

INTRODUCING...

martyn burke

a storyteller



Martyn Burke

I met Martyn Burke in a small dark room adjacent to his editing room. How à propos. We were going to talk about his film on conspiracy and power, *Coup d'Etat*. The atmosphere was appropriately conspiratorial. My goal, an interview for *Cinema Canada*; his, publicity for his biggest gamble to date, a more-than-million-dollar feature.

I'd never seen any of Burke's work at that point. I wondered whether he would be an introverted nationalist, or a sensationalistic amateur with a talent for a racy theme (I knew he had made *Connections*, the Mafia exposé documentary, for the CBC). I found neither, and was pleased.

Martyn Burke is that interesting mixture of ego and curiosity that produces storytellers. I found myself in a small dark room with a storyteller. And it was stimulating.

I should mention that I have since seen Burke's CBC documentary *Carnivals*. Speaking of powerful stories and undershown films! He has also made the documentaries *California Movie*, and *Idi-Amin: A Portrait* (shown on 60 minutes, CBS), and the feature film, *The Clown Murders*.)

Martyn Burke is that strange beast in Canadian feature films, a writer-director. There are others, Gilles Carle, David Cronenberg, but Burke is different. He seems less aligned with the auteur approach than the others. And he comes out of the television documentary. And he would like to go on making documentaries periodically. A contradiction. There is a rumor that Canadians make terrible screenwriters: too hung up in the documentary tradition. Maybe in the year of *Outrageous*, this rumor too, about Canadian film and filmmakers, will be laid to rest.

The story of the making of *Coup d'Etat* is itself a great story. I hope the movie lives up to it. The idea of filming a real coup has been with Burke since 1968 when he was caught in the middle of a real live takeover in Peru. Since then he's been reading, writing, studying. He's had lots of material. Dozens of governments have come and gone, particularly in the Third World. He also acquired the rights to Edward Luttwack's book, *Coup d'Etat*, the acknowledged "how to" book on coups.

In 1973, it looked like *Coup d'Etat* was going to be a feature, co-sponsored by CBC and Quadrant Films. Burke even shot ten reels of coup scenes in Germany using the Canadian Army to storm the national palace (Bavarian town and palaces were the background). Then the project came to a halt. And it wasn't until 1976 that Burke, along with producer Chris Dalton, recovered the rights to *Coup d'Etat*. I didn't press Burke on the bloodletting that led to the halt of the production.

With the footage that he already had, he prepared a short promo for potential investors. Enter Robert Cooper, better known to Canadians as the

CBC's Ombudsman. Cooper wanted into the movies; Burke needed help, ergo an executive producer with connections who lined up backers, and developed a co-production deal with David Hemming's Greenwich Co. in England. Suddenly, *Coup d'Etat* was going to happen, and it did. Cooper, Burke and Dalton began in January, 1977. By August, they were filming with Hemmings, Peter O'Toole, Donald Pleasance and Barry Morse, Canadians Jon Granik, George Tonliatos, August Schellenberg, Eli Rill, Chuck Shamata and others became conspirators in an unnamed Mediterranean country, ripe with corruption and idealistic army officers. By October the filming was done.

Burke and his co-conspirators have done everything to provide us with a high-powered thriller. International stars, a fine cameraman, Ousama Rawi (*Pulp*, *Black Windmill*), a special effects expert from England, Roy Whybrow (*Exodus*, *Battle of Britain*), a Los Angeles story editor to help beat Burke's script into shape, and ICM of Los Angeles, New York, London and Rome to market the picture. All the right moves.

They have to be, according to Burke. He's sticking his neck out in the international film marketplace, and he wants to make sure he can compete in that market. He's not afraid to compete, and he suggests the rest of us adopt the same attitude. Get tough. Be more disciplined. Don't accept second best. Work with the best people (ACTRA will be insulted by that one). Producers shouldn't accept a script that isn't fully developed and ready to make its mark (the implication is that they, too, readily proceed with half-baked scripts), and writers should go for people over topics if we are to have first calibre screenplays. Again, *Outrageous* comes up in the conversation. Canadians should fight their natural tendency to form committees; they could ruin beautiful opportunities for Canada to make its mark as a centre for international filmmaking (CBC, CFDC and ACTRA should be insulted by that one). And most of all, stop the didactic filmmaking. If you want a lecture, go to school. If you want to make Canadians better people, send them to church.



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After all the slammers, Burke concluded that he is actually very optimistic. As he puts it, we are now in phase II of the feature film industry in Canada. In phase I, you were a miracle worker if you could make a feature film in Canada. In Phase II, you had to pretend Canada didn't exist. Every film had to be commercial. What used to be called the 'passion pit film' was our penchant. And now we're in phase III, after **Duddy Kravitz** and **Lies My Father Told Me**, we have proved we can make successful commercial films in Canada. We don't even mind if the world knows they are set in Canada.

I asked Martyn Burke to fantasize for a moment about ten years from now. Where would he like to be. He looked away and closed his eyes. And then he answered, "Right here. In Toronto. In the middle of a thriving film industry."

Coup d'Etat is a film written and directed by Martyn Burke. I look forward to seeing it.

Kenneth Dancyger

albert kish

the son of mrs. kish

Albert Kish is a Hungarian filmmaker who, if you put a motorcycle helmet on him, looks like a cross between the poet Solzhenitsyn and a Russian astronaut.

He recently won seven international awards for his film **Los Canadienses**, a thoroughly researched study of Canadian participation in the Spanish Civil War.

Albert makes personalized films about events and situations he considers important. This is a **Photograph** portrays immigrants as striving and vital people in a developing Canada.

Albert does not laugh at the immigrants but shows their clumsiness during their first five years of assimilation. The immigrants are forced to learn a new language and culture, but Albert does not find their lives tragic; instead, he calls their attitude a type of "gal-lows humor".



Albert Kish

Photo: Lois Seigel

Albert reminisces, "On my first date with an English girl here in Canada I bought dog biscuits as a present because I couldn't read the labels." He reveals the humorous human predicaments which befall us all: One immigrant becomes homesick one night and calls his parents in Greece. "It's easy to pick up the phone in America." His phone bill is \$200. The next day he disappears.

A new film, **Hold the Ketchup**, considers the food people eat and focuses on Canadians who were born in other countries but who have retained certain culinary traditions.

The film avoids official commentary and instead concentrates on people making preparations which look simple so that the viewer might try the same recipes.

Albert, who was born in Eger, Hungary in 1937, first became interested in film when a movie company came to his home town. "They brought cranes, dollies, lights, actors," Albert explains. He was 15 and forgot to go to school. Albert watched the filming. "It was magic." The third day his mother came, the fourth day his teacher came, the fifth day the principal... they found Albert still watching.

Then the policeman came... but Albert didn't care. And the cameraman noticed him and let him look in the

camera. And he's been hooked on film ever since.

After high school Albert attended the Academy of Stage and Film in Budapest, the one founded by Béla Belazs. Then the revolution broke out in 1956, and he came to Canada. Albert apprenticed as a camera assistant and then freelanced as a cameraman shooting industrial shorts.

In 1964 the CBC had an opening for a film editor. Albert told the supervisor "I can edit." He became an editor. "That was my film school. I learned to think very quickly because I worked under enormous pressure. They teach you discipline. I learned editing by watching rushes and tried to connect everything. As a result I became very sensitive to the smallest detail."

During the Expo year the Canadian National Railroad film unit hired Albert. He photographed trains left to right, right to left, low angle/high angle, high angle/low angle. After this enlightening experience John Howe chanced to call the National Film Board. "What are you up to," he curiously inquired. "I'll take it." leaped Albert. Within one half of an hour Albert was an NFB film editor. And the son of Mrs. Kish has been with the film board ever since.

Lois Seigel