

wrestling his way to the top

by Günter Ott

Some people just can't win. While reports had it that Paul Lynch was out to make a grade-B film that would run well in the drive-ins, he turned in a minor masterpiece with *Blood and Guts*. Günter Ott spoke with Lynch and Mark Irwin takes us on location.

photos by Rick Porter



"And in this corner,"... as Dandy Dan meets his young challenger

It's a small town crowd – maybe fifty people in the house and the promoter has already worked out his percentage of the take. He chews his lip nervously and worries because the bouts have been slow tonight. This crowd has seen too many midgets; they're even bored with the black man who the promoter calls the Banker (“everyone hates bankers”). Now it's time for the main attraction and the audience still hasn't got off their seats screaming for blood. Tonight, although the promoter doesn't suspect it, they'll get what they came for.

The main bout features Dandy Dan O'Neill, the fighting Irish gentleman in a grudge match against Jungle Boy who has stolen away Dandy Dan's mate. That's how the promoters wrote the story. But this time it's for real. In the ring, Dandy Dan struts about shaking his curly golden locks and posturing haughtily. But when the bell sounds, his eyes grow cold, he flings away the wig along with the posturing: Dandy Dan is out for blood.

That sets the stage for a key scene in **Blood and Guts**, a film about basic needs, basic struggles, basic sorrows: the hard times that come from living on the road. The film is an intimate character study of wrestlers in the small town circuit who never connect with the main chance, who never get booked into the big cities. It's also a story about personal dignity, and the underdog who thumbs his nose at the corrupt and the powerful.

Paul Lynch, the 32-year-old director of **Blood and Guts** doesn't, however, treat these small town wrestlers as losers in the time honored tradition of Canadian films. Instead he respects the cultural milieu out of which the wrestlers work and tries to convey their hard times without implying they are destroyed by it.

Lynch understands the kind of people he is projecting on the screen. He knows the small towns of Ontario intimately, having started his career in Canada as a newspaper photographer in places like Oakville, Georgetown and Brantford, Ontario. Though Lynch eventually left the small towns for the more lucrative call of Toronto and Hollywood, he has never forgotten the ordinary people that live in those Southern Ontario communities.

In a sense, **Blood and Guts** is linked thematically and atmospherically with Lynch's first feature film, **The Hard Part Begins**. In that film, an ageing country and western singer, who is tired of the smoky small town bars where he plays, is forced to contend with an up-and-coming singer who threatens to steal the limelight from him. In **Blood and Guts**, Dandy Dan (played by an American actor William Smith) is a wrestler past his prime who watches as the new kid (Brian Patrick Clarke) is transformed into the star attraction.

Paul Lynch emigrated from England in 1960 and, after his stint with small town papers, came to Toronto to find fame and fortune as a cartoonist for the *Toronto Star* and as art director for two ad agencies and three publications. In addition to a burgeoning career as a graphic designer, he also worked as a photographer for *Maclean's Magazine*.

His first television film grew out of one of his photo stories. “While at *Toronto Life*,” he explains, “the staff photographer David Street and I decided we wanted to make a film out of a photo story I had done on teenage marriages. The CBC agreed to buy the story if they liked it so David and I got

some money together, found two likely kids and shot what we thought would be the ‘ultimate documentary’ over a period of three months working mostly evenings and weekends. We accumulated a lot of footage and luckily I met a former film editor for CTV named Bill Gray who offered to edit down the original 1 1/2 hours to 16 minutes. We eventually sold the film to *Thirty Minutes*, a CBC show, and that's how I started making films.”

“At that time (1968), it was a terrific time to make films in Canada,” Lynch remembers. “There were all sorts of shows that purchased materials. I quit my job at *Toronto Life*, went freelance as a graphic designer and made films. Up until I made **The Hard Part Begins** in 1973, I guess I filmed about 22 television films for the Corporation, just freelancing for *Telescope*, *Gallery*, *Man Alive* and *To See Ourselves*.”

In those heady days when there was great enthusiasm for developing real Canadian movies, Lynch and Bill Gray, who writes as well as edits film, started talking about a feature film. Lynch had always been fascinated by B-movies and wanted to work on a motorcycle film. “We put a script together and sold it with one condition imposed on us that the guy who bought it would direct.

“I agreed, figuring it was simpler to do one, sell it outright, make a little money and do another one. Then I got interested in country music and met John Hunter who had been a freelance writer for the CBC. He offered me an idea of his about an ageing country singer. That was in April of 1972. John wrote the story during the summer. The CFDC's low budget program liked it so we arranged some independent money through a friend and started on the production of **The Hard Part Begins** in 1973. John wrote the script, I directed and Bill Gray edited,” explains Lynch.

The film was released in 1974 by Cinepix and received surprisingly good notices for a low budget (\$95,000) first feature. In a review in the trade paper *That's Showbusiness*, I wrote at the time: “The film possesses a rough-hewn honesty (which) explores the workings of human nature in a direct way that cuts through the usual slickness and corn of films about country music.”

The film was later sold to the CBC for what was at the time, the highest price ever paid for television rights to a Canadian movie, (reportedly \$38,000). It was also sold to the Ontario Educational TV network, the BBC and a number of international markets.

Unfortunately, Lynch's career at the CBC had come to an end with the clean sweep inaugurated by John Hirsch. “When Hirsch came in with all the theatre people, film went out. All the shows I had worked on were brought to a close, so I decided to go back to the drawing board,” Lynch recalls.

While freelancing, and editing **The Hard Part Begins**, Lynch added to his reputation by making a film on *Penthouse* publisher Bob Guccione. *Penthouse* liked the work so much that they asked Lynch and producer Hugh Curry to transform the short into a feature-length industrial film about the flamboyant publisher. “I went around the world for two years shooting footage for *Penthouse*,” he says. “Since there were a lot of tricky opticals involved in the filming, we ended up in Los Angeles where we had four months to edit and finish the film. While there, I began directing shows for American network television series. There too, I met Joe McBride, a *Variety* reporter who proposed an idea for a story about small town wrestlers.” McBride worked out a first draft of

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Fighting their way through the proverbial love triangle...



Dandy Dan and the Jungle Boy have it out



And the lady gets the winner

Blood and Guts which Lynch, John Hunter and Bill Gray rewrote with a Canadian slant.

"I am fascinated with wrestling in the same way I am with country music," Lynch admits. "I like the idea of the kind of entertainment that the very ordinary people watch." Lynch says that **Blood and Guts** was originally conceived as a \$1.5 million picture; but that proved too big and expensive an undertaking so Gray and Hunter scaled it down to more manageable proportions "in the area of \$750,000". "By that time we had interested producer Peter O'Brien (**Love at First Sight**) who talked Quadrant films into putting up the private investment money. We also had a financing guarantee from an American distributor plus a distribution arrangement which pleased the Canadian Film Development Corporation though this deal later fell through."

Quadrant let the director and producer have considerable freedom in handling the project. That allowed Lynch to get the actors he wanted such as William Smith who normally plays B-movie heavies, Micheline Lanctôt and a former football player for the Memphis Southmen, Brian Clarke. It also allowed the production company to shoot in Lynch's favorite locations, the small southern Ontario towns like Brantford, Paris and Ayr where **The Hard Part Begins** was also shot.

What draws Paul Lynch to these locations? "Obviously it's the co-operation of the people for one thing," he says. "I feel that I can establish a rapport with these people. Then too, the places look like anywhere. There's no definite connection with Canada or the U.S. They are just nice, interesting small towns. Hamilton, for example, is a great looking industrial city that could really be located anywhere in North America. Although **Blood and Guts** is definitely a Canadian movie, it looks like what I think movies should look like: North American movies. Canadian filmmakers tend to forget that in order to keep making movies in Canada, we have to get American distribution."

For Lynch, wrestling is an ideal North American cultural phenomenon. It's the entertainment of the blue collar worker everywhere. "I've watched wrestling in Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto, down here in Los Angeles and in Montreal. The people really get off on it. It offers them an escape and a means of venting the frustrations they get from working in factories. It's wonderful to watch what a terrific time the people who go to wrestling matches have.

"In the film we decided not to emphasize the crowd, choosing instead to focus very specifically on Dandy Dan and Jim; their life and how they try to survive. The crowds are always there but I didn't want to capitalize on them. I didn't want to put them down like Altman did in **Nashville**, I just wanted the crowds to be there and record their reaction."

When comparisons are made, Lynch affirms that **Blood and Guts** would definitely have been made even without the success of the trendsetting jock film **Rocky**. "I don't think **Blood and Guts** is as comball as **Rocky**. We tried to stay away from that despite the ending" (which does have similarities to the end of **Rocky**). "But the 'Big Fight' is really the only logical way to end a wrestling or, for that matter, a boxing film. And in all good B-movies, the battered hero always walks off into the shadows with the girl who has come back."

For now, Lynch is moving ahead with plans for another action film featuring country music. He hopes to be filming shortly in Hamilton and the other small southern Ontario towns whose inhabitants he depicts so well.

It would seem then that Paul Lynch is developing a solid career as one of our fine young craftsmanlike filmmakers. Surprisingly, however, Lynch betrays a slight hesitation as he explains that graphic design is truly his first love.

Laughingly, he admits that this profession is a lot easier than making movies. "Filmmaking is tough in the best of circumstances; whereas with graphic design, I have several faithful clients I can count on in the lean times." But, after **Blood and Guts** and the reputation earned with his tough, finely wrought first feature, Paul Lynch need not worry. He's a filmmaker with a sense of style and a guiding vision that responds to a particularly intriguing cultural milieu. □

Filmography: Paul Lynch

Shorts

Teenage Marriage (1968). Prod: Glen Sarty, CBC "Take Thirty". 45 min. b&w.

Be Not Too Hard (1969). Prod: Leo Rampen, CBC "Man Alive". 30 min. b&w.

Charlie (1969). Prod: Don Elder, CBC. 30 min. co.

What's You Gonna Be, Boy, What's You Gonna Do? (1970). Prod: David Peddie, CBC "To See Ourselves". 30 min. col.

A Handy Guy Like Sandy (1970). Prod: Sam Levine, CBC "Telescope" 30 min. col.

Choice (1970). Prod: Don Elder, CBC, Schools and Youth Department, 30 min. col.

Big Bus Going to Nashville (1971). Prod: Sam Levine, CBC "Telescope" 30 min. col.

The Late Man (1972) Prod: Paddy Sampson, CBC "Program X". 30 min. col.

The Stock Car Boys (1973). Prod: Sam Levine, CBC "Gallery". 30 min. col.

The Painted Door (1973). Prod: David Peddie, CBC "To See Ourselves". 30 min. col.

Guccione (1974). Prod: Hugh F. Curry, Hupa Productions. 30 min. col.

Petrocelli (1975). Prod: Lenard Katzman, Paramount Television/NBC. 60 min. col.

Sidestreet (1976). Prod: Brian Walker, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. 60 min. col.

Beachcombers (1977). Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. 30 min. col.

Features

The Hard Part Begins (1973). Prod: John Clifford Hunter, Derrett G. Lee, Odyssey Films Ltd. 91 min. col. Dist: Cinepix

Blood and Guts (1977). Prod: Peter O'Brien, Independent Pictures. 94 min. col.