

# Blood on the Snow

What went wrong?

by William Weintraub



Analysts of the Canadian motion picture industry are still scratching their heads over the year's biggest mystery — the continued non-appearance in the theatres of *Blood on the Snow*, the much-heralded blockbuster produced by Montreal's Goniff International Pictures. *Blood*, as it is known in the trade, seemed to have everything going for it, including a brilliant coup at the Cannes Film Festival when its glamorous stars, Melissa Van Splatt and Jerome Spurgeon, were paraded down the Croisette atop elephants rented by the producers. The publicity resulting from this was phenomenal.

So why isn't *Blood* getting any distribution? Is it true that test audiences "either love it passionately or hate it passionately," with about 97 percent in the latter category? Very few people in the industry have actually seen the film, but there is much rumour and conjecture about it, and I hoped to get some answers last Wednesday afternoon as I hurried along Sherbrooke Street to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. For it was here that Goniff International Pictures was holding a gala reception to launch the sale of shares in its next project, a \$7,000,000 romantic comedy entitled *Zipperville*. But I was less interested in their next project than in their last one, the elusive *Blood on the Snow*.

When I entered the Prince of Wales Room of the Ritz, I found the party in full cry. Besides film people, I noticed many stockbrokers, bankers, financial analysts, lawyers, accountants and, of course, canny investors on the lookout for a cosy tax shelter. Everyone was milling about in a great hubbub, downing smoked oysters and glasses of Moët et Chandon. Gossip columnists and representatives of the trade press darted about inquisitively. Public relations men hovered suavely. Gorgeous young women — all of them aspiring actresses — slithered through the crowd and thrust copies of the *Zipperville* prospectus into the hands of the potential investors. As these gentlemen were mostly physicians and surgeons, in the 50 percent tax bracket, most of the city's hospitals were offering only emergency services that afternoon.

Gulping down a few beakers of the free champagne, I spotted Charlton P. Goniff, president of Goniff International Pictures, at the other end of the room. I hurried over to talk to this colorful young lawyer-turned-producer.

"Mr. Goniff," I said, "I am writing a no-holds-barred article about what ails the Canadian film industry. Can I ask leading questions?"

"Shoot," said Goniff.

"What went wrong with *Blood on the Snow*? Why isn't it in the theatres?"

"Why dredge up the past," said Goniff, "when we stand on the threshold of such a glorious future?"

"But I thought the industry was determined to learn from its mistakes. What

Everybody in the industry expected that it would be yet another great Canadian motion picture...

did you learn from *Blood*?"

"All right," said Goniff, "I'm going to let it all hang out. To start with, the screenplay was brilliant — so powerful and hard-hitting that six Hollywood majors and nine minors found it too hot to handle. Thus we were able to obtain a thoroughly professional American script at a very reasonable price. Then I had a quick re-write done locally, so it could be considered as Canadian content. This, of course, is necessary if you want to get certification from those bastards up in Ottawa, for your tax write-off.

"So we had this great script. And we had a great cast. As you know, we were able to get Melissa Van Splatt and Jerome Spurgeon — two very great stars who brought with them not only their vast Hollywood experience but also their

Canadian citizenship, to help with that goddam certification.

"In short, we had a magnificent package, with interim financing cross-collateralized through the exercise of options in the re-capitalization of the production guarantor's parent corporation. As a deal, it was pure poetry." Goniff paused, a dreamy look in his eye. "So what went wrong?" I asked.

"I'll tell you what went wrong," said the colorful young producer. "That son-of-a-bitch Headley Crowe went wrong, that's what. I made the mistake of a lifetime when I hired that mangy little bugger to direct! I must have been out of my tree! A director! Phooey! That bum couldn't direct his genitalia in a brothel, you should excuse the expression."

Goniff was shaking with rage and at-

tempted to calm himself by wolfing down four glazed eggs stuffed with anchovy paste. After a few minutes he was able to talk again.

"On the other hand," he said, "even though Headley Crowe was a disaster, *Blood on the Snow* is still a beautiful motion picture. Don't write it off too soon. Even though North American and European distributors are too blind to see its potential, don't forget that we've made important television in Sri Lanka and Zanzibar."

"I hear you're going to re-edit it," I said.

"That's right," said Goniff. "And we hope that'll give us another crack at the American market. We've held test screenings in Peterborough and Saskatoon, and we've learned fabulous things by observing at exactly what point the audiences drift off to sleep. No two audiences are alike. We ask them what they *dream* while they doze and this gives us fantastic clues for the restructuring. We're going to have that done down in New York, by the same great people who cut all the Charles Bronson movies. They charge an arm and a leg, but as you know they can turn any sow's ear into a silk purse."

Giving me a hug, Goniff moved on to speak to a group of proctologists who were heavily into film. I sampled a few more smoked salmon canapés and then approached Bobby Robitaille, Goniff's production manager. Perhaps he could give me some additional insights into what had turned *Blood* into such a disaster.

"It was the script," said Robitaille. "It was lousy to start with, but that re-write just about killed it."

"Who did the re-write?"

"Samantha," said Robitaille.

"Who's Samantha?"

"You mean you don't know Samantha?" he said, incredulously. "Everybody knows Samantha. She's the receptionist down at our office. She's got the two greatest boobs in all Montreal. Nineteen years old. A real traffic-stopper. And she wants to be a screenwriter. Majored in English in high school."

"I can't believe it," I said. "You mean your receptionist actually wrote the screenplay?"

"Yes, and answered the phone at the same time," said Robitaille. "Mind you, Goniff never thought scripts were all that important. And of course he was very anxious to get into Samantha's panties. But I think he learned something from *Blood*, and now of course we've got a full-time Creative Supervisor, in charge of nothing but the development of screenplays."

I'd heard about Goniff International's new Creative Supervisor, and I sought her out of the crowd. She was Mrs. Elsie Strudel, a well-fleshed, matronly woman in her 60's.

"Let me congratulate you on your appointment," I said.

"What's to congratulate?" said Mrs. Strudel. "If I wasn't Charlton Goniff's mother-in-law, and if my husband wasn't a major shareholder, I would never have taken this job. Dealing with writers is not a pleasant task. They are



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often bearded persons who seldom take a bath. Frankly, I would rather be home in my kitchen making *gefulte fish*. But *somebody* has to do it, and it was either me or that brazen little receptionist in the front office."

"But I believe you are highly qualified for the job," I said.

"Of course I am," said Mrs. Strudel. "I always have been crazy about fine literature. And I have published my own recipes in poetry form. And if there's one thing I know, even better than I know how to make *latkes*, it's what the essential ingredients are that have to go into a professional motion picture screenplay. Do you know what they are?"

"I'm afraid I don't," I said.

"The three essential ingredients are conflict, jeopardy and a good chase near the end. The main problem with Canadian movies is that they put the chase too near the beginning. Then there is nowhere for the story to go, dramatically speaking."

"What did you think of the screenplay for *Blood on the Snow*?" I asked.

"Don't ask," said Mrs. Strudel. "Whenever I think of that piece of schlock I get heartburn. But let me ask you a question, confidentially. Do you think there's anything going on between my son-in-law and that receptionist?"

"No, I don't think so," I said. "I'm sure it's just a professional relationship."

"It better be," said Mrs. Strudel. "If I catch him with his hand on her behind once more I'll brain him. If my poor daughter knew half of what goes on in that office she'd have a heart attack. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'd better go and speak to those writers over there." And she walked off toward three or four scruffy-looking individuals who were cowering apologetically in a corner.

Finding myself at the caviar table, I applied a couple of large spoonfuls to some Norwegian toast and stood there munching. A stunning young woman approached me.

"I see you haven't got your prospectus yet, Doctor," she said.

"Sorry, but I'm not a doctor," I said.

"That doesn't matter," she said. "As long as you're in a nice, high income bracket."

"Actually I'm in quite a low bracket," I said.

"You're putting me on," she said, with a dazzling smile. "Now we don't want to pay all those nasty taxes to the nasty old government, do we? It would be silly to do that, wouldn't it, when an exciting investment like a movie can give us a 100-percent write off?"

"Honestly," I said, "I'm not an investor."

"Of course you are," she said. And she moved very close to me, to whisper in my ear. "Between you and me," she said, "a man of the world like yourself will find it very stimulating to be part of the industry. Don't forget, you're going to meet a lot of actresses, and most of them really enjoy the company of older men." And, giving me a small peck on the cheek, she put a copy of the *Zipperville* prospectus into my trembling hands and moved on to tackle a nearby

neurologist.

Leafing through it I noticed, among other items, the proposed budget of the \$7,000,000 film. Appended to this is a deeply-moving statement by Charlton P. Goniff. "Our young industry is being criticized," he writes, "for a financial practice vulgarly known as 'siphoning off the top.' The fees that producers charge against their budgets for their own services have been described as being 'hideously inflated.' But Goniff International wishes to assure its investors that all moneys raised for the production of *Zipperville* will go right up there onto the screen, with no private pockets being lined along the way.

"I personally am making this great motion picture as a labor of love, because I believe so deeply in it. Thus the fee that I am charging as producer is merely a token sum. A glance at the budget will show how laughably small it is - less than the salary of the leading lady's assistant hairdresser." The statement is accompanied by a photo of Goniff in which he is shown standing beside his car. This vehicle, on the advice of his public relations consultants, is now a Volkswagen Rabbit, rather than the usual Ferrari.

Looking up from the prospectus, I now spied Anthony Purvis, the famous film professor and critic, and I engaged him in conversation about the ill-fated *Blood on the Snow*.

"I personally haven't seen it yet," he said, "but you can be sure of one thing: if it's having trouble getting into the

theatres it's because it's being suppressed by the American distributors. As you know, they control every movie screen in this country. They know that Canadian films are a threat to the Hollywood monopoly. They're afraid, that's what they are - afraid of greatness, afraid of any film directed by Headley Crowe."

"Perhaps," I said. "But Goniff told me that it was Headley Crowe that turned *Blood* into such a hopeless mess."

"Don't you believe it," said Purvis. "One does hear, of course, that Headley's last four films have been massively boring, but that's only what you read in the newspapers. Written by reviewers, not critics. What these Philistines call incoherence is actually Headley's masterful interweaving of many layers of ambiguity. Heaven help the Canadian cinema if it ever succumbs to the primitive, linear storytelling that epitomizes Hollywood's slick pandering to audience pleasure."

"So you don't think *Blood* is a failure?"

"If it's a failure," said Anthony Purvis, "it's one of Headley Crowe's noble failures. For a serious student of the cinema like myself, intentions are of much deeper significance than mere performance. Headley, for instance, always aims high. Have you ever seen a filmmaker who has suffered so intensely over the way the multi-nationals have rejected the solar energy option? And Headley Crowe is willing to share that suffering with us, and to make it refresh-

ingly inaccessible."

My next interview was with Manfred Peltz, the dashing gossip columnist who wields such power in the world of Montreal show business.

"Never mind about *Blood*," he said. "It's this new one I'm worried about, this *Zipperville*. It's starting out as a disaster."

"Why do you say that?"

"Just look around you," said Manfred, "at this chintzy party. Where's the glamor, where's the excitement? What is there for me to write about? Where are the Hollywood stars? Where is Ronald Motherland, who was supposed to fly up? Where is Fiona Upjohn? No-shows, both of them. Believe me, the Canadian film industry is never going to get off the ground at this rate. What we desperately need is glamor, chic, glitz, raunch, feist. But what does Goniff give us? Lawyers, bank presidents, accountants.

"Just look at this party, will you? It's only been going for about two hours and already the caviar is all gone. I doubt if they had more than a dozen quarts of it to start with. And look at this champagne Goniff is giving us - Moët et Chandon. How tacky can you get? Doesn't he know that this year the in-crowd is drinking nothing but Dom Perignon? I thought we were trying to be Hollywood North, not amateur night in Moose Jaw."

I wanted to pursue this topic with Manfred Peltz, but our conversation was drowned out by the uproar of an altercation that was developing at the far end of the room. The physicians and surgeons were shoving and pummeling each other as they struggled to get in line to buy the \$10,000 tax-sheltered shares that were being offered for the financing of *Zipperville*. The first 15 buyers would have the privilege of personally shaking hands with the glamorous Fiona Upjohn, who would be starring, along with Ronald Motherland. Thus urologists were slugging it out with neurosurgeons, rheumatologists with anaesthetists. Charlton P. Goniff watched the fray contentedly.

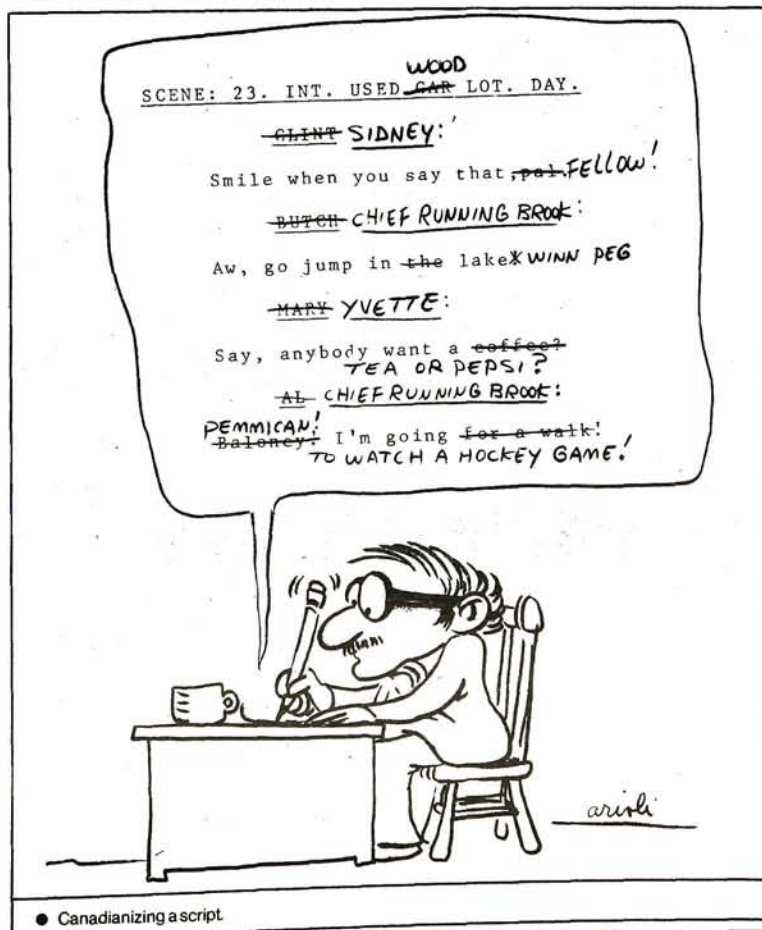
"The industry has learned a great deal from the mistakes of 1980," he said, "Nineteen eighty-one will be the year of the big shakeout. We'll see the amateurs and the fly-by-nights fall by the wayside. There will be fewer players left in the game - producers like myself, true professionals."

"What would you say was the principal lesson you learned in 1980?" I asked.

"We learned that writers are everything," said Goniff. "Don't skimp on them. For *Zipperville* I've brought up a couple of real geniuses from New York. It's costing me a mint."

"But I thought it was a Canadian screenplay?"

"Who's talking about the screenplay?" said Goniff. "I was referring to the guys who wrote *this* for me." And, with a manicured finger, he tapped the beautiful, four-color prospectus that had so inflamed this roomful of investors and had given them such high hopes for the future of the Canadian motion picture. ●



● Canadianizing a script