

julius kohanyi

a portrait

by Anthony Hall

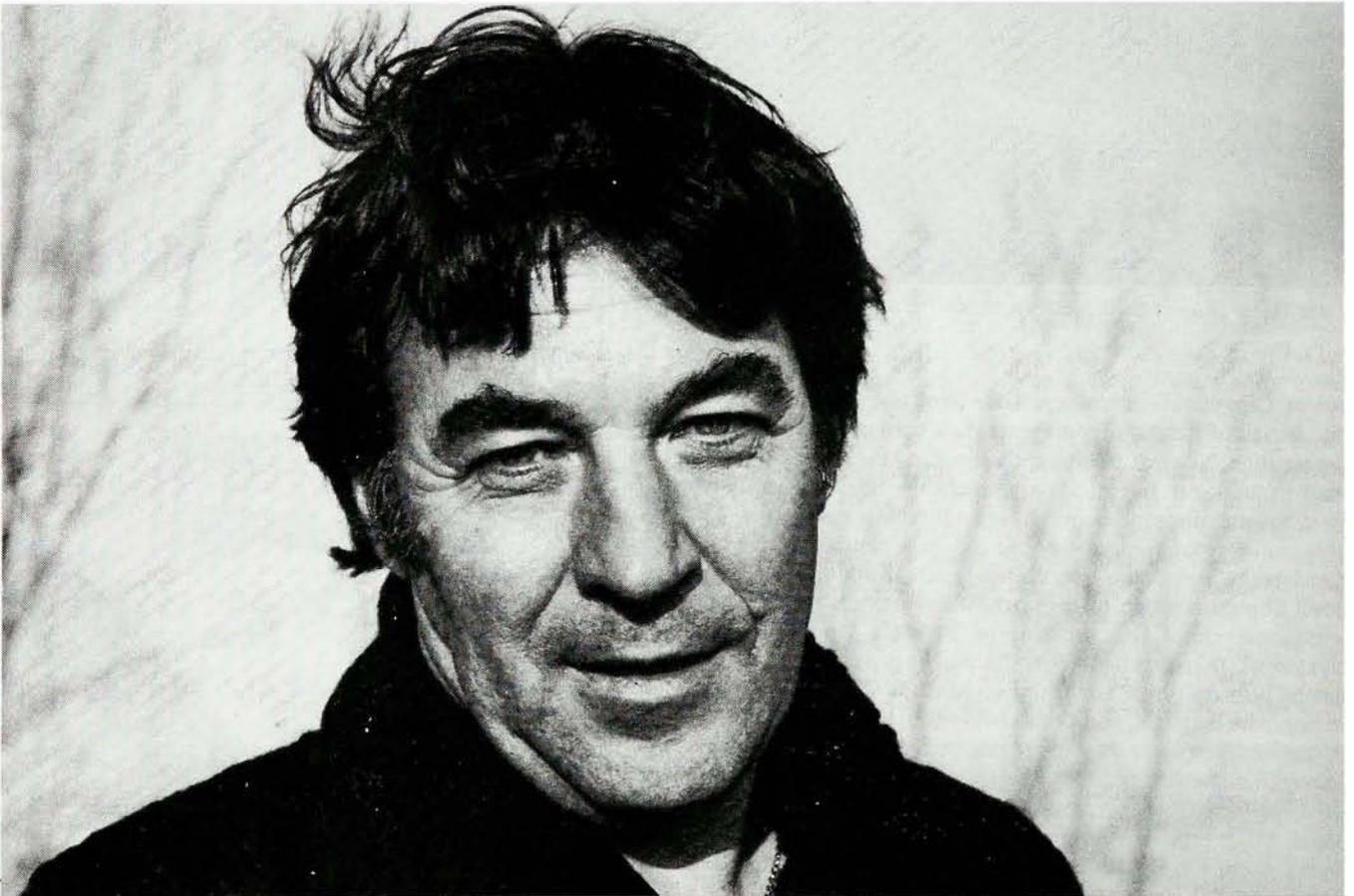


photo: Rose Pelc

Julius Kohanyi looking at a new location for a shoot

Film survivor Julius Kohanyi fought for three years to sell the idea for **Summer's Children**. Now that the film - a dramatization of an incestuous love - is finished, he is taking it to the marketplace at Cannes, confident that the first reactions to private screening promise a warm reception.

In the busy frenzy of last year's feature film activity, a quiet little crew working on a love story about a brother and sister was hardly noticed. But even during this era of sexual anarchy, a movie dealing with the ancient taboo of incest cannot remain unnoticed for long. Now that it's in the can, **Summer's Children** is beginning to make waves. The attention is coming not because the filmmakers have exploited the sensationalism of their subject matter; rather they have approached their theme with integrity and sensitivity, producing a work of art aimed not at the groin, but at the soul.

Due to the fine eye of cinematographer Joe Seckeresh, the film has a European look with shades of California, although it is set in contemporary Toronto. Jim Osborn's script takes us backwards and forwards in time, as we scour the city's underworld with male lead Thomas Hauff who is searching for his suicidal sister. This role is insightfully handled by newcomer Pully Jardine, who haunts the screen with the raw force of her unusually androgynous magnetism.



Photo: Ron Watts

Hanff and Jardin, stars of **Summer's Children**

The director of **Summer's Children** is Julius Kohanyi, a survivor of almost two decades of independent filmmaking in Canada. For him the feature's completion represents the happy ending of a long hard struggle. To sell the idea, he says, "it took three and an half years of incredible turndowns and insults and mental rapes. Before I knew we were going to make the picture I felt like a wasted old whore. Now I'm laughing all the way," he continues, exclaiming: "The so-called experts who looked at the script and said it was nothing. Now it's so sweet to prove them wrong."

Kohanyi's elation is perhaps premature, but not without foundation judging from the feedback he has received after previewing **Summer's Children** to a small group of film insiders. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation at once made a substantial offer for the television rights, while *Variety* praised the work (29 November, 1978), comparing it favourably to **Outrageous**. Sid Adilman of the *Toronto Star* reserved similar comments (23 November, 1978), hailing **Summer's Children** as "the most unusual movie yet made in Canada." "Nobody thought the film would get made," says Linda Beath, manager of New Cinema Enterprises, which will probably handle **Summer's Children** in Canada. "Now that its done," she continues, "everyone can see that Julius has pulled it off against tremendous odds."

Already Kohanyi's achievement in **Summer's Children** is bringing him offers to direct other features. One of these comes from producer Bill Marshall, the brains behind the Festival of Festivals. He calls **Summer's Children** "the best calling card" for a first-time feature director that he has ever seen. This judgement is shared by Michael McCabe, the man at the

Canadian Film Development Corporation who gave **Summer's Children** the go-ahead after his predecessors had turned it down three times. "We certainly would like to be involved in Julius' next feature," says McCabe.

What is really wowing the money men like Marshall and McCabe is the production quality that Kohanyi has been able to get on the screen with his limited budget. **Summer's Children** was made in 35mm for less than \$200,000 with a shooting ratio of five and a half to one. (Most feature filmmakers expose about fifteen units of stock for every one that appears in the final release.) To achieve such efficient production, Kohanyi did his homework. For example, he painstakingly walked and photographed every possible angle of his locations long before his crew was assembled. But the depth of Kohanyi's preparation for **Summer's Children** goes far deeper than this. He has devoted the best part of his thirty-nine years to a growing love affair with film. "I would have liked to have had a wife and children by now," he says, "but I have never been able to find a woman who can overcome the jealousy created by my all-consuming passions for my art."

Kohanyi's marriage to film has not always been an easy one. But then truly dynamic relationships never are. The bad experiences have left some deep wounds in a vulnerable man who has learned to fight back. Beneath his acquired street-wise cynicism, beats the vital heart of an incurable romantic, still in the clutches of his first crush. Kohanyi refuses to grow up, and his films at their best reflect the wide-eyed openness of the little boy in him.

Born the son of a hydro engineer in Kelowna, British Columbia, Kohanyi was taken by his parents to their native Hun-

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Anthony Hall is a teaching assistant working on his doctorate in Canadian history at the University of Toronto.

gary shortly after he was born. They arrived just in time for the Second World War, and it was not until 1947, when Julius was ten, that he and his sister could return to Canada. By the time he was seventeen Kohanyi's growing interest in film took him to Hollywood, where he met Stanley Kramer while taking evening film classes at the University of Southern California. "If you want to make films, don't complain about not getting a job," he was told by Kramer. "If you want to make movies just get yourself a camera and do it." Back in Toronto several years later, Kohanyi became ready to follow Kramer's advice. Working as an usher at the Uptown Theatre helped convince him to take the plunge. He recalls: "When you witness a film five times every day, and you learn every line, eventually you say, 'I would have done it differently.'"

Kohanyi bought his first used 16mm camera with \$150 borrowed from a girl friend and proceeded to make **Requiem for a City Block** in 1962. "This was so technically inept," he says, "that I would not allow it to be shown in public." Two years later he was ready to try again, and this time he came up with a winner that is something of a classic. **Herring Belt** is his intensely personal statement about the organic wholeness of life in Toronto's ethnically diverse Kensington Market. Here we get a sense of Kohanyi, the displaced person, harkening back to the more intimate way of life he had left behind in Europe.

During these early years Kohanyi supported his film habit by running his own tiny auto body shop. He was just barely able to make ends meet. Says Kohanyi, "When every \$20 you spend on buying and developing a 100 ft. roll means that you might have to miss your supper, you soon learn to correct any technical mistakes which waste film."



Kohanyi watches Henry Moore sculpt

By 1967 Kohanyi had mastered the basics of his craft. That year he directed two works, **Teddy** and **Henry Moore**, which began to win an international reputation for him on the film festival circuit. In **Teddy** the pattern was set for many of his later works — including **Summer's Children** — which deal with their joys and frustrations of youth. He explains, "The boy in my films is always confused. He doesn't know how to grow up. Like me in my childhood, he can't decide whether to relate to this or that culture. The alienation of **Teddy** towards his parents is an example of this."

Kohanyi has built the film around the trauma that **Teddy** experiences when he rips his pants. As in most of his subsequent works, Kohanyi seeks his drama not on the physical plane, but rather in the interior spaces of the emotional universe. "If I were dead my parents would be sorry," says **Teddy** as he passes through the bicycle wheel of life into his dream world. In **Games**, made in 1975, there is a similar pilgrimage into the aroused imagination of a young boy locked over night in the Royal Ontario Museum. With **I'm Alive**, his 1976 documentary on autistic children, Kohanyi takes the viewer deeper yet into the miracle of youthful perception.

Henry Moore, the other film made in 1967, reveals an added dimension of Kohanyi's talent. As he was to do later in a picture called **Rodin**, the filmmaker uses his craft to penetrate the meaning behind the work of a major artist. The structure of the earlier picture revolves around Kohanyi's engagingly intimate interview with Moore. Interspersed throughout these scenes are powerful cinematic forays around and through the organic mass of the great man's sculptures. In Kohanyi's superlative study of space and form, Moore himself becomes a sculptured shape seemingly carved on the celluloid by the deft movements of cinematographer Nick Knowland.

Kohanyi claims that the single-minded pursuit by Moore of an artistic concept served as an inspiration for him to keep going through some of the darker days ahead. And the influence did not stay there, for Moore's concern with the abstract is reflected in another aspect of Kohanyi's work. This is most readily apparent in **Images**, which he made with Eli Kassner in 1970. Kohanyi calls the film a "cosmic orgasm," a phrase heavy with the ambiance of the era during which it was conceived. To make the picture, still photographs were taken through a microscope of crystals being bombarded by acid. There were set in motion on the animation board through a variety of ingenious techniques. The effect produced is disturbing, as throbbing twisting images assault the senses in a pandemonium of red. The emulsion literally burns with the pulsating passion of Kohanyi caressing his craft.

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Pully Jardin, a raw androgynous energy



Wayne Best as a young and alienated Bob

But Julius Kohanyi does not always live in the ethereal spaces of high art. When he needs release, he gets it through cycling and tennis. In his work, responsibilities have come with the success. He has been an executive member of the Directors Guild of Canada and served on the pre-selection jury for the Festivals Office of the Secretary of State. More recently, he acted as Chairman of the Canadian Film Awards, but he gave up this position fearing that his work directing features constituted a conflict of interests.

One of the most interesting appointments received by Kohanyi was when he was chosen by ex-CBC drama chief John Hirsch to be the producer of the show *Sprockets*. The series, which ran from 1974 to 1976, was an all-too-rare

showcase for the works of Canada's independent filmmakers. As usual, Kohanyi took up the challenge with zest, turning out 26 lively programs at the incredibly low price of \$5,500 each. He achieved this without sacrificing production quality, and the impact of *Sprockets* was so strong that it often received over 700 letters a day. At the end of his contract, Kohanyi was able to return \$43,000 of the originally allocated budget to the Corporation. "For me it was an ego trip," he says. "I wanted to show that outside filmmakers are so good, that they can afford to give money back and still get the job done well and on time."

Kohanyi maintains that *Sprockets* was taken off the air, because its low cost and high popularity were an embarrass-

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photo: Ron Watts

an incestuous affair between brother (Tom Hanff) and sister (Pauly Jardin)

ment in in-house CBC producers with their bloated budgets. On the topic he becomes adamant, reserving kind words only for the underfunded CBC officers in the Program Purchasing Department who nurtured his career during the early years by buying his shorts. States Kohanyi, "The CBC is not for all the people. It is only for CBC people who care more about security and their homes in Rosedale than they do about making good television. They're a frightened, incestuous group." His solution, "Scrap the CBC as a production outfit. Keep them only as broadcasters of work handed out to private people. That way you'll have guarantees with contracts firmly limiting budgets and production schedules."

Kohanyi sees the problem at the CBC as part of a broader Canadian malaise. He explains this diagnosis through a discussion of the distribution strategy for **Summer's Children**: "We plan to open at Cannes and then New York in front of the best critics. I don't want to open my picture here because in this country it will be kicked as being Canadian. But if you bring a movie in after somebody else has approved it, like they did with **Outrageous**, then Canadians will applaud. Canadians approve what Americans approve. This comes from insecurity, which in turn comes from the fact that we sold off our timber and our oil and our real estate. The country is like a giant orange being squeezed drier and drier by a small group of hucksters. It's fast becoming a temporary bus stop for everyone."

In conversation Julius Kohanyi speaks his mind with refreshing frankness. But in his films he employs a different, more subtle mode of communication. Often it is the thing left unsaid, or the action happening off screen, which most forcefully arouses curiosity. Here lies Kohanyi's secret, for he understands that by being too explicit one limits imagination. And he knows that it is in the interior world of the mind's eye, not the exterior one of the camera's, where great movies are

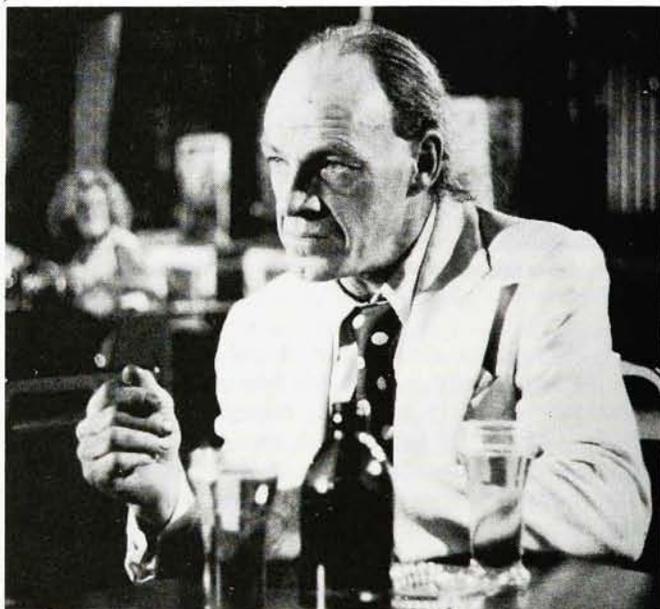


photo: Ron Watts

Don Franks, having a serious drink

really made. With **Summer's Children**, Kohanyi hones his sharp talent for stimulating an audience through innuendo and indirect reference. The only hint of the physical presence of the lovers' parents, for instance, is the father's cough at the beginning of the film. By the end of the picture, however, every viewer's imagination has been induced to create mental images of the strange parental pressures which underlie this unorthodox bond between brother and sister.

Just as some dramatic relationships are better left undefined, so it is with the nature of the forces which animate Julius Kohanyi's passion for his art. All we can say is that with the successful completion of **Summer's Children**, this tested love affair could well be passing into a beautiful new phase.