

BONJOUR MR. RICHARD HELLMAN

by Eugene Buia

I walk up and down St. Catherines Street looking for *Cine-Art Film Distributors*, where I was told I might find Richard Hellman, *l'enfant terrible* of film producers in Québec. The man who makes films to make money and who makes money to make films. I don't have an appointment, but I try it. *Cine-Art's* door opens. A guy talking on the phone shows me a chair. The fellow looks like an Italian singer bellowing into the phone: "Yeah, this morning; just came back from New York; Universal likes it; we were all set with the publisher; maybe we'll work here in Montreal with Woody (Allen) or Alan (Arkin). Hey, by the way, do you have a red convertible Cadillac? No? Okay, forget it. Bye, bye."

I try to present myself. "Bonjour, I'm looking for Mr. . . ." The telephone rings again. The guy who looks like an Italian tenor answers it. "Yes, Hellman speaking. Oh, you are? I'm so glad for *Kamouraska*, it is really a good movie. See you at Cannes."

He turns toward me — "Did you read *Schmucks*?"

"Shmakers...?" I try to pronounce it.

"No, *SCHMUCKS*! It's a funny novel. I'm making a film about it. It will be a funny film. The writer is Seymour Blicher. A real estate salesman, who published his first book in 1969 (*Blues Chased a Rabbit*) and now with *Schmucks*, Blicher became quite a success here in Québec. The story is a conflict between an immigrant cab driver and a real estate salesman. They pull into a narrow lane off Peel Street one night, and neither of them backs up to allow the other to pass. So they spend the night there. Funny, eh?"

"The film will be a Québec-Universal Studios co-production. We just got an agreement to publish the book in the States. You know Americans, they want to be the first to publish, but McClelland had published it first in Canada. It was difficult. The book sold in Montreal, so I tried it (he smiles). I like the book, and I can make a funny film from it. A truly funny film can't miss."

"If you must say 'film is art,' all right. But what is art without an audience? What happens when a film is made purely for a director's ego trip (and there's more than one like that in Canada)? What happens when a painting is made purely for the artist's pleasure (although a painting costs a bit less than a film)? Those films are losers. They lose spectators and money. I want to make money with my films. For this I am in this business."

"We made \$2,400,000 with *Tiens-Toi Bien Après les Oreilles à Papa*, in Québec alone. The film is funny and entertaining. We had a great actor for the film, Yvon Deschamps. Later, we made *Le P'tit Vient Vite* with him. We wanted to do it as a film for TV, but Radio-Canada, the contractor, was on strike, so we got the idea from Yvon to shoot the film on video tape. Afterwards, we transferred it to film."

"The quality of the film suffered, but the public liked it. I learned once more that if you have a poor image and a very good story, the film will make it. But if you have good photography and a poor story, the public will be unhappy, and if 'He' is unhappy, the producer loses."

I finally broke into a monotonous question — "How do you see the new cinema in Québec?"

"The Québécois are anxious to become a nation with their own identity. For this reason, their films have a purpose. Something that the rest of Canada is still trying to find."

"And Ontario . . .?"

"Ontario is an extension of the American film industry. The best Ontario filmmakers are now in the States. The best Québec filmmakers are in Québec. They never leave. They stay here, work, or stay out of work here."

"Ontario will become just a place for Americans to shoot their films. The only problem will be the Union. The Union isn't interested in films, they only want to make problems."

"Hey, say by the way are you writing something about this?"

"I don't know yet."

"At least you should buy the book. *Schmucks* is a very good book."

I leave him answering another call, and spend half a day looking for a copy of *Schmucks*. But I find it sold out, and regret that I don't have it for the train ride home.

Richard Hellman comes back to mind and I feel better. I realise that it probably won't be long before I watch the movie.



Denise Filiatrault and Yvon Deschamps

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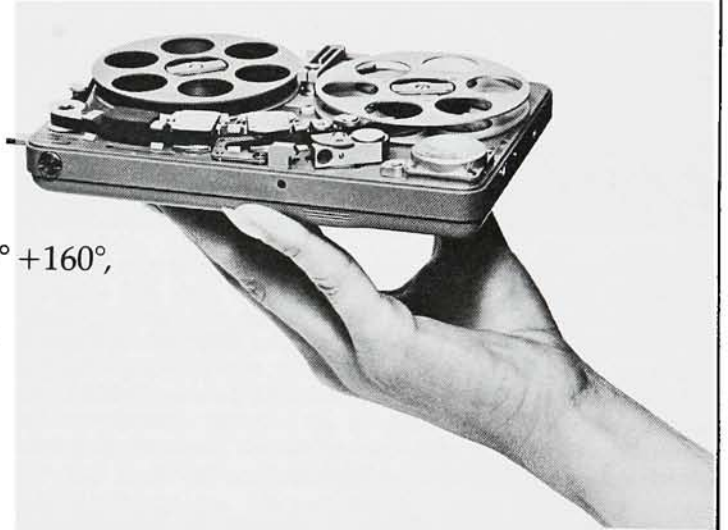
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