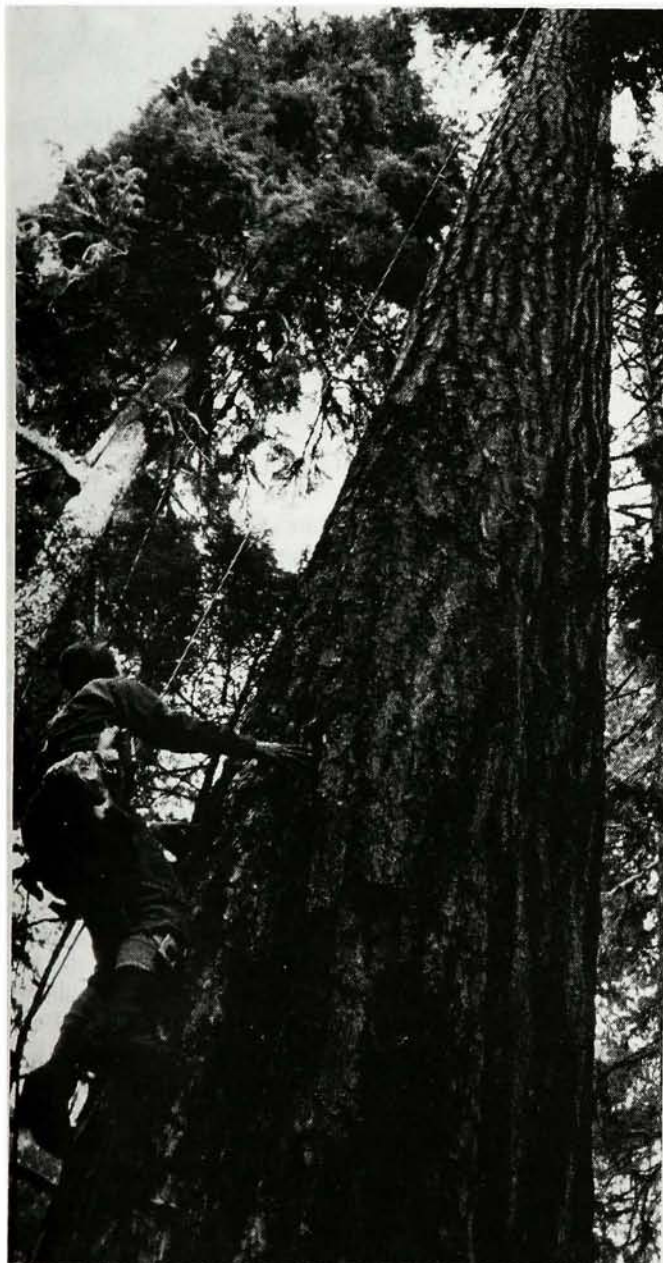

clear and independent



In *Spartree*, highrigger Marv Trudeau climbs up to top a tree

Ever wonder what happens to film school drop-outs? On the West Coast, Phil Borsos went on to make two lovely films and to win two Etrogs for them. What's more, he has taken care of their marketing.

by doug herrick

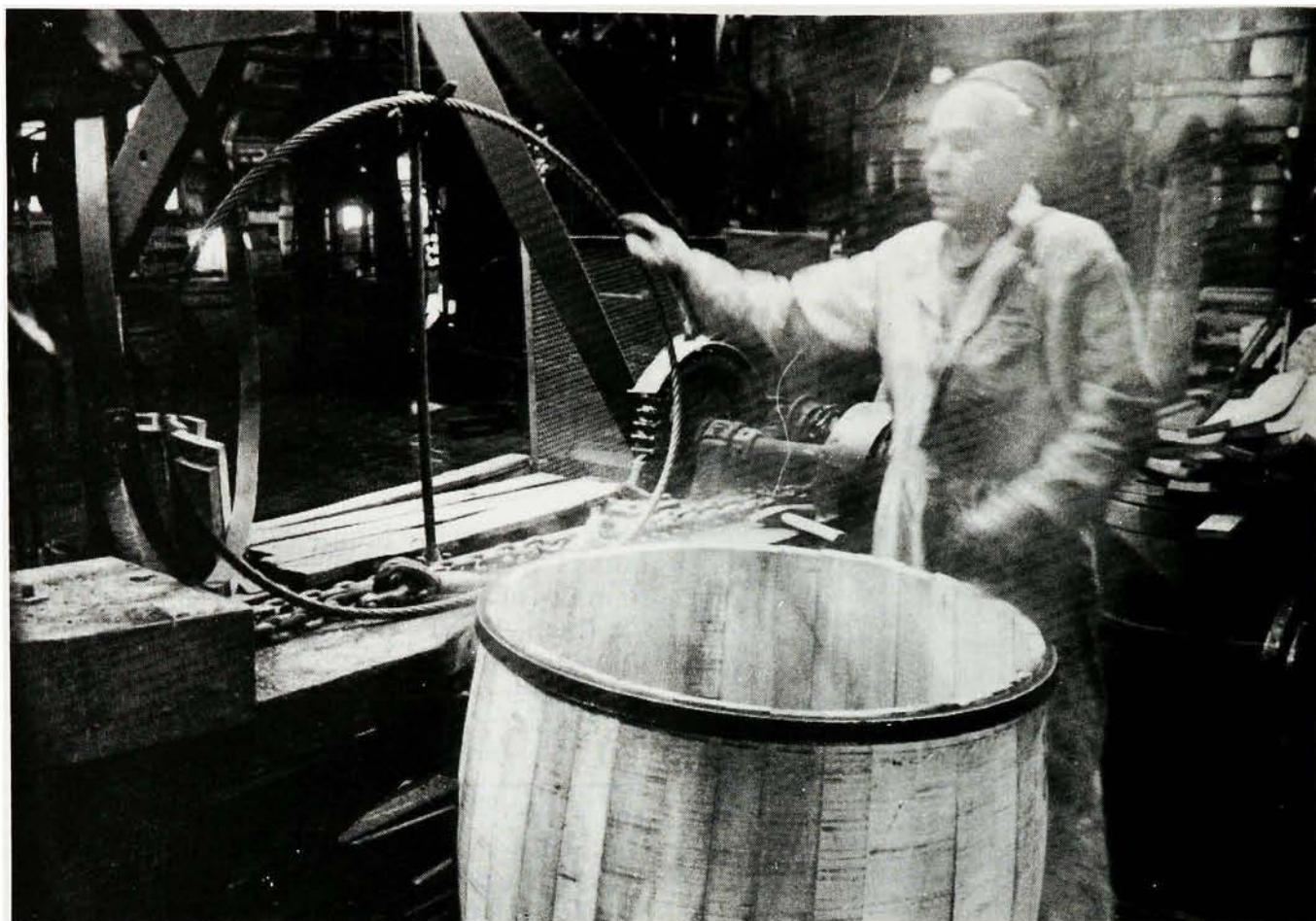
Like many talented professionals with an impatience for academic formalities, Phil Borsos began his career inauspiciously. He flunked his first filmmaking course.

But Borsos is not your average underachieving West-coast filmmaker. Today, at the tender age of 25, he has made two films, *Cooperage* and *Spartree*, both of which won the Etrog in the Theatrical Short category for the respective years of 1976 and 1977. In addition, he owns his own production company and backs up his considerable filmmaking skills with the promotional instincts and marketing savvy not always associated with the independent filmmaker.

Borsos has not let his visual style be seduced by the physical scale and epic quality of the British Columbia landscape. Instead, he prefers to work his camera in close, minutely documenting the processes of such dying arts as barrel-making and tree-topping. And he does so with the precise craftsmanship of his subjects.

Although he dabbled in photography in high school, Borsos is more conscious of the effect that silkscreening had on his visual discipline. As he tells it, "My father taught me silkscreening quite early. I became more and more drawn to the medium because it is so stark. I liked that. I also liked the fact that you could follow one single image to its logical conclusion. In fact, the idea of a single image is important in my inspiration for a film. If I walk into a place and I see something right off the bat, I know I have a film. The idea for *Spartree*, for example, came from a Vancouver Sun photo I saw of a giant fir being topped because it was infected with dry rot. Wow, what a shot!" (What a shot is right. For the dramatic topping of the giant fir in *Spartree*, Borsos assembled

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A cooper in a cloud of steam assembles a barrel at Sweeney's Cooperage

a crew of 20, placed twelve cameras in surrounding trees to record the fall, and even tied five surplus American Air Force gun cameras to the top of the fir just for fun.)

Out of high school, Borsos first enrolled in the Banff School of Fine Arts. It was here that his film instructor placed him at the bottom of his class of 23. Borsos took the hint and transferred back home to Vancouver to pursue filmmaking at the Vancouver School of Art. As with many student films, Borsos' VSA works (**Barking Dog** and **Cadillac**) will probably not be soon revived as overlooked masterpieces. But as experiments in technique, they give a good indication of the directions that Borsos would later pursue.

Barking Dog (1973) is described tersely in the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre catalogue as a "Take-off of the Western Cowboy and the American Gangster of the 40's." That's possible. It is vague, or shall we say ambiguous, to the point where one runs the risk of investing it with more significance than it can deliver if close examination is prolonged. Basically, however, it is a study of character through editing. A gangster and his moll drive up to the entrance of Sweeney's barrel factory, he enters the door with a package and is shot by a long-haired gunman who hops in the car with the moll and drives off. The conceit is revealed in the credits. Both men are played by Bill Cupit. Kuleshov is praised.

Cadillac (1974) provided Borsos with an opportunity to demonstrate his technical virtuosity. The film is a series of carefully set up shots of the flamboyant expanse of metal

and chrome known as the 1954 Cadillac. Borsos satirizes the television commercial in this film, because it provides him with a form in which to accumulate his roof shots, door shots, bumper shots, and shots of the car blasting down country roads and over a bridge. As Borsos' camera pores lovingly over each extravagant fin and bulbous backup light, a salesman lauds its qualities and options ("Optional at extra cost"). Without Bill Reiter's exaggerated and effusive parody of a salesman — complete with blue shirt, white tie, tacky Western Yoke jacket, and several days of unshaved facial hair — the film would no doubt be a first rate commercial.

For his third film **Cooperage**, Borsos returned to Sweeney's barrel factory to document the art of the barrel-maker. Like many filmmakers, he first approached the National Film Board with his ideas. "I didn't have the money to make **Cooperage** myself," Borsos explained. "So I walked down to the Vancouver office of the NFB and asked them if they could help me with some raw stock and editing facilities. Initially, they said they liked the idea and would pay for raw stock, a work print, and would see later on about editing time. They also agreed to loan me some camera equipment and said that a cinematographer would be sent to sort of oversee things. That was fine. Later, however, the camera equipment started falling apart and we had to replace it. The cinematographer never showed up."

When Borsos brought the rushes to the Film Board, the NFB withdrew support from the project. "They claimed

they were sorry, but they felt there was not much of a film there. They thought it was really disjointed and fragmented; When I asked them about editing facilities, they claimed that it was all booked up."

Borsos rough cut **Cooperage** himself and took it to a "really super editor" in Vancouver named Jana Fritsch. Much of the quality of **Cooperage** is owed to Fritsch. Her initial sequence of shots, edited to music, establishing the factory in a state of early morning rest before the old machines spring loudly to life is one of the finest of the film. Her cutting is quick, but the impression is one of total peace. Then Borsos' camera takes over, moving with the coopers through clouds of steam, peering into the open charring fires, and probing the greasy, dust-covered gears of antiquated equipment still driven by overhead belts. Old, tinted Weyerhaeuser footage of the making and assembling of barrel stays in years past, is woven through the beginning of the film, establishing just how little things have changed.

By right of excellence, if not aggravation, **Cooperage** triumphed over NFB competition at the 1976 Canadian Film Awards. The people at the NFB Vancouver office must have felt as testy as a certain film instructor in Banff.

The marketing plan for **Cooperage** was as well thought out as the film itself. Of the \$19,000 that Borsos spent making the film, the Canada Council chipped in \$5,000, and the Film Board donated \$2,000 in raw stock and processing. Rocky Mountain Films paid the balance. Borsos ran the film through the festival circuit with the help of the Festivals Bureau of the Secretary of State's Office. The film was screened in London, Chicago, Barcelona, and the Virgin Islands. Viking Films was contracted for film sales and still handles the Canadian market, while the Boston office of the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre is in charge of American sales.

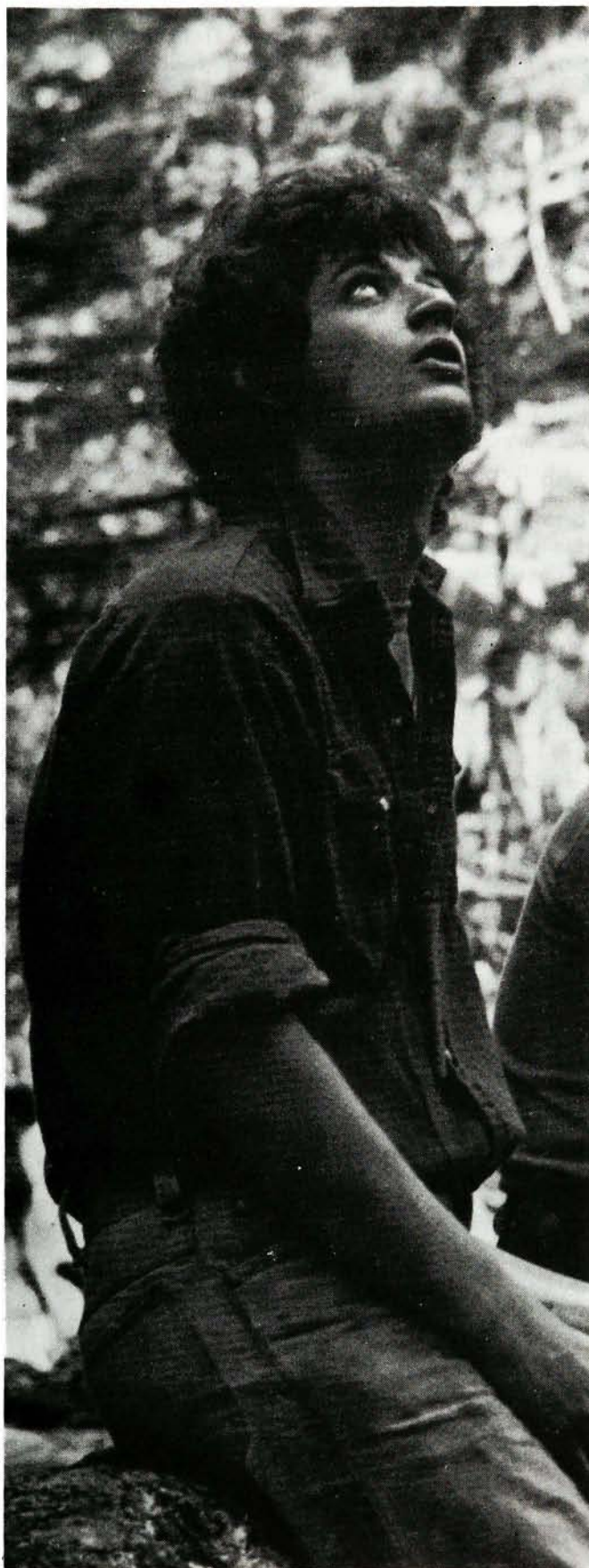
The CBC saw the film and its program purchasing department picked it up for \$1,750. Odeon gave it a thirteen-week run in theaters in British Columbia and Alberta.

The success of **Cooperage** enabled Borsos to secure a Vancouver bank loan for his next undertaking. Originally working-titled **The High-Rigger** and later changed to **Spartree**, it remains Borsos' finest film.

After **Cooperage**, Borsos vowed in a *Vancouver Sun* article never to make another short film. But, obviously he is hooked on the energy of filmmaking. He admits that he fell into filmmaking in the first place because, unlike silkscreening, "It's exciting." As he tells it, "You have to deal with hundreds of people, money, weather, and light, trying to coordinate all these intangibles. I like to think of myself as a producer, because I value the control. I prefer the overview."

In the case of **Spartree**, Borsos' skills as a producer were put to the test. Like **Cooperage**, he was out to document a fading art; that of the high-rigger, the man who tops the tree from which the central drag cables are supported in logging operations. Logistical problems started with finding the right tree. Initial inquiries were met with less than unbridled enthusiasm. Finally, a perfect 250' specimen was found, but it was unfortunately located in a firebreak — an area in which no cutting is allowed. After obtaining government permission to top one tree, Borsos assembled his crew of high-riggers, stuntmen, cameramen, speed climbers and others.

Borsos was obsessed with the visual quality of the film. He constructed elaborate dolly platforms over the forest floor to get the sort of smooth, gliding shorts that he felt even his



Director Phil Borsos on the Spartree set

steadicam was not up to. After all the rigging and preparation was over, the tree was topped. This climactic short appears in the final film from six different angles.

Like *Cadillac*, *Spartree* is a visual exercise in style. Everything leads up to the one shot from which the film was first conceived. As in *Cooperage*, the old Weyerhaeuser footage explains and provides counterpoint to the principle action. But these are not educational films in the usual sense even though they are selling well to educational film libraries. Borsos is not overly explicit in conveying the concepts behind making a barrel or topping a tree. Instead, he skillfully observes without narration, and in this way conveys process. This reticence works in *Cooperage*, but in *Spartree*, there is a weak moment. A blacksmith is seen beating into form an unexplained metal object. It is never completely understood what this object is, although one might assume that it has something to do with the cables.

But Borsos doesn't care about explaining each point. "You shouldn't have to tell the viewer everything," he says. "I believe that the audience must work at understanding the film. If the filmmaker does everything for the viewer, then he's just acting like some audiovisual babysitter and the viewer gets

less from the experience.

Recently, Borsos has been working on a short for the NFB (all is forgiven), a history of nails throughout the ages. He is also hard at work researching and going over script drafts for a feature film on the first Canadian train robbery. Much of Borsos' energy these days goes into his Vancouver-based production company, Mercury Pictures Inc. Borsos believes that a filmmaker must keep working in the medium, even if it means commercials, industrial films, or starving. "I used to work in a local film lab named Alpha Ciné in Vancouver for two years. Sometime during those two years I decided that I had to make pictures full time instead of dissipating my energies all over the place. So I quit, and starved for a while, but things are getting better. I don't understand writers or artists who drive cabs or wait on tables. I suppose you can do it, but I'd rather starve than waste away mentally."

Phil Borsos has achieved the perfect blending of skills for an independent filmmaker. His visual style is as meticulous, clear, and precise as his organizational skills, and he is an effective distributor and businessman. If he keeps up his present commitment to the medium, we will no doubt have much to look forward to. □



The owner and his 1954 Cadillac: a "flamboyant expanse of metal and chrome"