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 "Pombebe," 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 Carriere in three days, and a script from Robert Geoffrion 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 québecois films of Denis Héroux, Pierre David and Céline - films which featured acknowledged québecois 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 filmmaking experience." says 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, Mihalka, 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 filmmakers 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 cut away from the corpse to shoot him dropping the beer. We stay on the miner dropping the beer. We stay on the miner dropping the beer. 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..."
imposed conditions and under an impossible schedule. " I'm not meaning to say only six months to complete the film, from story idea through treatment, shooting, editing to finished product. And this includes 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 film.

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

My Bloody Valentine turned out to be a polished, professional-looking movie, even though Montreal native Bruce Bailey admitted when he wrote: "Not last Mihalka has shown us he can make a movie.

Mihalka doesn't want to make another movie, even though he would have no trouble finding another such project 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 if it was a part of a series.

In spite of some of his negative experiences working on the two feature films, he admits he is grateful for being able to graduate from 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 offer Mihalka on the strength of his prize-winning short film Pizza to Go, a spoof of genre films. The plot of Pinball - two high school buddies who, in an attempt to win a competition with a motorcycle gang - is 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 universities all the things you need to know for a large-budget film. Also, you have to experience an attitude change. I don't think anyone can walk out of university and carry on where he left off. For example, if you're making a film as a student there's no way you can rent a camera for a certain amount of time. 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 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 scope were much higher he explained: "Before the film, more 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 Cinema producers John Dunning and Andre Link had already been hired as his assistants. "I literally had to learn on the job. We were forced to make those films because if we represented the only chance I had to make a film and I wasn't interested in being starved artists. You have a choice: either you make films for the National Film Board or you do commercials for someone else. And if you make films for someone else, you're only the ones willing to give people a chance to make films." Mihalka also pointed out that if Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas could make exploitation films for Roger Corman's American International Pictures, then so could be. "We don't have rich backers like Jean-Luc Godard did. We can't make the film because we're not making a profit."

"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-interesting, 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 so good they're going to be measured by American technical standards.

"Canadians are bombarded by American films which are the world's slicest. That's how the world is used to seeing things. Until a few years ago, most Canadian films were very, very unprofessional. 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 look 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% Canadian content from cast to crew - although both films had to pretend to have American locales. They were also completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach. William F. Nolan and his crew were completely Canadian in their approach.