

# cronenberg on wheels

by Martha J. Jones

David Cronenberg has broken stride, taking time out for a racing film called *Fast Company* before moving back to horror with *The Brood*. Martha J. Jones reports on the Alberta shoot below, and talks with Cronenberg about his plans.

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photo: Brian Meyer



An inflamingly dramatic dragster stunt from *Fast Company*

On the western outskirts of Edmonton, Alberta, skirted by a dusty, grassy field on one side and Highway 16 with its truck stops, gas stations, and mobile home lots on the other, stands a nondescript prairie motel called the Sandman. Outside, in the parking lot, like some great carnival sideshow, rests a huge semi-trailer emblazoned with stars, stripes, and the flashy logo, FastCo. It is built to accommodate a Double A top fuel dragster and a funny car, both equally flashy in their matching coats of red, white, and blue. These are authentic racers, and they are featured in the film, **Fast Company**, now being shot in Edmonton.

Inside the motel, it's a mixed crew of people. The non-union production company is divided about 50/50 between eastern and western Canadians, about half from Toronto, the other half from the major western population centres. Director David Cronenberg (**Rabid**, **Shivers**) is here; so are producers Peter O'Brian (whose latest feature, **Blood and Guts** has been nominated for a Canadian Film Award as best Canadian film), and Michael Lebowitz of M.L.I. Somewhere in the roughly thirty rooms that have been occupied since late June are Mark Irwin, D.O.P. nominated for top cinematography on **Blood and Guts**, and special effects man Tom Fisher of Los Angeles, who spent two years blowing up vehicles for **Rat Patrol**. The cast features veteran American actors William Smith, lately seen in **Blood and Guts**, and John Saxon, as well as Claudia Jennings, a third American, who was granted special permission by ACTRA to take the female lead. Canadians Nicholas Campbell, Judy Foster, and Don Franks take other major roles.

Drag racing is the theme of **Fast Company**, and drag racing is what brought the crew to this western location. It is the second most popular spectator sport here, next to football. Many of North America's top drag racers come from Alberta, and Edmonton boasts Canada's second largest drag strip, International Speedway. The action centres on the adventures of drag racer Lonnie "Lucky Man" Johnson as he travels the Pacific Northwest circuit between Canada and the States. Edmonton doubles for various American cities during the course of the film, but also "plays" itself, at which time subtle Canadianisms are introduced — nuances of speech, local brands of beer and so on.

**Fast Company** was originally the brainchild of two young Vancouver men, Courtenay Smith and Alan Ireen. The two had attended a drag race for the first time in years, and were simultaneously struck by the filming potential. Here was the stuff of box-office — action, color, danger, and more female fans than a Bay City Rollers rock concert. Ireen came up with a story line, but eventually withdrew from any further involvement with the film. Smith went on to put together a script and peddle it for months in Western Canada and Hollywood before he finally got financial backing from the CFDC and Quadrant Films. "I didn't have a clue what I was doing," he admits candidly. "I'd basically written a documentary on drag racing, with a plot just stuck on top to carry it along." Since then, it has been rewritten, dramatized, and generally beefed up until it bears little resemblance to his original. There is no resentment in his voice as he explains what it has gone through, and in fact he seems relieved that it

has fallen into the hands of more experienced writers. One of these is Phil Savath (**Homemade TV**), John Hunter (**The Hard Part Begins**) assisted unofficially, and of course director Cronenberg, accustomed to writing his own scripts, makes changes as he goes along. In the end, the script-writing credits will probably be shared by Savath, Cronenberg, and Smith.

David Cronenberg's attitude towards working with someone else's script is very open. "It's refreshing," he comments. "I never would have written a script about drag racing myself." But presented with it he found it a subject he could easily get into. This is not surprising, as an interest in fast machines comes to him naturally. He has raced cars, bikes, and go-carts just as a hobby, and himself owns a Ferrari and a Lancia. One of his early films was a half-hour item on motorcycles called **The Italian Machine**. "I didn't want David only for his reputation as a director, but because I know he knows cars, as well," explains Michael Lebowitz.

And it obviously is going to be a movie about cars. Posters of dragsters are scattered on the walls of the production office. The flashy racers are featured on all the publicity material, and the local Top 40 station exhorts racing fans to come down and serve as extras — with good results. One enthusiastic local even made off with the classier parts of a camera-ready vehicle — parts which he could have picked up for nothing after the dragster was blown apart in a stunt.

Top drag racers will actually be doing the driving in their own cars; this means sharp-eyed aficionados could potentially pick out their heroes whizzing by — people like Gordi Bonin, Terry Capp, Graham Light, and others known only to the initiated. Authenticity is one of the objectives of the production, and a close rapport has been built up between the film crew and the racing community in Edmonton. "We needed certain stunts for dramatic purposes," relates Lebowitz. "At first, if the drivers didn't think they were true-to-life, they were reluctant to do them. But once they'd think about it, they'd realize that they could actually happen that way, and they'd be happy to help us set them up."

People like Lebowitz, who have never previously attended a drag race, are becoming overnight experts on fuels, speeds, engines and drivers. Like everyone else, he comments on the noise: "When the supercharged engines start up, powered by massive blowers, it's an unearthly noise, unlike anything else. The ground moves; the sound is physically felt. The noise, the smell — it's the creation of an event, and it's just soul-shattering." Peter O'Brian voiced a similar response. "After this is over, I'll probably go back to the drags, maybe once a year. It's an experience."

But something about Cronenberg's approach, the sense of caring as he talks about the film, the conscientiousness of his direction, makes one feel that this might not be just another drive-in double feature in which the cars are the stars. To him, balance between man and machine is all-important. The seemingly most trivial scene can end up being shot over and over, with Cronenberg's voice a soft, constant flow as he almost hypnotically encourages the actors. Patience, earnestness, and gentleness are words that come to mind. When questioned about his meticulous attention to detail, Cronenberg sounded almost Zen-like in his philosophy. "It can be like a drag race... or a long-distance run, or a boxing match... anything that requires endurance and total involvement. You have to be focused on exactly what's going on at the moment. Just because it's three in the morning, you don't

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let up your concentration... it'll show in the final work." As he speaks, softly intent on what he is saying, he is never distracted by other events in the room, and it is entirely credible that his concentration on the set is equally total.

The actors are important to him. He personally auditioned up to 50 potential candidates a day, seeking out the suitable. "Suitable" means someone who cares enough to get involved in the role. "Anyone can just read the lines and get through a scene fast. But someone who cares will tell me, 'This just doesn't feel right,' or 'I don't think this character would say that' and we can change it." Cronenberg finds the communal "feel" on the set to be important.

**Fast Company** is a complete thematic change from Cronenberg's two most recent successes, **Rabid** and **Shivers**, both

horror flicks, and both of which have received a certain amount of critical recognition; in fact, in Britain, it is not unusual to come across Cronenberg retrospectives, featuring such works as **Stereo** and **Crimes of the Future**. **Rabid** was so popular there that a paperback version was quickly put together to satisfy cult fans. In **Fast Company**, sure, someone does lose a hand in an engine fan and we get to see the fingers come flying off, but to Cronenberg, this is more of an action element than any vestige of his interest in horror.

Still, horror has a firm hold on his imagination. "It touches something basic in human nature," he quietly explains. "There's an attraction/repulsion syndrome... being frightened can be a cathartic experience. Maybe we face our own death in a controlled way." He cites the appeal of gruesome fairy tales like Hansel and Gretel, stories which have been frightening children for centuries. "And they love being scared," he laughs.

A good horror movie isn't easy to make, according to the young, self-taught director. It's pointless to just have a lot of gore and bodies being chopped up. He mentions **Night of the Living Dead** and **Texas Chain Saw Massacre** as two examples of horror that works. Yes, there's a lot of blood and gore in **Massacre**, he agrees, but there are such mysterious settings, such strange images — the moonlit fetishes of bone rattling in the breeze; the flurry of feathers in the deserted slaughterhouse — that the film is raised to a surrealistic level. His own plans for the future include a film he has written himself, **The Brood** which he hopes to commence in September of this year. And, it's a horror film — "but it's a special kind of horror, one I don't think has been seen before," he mysteriously promises, with no further hints.

As to other future plans, producer Lebowitz hopes to be collaborating on a comedy with Peter O'Brian sometime in November or December. After that, he envisions returning to Alberta in the spring to do a film portraying the confrontation of big money industry with the environment and native population of the province. Lebowitz found filming in Alberta a very positive experience, and went on record to say that this is a "spectacularly" good place to film: helpful people, cooperative government, and fine scenery. As for first-timer Smith, he hopes to use this venture in filming as a learning experience towards future productions of his own.

At the time of this writing, **Fast Company** is scheduled to complete shooting in Edmonton August 26th. Processing is to take place in Vancouver, and post-production in Toronto. If all goes as planned, the \$850,000 feature should be opening in Canada and the States in mid May '79, coinciding with the drag racing Nationals in Columbus, Ohio.

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## FAST COMPANY

d. David Cronenberg, sc. Phil Sabbath, ph. Mark Irwin, ed. Ron Sanders, sd. ed. Bryan Day, l.p. Bill Smith, Don Franks, Claudia Jennings, Nicholas Campbell, Judy Foster, Cedric Smith, Bob Haley, George Buza, David Graham, Don Granbery, Michael J. Reynolds, exec. p. David Perlmutter, assoc. p. Michael Lebowitz, Peter O'Brian, Courtney Smith, p. manager Caryl Brandt, p.c. Michael Lebowitz Inc. (1978), col. 35mm.

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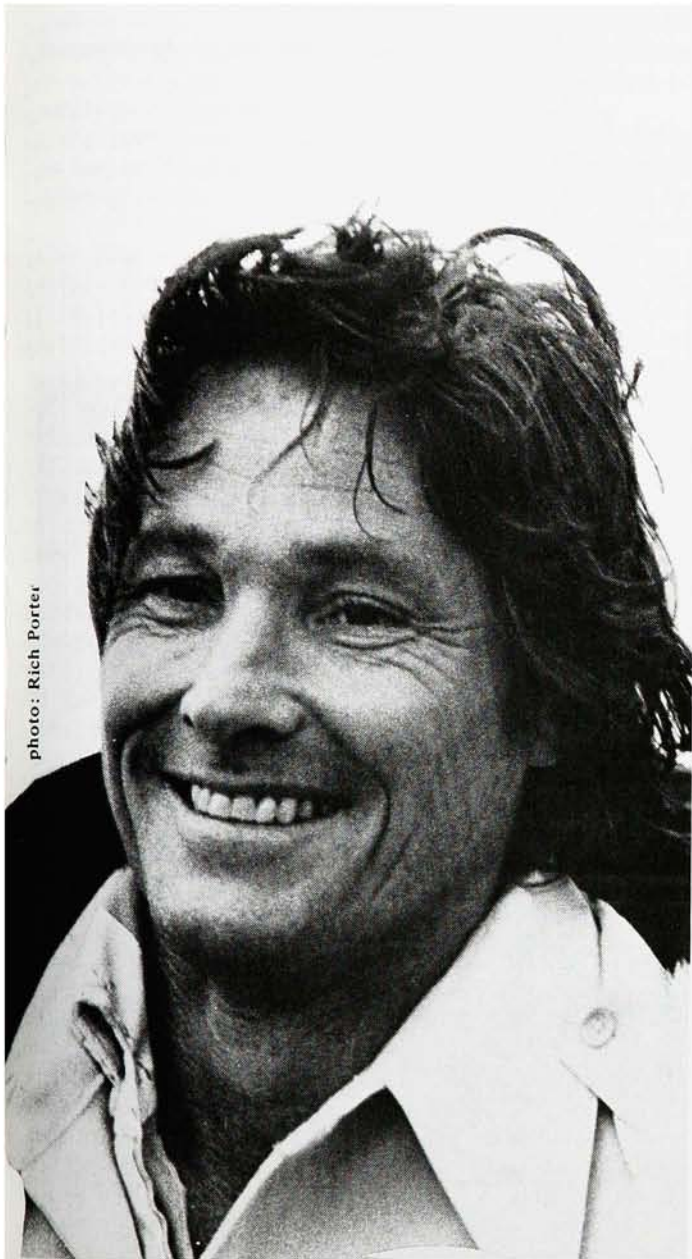


photo: Rich Porter

Fresh from the starring role in **Blood and Guts**, William Smith is now appearing in **Fast Company** as Lonnie "Lucky Man" Johnson