

# vincent vaitiekunas

## putting his foot down

During the two years, 1973 and that Vincent Vaitiekunas taught filmmaking at Simon Fraser University near Vancouver, films made by his students won the McLaren Award for best film at the Canadian Student Film Festival in Montreal. Today, a high proportion of those students are full-fledged professional filmmakers in Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto and elsewhere.

In 1974 Vaitiekunas moved back to Toronto and began teaching film at York University where he's now an associate professor in the film department. Again, several of his more recent students are starting to make their way into professional filmmaking.

Vaitiekunas is one of those rare characters who is both a recognized filmmaker, and a teacher with a real flair; and he draws from a varied background of experience.

He began his career by studying architecture and opera at the Baltic University in Hamburg, following an escape during the war from an SS forced labor camp in his native Lithuania, where he had been held as a member of an underground student resistance movement.

In the mid 1950's, after a move to England, Vaitiekunas became an actor and, under the stage name of Vincent Edward, appeared in several British feature films. He invariably played the role of a nasty villain. ('Or semi-nasty,' says Vaitiekunas.)

Not too many years later, and after another move, he attended the Ontario College of Art, which he left in his second year to join a design company for \$20. (twenty dollars) a week. At that time he also worked as a set and puppet designer with John Conway's *Uncle Chichimus*, a well-known name in early CBC television.

The next stop was two years at the Canadian Theatre School, where he met a number of fellow students including screenwriter and director Bill Fruet and novelist Donald Jack. While at the school he also met his wife, Mary. At that time an actress, Mary Vaitiekunas

has since made her mark as an artist/bannermaker. They have two children.

As a teacher, Vaitiekunas has a style that's decidedly unique. Even he can't figure it out. "Hell if I knew how it happened" was his reply when I asked him about it.

One feature of Vaitiekunas' teaching style is that he assumes without question that his students are fully capable of achieving the standards of energy, integrity and imaginativeness that distinguish a professional in any field.

photo: Nick Rotunda



Vaitiekunas on location

Another feature especially in evidence at the SFU Film Workshop, which at that time was an innovative non-credit program for students who weren't interested in grades or lectures, to his readiness, as he says, to "put my foot down," to ensure that students work at their films consistently, right

through post production, instead of procrastinating till the last minute.

Aikenhead, whose *Ivory Founts* won the McLaren Award for SFU in 1973, contributed to the sound recording.

In the same year Tim Sale, another of Vaitiekunas' students shared the honors for CFA's craft award for cinematography, for Phil Borsos' *Spartree*, which also won the CFA award for best theatrical short.

Among other notable Vaitiekunas students from SFU are Harlan Dorfman, a Vancouver TV newsfilm editor; Chris Windsor, whose *Trapper Dan* won the McLaren in 1974 and who later went to ACCESS TV in Edmonton; Danice MacLeod, who finished her epic film *Rawstock* after Vaitiekunas had gone to York; Rudy Wrench, directing for NFB in Toronto; and Mary Anne McEwen, a busy Vancouver filmmaker who remarks that 'everything I know I learned from Vincent.'

Vaitiekunas was delighted, but not surprised, when one of his former SFU students, Michael Chechik, won the 1977 Canadian Film Award for best documentary film under 60 minutes, for *Greenpeace: Voyages to Save the Whales*. *Greenpeace* was co-directed by Chechik and two other SFU alumni, Ron Precious and Fred Easton.

Some SFU Film Workshop students, such as Larry Keane, have gone on to further studies: in Keane's case to USC in California. James Orr, a graduate from York who studied production with Vaitiekunas in more recent times, has also gone on to further study at the American Film Institute in Beverly Hills.

All this points to Vaitiekunas' resourcefulness and innate versatility as both a film teacher who has inspired and guided many of his students on to their own successes and as an acclaimed filmmaker who has worked on over 100 theatrical, documentary and television films: as director, editor, writer, producer and actor.

Among his national and international film awards is the prize for best color cinematography at the 1970 Canadian Film Awards for *Multiplicity* (For Canadian Pacific, produced by Crawley Films Ltd.), a film which, be-

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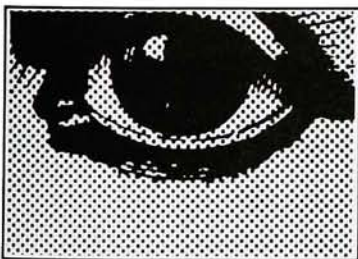
cause of its excellent color quality, was used for an entire year as a color standard by the BBC at the start of each day's television programming to enable viewers to adjust their sets. **Explore - Expo 67** (produced by Crawley for Alcan) won Vaitiekunas a diploma of merit at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1968. **Motion**, another Expo Film (by Crawley for Canadian National) was released theatrically by Warner Brothers.

In 1969 his film **For Want of a Suitable Playhouse** (by Crawley for the Shaw Festival) won a silver medal award at the New York International Film and TV Festival. More recently, Vaitiekunas won a bronze at the same festival for **Fine Arts at York** which he directed, produced and edited for York University.

Earlier in his career he also directed two Film Board films, and his television experience includes several films for the CBC's **This Hour Has Seven Days**, including **Strike! Men Against Computers**, which he co-directed with Larry Zolf, winning the CBC's Special Wilderness Award for Screen Journalism in 1965. He had begun his production career as an assistant film editor at CBC.

During the coming year at York, Vaitiekunas will teach a course in directing and acting for film and television as well as 16mm production. He also has several film projects of his own in the works. When asked for details, he looked for a moment with that canny expression that his students well know, and said, "The film will speak for itself."

Jaan Pill



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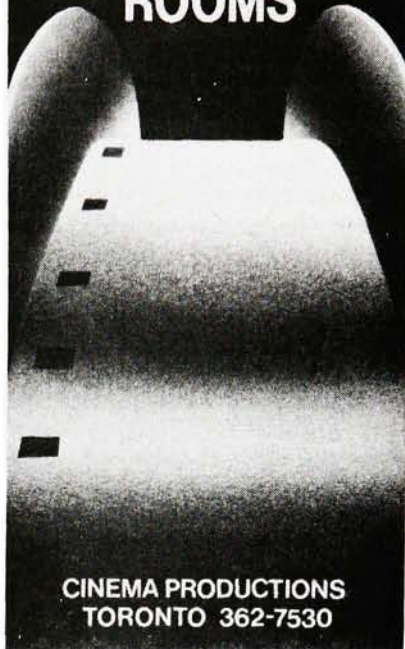


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