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 uninvolving — 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, if 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, Gotlieb 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 Hofses

Robin Spry’s DRYING UP THE STREETS


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
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 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.

Len Cariou (left), a narcotics officer tries to enlist heroin addict Peter Brennan, played by Don Francks, to help break a narcotic ring.
has been made while rehabilitaing in Okala.

Through meetings in topless bars, featuring tasteless shows almost comedic on screen, Brennan's circle of contacts grow. They lead him into violence — a jewelery store robbery, ridding the beauty, poise and, for a crassly commercial one.

and all without eroding usual super competence. But Sheila's played by Jayne Eastwood with her stage show. At first she is shielded by Brennan's circle of — entwined with Brennan's. She shows up as a shy, reluctant participant in a topless long shot, a girl, played by newcomer conveniently enter Brennan's restaurant where he overhears the man offer to the help of his woman. The audience witnesses a theft from a car. In what first appears to be a documentary film, 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, unpolticedized "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 eye-patch 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 As '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-gripping 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.
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


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 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 Photographs 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 Lagimodiere, an agent of the Hudson's Bay Company, frolicking merrily through the autumn woods near Fort Edmonton with his...