

FILM REVIEWS

George Kaczender's IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN

d. George Kaczender, sc. Paul Gottlieb, adapt. Adapted from a Stephen Vizinczey novel, ph. Miklos Lente, l.p. Karen Black, Tom Berenger, Susan Strasberg, Alexandra Stewart, Marilyn Lightstone, Helen Shaver, Louise Marleau, Marianne McIsaac, Monique Lepage, Helen Shaver, Susan Watson, exec. p. Stephen J. Roth, & Harold Greenberg, p. Robert Lantos & Claude Héroux, assoc. p. Howard R. Lipson, p.c. Astral Bellevue Pathé & R.S.L. Productions, 1977. 35mm, running time 120 minutes, dist. Astral Films



Tom Berenger as András gets lit by a Hungarian torch singer

Stephen Vizinczey's memoir *In Praise of Older Women* has sold two million copies since its publication in 1965. The *New York Times* hailed it as "refreshing, individual — a post-pornographic book." Canada's leading literary critic, Northrop Frye, described it as being "written with great lucidity and charm." The most commonly recurring word in the book's reviews was "elegant": "Elegantly entertaining," said *The Times* of London. "Elegant, exact and melodious," said *The Sunday Telegraph*. "Elegantly erotic" said *Punch*. What impressed these reviewers was Vizinczey's ability to blend sensuality with wit, carnality with intelligence; in short — lust with taste.

Vizinczey's book is a delightful entertainment in which he describes the erotic adventures of his surrogate-self, András Vajda, from age 10 in Hungary, to age 30, by which time he has immigrated to Canada and accepted a teaching post in Saskatoon. The book is lyrical about Hungary, satirical about Canada; reverent about sex, dilettantish about politics. Its 185 pages can be breezily read in a couple of hours, making it the ideal kind of

light reading for travellers beset with interruptions and distractions or people with more permanently restive attention-spans. It is too slight a work however to be regarded as a minor classic, even as erotica; Vajda-Vizinczey has curiously naive attitudes for a libertine: he describes a lesbian as having "strong male drives;" homosexuals are invariably "unmanly;" he tends to view any sexual act other than intercourse with disdain. *In Praise of Older Women* is not the troubling work of a sexual revolutionary; simply a little night music composed by a middleclass "swinger."

The appeal of the book to producer Robert Lantos, director George Kaczender, scriptwriter Paul Gottlieb, cinematographer Miklos Lente, among others responsible for the film version is understandable: each is an Hungarian emigré, for whom the story clearly strikes a strong emotional chord. Besides, given the popularity of the book and the saleability of the theme (Vajda is an upbeat, "sensitive" Alfie, a Casanova without machismo) a film version looks like a wise commercial investment. On the strength of its cast

(Karen Black, Susan Strasberg, Helen Shaver, Marilyn Lightstone, and Tom Berenger, from *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, as Vajda), and a slick advertising campaign, *In Praise of Older Women* may be the singular Canadian hit of the fall-winter season — but not, I expect, if word-of-mouth gets around fast.

There were basically two ways to proceed in adapting the novel: the mentally-easy and obvious course would have been to make a glossy, grade A, porno-film, for Vizinczey's memoir is sexually explicit, and its structure is that of most erotica; whenever the author feels that a reader's interest may be lagging, he changes partners and a new round of seductive intrigue begins. The book has nothing on its mind (despite a pretentious epilogue about "the meaning of sex" that would not get more than a C plus in a philosophy course) except orgasms. The problem with following this route is that — being Canadians — even if we did make porno films we probably couldn't muster the élan of the Swedish or the French; the hard-core market is wildly unreliable with most pro-

vinces and states in such a bewildering condition of ambivalence, enforcing laws based on such arbitrary standards, that a direct and honest translation of book-into-film was not considered practical. The problem which Kaczender and Gotlieb faced was one of cultural lag and confusion. In 1978, it is permissible (even in Ontario) to write and publish sexually explicit material; but a photograph of the same acts runs a high risk of prosecution. What in one medium is now considered conventional, is in another (even when restricted to an adult audience) considered outrageous. When a book becomes famous, due in great part to its sexual candor, and filmmakers become tempted to cash in on the success but also feel obliged to delete the sex or reduce it to head-and-shoulder couplings or "artfully" choreographed scenes in which a shadow, a bedpost or strategically-placed vase of roses means the difference between an "R" and an "X," what emerges is a hypocritical hodgepodge — a film that talks out of both sides of its mouth — a sniggering yes, and a cowardly no.

The alternative to that dilemma is to alter the book significantly and deliberately in an altogether different direction. When Stanley Kubrick made *Lolita* he recognized two limitations — one in himself (he has no aptitude for depicting sensuality, beyond his highly-developed sense of visual beauty) and the other in society (erotic interplay between a 12-year-old girl and a middle-aged man would not have been permitted in a film in 1963, or even in 1978 given the legal difficulties of Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby*). Normally those limitations would disqualify anyone from adapting *Lolita*, but Kubrick's gamble was that one could produce an "interpretation" of the book, substituting a new kind or pleasure — brilliantly sly satire — for the one that had made the novel notorious. Whether he succeeded or not is open to debate (he occasionally has expressed the wish to try it again, for the film is clearly compromised by moral attitudes of the time) but it is still an option for filmmakers caught in the crevice between avant-garde literature and rear-guard cinema. Following this method of adapting *In Praise of Older*

Women the director should have regarded as his models such European films as *Loves of a Blonde* or *Closely Watched Trains* — that is, drawing upon his knowledge of Hungary, and the experience of dislocation in being an immigrant, given us a film that concentrates on well-drawn characters, and a sense of time-and-place that one can almost taste and smell in its palpability.

Kaczender's past films (*Don't Let the Angels Fall*, and *U-Turn*) seemed emotionally flat and uninvolved — which I attributed to the slightness of their scenarios. This time, with a better range of material, the effect is roughly the same — one watches with polite, rather than rapt, attention. And this time my conclusion is harsher: I don't think Kaczender knows how to "hook" an audience. His films look good (in a tv-commercial way) but they are unengaging on any other level.

The novel, slight though it is, maintained a keen sense of irony which the film lacks; space permits only one telling example. Vizinczey depicts an encounter between Vajda and a young actress named Mici. She leads him on, and agrees to go back to his room, then has a sudden change-of-mind and begins worrying if she'll get pregnant. Of her own accord she offers to have sex the "safe" way — orally — ("Well, you want me to do it or not?" she asks; "I wouldn't dream of inconveniencing you," András replies) but given András' attitudes to oral sex he doesn't find deliverance. ("We made love in the French way," he says. "We both came but it didn't help me, my headache only grew worse. Mici was completely satisfied. It was the culmination of her chaste dreams, I suppose: the mysterious immaculate conception.") In the film, Gottlieb and Kaczender show András picking up a young cabaret singer (who does a lusty song-and-dance routine that enflames András's imagination) only to have her turn out, somewhat incongruously, to be merely a "cock-teaser." András goes home, without any sex, complaining bitterly about the fickleness and lack of sophistication of young girls. Frequently throughout the film one finds the novel being

cheapened and coarsened, made into stereotypical situations. Other chapters of the novel, such as one showing Vajda's rather heartless affair with an impoverished mother-of-two, are left out altogether. The end result is a fuzzy and trivial film about a man who never grows up, and who is never forced to take anything seriously.

With the exception of Helen Shaver, normally a fine actress, but here confined to an embarrassingly silly caricature of a North American faculty-wife, most of the cast give creditable performances (especially Karen Black) but they all deserve something better. What in Vizinczey was sensual, witty and elegant is — via Kaczender — rendered merely smutty, cute and photogenic. One may forgive *In Praise of Older Women* for its sexual cowardice, but there is little excuse for its mediocrity.

John Hofsess

Robin Spry's DRYING UP THE STREETS

d. Robin Spry, sc. B.A. Cameron, ph. Ken Gregg, ed. Myrtel Virgo, l.p. Len Cariou, Don Francks, Kelvin Butler, August Schellenberg, Jacques Hubert, exec. p. Ralph L. Thomas, p.c. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Radio-Canada) 1977, col 16mm, running time 90 minutes.

This is not the "great" film followers of Spry's career have been expecting.

Nevertheless, it is well worth seeing for its uncompromising depiction of the sordid subterranean world of hard drug pushers and junkies, of anxious-to-please pimps and the girls they exploit: the runaways who are lead into drug addiction then forced to pay for

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it by servicing the string of pasty, insatiable customers coughed-up by most North American cities. It's a "sewer" says an undercover man. And it's a vortex of violence to shock anyone, including those who've tripped gaily over the tattered carpets of a Yonge Street massage parlor.

Originally the film was conceived as a 60 minute CBC-TV special, but after thirteen days shooting a feature had been born. (The secret of such fertility should be shared, what with government cutbacks creating a prophylactic atmosphere for future CBC film productions.) What will bring the film to the local cinema is not the occasional flash of bare flesh, but several fine performances and the many levels on which the film works.

Don Francks unquestionably dominates the film. The former CBC song and dance man, a one time drop-out himself (he once appeared in leathers on the Pierre Berton Show, figuratively spinning the shocked host's bow tie at 3,000 rpm), is most convincing as Peter Brennan, a West Coast pharmacology professor who has become a heroin addict in that lifestyle experimentation endemic to Pacific shores. His wife has deserted him, his daughter has run away. Francks, with his gaunt face, balding pate and waist length pony-tail, is so well cast as the archetypal 60's dope scene drop-out that he visually steals almost every scene.

In a quick cutting, opening sequence a hand held camera, shaking with TV news authenticity, discovers Brennan O.D.'ing in the toilet of a greasy spoon. One of the cuts includes a gruesome close-up of him salivating, a first indication this film is not for the squeamish or those socially isolated souls who think that our greatest problem is the future of the monarchy.

The strident music, accompaniment for Brennan's moments of isolation throughout the film, suddenly becomes muzak, and in the first of many changes in rhythm characteristic of the film's structure, the fast cutting is replaced by a moving camera which reveals an antiseptic hospital room. There, Brennan is cold-turkeying it, sandwiched between white sheets. Len Cariou, cool and sophisticated as a crusading newsman in *One Man*, but a little



Len Cariou (left), a narcotics officer tries to enlist heroine addict Peter Brennan, played by Don Francks, to help break a narcotic ring

worldly to play RCMP officer, Larry, exploits Brennan's helplessness, not unlike the way the pimps exploit their girls. Larry shows lurid slides of a girl forced into masochistic acts to support her habit, hinting she may be Brennan's runaway daughter.

It is then the bones of the plot are revealed: the mounties, demonstrating questionable ethics at once similar to *Kojak* but all too believable in light of the McDonald Commission inquiry, will help Brennan find his daughter — if he helps them break a dope ring and identify the king-pin.

In an inspired bit of filmmaking Larry exits, leaving the projector on automatic ostensibly to give Brennan time for a decision. The slides, previously shown mostly at comfortable home

viewing distance, now become a quick cutting montage, bloody details bludgeoning the viewer as they do Brennan. No soft-sell consciousness raising is this. When a family snapshot snaps by, Brennan's decision is a foregone conclusion.

After possibly the briefest cross-Canada bus trip for a Canadian film — no shots of the Rockies or the prairies — Francks disembarks before Toronto's eternally "new" city hall, takes one last look at his daughter's photograph and symbolically rips it up.

Soon after his arrival but not before a greeting committee of police brutalizes then briefly jails him, Brennan is slowly sucked into the sewer. It's apparently easy if the hang-outs are known, if the right questions are asked, and as is so often the case, if a contact

has been made while rehabilitating in Okala.

Through meetings in topless bars, featuring tasteless shows almost comic on screen, Brennan's circle of contacts grow. They lead him into violence – a jewellery store robbery, ridding the street of "Frenchie" competition – and then into employment suited to his professional training, cutting drugs for street distribution. But he reveals a sort of Hawksian ethics: he only cuts the drugs with pure materials, and refuses to bend when grilled about the high costs.

These developments are intercut with Brennan's long treks through nameless streets, effectively building suspense while he searches documentarily filmed passersby for the face of his daughter. Often, he visits the methadone maintenance clinic to exchange his urine sample for his surrogate drug and to report his findings to Larry, disguised as a doctor. "Dr. Fraud" Brennan puns on their first meeting, one of many one-liners offering comic relief. The effective one liner, *de rigueur* in the fast cutting TV milieu, seems a forte of scriptwriter B.A. Cameron. When Brennan's virility is questioned, one character quips "He couldn't get it up with spray starch and splints."

During an early restaurant stop he witnesses a theft from a car. In what at first appears to be a documentary long shot, a girl, played by newcomer Sarah Torgov, takes a camera but is caught by a black man, ironically wearing a white hat. Arguing, the two conveniently enter Brennan's restaurant where he overhears the man offer to take the girl home and put her up with the help of his woman. The audience knows the girl, Anne, is the archetypal runaway. Her fate, despite that easily identified with signs of middle class success – beauty, poise and, for a teenager, pimple-free skin – will be that described earlier by Larry.

Predictably, too, her fate becomes entwined with Brennan's. She shows up as a waitress in his haunt, then as a shy, reluctant participant in a topless stage show. At first she is shielded by Shiela, the hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold played by Jayne Eastwood with her usual super competence. But Sheila's shield is as short-lived as Sheila. She

is terminated violently for squealing to the police after refusing to allow her daughter to stand-in for a member of a pedophilic daisy chain, staged with a drugged Anne for the benefit of porn-tographers.

Only an inventory could do justice to the many ways Anne is degraded. At one point she is referred to as a "facility," a term to raise the ire of even a closet feminist. Brennan is aware of this; the fatherly concern he should have shown for his daughter is inexorably transferred to Anne, even as her addiction is slashed into our consciousness by the close-up of needle tracks along her delicate white arm.

Most of this would be straight TV formula, tame or violent enough for Kojak, were it not for Spry's skill and wit in rendering the material. He has such feeling for form, he can make socio-political statements, *nouvelle vague* references, and toss off a few nods to the NFB – all without eroding the entertainment values treasured by the apathetic, unpoliticized "home viewing audience."

In sex and violence Spry tells all but shows only just enough. A man's eye is poked out. Several shootings take place. Using a montage in which shots of perpetrator and victim (always backing away from the camera until stopped by a wall) are intercut with steadily increasing rapidity, Spry never includes the explicit shot of bullets or instrument striking. This shot is filled in by the viewer from that fund of experience informed by the glut of violent photographic images seen daily, or the apparently innate capability of humans to visualize gore. The moment of violence occurs between frames, in the mind of the viewer primed by fast cutting. Where the sharp instrument is used, the thug wielding it says more people will be wearing eye-patches, on the last word there is a witty cut to a fig leaf on an alabaster David in the bar, an eyepatch if ever there was one. Later the same thug says, "The citizens have their police, we have ours." Criminal violence differs little from socially sanctioned violence.

In this bizarre world, where promises to do anything in return for a fix are honored, Anne is put to the test with

the sexually imaginative (or perverted, if you prefer). However, the explicit shot is filled in again by the viewer, who may discover his/her sexual imagination has a wider range than earlier thought. The casting of almost grotesque lesbians seems questionable, perhaps designed to confirm male chauvinist prejudices.

Brennan's treks through the streets are done in long takes, Francks forcing the action towards the camera in another mandatory TV technique which forces the camera to reverse dolly and create an attention grabbing, always changing backdrop. Invariably, these shots are filmed in hazy overcast, a light which mutes the colors and adds a bluish cast expressive of Brennan's alienated state of mind. In these sequences a notable time transition has been used: he stops to study strip joint pictures for his daughter's likeness; there is a cut to a subjective shot, hand held; and when the objective shot follows, it is night. This is smooth, yet, momentarily an expressive disorientation in time.

Several distancing devices are used, also with irony. Several times two large neon yellow A's appear behind Brennan; they grab attention, invite only impossible interpretations. A neon record flashes behind his head, becoming a halo – a crassly commercial one. Later, Brennan is hooded and violently shoved into a back seat, but the low angle composition of the shot emphasizes the "Keep Ontario Beautiful" on the license plate. The plot progresses while with simple juxtaposition Spry criticizes the head-in-the-sand attitude to socially reality manifest by bureaucratic sloganeers.

The plot is resolved neatly, as expected from a made for TV flick, but not without more gut-grippling moments of suspense, the seemingly obligatory chase scene, and the somewhat implausible way Brennan leads police to the king pin's mansion.

Some questions, however, remain. Casting a black (Calvin Butler) as a pimp, white stetson notwithstanding, might confirm the racist prejudices now bubbling below the smug surfaces in Canada – unless this is a marketing ploy for stateside acceptance. Torgov is a remarkable young actress.

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In one scene when she parrots paragraphs from self-help books about giving and sharing, it can be seen how easily the supposed gospel truth in such books can be manipulated to serve any end. Warren Davis, once an official CBC face and voice, suffers from that old Canadian actor's problem of too much TV exposure. (Can you see Peter Kent as Citizen Kane, or Barbara Walters as Lady Macbeth?) And the attention to TV lighting values of 2:1 or 3:1 robs Spry of the expressionistic tools of shadow manipulation.

Drying up the Streets flirts with the skirts of sensationalism, even lifting them at times. It has none of the didacticism of **One Man**: it sensitizes viewers to social problems with shock.

Doug Isaac

R. Martin Walters' MARIE-ANNE

d. R. Martin Walters, sc. Marjorie Morgan, adapt. George Salverson, ph. Reginald Morris, ed. Stanley Frazen, sd. Chris Large, m. Maurice Marshall, lp. Andrée Pelletier, John Juliana, Gordon Tootoosis, Bill Dowson, David Schurmann, Linda Kupecek, Bill Meilen, Tanto Martin, p. Fil Fraser, p.c. The Motion Picture Corporation of Alberta 1978, running time 88 minutes.

Marie-Anne is the second feature to be turned out by Edmonton producer Fil Fraser, who made his debut in the Canadian film industry not too long ago with **Why Shoot The Teacher**. Like that film, **Marie-Anne** is a movie shot in Alberta on a subject drawn from local history, and as such it has a peculiar fascination for Alberta audiences. Until Fil Fraser came along, it seemed, people in this part of Canada had never seen themselves or their history fictionalized on the screen — unless it was in the course of an occasional Eastern-financed project, or during one of Hollywood's brief, absurd forays north. Thus the shock of finding that it's possible for *us* to make *real movies*



Marie-Anne and family at Fort Edmonton

about *our* lives and heritage (of course retouching them for painless consumption just like the Americans do) has tended to overwhelm any objective local assessment of the film's actual worth. The Alberta public flocked eagerly to **Why Shoot The Teacher**, as it is now doing to **Marie-Anne**, like proud parents going to watch junior in the school play; and for them the question of how good **Marie-Anne** is when compared to (say) **Pretty Baby** or even to **J.A. Martin Photographe** is likely to appear meaningless in the strictest sense of the term. After all, you just don't look at your own child's performance in the same critical light as you would Glenda Jackson's Hedda Gabler.

Nevertheless, if filmmaking in Western Canada is to escape from parochial smallness of vision, it must be judged

according to criteria just as rigorous as we would apply to any film and it has to be said that by these standards **Why Shoot The Teacher** is an artistic failure enlivened by moments of authenticity and insight, and **Marie-Anne** a movie of no special interest.

Marie-Anne (scripted by Marjorie Morgan and directed by R. Martin Walters) is the story of the first white woman to come to Alberta. In the interests of conveying some idea of a film whose major problem is that it seems completely boneless and insubstantial, I'm going to give a full summary of the scenario — more, perhaps, than you ever wanted to know about

During the lengthy credit sequence we see Baptiste Lagimodière, an agent of the Hudson's Bay Company, frolicking merrily through the autumn woods near Fort Edmonton with his

Indian mate Tantoo in the year 1805. He receives a message that his father has died, and that he must go back to Québec to settle the estate and look after his mother. Upon arrival, he's told by the local parish priest that it's time he married and is furnished with a number of recommendations. A late addition to the list is the priest's housekeeper, Marie-Anne, who bursts into tears and complains to her employer that she's 25 already and headed for a dismal future of spinsterhood and domestic slavery. Remaking her mother's wedding dress, she shows up resplendent at the ball that night, and captures the prince's heart in true Cinderella fashion. Cut to scenes of the early days of their marriage, a happy relationship clouded by Baptiste's yearning to return to the open sky and the prairie. Marie-Anne and her husband go to Fort Edmonton in 1808 and immediately run into difficulties with the Company Factor Mr. Bird, who sees Marie-Anne as a potential precedent for the conversion of the Fort from trading post to settlement — the beginning of the end for the local fur trade. He strikes Baptiste from the Company rolls until his wife is sent back east. Marie-Anne also causes a spectacular disturbance among the local Cree Indians: the jealous Tantoo assaults her and Chief Many Horses wants to buy her. This catastrophe is averted only when she goes out to the Indian camp alone to explain why she can't be sold. Many Horses saves face by adopting her into the tribe as his daughter. This even becomes the too-convenient, not-to-be-examined-too-closely escape from the plot's complexities: Marie-Anne can stay because she's an Indian and Bird has no authority over her movements and now Baptiste can return from his trading mission to join her in an idyllic reunion. This outline of the film's storyline is perhaps misleadingly exhaustive for a movie in which nothing of any consequence ever seems to happen. Certainly there's material here for a good film — but only for a film which wishes to intricately observe the niceties of its characters' behaviour and to dwell with quiet intensity on the beauties of period objects and landscape (as, for example, J.A. Martin does),

not for an up-tempo movie that's half conventional plotting and half historical celebration. The treatment of the characters falls squarely between these two poles, so that we're never sure whether to react to them as emotionally-tangled soap-opera characters or as two-dimensional figures in a historical frieze. Whatever individuality the characters do achieve is attributable mainly to the acting (good performances from John Juliani as Baptiste and, especially, from Andrée Peletier — who almost saves the movie, indeed — as Marie Anne).

As for the historical end of things, the film always looks like exactly what it is — a bunch of actors in brand-new costumes cavorting around the reconstructed Fort Edmonton. There's no sense that the objects we see have ever been used, or the clothing lived in; and no sense of the vastness of the wilderness or the distance from civilization — no sense, in a word, of the harshness and isolation, or of the grandeur, of life as it must have been lived in Alberta 170 years ago.

Nor is this unwelcome atmosphere of a small-scale fancy-dress outing dissipated by director Walters and cameraman Reginald Morris. All the interiors are bathed in second-hand Barry Lyndon firelight amber, and all the exteriors are brightly high-key as if lit for television (which, incidentally, is where Walters must have learned his occasional ugly habit of starting a scene with a closeup of some insignificant object and then doing a slow zoom — out to take in the surroundings). Then there's the minor annoyance of peripheral actors injecting an urban Anglo twang into the French-accented context, and the major annoyance of Maurice Marshall's lightweight music — relentlessly wisful and twee, as if assuring us that everything's going to turn O.K. no matter what temporary misadventures the principals might be enduring.

Maybe I'm being too harsh on *Marie-Anne*, which is, after all, an unassuming little movie. What need is there to come down hard on a film with such good intentions and such a transparent awareness of its own lack of ambition? But good intentions and polite unambitiousness are the

bane of the English-Canadian film industry, and it seems a pity to watch Fil Fraser heading down the same road without uttering a protest. Of course we can't produce super-slick superproductions, and we shouldn't want to (though I suspect that's what Canadian audiences do secretly want); but neither should we accept limitations of resources as an excuse for weak scripts and bad directional judgement. I'm sure that, like the parents at the school play, Alberta audiences will get a lot of pleasure out of *Marie-Anne*; but in merely demanding that their child get its lines right and not fall on its face, they will be overlooking a pervasive diffuseness and shallowness in both conception and execution — faults which will be readily apparent to viewers not in the family.

Bill Beard

Ralph Thomas' TYLER

d. Ralph Thomas, sc. Roy MacGregor, ph. Vic Sarin, ed. Ron Wisman, m. Eric Robertson, l.p. R.H. Thompson, Murray Westgate, Sean McCann, Robert McClure, Sonja Smits, exec. p. Ralph L. Thomas, p. David Pears, p.c. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Radio-Canada) 1977, col. 16mm, running time 82 minutes.

This low budget, made for TV film, winner of the Montreal Film Festival for the best Canadian film out of competition prize, is a farming story with a bumper crop of paradoxes. It is too realistic to be fantasy: too fantastic to be real. Those given to classifications will find in this film all the features of a fable, a short story exemplifying a pinciple of human nature and concluding with an epigram. In this case, "Think Canadian First" appears in the last shot on the back of a truck, and in both official languages.

Of course, dealing with any film from a realistic perspective is always risky, since filmmakers from documentaries to experimentalists all lay

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claim to privileged insight into reality. And for most urbanites, except those doing piece work for minimum wage, a realistic depiction of Canadian farming life would resemble the "daze" in the life of Ivan Densinovich. As one farmland refugee has observed, once you've farmed, all else seems to be a vacation. Despite this dark view, supported by recent figures showing a higher per capita tranquilizer and alcohol use in rural areas, many city dwellers dream of the simple country life. Surprisingly, this overtly romantic, often unbelievable and frequently flawed film seems to pander to that dream.

"Surprisingly" is the qualification, since a more penetrating tale might be expected from director and former farm boy, Ralph Thomas, who until recently was associated with CBC's often controversial series, "For the Record." To be sure, real problems facing farmers aren't covered in mulch. Here they have been scripted and cast as stars. These include bureaucratic over-regulation, quota systems which penalize productivity, and financial barriers forcing from the land those young people willing to farm. Indeed, bureaucracy is the villain of the piece.

Any social consciousness raising is over-shadowed by characterizations either larger than life, or too small for it; by a fate so co-operative it must have rehearsed the script; and by a symbolism bordering on poetic overkill, given the complexity of the plot. Several technical faults, certainly not included to give that improvised look esteemed by the European modernists, don't help the film any. What does is the virtuoso performance of R.H. Thomson.

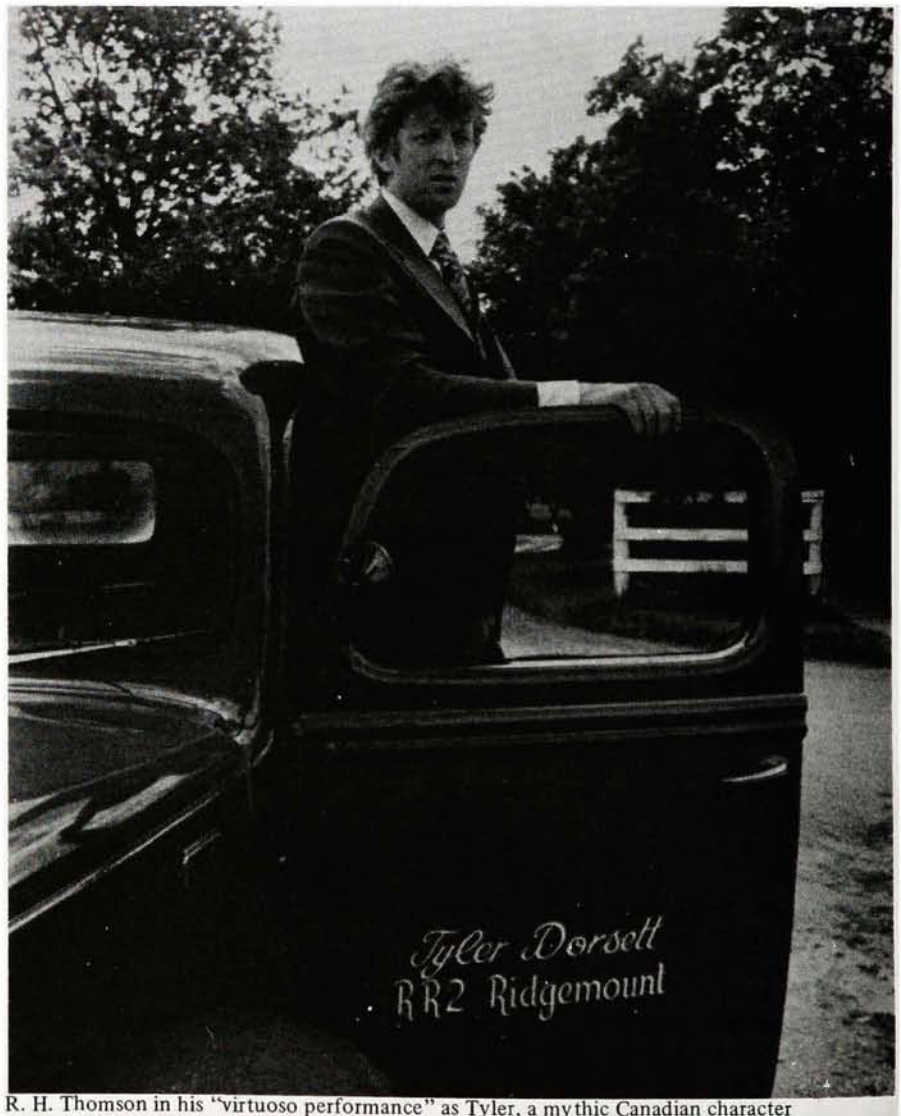
He is superb as Tyler, a post teens farm boy with freckles and red hair (not unlike a rooster's comb), and the charm and ear-lobe-to-shoulder-tip muscles of a budding, farm bred NHL'er (think Canadian). Directorial intent is obvious; early in the film a lingering camera gives Thomson ample opportunity to ham it up. He chug-a-lugs his beer, burps, stuffs a bottle into his belt, and later tosses it into the mailbox, but not before he has impishly "borrowed" money from mom's cookie jar to get drunk. This he does behind the woodpile with the neighbors'

boys, who've got a deluxe shag wagon and a hankering to get from some jail-bait what they used to get from her "friendly" older sister. Tyler is naughty but loveable. For him farm work is play, and play, in keeping with the paradoxes, is undertaken with grim determination easily confused with gusto.

The film opens with a static post-card shot of a white farm building. In one continuous long take, the camera moves forward à la Renoir to re-frame on his father, Archie (Murray Westgate), who walks down a driveway and nails a For Sale sign on a tree. When a distant Tyler yells "Goddamn you!" Archie poignantly turns to the camera and mutters, "Maybe he already has." The film has opened with a curse, a conflict and cynicism. Spectator

interest is piqued, then effectively dis-oriented in the fast cutting sequence following: the shot proves to be a subjective view of Tyler's sister's boyfriend, but before this is ascertained a rush of people has poured from the house with beer commercial enthusiasm, and Tyler has leaped on his motorcycle to race up a hill.

Hills have served as symbols before, and, thinking Canadian, the slag heap in *Mon Oncle Antoine* comes to mind. It was used subtly to begin or end the occasional sequence, a never over-worked temporal sign which also visually resembled the pile of sand in an hour-glass. But Tyler's hill, when he's at one with his machine, is the challenge of nature he must overcome to re-affirm his strength of character, his na-



R. H. Thomson in his "virtuoso performance" as Tyler, a mythic Canadian character

tural if some what romantic ability to take on the toughest challenge and win. It can almost be imagined that with each piston throb he mutters, "I think I can, I think I can...." It is simplistic but significant that the college educated boyfriend, who's hands are as soft as a "baby's bum," chooses that hill for the sight of his home. But later, when he tries to emulate Tyler and make it on the bike, he fails — tragically.

An early demonstration of this aspect of Tyler's character is essential to the plot. Although Archie still has the strength and the will to win the log-sawing contest for the twelfth year in a row (like father, like son, but a poorly cut sequence in which the wrong sawblade is ahead at the end), he has to sell the farm. His wife (Kay Hawtrey, the visual embodiment of wood stove warmed maternalism) is ailing, while each year means \$5,000 more in debt, hard to take when weekly postcards beckon him to retirement in a Florida trailer camp. The quota system penalizes Archie financially if he produces too much milk, but with characteristic rural pride he prefers debts to cutting back "while people are starvin' in the world." Tyler asks to be given first chance to buy the farm and a skeptical Archie agrees.

Tyler visits the farm credit bureau where an agriculture department bureaucrat (Dennis Hayes, so suave he'd easily outshine Eugene Whalen) states that before they could grant him the mortgage, Tyler would have to raise \$30,000 in one month as proof of the farm's productivity. As Tyler leaves, the camera shifts focus to a government poster: *Where in the World is Your Dream?*

With a skill to turn a commodity broker green with envy, Tyler begins to hustle up the cash. He sells everything he can get his hands on, including the truck he's lovingly restored, and the steers he's raised. He undercuts the going rate to get fence building contracts. When he's short, he turns to back road deals selling un-pasteurized milk — something to think about the next time you buy milk at loss-leader prices. The viewer begins to believe Tyler will make it, just as he always makes it up the hill.

With only a few days left and a few thousand short, Tyler goes to gamble on the cock-fights. Getting there involves a ritual which would do justice to the Klu Klux Klan. The outcome, again in keeping with the paradoxes, requires and overly benign fate; it is about as unbelievable as the way the cockfight is depicted. The preliminaries for each bout are staged for the camera to the point where the roosters are brought in. Then footage obviously taken elsewhere is intercut in all its bloody detail with cut-aways to the gambler. It seems that to keep the film audience entertained the fight can't be alluded to, it must be shown.

The film is not without wit. Tyler takes time from his hustling to dump a pail of milk over the head of a supercilious bureaucrat, a kind of liquid pie in the face. When told his sister has broken off her engagement with her joe-college boyfriend (a caricature of the formally educated who in trying to be one of the boys succeeds only in appearing condescending), Tyler says with a paradoxical blend of urbanity and farmyard forthrightness that the last time he saw them they seemed ready to consummate the marriage. Most hilarious is Tyler's treatment of the city "rubes" who come to look over the farm: the man is dressed in shorts and Adidas, his wife looks ready for a cocktail party. In this sequence, Tyler is filmed upward from below and framed within the frame by a doorway, a perspective to express his dominance in the scene as he hints the neighbor may be a child molestor. Tyler's natural moxie transcends city sophistication as it does his future brother-in-law's formal education, a neat reversal of the country bumpkin stereotype.

But Tyler loses, although he's heroically raised the cash. The credit official, who was also at the cockfight, could recommend the loan, but the government regulations which require an MBA even to read, let alone understand, ultimately won't allow types like Tyler to be financed. The official, whose sudden withdrawal of support is inadequately explained, even mentions that if Tyler had a degree... well... maybe his chances would be better.

A drinking bout follows, a traditional favorite of American directors unwill or unable to articulate dramatically deep emotions arising from setbacks or tragedy. In one sequence, faulty continuity is more intriguing than the action: a baby bottle (paradoxically a nice touch) is almost empty of liquor in one shot, in the next it is almost full, yet no temporal ellipsis has been implied. Similarly, in one last self-affirmation, Tyler takes a run up the hill. He makes it to the top, but not without the assistance of a hand which flashes in from off-camera to grab the wheelfork, presumably a hand from the director or maybe even God. (Then again, within the given context of the film, at times the two are indistinguishable.)



Tyler, the face of a young man whose dreams are shattered

A reflection of its construction or, perhaps, the low budget, this film elicits paradoxical responses. It lacks the self-evident style of *Drying up the Streets*, and in its efforts to be simple, *Tyler* is often simplistic. Characters tend to be caricatures, but Thompson as Tyler is almost mythic, the kind of character Canadian film needs. Farmers' problems have indeed been underlined, but the picture of their lifestyle smacks of the TV *Waltons*, a closely knit family circled together like musk oxen (think Canadian) against a hostile outside world. Eric Robertson's music evokes country without, thankfully, step-dancing through Tommy Hunter territory.

Not to be forgotten is that *Tyler* was made for TV. And for all its faults, it far surpasses the flicker and flash of most made for the tube mass entertainment.

Doug Isaac

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Peter Collinson's TOMORROW NEVER COMES

d. Peter Collinson, sc. David Pursall and Jack Seddon, adapt. Sydney Banks, ph. François Protat, ed. John Shirley, sd. Brian Simmons, sd. ed. Peter Best, a.d. Michel Proulx, set dec. Normand Sarrazin, cost. Shura Cohen, lp. Olivier Reed, Susan George, Raymond Burr, John Ireland, Stephen McHattie, Donald Pleasence, Paul Koslo, Cec Linder, Richard Donat, Dolores Etienne, Sammy Snyder, Jane Eastwood, Mario Di Iorio, Stephen Mendel, Walter Massey, Earl Pennington, Jack Fisher, p. Julian Melzack and Michael Klinger, assoc. p. Denis Héroux and Bob Sterne, p. manager. Robert Ménard, p.c. Classic Films Industries Ltd. 1977, col. 35mm, running time 106 minutes.

When Canada becomes involved in a co-production deal and it turns out to be very very good, no one remembers Canada's involvement in the project. A *Special Day* is considered to be an Italian-made film and *Violette Nozière*, which won a well-deserved best actress award for Isabelle Huppert at this year's Cannes Film Festival, is considered to be a French film. Yet, Canada has input in both.

However, when a co-production turns into an abysmal schmozzle, everyone conveniently forgets the other party's involvement and remembers only Canada's.

Such is the case with *Tomorrow Never Comes*, a feeble police melodrama that makes *Dragnet* seem like intelligent, thought-provoking drama. Produced by Canada's wiz-kid Julian Melzack and Britain's Michael Klinger, one has to wonder what this pair of enterprising backer ever saw in the property in the first place.

The film, directed by Peter Collinson, blends together several fashionable topics that are popular both in the movies and in real life: the disillusioned cop, urban violence, hostage-taking and the evil machinations of local authorities. The shimmer of social comment is present but, under Collinson's direction, it lies dormant.

As the credits roll up on the screen and a suitably drippy ballad sung by Matt Monroe drones in the background, a young man returns home, after months away, to reclaim his girl friend. But he flies into a tizzy when he finds out that she has jilted him in favor of the town's highfalutin' influential bigwig who owns everything and everyone. Following a barroom brawl, Frank — that's our hero — suffers a bump on the noggin, goes bananas, finds Janie — that's our heroine — living in the big shot's beach cabana, terrorizes her maid, accidentally shoots a cop, takes Janie hostage; and the scene is set more or less.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, the local men-in-blue are singing 'For He's A Jolly Good Fellow' to their lieutenant who isn't jolly and who is leaving because he's "weary and revolted by the violence and brutality of modern police work," according to the press notes. The humane lieutenant, played by Oliver Reed, rather than just saying goodbye, decides to take control of the erupting hostage drama. (Have you noticed that newspapers love to call these events "hostage dramas" or "hostage incidents", neither of which sounds appropriate.)

At 90 unrelenting minutes, *Tomorrow Never Comes* is at least 60 minutes too long and never rises above being a made-for-television movie, on the Kojak level. But that comparison may not be totally fair since Kojak did pack a wallop from time to time. And Kojak had the driving presence of Telly Savalas who also played a cop tired of corruption. Reed's character bows out like a martyr; Savalas accepts it as a universal, inescapable, fact of life.

Peter Collinson has directed the film in a straight-forward no-nonsense style and that, oddly enough, is the biggest fault of the film. In a time when movie making has become over-written and over-produced, a simple story shooting right from the hip should be welcomed. But the sterility of the plot and its stylistic obviousness robs the film of any high-voltage impact it might have had. Being straight-forward is one thing; being a one-note drama is quite another matter.

What should be a gripping film fraught with tension, something along the lines of *Experiment In Terror*, becomes a talky overlong movie devoid of any suspense. The title telegraphs the conclusion.



Holed-up in a beach cabana, Janie (Susan George) comforts her kidnapper and x-lover, Frank (Stephen McHattie)

Reed, the patient, understanding cop, wants to solve the situation as peacefully as possible. An overzealous plain clothes officer (Paul Kosto) would just as soon use brutish SWAT-tactics, and the crowd that gathers only wants to see blood, anybody's blood.

Collinson's style lacks subtlety. The police, except Reed are portrayed as trigger-happy gunslingers. The crowd, one aspect that's overdone makes asinine comments like "where is Telly Savalas" thinking it's a television shoot, and orders snacks as the drama drags on. It's all so heavy-handed. But when Raymond Burr, as the corrupt commissioner and paid flunky of Mr. Big, pops in on the siege scene dressed all in black, that's too much. The "oh-nos" are audible.

Directors, too often, resort to the flashback in narratives but here, not only would flashbacks be ideal, they are essential. We never really get a feeling for the characters we're dealing with, especially Janie and Frank, who are hold up in the cabana. Why did Frank leave for so long? Did he really expect Janie to hang around for him? Why did she go off with Mr. Lotta Bucks? Was she attracted by \$\$\$\$ only? During the siege, she pleads with Frank and tells him she still loves him, but does she mean it? And if she does, why?

Susan George has so little material to work with the only thing she can do is look puffy and terrified, and sob on cue. It's not a terrific performance but it's like the Olivia Newton-John role in *Grease*, I'm not sure any actress could do much better.

Stephen McHattie, who did a splendid job in the TV James Dean Portrait and made less of a splash in *Grey Lady Down*, does remarkably well with the typical stereotyped-crazy-man role. He fluctuates nicely between the irrational ravings of a bonafide madman and the fuzzy bewilderment of a youth trapped in a situation he doesn't fully comprehend. McHattie keeps the built-in histrionics of the part in check.

The other performers do okay with one-dimensional characterizations but special attention has to be drawn to Donald Pleasance, who's appearing in

anything that remotely resembles a Canadian film. Pleasance contributes one of the nuttiest pieces of overacting I've ever seen on film. He plays the town doctor who gives his two-cents worth concerning Frank's head injury and explains why he's not responsible. Shabbily dressed to look like a cousin of Columbo, Pleasance does the most amazing things with his lips and a cigarette. It's as though he's mugging for the camera and Collinson hasn't noticed — it's difficult to believe he ordered this. Even when he's in the background, Pleasance appears to be doing a cross between Inspector Clouzot and Claude Chabrol. While he could be accused of blatant overacting, I prefer to think of it as a witty performance by an astute actor who recognizes the fact that he's in a stinker and wishes to surface with his career in tact.

Even though David Pursall and Jack Seddon's screenplay fails to appeal to the intellect, *Tomorrow Never Comes* is a visually impressive film. François Protat's cinematography conveys both the heat of the situation and the heat of the day, a feat which should not be underestimated considering the entire shoot was plagued with numerous problems, including inclimate weather, from beginning to end.

Lee Rolfe

Peter Carter's **HIGH BALLIN'**

d. Peter Carter, asst. d. Tony Thatcher, sc. Paul Edwards, ph. Rene Verzier, sp. ph. effects Richard Helmer, sup. ed. Eric Wrate, sd. Jim Hopkins, sd. ed. Douglas Branton, a.d. Claude Bonnière, m. Paul Hoffert, l.p. Peter Fonda, Jerry Reed, Helen Shaver, Chris Wiggins, David Ferry, Christopher Langevin, Mary Pirie, Kay Havtrey, Alan Crofoot, John Friesen, Les Carlson, Cec Linder, Eric House, Myrna Lorrie, assoc. p. Stanley Chase, William Hayward, p. Jon Slan, p. manager, Marilyn Stonehouse, p.c. Jon Slan Productions Inc (1977), col. 35mm, running time 100 minutes, dist. Ambassador Films Limited.

The advertising copy for *High-Ballin'*, which was prepared by the

U.S. distributor American-International Pictures, does not inspire confidence in the merits of this picture, nor does it give any indication of its Canadian origins and location. Indeed, the poster is clearly designed to exploit the similarities between this film and Hal Needham's immensely profitable *Smokey and the Bandit*. It is certainly true that with this film producer Jon Slan and director Peter Carter firmly place themselves on the commercial or "Hollywood North" side of Canadian film, but this should not be seen as a condemnation. The test of a film like this should be whether it succeeds as entertainment and not its nationality.

The action-adventure genre is much more vulnerable than most other types of movies to either pretentiousness and verbosity on the one hand or triviality and mindlessness on the other, and recent examples of these can easily be found. Carter himself fell victim to the pretentious style in the boring *Rituals*. It did, however, teach him an important lesson, which he consistently attempts to apply in the present film; in the absence of a budget that can allow the plethora of stunts and effects of a *Jaws*, a *French Connection* or a *Smokey and the Bandit*, the best way to make an action film that works is to return to the virtues of the western, and aim for straightforwardness and simplicity. If the story is strong enough, these features should be enough — theoretically — to engage the audience.

The question is, does *High Ballin'* work on these terms? The unoriginal script, by Paul Edwards from a story by Richard Robinson and Stephen Schrenk, gives little grounds for optimism. A group of independent truckers, led by Duke Boykin (Jerry Reed), are being harrassed by a gang of high-jackers under the command of a gun-toting tough named Harvey (David Ferry), and bankrolled by the local cargo magnate, King Carroll (Chris Wiggins). Into their midst comes an old friend of Duke's, a reticent and upright ex-motorcycle stuntman with the enigmatic name of Rane (Peter Fonda), who, after some initial hesitation, agrees to help Duke and his buddies. If this sounds familiar, it should, because what Edwards, Ro-

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binson and Schrenk (with, apparently, some input from Fonda as well) have presented is a modernized version of *Shane*. Boykin even has a hero-worshipping son named Tanker (Christopher Langevin), to parallel the role played by Brandon DeWilde in George Steven's film.

Fortunately, this cliché-studded prescription for bathos is offset by the tight control Carter maintains on the story at the outset. In sharp contrast to his direction of *Rituals*, he does not let the movement of the main plot slow down. In this, he is helped by competent performances from the actors. Jerry Reed — for once out of the shadow of Burt Reynolds — gives his standard good-ol'-boy characterization in a comfortable and slyly humorous manner. He is well aided by a group of familiar faces — John Friesen, Alan Crofoot, Mary Pirie, Kay Havtrey, Cec Linder, Eric House — who represent some of the cream of Canadian character actors (whom it is nice to see employed in something other than commercials). Christopher Langevin's Tanker neatly avoids sappy sentimentality.

The villains, however, do not fare as well. Chris Wiggins is his usual solid self, but somewhat ridiculous with his vaguely Texas accent, an obvious black stetson, and a string tie which he also wears in bed. David Ferry's Harvey starts out promisingly with a sort of quiet menace, but he degenerates by the end into the type of twitchiness that even Bruce Dern is trying to abandon.

The key character in *High-Ballin'* however, is Peter Fonda's Rane, and it is with him that Carter's balancing act begins to go awry. In the straight action scenes, such as the chase where Rane hurls some old cars down on the pursuing highjackers, or the classic fight in a dimly lit barnlike barroom, Fonda handles himself with reasonable dispatch. But, in the more reflective moments, his performance begins to come apart. There are times when Rane seems a sadly eviscerated version of Wyatt from *Easy Rider*. No longer the proto-hippy, existential searcher, Fonda's character is now merely "lookin' for something," having quit his stunt riding for the most pragmatic of reasons



Rane (Peter Fonda) comes to the aid of independent trucker, Duke Boykin (Jerry Reed) laid low in a shoot-out

— though he broke "all them records," as he tells Tanker, he also broke "all them bones." At other times Fonda affects the upright innocence characteristic of his father (whom he increasingly resembles physically), or a most disconcerting John Wayne drawl.

It is in the romantic subplot, a traditional bugbear of action films, that *High-Ballin'* really falls apart. Helen Shaver begins very strongly as Pickup, a fiercely independent semi-driver with a dry sense of humour. Her wit helps to obscure the banalities of the script until, for some reason, she takes after Rane (she accurately describes him as "really slow"). The love scene that follows almost brings the film to a grinding halt, as Fonda exhibits a languidity worthy of Keith Carradine, and Shaver is not much better. Carter tries to get the momentum going again (Harvey blasts in with a machine gun), but from this point the flaws in the script become more noticeable, until the climactic shootout scene in which the western motif takes over completely as Rane and Harvey face each other with Pickup looking on like a damsel

in distress. Unlike Rane, however, Peter Carter has lost his fight with bathos.

What then is the answer to the question 'Does *High-Ballin'* work?' A qualified 'yes' is in order. The action audience will tolerate quite a bit, and it is to Carter's credit that, until the ending, he does not talk down to them or insult their intelligence. He gives them a reasonably exciting story and handles his stunts and effects with restraint.

As for its value as a Canadian production, that is a more problematical matter. *High-Ballin'* shows that Canadian technicians and actors can compete in this fundamentally American genre. Helen Shaver's career in particular will hopefully profit by the international exposure she will get here. And while it might confuse audiences in Texas or Alabama to see Canadian flags, Ontario licence plates, and maple leaves on policemen's caps, it is refreshing to see that the paranoia of our filmmakers against showing distinctive Canadian symbols is beginning to lift. Perhaps someday it might be unnecessary.

J. Paul Costabile