

Schlock but slick

by Minko Sotiron

On Dec. 4, RSL producer Robert Lantos called George Mihalka, offering him a chance to direct an as-yet-unwritten film - a sex comedy, to be made in French and based on "Pornobec," Quebec's own little political scandal. Some video technicians had been accused of using the equipment at the National Assembly to make porno films, and although the scandal soon petered out, it made good reading while it lasted. ("Quebec is the only place in the whole world where you can have this kind of scandal and have the population laugh it off as a great joke instead of bringing the government down," comments Mihalka.)

Having nothing better to do, he went down to talk about the movie, got a synopsis from Marc Carrière in three days, and a script from Robert Geofrion in four. The film was on.

Scandale was shot in 16 days this January, and RSL hopes to have it ready for release on April 23. In many ways, the film is a throwback to the early québécois films of Denis Héroux, Pierre David and Cinépix - films which featured acknowledged québécois talent, mixed sex with humour, and were made for a song.

"They've realized that you can always replace money with cleverness, that you can add production value to your film without having to spend great deals of money," says Mihalka, referring to his producers whose more recent films were big-budget ventures. "We learned those things in school, but most people in the Canadian film business never went to film school."

Mihalka, having made three features in as many years, and still working on Funny Movie, is having a good time. Whether he is making the films his professors would like to see him make, and whether his B-movie apprenticeship will eventually lead elsewhere, remain to be seen.

Before the recent Scandale project was even a glint in anyone's eye, Minko

Sotiron spoke to Mihalka about his filmmaking experience.

Film director George Mihalka doesn't apologize for making what can be frankly termed exploitation films. His first feature film, a teen surf'n'sun farce called *Pinball Summer*, he describes as "Walt Disney with tits and ass." Clearly aimed at the drive-in market, he admits the movie was silly; in fact, in "endearing bad taste." But he says the movie doesn't need defending: "It's meant to do nothing more than please your eyes like a 90-minute Coca-Cola commercial."

His second feature film, the horror flick *My Bloody Valentine* was clearly more ambitious. Released by Paramount one year ago *My Bloody Valentine* is about a mad killer miner who terrorizes a mining town by murdering its people in a number of novel ways. Although a fairly typical example of the blood 'n' gore genre - a *Newsweek* critic called it "schlock shock" - Paramount Pictures gave it a big push.

"Paramount must have thought we had done something right, because they made 1180 prints which is close to the most copies of a Canadian film they've ever printed," Mihalka notes, adding that Paramount backed it with a massive advertising campaign. This included full-page ads in *The New York Times* and extensive television coverage. Indeed it was so pervasive that when Mihalka was down in Los Angeles, he was startled to hear the film's commercial on a taxi radio.

"There it was on Mecca's airwaves, and for a brief moment, I thought, My God we've really made it!" And Mihalka and his collaborator, cinematographer Rodney Gibbons, could be forgiven for thinking they had indeed made it. Unfortunately for them however, although *Valentine* opened strongly in the U.S. and Canada, it didn't appear to develop "legs" at the box office.

Part of the reason for its lack of box office staying power, according to Mi-

Minko Sotiron is a free-lance writer and information officer at Concordia University in Montreal.



● George Mihalka Photo: Piroska Mihalka

halka, lay in the advertising campaign. It emphasized the bloody nature of the film, yet the producers were forced by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) to cut out the most sensational gory parts in order to maintain an "R" rating. This resulted in the anomalous situation of many potential filmgoers being turned off by the threat of excessive blood, while the violence aficionados were left disappointed because the expected gory mayhem wasn't delivered.

It didn't help, Mihalka notes, that the cuts also weakened the story line. Moreover, strict deadlines exercised by the producers, who in turn were pressured by the distributors, also stifled the film's creative potential. He gave an example of how tight this control was:

"In one scene - basically consisting of an action shot which took place in the miners' shower room - the showers are all on, and the killer has already murdered the girlfriend of a miner who has temporarily left to get some beer. When the miner returns and he sees the girl, we cut away from the corpse to shoot him dropping the beer. We stay on the sixpack as it hits his feet. He doesn't react. We keep the camera at his feet long enough to show the water that's swirling at his feet slowly turn red with blood.

"That shot wasn't on the shooting schedule. Once the producers saw the rushes, I was questioned about spending time shooting a six-pack. Yet when we were forced to do the cuts it was the only shot left.

"Although we made the film the distributors asked us to, they, however, completely misread the MPAA, which was stricter than they had expected. To satisfy its standards and avoid an 'X' rating, we were forced to make over 30 picture cuts in a week. Anyone who has ever made a film knows what that means. The result was a completely different picture."

Yet, Mihalka doesn't want to appear full of sour grapes. No regrets, he says. "We all knew what we were getting into. We agreed to make a formula film in

● MAKING IT

impossible conditions and under an impossible schedule."

'Impossible' meant having only six months to complete the film, from story idea through scriptwriting, shooting, editing to finished product. "And this included having to direct 60 people in a mine 800 feet underground." Moreover, he wasn't helped much by the fact that the abandoned Cape Breton mine they had chosen as their location had been prettied up by the townspeople in a misguided attempt to help to filmmakers.

"They had cleaned the mine and painted it with bright red and white colours. We had to go back and make the mine grungy so it looked like a real mine," he recalls.

My Bloody Valentine turned out to be a polished, professional-looking movie, which even *Montreal Gazette* critic Bruce Bailey admitted when he wrote: "...at last Mihalka has shown us that he can make a movie."

Mihalka doesn't want to make another horror movie, even though he would have no trouble finding another such project. "I don't want to be cast as a horror movie director," he says, adding that something in the future he wouldn't mind making another horror movie, but only on his terms.

In spite of some of his negative experiences working on the two feature films, he admits he is grateful for being able to work on them so shortly after leaving film school. In 1979, he was only a couple of years out of Concordia University's film production program when Jack Murphy of Criterion Films offered Mihalka the chance to direct the \$750,000 *Pinball Summer*. Apparently, Murphy decided to pick Mihalka and Gibbons on the strength of their prize-winning short film *Pizza to Go*, a spoof of genre films.

The plot of *Pinball* - two high school buddies pursue two sisters in competition with a motorcycle gang - was lightweight, generally a vehicle to get as many sight gags as possible. (The film was re-released last summer under the title *Pick-up Summer*.) The essential thing for Mihalka was that he gained valuable experience in learning how to work on a tight schedule and within a strict budget.

"There's no way you can learn in a university all the things you'll need to know for a large-budget film. Also, you have to experience an attitude change. I don't think there's anyone who can walk out of university and carry on where he left off. For instance, if you're making a film as a student there's no way you can rent a crane for a certain camera angle. They cost at least \$500 a day. You might figure out a way to tie a camera to a rope and hoist it up but you can't do that on a feature film. You have to do things quickly and get them right because every mistake is very, very costly."

For Mihalka, the jump to the \$2 million *Valentine* was even greater than the one from school to *Pinball*. The scale and the stakes were much higher he explains: "Before, Rodney and I were like Triple A league baseball players. Now we had been called up and were in the big leagues. And we knew we had to produce because this would probably be the only chance we'd get."

Luckily for him the experienced hands of Cinépix producers John Dunning and André Link steadied him, for as he admitted, "I literally had to learn on the job. We were forced to make those films because they represented the only chance I had to make a film. Rodney and I weren't interested in being starving

artists. You have a choice: either you make films for the National Film Board which no one sees, or you make films for someone else. And in Canada, Link and Dunning are the only ones willing to give people a chance to make films."

Mihalka also points out that if Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas could make exploitation films (for Roger Corman's American International Pictures), then so could he. "We don't have rich backers like Jean-Luc Godard did. Make no mistake about it, he's a prostitute like the rest of us."

"As long as you're going to get used, you might as well know who's doing it, and get paid for it." If this sounds like prostitution, Mihalka doesn't deny it.

"I'm going to learn the craft by making films for other people. After a while, Rodney and I will be able to make films we can really be proud of - commercially viable films that are entertaining yet have a serious message."

Making visually-exciting, slick films is the goal Mihalka is aiming at. "We probably make the most American-looking films in Canada," he says, explaining that it's important that Canadian films look good since they're going to be measured by American technical standards.

"Canadians are bombarded by American films which are the world's slickest. That's the look they're used to seeing. Until a few years ago, most Canadian films were visually incompetent. And whenever a Canadian filmmaker did become professionally competent, more likely than not, he'd be on a plane to Hollywood. Rodney and I are the only ones to have achieved a degree of visual excellence without leaving the country. Our aim is to make our films as slick as American ones. There's nothing wrong with making films that are easy on the eyes and professional-looking."

Paradoxically, though, Mihalka is quite the Canadian nationalist, pointing to the fact that his movies have had 100% Cana-



● Laying it on thick, Sylvie Boucher and Gilbert Comtois in *Scandale*

dian content from cast to crew - although both films had to pretend to have American locales. They were also completely shot in Canada. And he didn't use "used" ex-Canadian actors. "Our biggest name was Don Francks in *Valentine*; for the rest of the casts, I used unknown actors," he says.

He wishes that the narrow, provincial Canadian attitude towards film would change. "It's alright to make documentaries in Canada," he says, "but otherwise, entertainment is a dirty word here. Canadians just don't respect it, nor do our institutions. Why aren't the CBC and CTV showing more Canadian films?

Nothing succeeds like excess

Hollywood loves nothing more than success. If *Star Wars* makes it big, then churn out imitations in the hope of tapping into the box-office gusher. This was the impetus behind the making of *My Bloody Valentine*.

Stephen Miller, an ex-owner of a repertory cinema in Montreal and the producer of *Hog Wild*, conceived the idea of a horror film about a small mining town on St. Valentine's Day. He approached Cinépix producers John Dunning and André Link who in turn approached Paramount Pictures with the idea.

Since Paramount had a smash financial hit with its film *Friday the 13th*, it thought it had a second

chance to duplicate the millions it had earned. The distributor was also mindful of the success of *Halloween* - another horror film which used a significant day as a theme - and thought a film on St. Valentine's Day was extremely exploitable.

Says Mihalka, Paramount wanted the film to be so gory that "it would make *Friday the 13th* look like a Sunday School picnic," and they were insistent that the bloodshed consist of "creative kills." The deal was consummated in July, 1980, and Paramount stipulated that the film be ready for release on St. Valentine's Day, February 14, 1981.

"Take the film *Metamorphosis* which won a prize at Cannes. It was a student film and had it been American, Barry Greenwald would have been given a break. Yet here why hasn't anyone seen it, and why hasn't it been on TV?"

Mihalka recalls what he learned at the 1981 Wim Wenders film workshop he attended in Montreal. "I was sick with envy at how the German government supports their filmmakers. I wish I could go to a TV network with an idea and then be guaranteed 50% of a budget and guaranteed screening on TV in three years as they do in Germany. No wonder their film industry developed so quickly."

"I could easily find hours and hours of good film work in the last five years

a new film project, very different from *My Bloody Valentine*. He's developing a script for a Canadian comedy tentatively titled *Funny Movie Eh?* It's being written by Tony Hendra, Sean Kelly and Ted Mann of *National Lampoon* fame. Backed by Jack Murphy of Criterion Film and Andrew Alexander of Second City, the film is to have a budget of \$2 million. According to Mihalka, *Funny Movie, Eh?* is going to be a spoof on genre films based on his earlier *Pizza to Go*.

Mihalka came to his interest in film gradually. His family emigrated to Canada from Hungary in 1956 and he followed them in 1961. After high school in Montreal, he enrolled at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University), earning a degree in English literature in 1973. While teaching at his high school during the day, he was studying for a Master's degree in educational technology at night at Sir George.

Increasingly, he became interested in film work and eventually enrolled in the university's film production program, graduating in 1977. While at university Mihalka and partner Gibbons made many short films, several of which won awards at various international festivals. Their *November 3*, a 30-minute dramatic film, won the "Mention de Qualité" at the Tours International Film Festival and their documentary *Thin Film Technology* won awards in science film festivals in Hong Kong and Toulouse. In Canada, their short experimental film *Claustro* won the Kodak film award.

Upon graduation, Mihalka and Gibbons formed the Sloth Film Corporation. They continued to produce films, while working as free-lancers in the Montreal film industry in positions ranging from production assistant to cameraman. During this period, they made several commercials, industrial films and documentaries, most notably *The Agony of Jimmy Quinlan* for the National Film Board.

Now making it as a director, does Mihalka have any advice for young filmmakers?

"The best way to get started in this business is to learn to make good coffee. I started in features serving coffee on a certain producer's film and year-and-a-half later I was his director.

"After that, learn to sweep floors. Use your own initiative - you have to make your own breaks."

At the moment, Mihalka is engaged in