

REVIEWS

Clay Borris' **Alligator Shoes**

Alligator Shoes is the first 'personal' film to appear in English Canada for many years; personal, in that it stems from the director's particular vision of life. It reflects his identity and his values, which are strongly working-class. It is rooted in a specific area, a real community — an Acadian family living in Toronto's Cabbagetown district. Certainly this is a surprising departure from those fat-budget films, with their imported stars, that are slavishly aimed at the U.S. market.

The opening title sequence clearly defines the film's boundaries. A high camera angle follows the hero and his brother from the famous Winchester tavern, into a brawl in a nearby billiard hall, then south on Parliament to Gerrard where they turn east. This is the neighbourhood where Clay Borris was raised and where all his films take place. It is his territory.

The other values in the film derive from the family unit, which is seen as a bastion, enabling individuals to survive who would otherwise have no chance in society because of their lack of skills and social upbringing. This leads to the hero's philosophy that it is necessary to lie, cheat and steal in society-at-large, but that such behaviour must never extend to the family. Family relationships are sacred, although they are raucous and down-to-earth, as when Rose, the mother, bursts into a torrent of swearing in Acadian and the family retaliates by pinching her behind.

After a swift introduction to the family's lifestyle of continuous partying and fast-talking deals in the taverns, the film brings in a new character who threatens the stability of the family. She is a young aunt, attractive yet dangerous because she has a history of mental illness. The brothers are divided about her staying because she always causes trouble. At the same time there is a responsibility to protect her because she is a relative. After a rousing night of dancing and drinking she tries to start a physical relationship with Bin, the one who has most supported her. At first he encourages her, but then draws back, realizing that he has gone too far. She interprets his inability to respond as rejection, and it provokes a fit of depression which leads to her suicide on a desolate beach during a weekend in the country.

It is typical of the film's optimism that her lonely death is not the end; instead, it results in a greater understanding between the brothers, as expressed in a fight. There is a feeling of increased solidarity within the family. Life must go on. If they have lost one member they will stick together even more. The film ends on a positive note as the alligator



The family comes first for brothers Gary and Clay Borris of *Alligator Shoes*.

shoes of the title are thrown into the murky waters of the lake, demonstrating that human values are more important than material ones.

The look of the film is refreshing, in that it does not follow the Hollywood model, nor does it look like a CBC drama (equally glossy and vacuous). Shots are held longer than would be permitted in a large-budget film, unusual juxtapositions of angle occur, sometimes breaking the flow of a scene but giving the film a more realistic documentary feeling. The locations are not overly decorated, many of the walls are bare and the lighting harsh and full of contrast. The compositions are undoubtedly more real than those in more expensive productions where all kinds of art objects clutter the frame and the lighting is soft and filtered.

In short, the film breaks all the rules, but this is part of its appeal. Like the early French films of the sixties it goes against the current trend of filmmaking, and therefore makes a political statement. Clay Borris has described himself as "a French filmmaker working in English."

The film contains many morally ambiguous scenes closer to European cinema than to Hollywood — as when Bin finds it necessary to punch a cripple (one who is lower down the social scale than himself) in order to maintain his dignity. The opening scene in the shoe store is structured very much like an early Truffaut film where the camera lingers on the point of view of the characters before revealing their faces. Many of the scenes have an ethnic

quality that would be carefully excised from most Canadian films to cater to the American market. Such scenes as where the brothers drive up to the camera, get out of the car, and take a long leak, would be offensive to American taste. (Sex and violence are permitted, but not lowbrow humour.) *Alligator Shoes* has a raw energy we have not seen in Canada since the early films of David Cronenberg.

The decision to cast non-professional actors in two of the three leading roles was an unorthodox one. It comes out of the director's long experience of making documentary films about his family. It was also a budgetary one. There was simply no money to employ well-known actors. The film gains and loses by this decision. It becomes increasingly personal when the camera turns on the director and members of his family. The film almost ceases to be drama and becomes real life in the dancing sequences, the beer drinking contest, and the comedy sequence of jumping an expensive car across a mud patch in the country.

Whenever there is a comedy or action involved, the brothers perform with more style than any professional could hope to do. The opposite is true where there are long speeches and moments of emotion (Bin's reaction to the suicide). Then they are prone to overreacting and reveal an inadequacy of range. Fortunately many of these scenes are carried by Ronald Jones as the aunt. She is the film's real discovery. An actress with deep inner resources and control, she is able to convey hysteria

through comedy and facial expressions. The audience is never sure how she is about to react at any given moment in a scene. Her presence gives the film its highest moments of tenderness and despair.

Is this film the light at the end of the tunnel for independent filmmakers in Canada? It could be. Two major cultural changes have already occurred in the course of this year. The first was when *Les bons débarras* swept the Genie Awards, outclassing *Tribute* and all other made-in-Canada Hollywood product. The second was when *Alligator Shoes*, on a budget of \$250,000, was one of only two Canadian films (the other being *Les Plouffe*) officially screening at Cannes. This is a heroic film, made out of love and dedication, against all the odds. The primitive style is refreshing and appropriate to the budget.

If there is to be any kind of revival in the quality of Canadian films it can only come from the low-budget field where the director has the freedom to express personal ideas. Instead of continuing to invest in the same, dull, middle-of-the-road projects that end up being commercial failures, the CFDC should change the emphasis of its policy and encourage new directors.

One name is conspicuously absent from the credits at the end of *Alligator Shoes*: the CFDC. The film was rejected by the Toronto office as being hopelessly flawed and having no commercial appeal. And yet, it has probably won more respect for grassroots Canadian cinema than any other film distributed this year in English.

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One would like to see many more Canadian films in this vein; not necessarily autobiographical films using non-professional actors – there are many fine actors still working in Canada – but ones which would, above all, show the variety of Canadian life and reflect the personality of the filmmaker. During the seventies a whole school of filmmakers showed this kind of promise. But so far, they have no chance to go beyond a few tentative television productions, such as Bruce Pitman's *Hailey's Gift*, Martin Lavut's *War Brides*, Peter Rowe's *Horse Latitudes* and Rex Bromfield's *Love at First Sight*. These are the kind of 'personal' filmmakers the CFDC should be encouraging – instead of forcing them to starve, or work on schlock, look-alike, American films.

Alan Collins ●

ALLIGATOR SHOES

d./sc. Clay Borris p. Clay Borris, John F. Phillips exec. p. Don Haig, Barry Shapiro assoc. p. Paul Caulfield d.o.p. John F. Phillips ed. Gordon McLellan sd. Brian Richmond mus. Murray McLaughlan electronic score Eugene Martynec lighting Robert Holmes p. man. Nick J. Gray a.d. Dennis Chapman asst. cam. John Gundy 3rd a.d. Colin Brunton best boy Dave Roberts boom Carol McBride cont. Barbara Ratz stills Anita Olanick key grip Mike Ray pub. Jack Cunningham l.p. Garry Borris, Ronald Jones, Clay Borris, Rose Mallis-Borris, Len Perry, Simone Champagne, Gary Furlong, Guy Lefebvre, Rick Pappa, Rene Pappa, Philip Williams, Dave Roberts, Tony Hill, Gerry Whitmore, Doris Chiasson, Karen Williams, Sheila Morgan Wood, Gary Boisvert, Ginny Borris and P.J. Aziz as the Stunt Driver p.c. Alligator Shoes 460231 Ontario Ltd. (1980) col. 16mm/35mm (English with French subtitles) running time 98 min. dist. New Cinema

William Fruet's *Cries in the Night*

Cries in the Night is your basic horror-house thriller. A young city girl (promising 15-year-old Lesleh Donaldson) spends a summer holiday in the country with her granny (Kay Hawtrey). Grandpa mysteriously skipped out many years ago. But lo, there are mysterious voices arguing in the basement... Not to mention a retarded handyman, the obligatory black cat aspy and ascreech, a ghoulish setting, and a plot climax that rises like the mythical phoenix from the ashes of Norman Bates.

But a tasteful pallor hangs over the proceedings. The film does not deliver the extremity or the volume of fright that the C-movie ads promise. Did director William Fruet rein up on the gore in deference to the CFDC funding? Or might it be that Fruet does not really wear his heart in the lowlands where his recent art has been slumming?

At first sight the career of William Fruet seems to have plunged from his award-winning *Wedding in White* (1972) to the box-office lurids of bile in black. But in most of his commercial films, there is a hint of sensitivity and intelligence all but buried in his brutishness. In his most scandalous commercial work, *Death Weekend*, one sensed that the violation of the vacuous Brenda Vaccaro was not meant to be as upsetting as the jobs' violence upon dentist (oops, Oral Surgeon) Chuck Shamata's material goods. But box office being what it is, the threat of rape eventually took over the film.

In his fine 1978 thriller, *Search and Destroy*, Fruet produced a kind of low-budget and straight version of 1941. He

brought the Vietnam war to the complacent American homeland. In addition, there was real wit in transplanting the Viet Conga lines to the plastic romance and glitz of Niagara Falls, das honeymoon kapital of the whirled. Indeed, apart from her glamorous make-up, Tisa Farrow's quivering simp recalled Carol Kane's pathetic wimp from *Wedding in White*.

And so to *Cries in the Night*, a \$1,400,000 romp filmed in 1979 but withheld pending arrangements for U.S. distribution. Amid its grisly flab there is a quiet, sensitive film crying to get out.

The smothered story shows a young girl awakening into the promise of womanhood, but overwhelmed by a horrifying parade of dead love. The supporting cast of grotesques dispels her romantic expectations of maturity. Harvey Atkin plays a repulsive traveling salesman secreted away with an equally obnoxious sweet patootie. Then there's Barry Morse, still chasing a fugitive after all these years. This time he's tracking down his wife, who ran off with the heroine's grandpa.

Most importantly, there's Granny Chalmers herself. Her attempt to convert the family funeral home into a cozy tourist inn is as romantic and futile a gesture as her attempt to keep alive her departed hubby's romantic character. Inevitably, the funeral aspect rises out of the cellar to overwhelm the romantic notions of the tourist home. Another nightmare sweeps through the Niagara Falls of the mind.

But for all the potential of wife Ida Nelson's screenplay, Fruet's film does not free that aspect. The psychological center is abandoned in favor of the horror-house hoaries.

Too bad. Through all these films Fruet shows a sensitivity towards the collision between innocence – whether delicate or deluded – and the harshness of the social reality. But for the master's voice

to be heard, it will have to shake free from the formulae and rhetoric of American gothic.

But then, *Cries in the Night* went to Cannes in 1980 and was sold to Norway, Spain, Argentina, the West Indies, etc. Maybe Fruet doesn't want to quarrel with such success.

Maurice Yacowar ●

CRIES IN THE NIGHT p. William Fruet exec. p. Barry Allen assoc. p. Patrick Doyle d. Director: William Fruet a.d. Roy Sager sc. Ida Nelson cont. Marie Therese Boily d.o.p. Mark Irwin, CSC cam. op. Robin Miller stills Rick Porter grip Maris Janson gaf. Jock Brandis ed. Ralph Brunjes, CFE sd. ed. Wayne Griffin sd. op. Ian Hendry sd. mix Joseph Grimaldi art d. Roy Forge Smith, Susan Longmire ward. Mary Jane McCarty make-up Shonagh Jabour sp. efx. Dennis Pike props Michael Fruet animal handler Karl Mitchell mus. Jerry Fielding p.a. Geoff Martin p. man. Patrick Doyle l.p. Lesleh Ann Donaldson, Kay Hawtrey, Barry Morse, Stephen Miller, Dean Garbett, Alfred Humphreys, Harvey Atkin, Peggy Mahon, Jack Van Evera, Les Rubie, Bob Warner, Linda Dalby. p.c. Production Co.: Northampton Productions Ltd. (1980) col. 35 mm running time 103 min. dist. Frontier Amusements.

Alfred Sole's *Tanya's Island*

A natural suspicion is aroused – things being what they are in our film industry – when a co-production company has a name like Rainier Energy Resources Inc. That suspicion deepens when the film in question has sat around for over a year, in spite of the ballyhoo and cheesecake that attended its creation. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the brief appearance of *Tanya's Island* on Toronto's screens elicited hoots and catcalls from the critical fraternity.

Still, those who have called this pic-

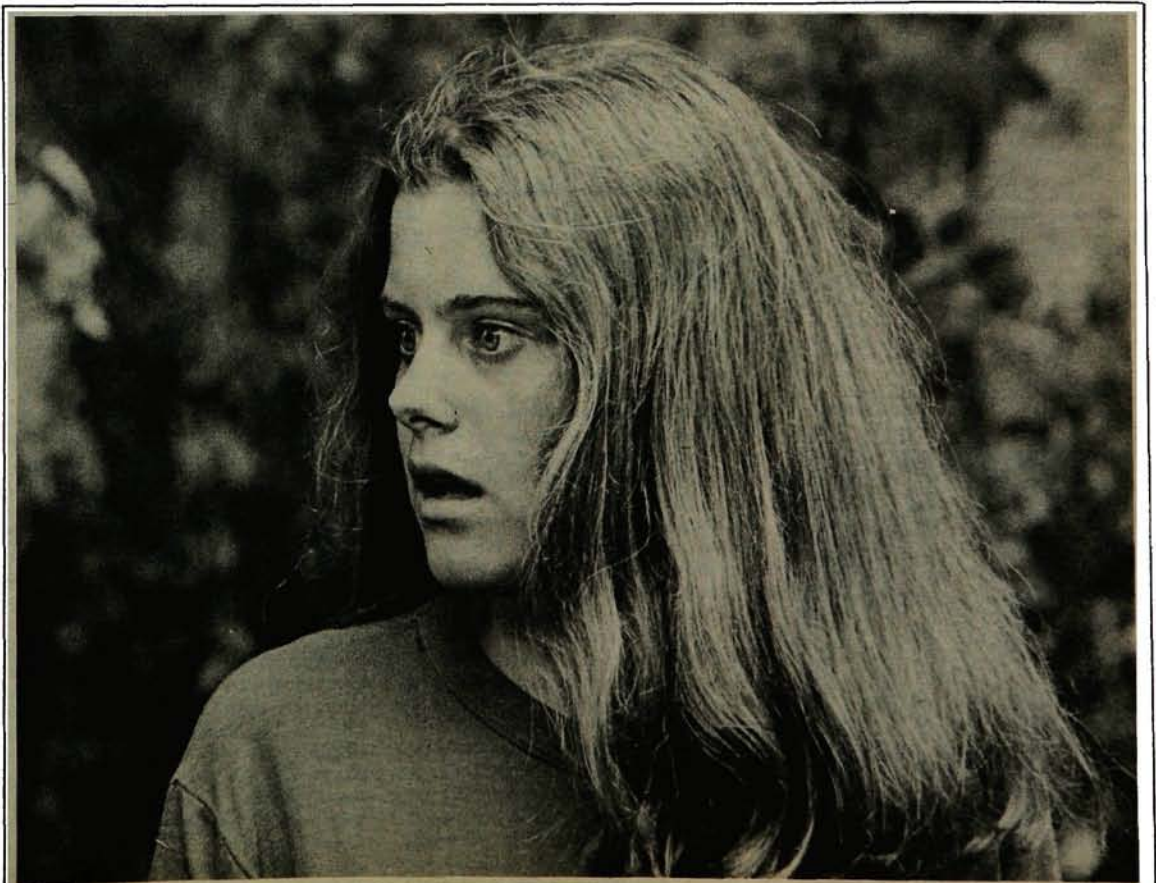
ture the year's worst are perhaps overreacting. After all, 1981 has already seen the likes of *My Bloody Valentine*, *Kelly*, *Dirty Tricks* and *Happy Birthday to Me*. Pierre Brousseau's production has a lot of competition in the turkey sweepstakes.

Such as it is, the plot involves the erotic fantasy of a Toronto model (D.D. Winters) who imagines herself and her boyfriend – a surly artist appropriately named Lobo (Richard Sargent) – on an island. But they are not, as they believe, alone. The other occupant is an ape-like creature whom Tanya suddenly discovers. After an initial shock, she befriends him and names him Blue. The essential conflict is thus set, as the two males battle each other for the female's body.

Pierre Brousseau's idea is just bizarre enough to sustain a passing interest, but the screenplay is totally lacking in anything approaching craft. Clearly, he has seen his fair share of Roger Vadim, and has absorbed from him a view of women of which could only be called retrograde. If the theme is, ostensibly, that all men are essentially beasts in sexual matters, he also maintains that all women are passive and willing to be bound, for Tanya offers only perfunctory resistance.

As Lobo, in his contest for physical mastery with Blue, degenerates intellectually (if such is possible), he blackens his face 'guerilla'-style (feeble pun obviously intended) in a racist slur that becomes all the more objectionable as it progresses. Director Alfred Sole may have an intention to make a witty remark with an allusion to *Apocalypse Now*, as he does with an earlier reference to *Mighty Joe Young*, but heavy-handed, utterly unbelievable dialogue ruins whatever effect he has in mind.

With respect to D.D. Winters, no useful comment on her acting can be made, since she is given the vocabulary of a



Never a dull moment for *Cries*' Lesleh Donaldson.