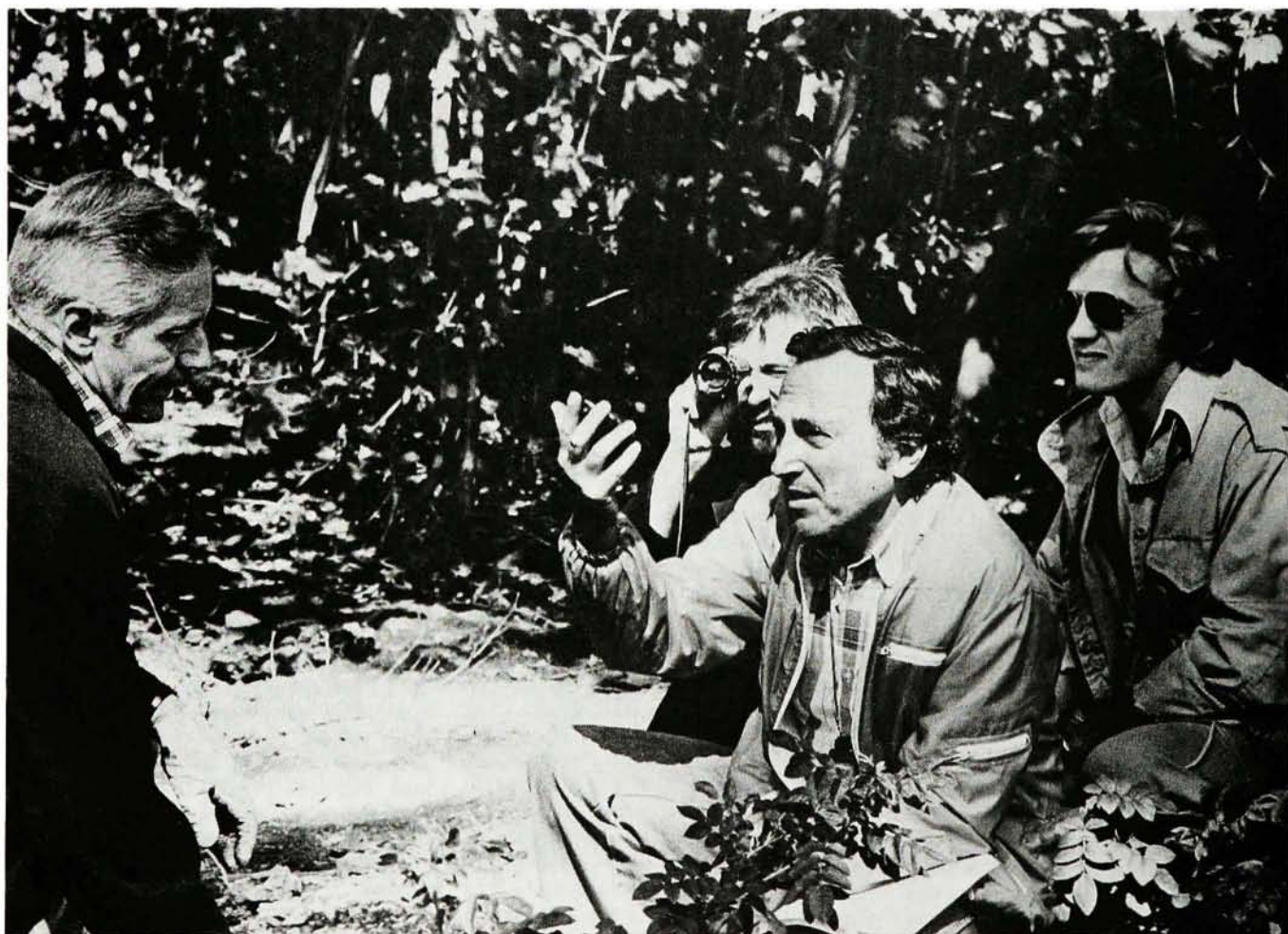

an interview with alvin rakoff forewarned is forearmed

by jean laikan

Alvin Rakoff returned to Canada because tax shelter investments made work plentiful. But, four features later, he has serious reservations about the industry's failure to promote artistic quality.



Director Alvin Rakoff coaxing a reluctant Arthur Hill as the cinematographers line up a shot on *Dirty Tricks*

In the maze of business deals and tax shelter schemes that form the Canadian film industry, the high profile positions seem to be reserved for the producers. Although the creative communities of other countries often take a 'de facto' back seat to the moneymen, it is nevertheless the directors, writers and cameramen who receive most of the public attention generated by their films. Canadian motion pictures are not yet a director's medium: the scramble to see a return on investments and the push to feed the international market with 'commercial' products has focused the spotlight squarely on the 'packager.'

Despite their low profile, there is a small cadre of Canadian directors who lend both their skills and their qualifications as two 'certification points' to those same packages. One of the busiest, albeit most mysterious members of this group is Toronto-born Alvin Rakoff, who helmed one of the first features produced under the tax shelter scheme, **King Solomon's Treasure**, and has since overseen **City on Fire**, **Death Ship** and **Dirty Tricks**.

After graduating from the University of Toronto, Rakoff entered the field of journalism, then gradually shifted his focus to writing for radio and television. It was as a writer that he continued his career in England: the BBC made him a director, and he remained on staff at the Corporation for five years. He later became the first free-lance director in British television, producing a volume of work for the British independent credits. From time to time, Rakoff has returned to Canada to direct television drama, but the bulk of his recent Canadian output has been in the new motion picture industry.

Cinema Canada spoke with him in the editing room of **Dirty Tricks**.

Cinema Canada: *Your television credits are extraordinary, and as you've worked in drama at both the BBC and the CBC, what do you feel are the differences between the two organizations?*

Alvin Rakoff: They're enormous. The CBC is not geared to producing plays anymore; it hasn't been for years. The staff and crews aren't trained to the extent of those at the BBC, which produces about four or five plays a week of varying size. Drama, or the television play, is part of the television diet there: it is not part of the diet anywhere in North America. The experience for a director who travels back and forth can be hair-raising. I disliked almost the entire experience at the CBC. I liked being back in Toronto, liked the Canadian subject matter. But the technical nightmares were horrendous.

Can you give me an idea of the work you did recently in Canada?

One play I did in Toronto three or four years ago was called **Lulu Street**. Good play, nice cast of people, and one of the worst sets I've ever worked with in my life. Art direction, incidentally, is a great weakness in Canada, in both film and television. It was hard to impose one's will on the CBC. Perhaps in that big a bureaucracy, you've got to

Jean Laikan is an avid film buff and free-lance writer living in Montreal.

know how to make the wheels turn in your favour. For instance, I know — even after years of absence — how to make the BBC wheels turn, and I found it difficult to impossible to make it work at the CBC in Toronto. The result was that I did a very ordinary production. And there's no need for a television play to be just 'ordinary.' It should be good or not screened.

*To move to film, it seems you were involved in one of the first pictures to be produced under the tax shelter regulations, **King Solomon's Treasure**.*

Yes, and the less said about that the better!

Well, it's just that no one can figure out what happened to it.

Which proves that there's still someone in heaven looking after our interests, and the interests of the public. Hopefully, that picture will never be seen by anyone. I mean, it wasn't a *bad* film. It was supposed to be a kiddies' movie, with monsters and such.

The original **King Solomon's Mines** was a wonderful picture, very important in the history of Hollywood films because it was one of the first that really went on location. A great landmark. Ours was a landmark in another way, in that they tried to take this children's story and turn it around. The whole production was built around these models. They needed two dinosaurs, and giant crabs, and various other monsters, and the production ran out of money. So that by the time it came to be shot, ridiculous monsters were built, and the picture just doesn't hold together. The last reel isn't that bad, actually.

*The next Canadian picture you did was **City on Fire**, and then **Death Ship**, and finally **Dirty Tricks**. People are always trying to determine why a director takes one kind of picture over another, and the sensationalist nature of the first two films brings that to mind. Did you specifically choose that kind of picture for any particular reason?*

No. I mean, you've got a choice. You can sit back and wait for the kind of film you want to make to be offered to you. If you do, you don't work very much. And because of the nature of what is being made in Canada today, I certainly wouldn't have been offered very much. The only positive thing is that I'd earned a reputation for being a strong storyteller of meaty dramas, and for controlling actors. And I wanted to do some action stuff: I knew I could, because that's what I'd started with. But when **City on Fire** came along, I didn't want to do it because I was right in the middle of **Romeo and Juliet** for the BBC Shakespeare series. And it was such a switch, from doing something where the word is all-important to where the action is all-important. But it was good to make the switch, because I like doing action as much as I like heavy verbal drama, and I needed to get back to the action stuff. That's the reason I did **City on Fire**.

Do you harbour any fears that you'll be 'typecast' as an 'action director'?

You know, I've been doing this job a long time, and you

can be labelled and unlabelled with every picture you do. If *Dirty Tricks* takes off, as hopefully it will, they're going to say: "He's such a great director of light comedy." If one of the action pictures had taken off, I'd suddenly become an 'action director.' All a director has to do is choose, set up a pattern for himself.

I'm not interested in one specific genre of film, and I think categorizing someone is rather hateful. Even now,

most people say "He's a television director," or "a television-film director." All of which is bullshit. You're either a director or you're not.

An ideal year for me would be to do one theatre, one television and one film. As a director, I'd be testing all my muscles. Now I know that for some, this is almost heresy: they think this great medium is your be-all and end-all, and I don't think that's true. I think there are other muscles to flex, other stories to be told, which can't be told on film.

Have you done a lot of theatre work?

No, not nearly as much, because of the very prejudices we're talking about. I made my name in Britain as a television and film director, and they have the same barriers there. They say: "Theatre? My God, he's not a West End director: he's a film man." I personally think that's nonsense.

To shift to the Canadian scene, how do you view products being produced, and the basic foundations of the industry?

I think they've started something on a financial basis. One of the credible ways in the film industry to make movies: get some money together and do it. It can lead to a very hollow way of making movies. What I see as being wrong, and God knows it's only my opinion, is that it's an external way. No one, in all the time I've been working — and among my friends who are directors — has approached a director and asked, "What kind of film do you want to make? What would you like to do that reflects life as you see it?" Everybody says, "We've got this pile of tax shelter money, let's find a property, and do you, the director, want to make it?" Now, as a professional director, you've got a choice. You either say 'yes' or 'no'; no one's holding a gun to your head. But I'd like to see the more internalized way get a chance.

If the business holds together in its present form, how do you see its future?

You'll have developed an industry purely dependent on tax shelter money. No self-expressive directors or film-makers will have evolved, and the moment that 'external' thing — the money — is gone, and there's nobody who will have achieved world-wide recognition, the industry has to collapse. The potential here is enormous because of the tax shelter laws. The thing is to use that to create a film industry, and stop trying to make pictures that Hollywood doesn't really want to make.

Ted Kotcheff said that he didn't see the point in coming home to direct "B" pictures — that he could do that in Hollywood if that's what he wanted.

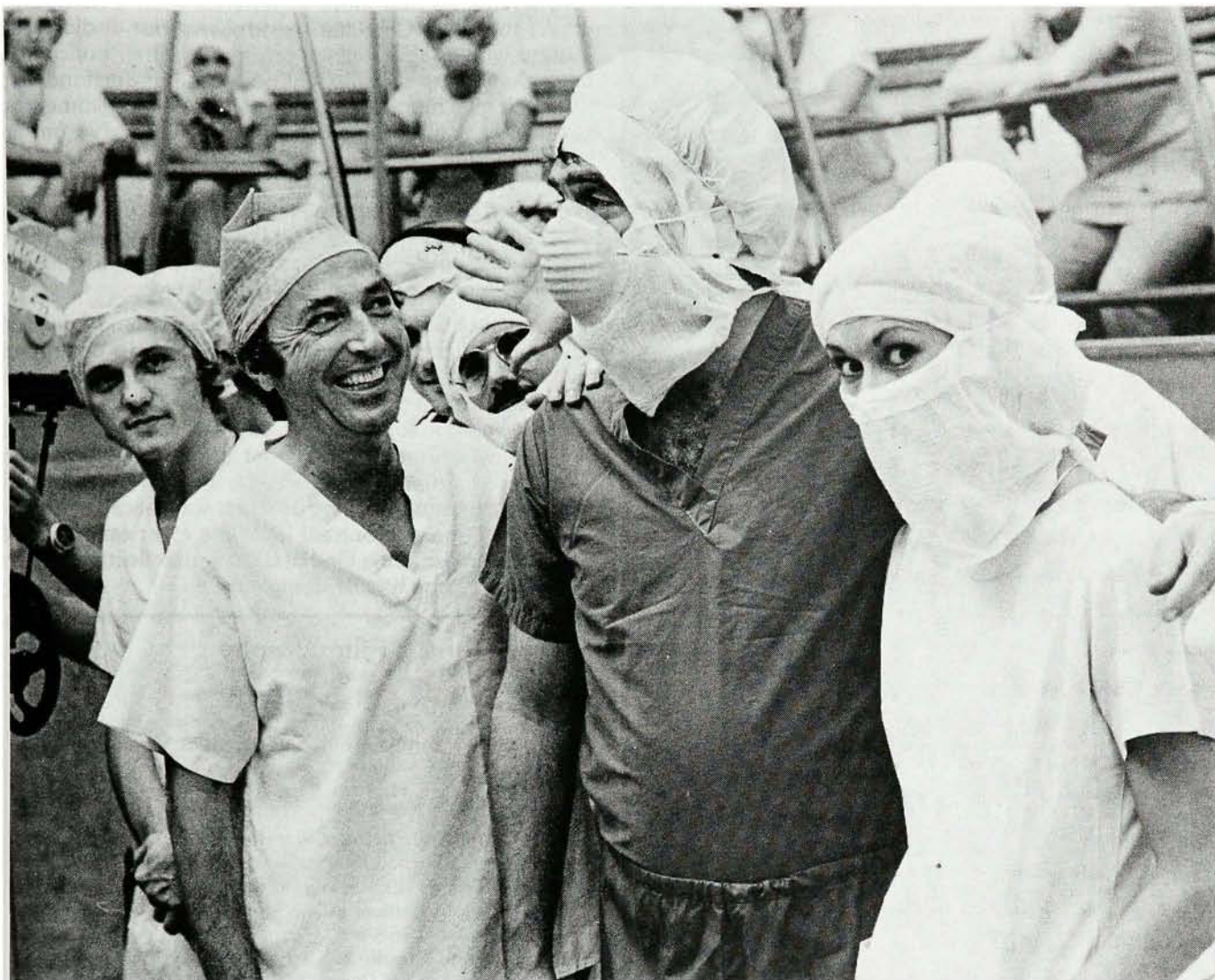
Exactly. And you know, Hollywood's never been able to predict what the public would like — *never!* Why should we go on trying to make what we think the public is going to buy? It's always been like that — film producers making last year's movie. Storytellers aren't interested in that — storytellers have got a story to tell. If someone could write a script about two people in Toronto finding life difficult, and you made it honestly, and the package was reasonably

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Dirty Tricks, yes —but hardly a matter of life and death for director Alvin Rakoff (2nd from left), cinematographer Richard Ciupka peering over his shoulder, and O.R. colleagues Elliot Gould and Kate Jackson

commercial, I think its chances of success would be as big as anything else. I mean, we have to get rid of this 'exotic' thing. Suddenly the pictures we're making have to take place in New Jersey, or Boston.

Do we have producers who are willing to reexamine their thinking in this light?

Not that I know of. I mean, I'm guilty too; we musn't just knock the producers. As a film director, I should take less money and be more concerned with the product I make. But as a professional, I know those products aren't around. I've got at least six subjects I'm interested in exploring. But nobody has asked me what I want to make. And I'm not talking about highbrow, highfalutin subjects: I'm talking about good commercial film subjects I think would work. But somebody would have to believe *with* me that they stand as much chance of working as anything else.

I think, in fairness to everyone, this is a passing phase; the producers who want to go to Hollywood will go, and those that want to stay in Canada and make films will stay. We're trying to evolve our cinema, and the government's

intention in trying to do this is valid, but what is being achieved is not the only answer. That's what worries me.

To translate the term 'government' into the Canadian Film Development Corporation — how do you view their role?

They were initially producer-oriented, and they only gave to writers via the producers. Now, there weren't enough producers in this country to make that stand, and it was a silly stand. I think the CFDC should be there to develop Canadian films, and that should mean aid to a writer, a director, a producer... whatever.

At the moment, it's easy to get money out of them if you're a producer. Sometimes if you're a writer of some stature, you may get some pre-production money. But I think they're not doing what, to my mind, they should be doing, which is encouraging *all* the people who want to make films.

They started the labelling thing, too. I personally tried to get money out of them for a project when they first started, and they said, "You're a director, you're not a producer."



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At the time, I'd had more experience than a number of other so-called Canadian producers, but I didn't go around with a label saying "producer." Their policy may have changed to some extent now, but I understand they still don't give money to directors. It's silly. I presume they can justify it all now on the basis that they've got an industry going.

We talked a bit about the American tone that seems to characterize this industry, and I'm wondering if you think it's possible to develop a genuinely indigenous product here, despite our proximity to the States.

Yes. Because Canada has always had something individual to say in its literature, however small, and in its poetry and its art, which has always been unique and apart from the American dream or the British syndrome. Sure, as Canadians we've got something to say, and we could say it. I don't know about this idea that it has to be Canadian content, or reflect Canadian life, but I wouldn't mind seeing the pendulum swing a bit that way, because I'm sick of trying to make Montreal look like eight other cities. I would like to see some kind of Canadian reflections, which I know we're capable of doing. □

Alvin Rakoff: Filmography

Television

(on staff at BBC from 1955-58)

Waiting for Gillian (National Television Award) — BBC (1955)

Requiem for a Heavyweight — Sean Connery, Michael Caine — BBC (1957)

The Caine Mutiny Court Martial — BBC (1958)

A Town Has Turned to Dust — Rod Steiger — BBC (1960)

Call Me Daddy (Emmy Award for Best Direction. Various European TV Festival Awards) — Donald Pleasance — THAMES TV (1968-69)

Summer and Smoke — Lee Remick — BBC (1971)

Adventures of Don Quixote — Rex Harrison, Frank Finlay — BBC/CBS (1972)

Harlequinade — Dame Edith Evans — ANGLIA (1972)

In Praise of Love — Claire Bloom — ANGLIA (1975)

Cheap in August (British Academy Award Nomination) — Virginia McKenna — THAMES TV (1975)

Lulu Street — Hugh Webster — CBC (1975)

The October Crisis (Dramatic Segments) — CBC (1975)

Dame of Sark — Celia Johnson — ANGLIA (1976)

Nicest Man in the World — Celia Johnson — ANGLIA (1976)

The Kitchen — BBC (1977)

Romeo and Juliet — BBC (1978)

Film

World in my Pocket (1959) — Rod Steiger

Comedy Man (1963) — Kenneth Moore

Crossplot (1967) — Roger Moore

Say Hello to Yesterday (wrote and directed) (1969) — Jean Simmons

Hoffman (1970) — Peter Sellers

King Solomon's Treasure (1976)

City on Fire (1978) — Shelley Winters

Death Ship (1979)

Dirty Tricks (1979) — Elliot Gould, Kate Jackson