feature director.

Few women have the opportunity to direct feature films. In the United States a few have broken the barrier (Claudia Weill, Anne Bancroft), and in France there is a small renaissance of female directors. In English Canada only three women have directed features of note including: Sylvia Spring (*Madeleine Is*, 1970), Joyce Wieland (*The Far Shore*, 1976), and Janine Manatis (*I Maureen*, 1978), as reported by Barbara Martineau in *Cinema Canada* No. 71. In light of such statistics *Love's* success could mean a lot to women who are trying to break into the ranks, in any category.

There has been a recent trend in Hollywood to give new or first-time directors a break. In the last year, for example, Taylor Hackford, Joel Schumacher and Jeremy Joe Kronsberg had the opportunity to direct *The Idolmaker*, *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*, and *Every Which Way But Loose* respectively. (Ref. "First Time Directors," *American Films*, Jan./Feb. 1981.) In Canada however, similar opportunities have been infrequent - for men, much less women. Most women who have been first-time directors have in some way created the project for themselves - as was the case with Claudia Weill, Barbara Hopple and Anna Thomas. (Ref. "The Non Hollywood Hustle," *American Film*, Oct./80.) "Women are involved in all sorts of developmental deals," says Martha Coolidge, the independent filmmaker who made *Not A Pretty Picture*. But when it gets down to the bottom line, they always fall through. Why? "Studio executives," says Coolidge, "offer a variety of reasons. All their arguments are good," she notes. "On the other hand there are many male directors who can't relate to actors, can't take a meeting, can't communicate. Why are they working? Who knows." (Ref. "First Time Directors," *American Film*, Jan./Feb. 1980.)

In the case of *Love*, Mai Zetterling and Liv Ullmann were both accomplished actresses before becoming directors. Their many years of film experience enabled them to communicate very succinctly what elements were essential in the construction of their vision. Zetterling left the acting world twenty years ago to become one of the first female film directors. She wrote and directed the anti-war film *The War Game* which received The Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. Her two box office hits *Night Games* and *Loving Couples* both won international film festival awards. For *Love* she not only directed her own script - drawn from an earlier original story - but also the script written and performed by Joni Mitchell, and that contributed by Edna O'Brien. In her attempts to find the limits of the camera, macro shots, prismatic effects and slow motion photography were tested and eventually blended into her episodes. Although each scene was designed with an obvious cutting point, the logical and natural flow of the action was maintained.

Similarly, Liv Ullmann showed a respect and gift for the craft of directing. She had worked out a complete shot plan for her short piece (three shooting days) and there was little doubt about exactly where the piece would cut. Because her segment was so spare, it was difficult to tell if any of Ingmar Bergman's mastery had rubbed off on her during her association with him. The only dialogue in her episode is a passage from the Bible that an elderly man reads to his ailing wife during his weekly visits to her hospital room. At one point during the filming, Ullmann had an actress sit absolutely still for a take. No action was required and only the barest motivation was necessary to the scene. After the take was completed she simply said; "Magnificent," and moved into the next shot.

Both Nancy Dowd and Annette Cohen came to directing via writing. Dowd

needed to direct a motion picture.

The only way that we will be able to develop talent in this country is if people are given the opportunity to direct. In Cohen's case both her strengths and her weaknesses were explored. One of the benefits of being an apprentice director in a situation like this is that you get an insight into the problems that beset a new director. Coverage became one of the most important factors on *Love*, when it was realized that some of the earlier scenes would be difficult to cut. As the picture progressed it was apparent though that Cohen's rapport with her actors was her forte. Numerous members of her respective casts were blatant in their appreciation of her attention and sensitivity. The actresses in particular seemed excited by the opportunity of responding to a woman in the actor/director relationship. The film itself will eventually reflect the person-



● No cold shoulders for Janet-Laine Greene and Larry Dane in "Julia" segment of *Love* (writer: Edna O'Brien, director: Mai Zetterling).

started her career writing short films and rose to fame as the screenwriter of *Slapshot*. She also wrote the original story for *Coming Home*; the script that she contributed for *Love* has a similar plot, based on the return of a soldier after WW II. The tricky part was to make Toronto in October 1980, look like Long Beach, California, 1945. While the crew had the advantages of down-filled coats and vests, actors Nicholas Campbell and Tony Kalem had only a few H.M.I.s to keep them warm!

Of the four women only Annette Cohen is a Canadian. Previous to this assignment several of her scripts were produced by the CBC and OECA. As well, she has produced and directed some of her own material. With *Love*, Cohen has entered that small and elite circle of Canadian women who have directed feature films. Certainly it is a difficult job for a neophyte. The first problem is hierarchy - who defers to whom and the politics thereof. Add to that the complications of unions, guilds, associations and affiliations, and it's a small wonder that anyone but a seasoned veteran could comprehend and assimilate, then sift and apply all the informa-

alities of the women who produced, directed and wrote it. Although the anthology film format has not been used to great commercial success in the last ten years, the scene may be changing. Recently *Sunday Lovers* was released, in a format that is very similar to *Love's*. *Sunday Lovers* stars Roger Moore and has one episode that was written, directed and performed by Gene Wilder.

Ultimately, no one element, or even combination of elements, guarantees the commercial or artistic success of a feature film. Lately, many made-in-Canada features have drawn flak because they have obviously been made for the Capital Cost Allowance, with little attention paid to the artistic content or commercial potential. There are a few pictures however that still maintain a high level of artistic excellence and market potential. *Love* is one of these pictures. At a time when few real chances are being taken in our industry it is exciting to see a picture that breaks so many accepted standards, and gives hope and opportunities to those involved. Much of the credit should go to Renée Perlmutter and her staff at Coup Films. ●