



ROBIN SPRY

Á. Ibrányi-Kiss

DIRECTOR, "ACTION/REACTION"

When asked about some of his favourite NFB films, Sydney Newman recently replied, "I was very pleased with this little half-hour film which I saw on the CBC the other day written by a staff member, Ian MacNeill, and directed by Robin Spry. (*Downhill*) A little fictional thing about a man who was aging and who has had a love affair with a young girl; he has a heart attack and comes to peace with the fact that he's in his forties and is married, with a young son. It's a very nice little short story and it was beautifully directed by Robin Spry. Incidentally, Robin Spry has just completed a marvellously revealing film about the whole events of October in Quebec in 1970. (*Action/Reaction*) He presents a kind of media witnessing and a kind of eye-view of the events that's really terrific! It's best summed up in its closing line, that one thing Canada learned out of all this is that it lost its innocence. And we did lose our innocence in 1970, with the streets of Montreal filled with soldiers and machine guns. . . . We just finished this film about two weeks ago and we're preparing a French version of it. That's going to be a very impressive film when it's seen. It's an extraordinarily good documentary! There are wonderful revelations of René Levesque and the Prime Minister in absolutely unguarded moments that are very, very revealing."

This rave review was prompted by what are actually two 45-minute films. *Action* documents the events of October 1970. Included in the film is footage of Pierre Elliot Trudeau in Bermuda shorts, marching alongside Chartrand and striking miners in Quebec in the 1930's, facing heavy machine-gun posts manned by police protecting the mines for the bosses. Later in the film, Trudeau as Prime Minister is shown defending the War Measures Act. . . . *Reaction*, on the other hand, takes a unique angle on the events by exploring the feelings of Montreal's English community during the Crisis. Viewed together, *Action/Reaction* is a strong statement on the Canadian political scene.

How had such a gentle, soft-spoken man as Robin Spry decided to make such a film? "I was in the middle of preparing a feature when I heard on the radio that there were soldiers in the city. I went down and looked and there were indeed soldiers in the city! I was so amazed by that, that I rushed out and just shot for a few days. I dropped the thing later and went back to try and get the feature together, and that didn't come off. Then I worked with Ian MacNeill, who wrote *Downhill*, on a big science-fiction-ecology feature which I really liked, and that didn't come off. . . . Then I was working on *Downhill* — which was an experiment in trying to work with somebody else's personal ideas. It was almost desperation, because I had two features turned down and I hadn't shot any film for four years outside of the five days of *Action/Reaction*. So I had to do something. *Action/Reaction* was done as a response to a situation My feeling was that there was an obligation to cover that."

Spry had intended to make only *Reaction* at first. He wanted to film how English Canadians in Montreal responded to the events. "In this situation, the English were the minority and they were suddenly under pressure. Their normal situation of being on top of the affairs was suddenly reversed. There-

fore, it was almost as if I were an anthropologist looking at my own species. I was looking for a way of drawing a picture of a minority community, as well as a picture that would find the rich and powerful supporting the government and the poor and underprivileged being against the government. That is basically what is in the film. On the average, my thesis proved to be correct."

What Spry had not expected, was that there were also people in Westmount who were extremely critical of Trudeau and poor people who were happy to have the soldiers there. He also discovered, "that the question of separatism was a function of, and directly related to, money. The language line becomes blurred when you draw the social line through it — they sort of overlap. And there is such a thing as an English-speaking separatist."

Reaction, shot from the announcement of the War Measures Act through Laporte's funeral, consists of several different groups of English-speaking Montrealers openly talking about how they feel about what's happening around them. As Spry

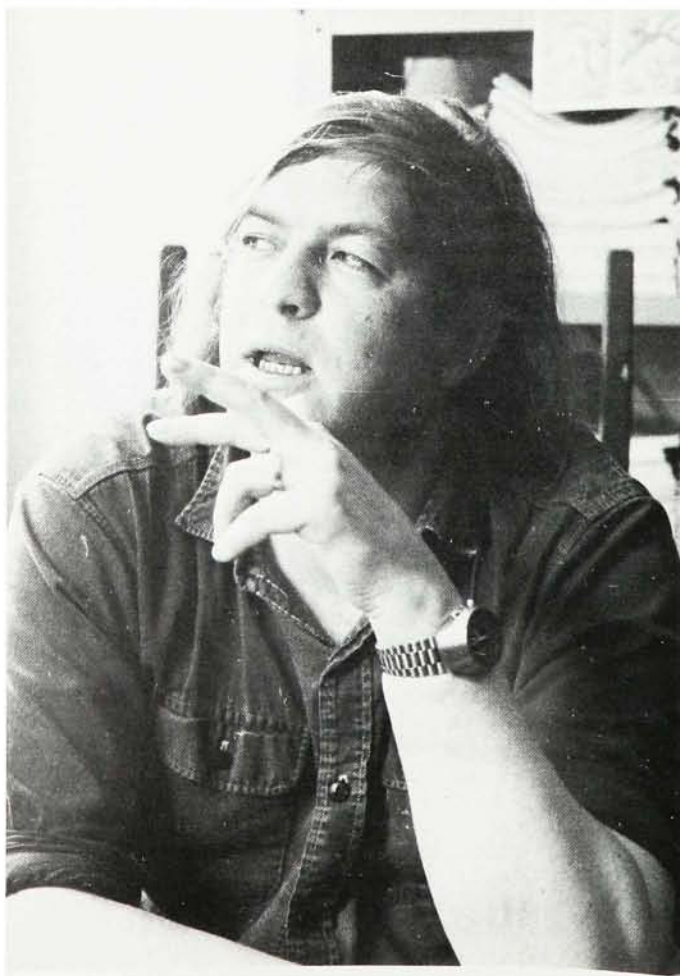


Photo: Balazar

says, some of the reason for the degree of honesty and openness was that, "We shot at the emotional peak of the whole thing. All the pent-up talk was suddenly released."

What of the difficulties facing a crew running around with film gear in a city under siege? "Well, even with the whole Film Board establishment behind you, it was pretty hard to go more than a couple of blocks without being stopped for questioning. If you would have been an independent French-speaking filmmaker trying to shoot in the East End of Montreal. . . I think it would have been *very hard*."

Which explains why *Action/Reaction*, amassed from footage shot by 2 French and 1 English crew, but produced by the English part of the NFB, is the first film to come out. Spry definitely feels that the French Production must make a "four-hour massive epic" on the October Crisis. "Eventually I made the film because nobody else wanted to make films with the material. *Action* was an accident because initially I didn't think I should make that film. I thought the French Unit should." The Board's French filmmakers had seen the footage, but most thought it was too long or they didn't see a film in the material. As a result, Spry had to make *Action* in order to explain what *Reaction* was all about.

The only questions now are, when is French Production coming out with a film about October, 1970, and when will Canadians get a chance to see *Action/Reaction*?

Robin Spry doesn't know the answers to either of those questions. He's busy trying to get another feature off the ground. The feature he was working on around the time of October 1970 had already been approved by the programming committee and was in rehearsals when Sydney Newman halted production on it. Why? It seems Newman didn't like Spry's first feature, *Prologue* (which included footage of the 1968 Chicago demonstrations, interviews with Abbie Hoffman, and basically dealt with the question of militant protest vs. communal retreat) and also didn't like the subject matter that Spry was dealing with.

"I was very interested in exploring sex as part of a relationship, in a non-exploitative way. Perhaps that's not possible, I don't know. But I felt that the only place you could make an honest film about that was at the Film Board. Outside the Board I could certainly be accused of doing it for personal gain, but there's no way that a film with a lot of sex in it made at the Film Board would ever benefit me financially. That to me is 99 per cent of the justification of the Film Board - that you make your films there and there's no financial connection between what you do in the film and yourself. I love that aspect of the Board. . . ."

Spry feels very privileged to be able to spend his life making films with relative freedom. He feels the most dangerous temptation at the NFB is deciding the trouble isn't worth it after being hassled for certain subjects. "This leads to a kind of self-censorship that in time becomes more acute than the

actual censorship at the institution. It has a long-range Chinese drip torture effect on you and that's very destructive."

"There are two ways you can function at the Board - you can keep attacking the frontier or work well within it. Some people are lucky enough to have interests that don't impinge on that frontier and they can follow their genuine interests without spending a lot of time recutting films and going to meeting after meeting trying to find out whether they can release their films. Of course, freedom has its cut-off point, and a lot of my energies go to hassling around the cut-off point."

The feature *Robin Spry* is now trying to get off the ground deals with a TV journalist whose personal, professional and financial lives are all building to the point where he either has to crack up and go under or step out of his present mode of existence. "It's about the problems of working at the Film Board, in a sense. It's about how far you can lend yourself to an institution without contributing to the negative aspects of that institution."

On the basis of percentages, Robin Spry figures he's got a chance that this feature will be accepted.

(From Eleanor Beattie's "A Handbook of Canadian Film")

Biography

Robin Spry was born in Toronto in 1939 but spent his childhood in England. While there, he was involved in the organizational side of theatre, continuing this involvement in Canada with the founding of classes on film acting technique given at the National Film Board. Spry began his film career at Oxford and the London School of Economics where he made a number of short, dramatic films. He first joined the Board in 1964 as a summer student, and in 1965 full-time, to work with John Spotton as an assistant editor. He was later assistant director on Don Owen's *High Steel* and *The Ernie Game*. His feature film, *Prologue*, was the first Canadian feature to be accepted at the main festival in Venice.

Filmography

- 1966 *Change in the Maritimes* (Métamorphoses dans les Maritimes). Prod: Joseph Koenig, NFB, 13 min. col.
- Miner* (Une Place au soleil). Prod: John Kemeny, NFB, 19 min. col.
- Level 4350* (4350 Pieds sous terre). Prod: John Kemeny, NFB, 10 min. col.
- 1967 *Illegal Abortion*. Prod: Guy Glover, NFB, 25 min. b&w.
- Ride for Your Life* (Mourir champion). Prod: John Kemeny, NFB 10 min. col.
- 1968 *Flowers on a One-Way Street*. Prod: Joseph Koenig, NFB, 57 min. b&w.
- 1969 *Prologue*. Prod: R. Spry and Tom Daly, NFB, 88 min. b&w.
- 1972 *Face* Prod: R. Spry and Tom Daly, NFB, 20 min. col. and b&w.
- Downhill* Prod: R. Spry and Tom Daly, NFB, 30 min. col.
- 1972 *Action/Reaction*



Robin Spry during the filming of "Prologue".