

A 20th Century Chocolate Cake is not a conventional Canadian feature film. It is a bizarre comedy about the absurdities of the 20th century where dreams don't come true. It revitalizes contemporary clichés and creates a recipe for the future. I produced, directed and edited the film. Gregory Van Riel wrote the screenplay, acted the lead role and co-produced the picture.

The docu-drama includes interviews with Montreal gossip columnist Thomas Schnurmacher; feats of strength by The Great Antonio, a 510-pound mass of raging man; a secretary who Xeroxes herself; a giant rabbit that dodges cars; an authentic male belly dancer; and anti-romance.

Essentially Greg and I put the film together with very little money. We recruited friends and friends of friends to shoot the entire film, which was shot on weekends and during summer months.

I met Greg at John Abbott College where I teach film and English and Greg was trying to be a student; in the '70s neither of those occupations was easy. Greg wasn't the typical John Abbott student. He was more aggressive, independent and less controllable. I found these traits attractive and took up the challenge of trying to work with him. We made a first "dramatic" film entitled *Recipe to Cook a Clown*, a rather loose scenario featuring Greg and Charles Fisch, Jr., another former student of mine. The film consisted of a series of vignettes - Greg meeting bizarre people in the city, a favorite theme of mine.

Somehow, we forgot the pain of making our first drama and decided to create another. Greg came up with a story about this schized-out 20th-century youth who goes around the city with a tape recorder interviewing people on the street. I loved the idea of interviewing people candidly. The most spontaneous material came from children: there's a revealing sequence where a four-year-old boy tells us his father is in jail - suddenly his sister clobbers him with her fist, and he quickly changes his story saying *Daddy is in the South*; obviously, just what he was told to say.

By now we were hooked. We had edited about 20 minutes of really interesting documentary footage, but there still wasn't a coherent story.

Greg would write all day and drive taxi at night, while I'd teach school during the day, then edit at night. At about 12 midnight we'd meet at a bar downtown to discuss the scenes and

Montreal filmmaker Lois Siegel is currently scripting, with Gregory Van Riel, the sequel to A 20th Century Chocolate Cake, A 21st Century Lobotomy. She is also shooting a half-hour documentary on Albinos.



The baking of a chocolate cake

by Lois Siegel

plan the next weekend's shoot. We enlisted Charles Fisch, Jr. from *Recipe* to play an alter-ego to Greg, as well as the very charismatic Jeannine Laskar, who had never acted in films before, to play a mysterious lady.

One night I received a strange call in

broken English with an Italian accent: "Gregory, he in jail." I freaked out - we were to shoot the next day, and Greg was in the scene. "Where?" I shouted in panic. "Gregory, he said you would know." And the lady hung up. I spent the next four hours on the phone calling

every jail in the city trying to find Greg. Finally I reached him. "Greg, what happened?" "Oh, they picked me up for an expired taxi license. I'll be out by tomorrow - I'm having a great time. There's all these weird people in here. I'm interviewing them, doing research..."

Despite tremendous efforts to finish the film, *A 20th Century Chocolate Cake*, started in 1978, was still being shot in 1980. One of the most elaborate scenes involved PJ's Cabaret, one of the more liberal-minded bars in the city - a place where both gays and straights mingle without hostility. M.C. Armand Monroe was fantastic in helping us achieve an authentic look. The week before we shot, he announced to the regular clientele that we were in pursuit of extras for the film. People from all over the city showed up at 8 a.m. Sunday morning to be in the scene: rockers, a leather man, punks, the Queen of England - it looked like Halloween. One girl was even let out of Douglas Hospital for the day to be in the film, and stripper Fonda Peters showed up practically naked. (She subsequently became Linda Lee Tracy of *Not A Love Story* fame).

Our new cameraman that day, Peter Benison, who actually was a real cameraman, shooting normal features and commercials, flew in from Toronto at the last minute for the PJ's shoot. Peter had been in Toronto shooting *Death Ship* the day before and had missed his plane back to Montreal. The only flight available was to Ottawa where he prearranged to rent a car when the plane arrived at 1 a.m. But when Peter landed in Ottawa, there was no car and the rental office was closed, shut tight for the night. Wisely, Peter had written down the name of the owner of the rental office and after waking up half of Ottawa asking for a Mr. Johnson, Peter finally found him (imagine calling anyone after 9 p.m. in Ottawa) and coaxed the man, with the threat of ruining a multi-million dollar picture, to get out of bed and come down to the airport and give him a car.

It was 5 a.m. when Peter arrived in Montreal... and he was on the set two hours later. We pried his eyes open, fed them some coffee and glued them to the camera eyepiece. Then Peter proceeded to shoot one of the most superb scenes in *Chocolate Cake*.

Charles did his belly dance, and I post-dated some cheques into oblivion so we could look at the rushes. Bellevue Pathe Laboratory was great. Everytime a cheque would bounce they'd merely call me, and I'd post-date a few more cheques. I was always about three months behind.

Then Greg came into an inheritance - a "Flower-Powered Geek Mobile." Scriptwriter Edith Rey (*Babe, The Armoured Man*) had been working on the film

Tomorrow Never Comes, directed by Peter Collinson. As a going away present Edith was given the car which was completely covered with painted daisies. Greg took one look at the car and flipped: "I gotta have that car for our movie!" Edith gave him the car. So now we had a car covered with daisies. People looked at us like we were crazy as we did highway shots and stunts: the Geek in the country, the Geek in the city, the Geek in the morning, the Geek at night, the Geek going the wrong way on the Trans-Canada Highway service road, dodging shocked little red Volkswagens...

I only spent money on film stock and processing and hustled everything else. I took care of equipment, crew and transportation. Greg took care of actors, accessories and locations. Every week Greg would approach another delicatessen on Ste. Catherine Street for catering so that we could feed our crew. We'd trade a credit in the film for food, props and beer. Our credit list is about five miles long, not unlike that in *Superman*. Greg would often secure a location by offering the manager of the place a part in the film.

By the end of the shoot we had used 10 cameramen, 10 sound men, 10 different cameras, and most of the film was shot on outdated 'short ends' - some only 40 feet long. Once I received some outdated film from a group of women who wanted to make a porno film, but who never got around to it...

We got to the point where we'd offer assistant cameramen the honor and opportunity of shooting part of our film if they would supply the film stock. I'd often find film cans pushed through the mail slot when I awoke in the morning.

Then we scripted an insane skit in a gas station with Stephen Lack and Peter Brawley of *Montreal Main* and *Rubber Gun* fame. Brawley played a vindictive mechanic who completely dismantles Stephen's handsome car. We interviewed Thomas Schnurmacher about why people love gossip, then we added The Great Antonio (one of Montreal's famous street people, renown for pulling four buses at a time on chains through downtown). Enlisting The Great Antonio's services was not an easy task. He didn't have a phone and could only be reached by leaving a message at the restaurant where he had breakfast. After weeks of calling, we arranged to meet him at his apartment in Montreal East to try to convince him to be in our film. He wasn't very impressed by us because there weren't any real 'super stars' in *Chocolate Cake*.

He pulled out hundreds of photos of himself posing with famous stars: snaps of him hovering over Alain Delon, Liza Minelli, Lee Majors, etc. He wouldn't appear in a film unless there was a big star featured. Finally I said, "O.K., listen. Tom Jones is in tonight. If I take a picture of you with Tom Jones, will you be in our film". Antonio said, "What do you want me to do?" We filmed him the next day.

Broke again, I applied for a couple more charge cards and put all my cash into the film. Then I figured out how to obtain two Master Cards. By this time I had started another film: a documentary entitled *Extreme Close-Up*, about multi-handicapped, young adults who have one handicap in common - blindness. Since I was putting money into two films, my funds were low. Eventually Master Card discovered my two accounts and blew their top. I spent one whole day answering hysterical phone calls



● Dance of the Veils: Linda Lee Tracy (aka Fonda Peters) in a scene from *Chocolate Cake*

because their system had gone wrong, and no one could cope with the idea of a customer having two cards under the same name. Finally a guy from the head office called me at school, and we had a great conversation. I explained to him how anything was possible within a large system - the larger the easier, and I taught him how to obtain two accounts. Then I told him about my films and said I would send him a cheque immediately, but by the end of the conversation everything had reversed, and he told me not to worry, everything was all right, I didn't have to send him any money...

The second summer was almost over, but we still had a few shots left to shoot with the Geek mobile. Unfortunately, the car brakes had given out - so Greg approached stuntman Marcel Fournier about fixing the car. Fortunately, Marcel just happened to be looking for such a crazy car. He was hired to perform the stunts for CTV's *National Driving Test* and needed a 'punk car.' We traded it for a brake job. Marcel fixed the brakes, we

shot the next day and delivered the car that night to Bienville, Québec. Then Greg and I were hired to play the parts of punk kids who get smashed up in the punk car in *National Driving Test*. It was the first time I saw myself killed on television.

Next, we got the idea of having a rough-tough motorcycle lady pick up Charles who was hitchhiking in one scene. But where do you find motorcycle 'Hells-Angels' type ladies?

Greg and I went down to the tough side of town - Pointe St. Charles - and discovered a bike shop on Wellington Street. Looking like the Bobbsey Twins on Sunday, we smiled at several mean-looking characters who were polishing their brass knuckles and omnivorous tatoos. We asked whether they knew any motorcycle ladies. Surprisingly, they kindly made a phone call and within a half-hour, up pulled the biggest purple Harley-Davidson we'd ever seen in our lives - driven by our motorcycle lady. Everything was set. The day of the shoot

she brought her boyfriend, "Tiny," along. He was about 6'5" and as wide as he was tall. His Harley Davidson made his girlfriend's bike look like a tricycle. He watched over the production to see that we didn't take advantage of his lady, and we tried to keep from looking scared.

Everyone we knew became an extra in *Chocolate Cake*. When a crew member wasn't shooting, he was enlisted as an actor. It was like musical chairs. Everyone constantly changed roles. During one scene the electrician became the assistant director, the soundman helped with the lighting, I set up the tripod, and everyone was constantly over-involved and therefore happy. Sometimes people would even cancel their paying jobs to work with us. If an extra ended up on the cutting-room floor, we'd try to use that person in another scene at a later date.

Filmmaking became a way of life. We were so involved that sometimes we lost sight of what was happening. For instance, Greg wrote a scene about the main character of *Chocolate Cake* who decided to be a dog trainer. The scene included an encounter with a ferocious, man-eating German Shepherd. That was before he found himself on location playing the part of that guy. When he saw the huge, growling beast tearing and tugging at the strong leather leash of the trainer, he definitely had second thoughts about acting at that moment.

But we always went ahead anyway. Logic and reason weren't in the script, and we certainly weren't going to write them in.

By now we were into year three, and all those little details that crop up when re-shooting a film had to be straightened out. Haircuts had to match, weight had to be lost or gained. The dry cleaners lost a pair of pants from Greg's wardrobe, and somehow we had to find a matching pair that belonged to a suit which was bought in Nairobi, Kenya. Montreal shopkeepers told us to forget it.

Then I read this lovely story in a newspaper about a secretary who Xeroxed her rear-end for a party invitation and was consequently fired. Of course, I had to recreate the scene for *Chocolate Cake*.

Filmpian International Inc., a company which makes features, agreed to let us use their Xerox machine on a Saturday morning. We never had so many requests to work on a scene.

Then we arranged to shoot a fight scene at a heavy bar near St. Lawrence Street. We got permission to shoot on a Sunday, and O'Keefe donated about 15 cases of beer for the cast and crew. But the barman decided to make some extra cash and started selling the free beer to all the extras. By the time we needed the extras for the fight scene, everyone was drunk. The bartender had been drinking for 12 hours when it came time for him to say his lines. His contribution to the film is most unusual.

Now, towards the end of year four, *Chocolate Cake* is finally scheduled to appear. It will have its world premiere at the Monkland Theatre, June 1, at 9 p.m. in Montreal. Thanks to finishing assistance from the National Film Board of Canada, the cake is finally out of the oven.

Stories about the baking of the *Cake* could go on forever. Obviously *A 20th Century Chocolate Cake* is not your average slick, commercial film, but it is just about everything else. It's a 20th-century adventure in which one learns to accept the world - absurd as it is.

● Fired for photocopying her rear-end, ex-secretary Lucie Tétrault recreates the event

