The ups and downs of Paul Almond

Ups & Downs signals the return of Paul Almond to his own kind of feature filmmaking. It is, with the exception of Final Assignment, his first feature since 1977.

Any new Canadian film by a quality director, to be sure, is matter that warrants Cinema Canada's attention. Ups & Downs, however, is of particular interest in that it brings back into the spotlight a film director who, a dozen years ago, lived in the public spotlight — but whose public life, at least in terms of the Canadian film industry, all but disappeared in the ensuing years.

In the days of the "Trilogy" (Isabel 1968: Act of the Heart-1970; and Journey-1972), Almond and Genevieve Bujold were media darlings, the Beautiful People; she a rising star; and he the avant-garde producer-director-writer artist. Some (to Almond's embarrassment) had him tabbed as Ingmar Bergman.

But even then Almond was to an extent the Outsider, the charming, gracious, out-of-touch fellow who just happened to be the guy who lived and worked in his own world. How is he doing? And how he worked. There he was, an Anglo director in Franco Montreal — and what self-respecting Franco critic could take an Anglo seriously in those heady revolutionary days? As for the Toronto critical/artistic establishment, well, Almond was the foreigner. Worse, he had deserted Toronto, where he had worked so intensively for CBC-TV for almost fifteen years. It is quite understandable, then, that Almond's decade-long silence as a feature filmmaker has led to almost total neglect at least in the world of pop film journalism. There have, of course, been other reasons contributing to the neglect, as we shall see below.

An English-Canadian born in Montreal of a father who was an Anglican priest and a mother who was a ballet dancer, and whose roots are in a tiny Anglo settlement, Shawigate, on the Gaspe coast — Paul Almond's life, to say the least, has been colourful, the stuff for a popular biography. The boy who spent his summers on the Gaspe farm was to evolve through privileged schooling: Bishop's College School (BCS), McGill University, and finally Oxford (Balliol), where he even became editor of the legendary poetry magazine, Inx. Not bad for a colonial. But Europe meant not so much an education (also linguistics) as a lucky break in the making of a film director. In 1982 he represented Canada at the Berlin Film Festival and in the following years worked extensively in Europe.

From 1984 to 1987, Almond worked in WCDF-TV drama. In its early Toronto glory days (Sydney Newman, Jewison, etc.) his drama garnered awards, and the actors he worked with were a veritable Who's Who of Canadian (and international) talent. There were numerous British and American prestige dramas as well, and in all Almond directed well over a hundred TV productions.

And then came the trilogy of films starring Genevieve Bujold. The critical acclaim, the ferocious attacks, the publicity — these were amazing years filled with their ups and their downs. With Isabel and Act of the Heart, Almond was now being considered a quality film director. For some, he represented the Canadian hope for a world-quality cinema. Almond was indeed achieving a quality look, and that without financial disaster, for he worked within low budgets and according to schedule. Commercially, the films did better than most Canadian features (with the exception of a few sex romps and Quebecois comedies) at a time when Canadian films were victimized by horrendous market realities.

In a word, each Almond film, in those days, was an event. Journey (1972) did not measure up to its predecessors either with the critics or the general public. It came at a difficult time in Almond's life, marking the end of his professional and personal association with Genevieve Bujold. Gradually, however, new scripts and projects began to develop — and new chapters in his life. From his travels in Morocco he scripted Solstices, an allegorical serio-comic adventure romance, that Almond considered too far out — until, a few years later (and after his script had done the Hollywood rounds), Star Wars and its sequels and imitations began to fill the world's screens with amazingly similar stories, situations, characters. The Burning Book (Tytanlley) was another script he wrote, this one based historically and geographically in Britain. And his travels in the Middle East helped shape still another script, The Eye of the Falcon.

None of these properties have yet found sufficient financing; and the stories surrounding Almond's efforts in this area, the heart-breaking near-misses, are almost beyond belief in their surrealistic convolutions. It must be remembered, however, that the mid-'70s were dreadful years for Canadian film financing. And the Boom which followed (capital cost allowances, 'producers payments, etc.) created an entrepreneurial system that nurtured film projects totally at odds with what Almond stood for. "Hollywood North" recipes and inflated, quick-profit budgets created a climate that made life extremely difficult for many of Canada's finest film directors. No one, let it be said, suffered more from the new rules of the game than Almond, with his quest for quality and his reputation as an intransigent artist.

For the last half-dozen or-so years, Paul Almond and his wife Joan have moved back and forth from their homes in Montreal and Malibu California; surmounted more often than not, by some of their combined total of five children; and a floating colony of international friends, aspiring writers and film workers and so on. Dogs and cats and flowers and beautiful environment and super-healthy food. Paul works on scripts and projects. Joan on photographic books assignments. Life, vitality, creativity, and above all: the making of the film business. In the interim, there have been a couple of one-hour CBC television films, one of which (For the Record's Every Person is Guilty) added to Almond's collection of Genies (Best Director of a TV drama). The following year, a Bell Canadian feature, with its early Toronto glory. Almond was indeed achieving a quality look, and that within budget, he too eventually left the project, without control of the final cut. That sense, Final Assignment hardy stands as an Almond film, though one might be tempted to play the game of what in the movie is "Almond" and what is not.

Which brings us up to the last two years and Ups & Downs — the occasion for this up-date on the career of Paul Almond.

Ups & Downs represents a very different kind of challenge for Almond, his attempt, in a sense, at reversing the trend of the Boom Years, and his effort to reach the youth market (as well as the rest of us). So much that surrounds the making of the film is intriguing; and in the interview further on, Almond speaks about this well as about his view on a number of other aspects of what one might term the "Almond phenomenon."

Certainly not. Almond's most "artistically ambitious" project (especially when compared with what Paul Peixer calls Almond's allegorical cinema), Ups & Downs nonetheless has a humanity, a concern and love for human beings, and dedication to filmic craftsmanship that are typically Almond-esque. Whether on film, by its relative accessibility, its "popular" approach, actually reaching youth-and-other audience in this new age of combined theatrical and TV exhibition remains to be seen. But one thing for sure: in all of the main characters of Ups & Downs a depth, a groping for meaning is suggested beneath the playful melodramatic surface. There is still mud and mind and heart; and this cinema is removed from the rather cynical and physiognomic and sometimes amazing financially successful recipes that dominate so-called "youth" films. There is a playing down.

Marc Gervais teaches communications at Concordia University.
**CLOSE-UP**

**Paul Almond’s heroic quest**

by Paul Pichler

Essentially, society expects of its artists variations on conventional, comfortably familiar themes. Whether he is categorized as avant-garde or pop, highbrow or low, the artist must remain somewhere within his audience’s range of expectations to get a fighting chance of a hearing for his work. And in no case is this more true than for the filmmaker, dependent as he is on instant positive response from not only his public but even more from the extraordinarily complex network of financial and other administrative sponsors, whose very professional existence depends on their avoiding any suspicion of overestimating the public’s tolerance of novelty.

Paul Pichler is professor of literature at McGill University.

Be that as it may—and this is really difficult to account for even in North America, the home of safe, solid, predictable commercial products, Chevrolet makers to the world—sometimes films get made that utterly elude the banality of normal commercial production. Western society has never been entirely devoid of that other type of artist who uses the forms of the everyday world in order to explore the reality beyond the forms. It will rarely be a popular role, since the allegories he creates inevitably call in to question the basic assumptions on which all modern societies are based. Yet it is the allegorist, constantly shaping the energies of the world beyond form into the solid-seeming shapes and forms of this world, who is, fundamentally, responsible for the character, even the very existence, of the comfortable everyday consciousness we take for granted.

The role of the allegorist in his own lifetime is rarely anything but a conti...
Almond and the critics

When *Act of the Heart* was released in 1970, Look magazine, at that time overtaking *Life* in the circulation race, published a full page (jumbo size) on the film. Gene Shalit refused to print a normal critique on *Act of the Heart*, stating that the film alone, with such an intangible quality of mysterious beauty that it was preferable to reproduce "only" a colour still along with a poem occasioned by the film.

*Look* was not alone in its enthusiasm. Not many Canadian features have elicited the kind of praise or serious treatment given to the first two films of Almond's "Build" trilogy. But that, of course, was only part of the story. For there were other reviews—the most important of these tended to emanate from Toronto, appearing in such key publications as the "Globe and Mail", the "Star", and "Saturday Night", and signed by a Robert Fulford, an Urjo Kareda, or a Martin Knelman—who were surprisingly unoffended by their opposition. As often as not, they were published well in advance of the Toronto openings, thereby probably causing the films irreparable harm. Even Gerald Pratley, long a champion of Canadian quality cinema, was guilty of this.

One might well question the media ethic that so often resulted in critical demolition *before* release. Far more important, however, is the lamentable fact that critics don't have to state their criteria, accept or otherwise, nor reveal the grounds whence spring their critical judgments.

And so, Almond was attacked, often viciously, for his "lack of clarity," his "artistic pretentiousness," etc. What was not so clear was the attitude underlying the criticisms. It was not merely an attack on the film, or the colonial game of Canadian put-down of things Canadian. Rather, a whole complex of highly dubious critical philosophy tenets slipped by unchallenged.

To caricature the implicit position: film must be clear, it must fit nicely into an assumed univocal genre or entertainment package. It must be readily explainable in the tidy rationalizations of the critics' reductive sociological or psychological terms of reference.

Reflecting on these sad facts of past Canadian critical history (perhaps we ought to forget about it), one feels that they need exercising, since they have helped create an enduring negative climate, James Leach, film professor at Brock University, gone a long way in showing what may be the shallowness of such an approach. In a remarkable article entitled "Paul Almond's Fantastic Trilogy and the Development of the Film Genre" (in *Canadian Film Studies*), Leach borrows an analytical tool, at once aesthetic and semiological, from Tzvetan Todorov—the notion of a hierarchy or semiotic structure—and the film's critical systems rest, hence, the violent reaction.

The merit in Leach's work resides, not in my cavalier and polemical rephrasing of many of my own terms of reference, but in the meticulous application of his theory to so much of what is actually in the Trilogy films. Hence, the criticism proposed for those who see serious merit in Almond's trilogy.

Two concluding, if somewhat repetitious, comments. First, Leach's work is a fine example of what is best in contemporary film analysis. And secondly, the very criticisms of those not fully cognizant of the Trilogy films far from underlining real weaknesses in the films. may well testify rather to their being uncannily powerful ("artifact")—which then applies in great detail and with exemplary precision to each film of Almond's trilogy.

Marc Gervais
family photographs, the solemn ticking oppressive than the silence itself. The odd unaccountable noises morepressive silences broken only by sudden a manner that threatens a temporal break down between her present circumstances and the eerie vitality of these past events. Blended in, moreover, with her numbing fears of these intrusions is the developing awareness, at once timid and appreciative, of her own nascent sexuality.

But Isabel has nothing of the conventional "haunting" flick; one has no feeling that events are being manipulated to stir our emotions in a predictably creepy manner. Rather, we gradually become convinced that, in this very plausible human situation, this is how it may of us would respond. For Almond has the rare gift of allowing us to see the story through the eyes of the heroine to such an extent that we become identified with her rather than see her as the target of our desires - she is the subject rather than the object of the plot, the I and the eye of the audience.

As the film develops we find ourselves passing through a rite of passage in the person of Isabel. Through her we learn to cope with the ambiguous gift of sexual attractiveness as well as its attendant vulnerability, to be less naive about the intentions of the familiar - all too familiar village louts (who desire only to "play around" with the attractive heroine in the hayloft). We also become more trusting of the mysterious young man from the back country who turns so unexpectedly to give essential help at moments of crisis. And eventually, we learn to cope with the increasingly menacing sounds and appearances of the old house, and "even forces of evil" into manifestation, whereupon we challenge that manifestation with a cry in which defiance finally overcomes our fearliness.

In all this, we feel ourselves in the presence of a minor masterpiece, a work in the vein of allegory which, in petting the frontiers of formed and unformed realities, takes us realms beyond the reach of common art whether commercial or avant-garde and, by postulating new ways of reality, it is matter of surprise and congratulation that the film ever got itself financed and distributed at all. Indeed Almond harmonizes the limited powers of his craft intractively with the performances of relative neophytes and local Gaspe personalities, creating a sense of integrity in character and setting which could hardly have secured for Isabel far wider edenices than its distributors could acknowledge - in spite of all the praise itaped on the film by the American critics.

And yet, for some viewers at least, the film is not quite flawless. There seems to be a significant unresolved contradiction in its final image. After Isabel has experienced her climactic encounter with the eerie forces of the old house, she runs out through the night down to the dock where she finds protection and comfort in the arms of her friend and lover, the mysterious Jason. They meet in a passionate embrace in which the major images of the film coalesce, dissolve and reassemble before our eyes, and at this point Isabel is manifested as what one can only interpret as the corpse of Isabel's drowned elder brother, in a brilliant fusion of erotic, incestuous, and supernatural imagery.

And yet the conclusion is aesthetically troubling. Admittedly, the fusion of images works brilliantly at the avant-garde level. And if one regards the film as exceptionally brilliant horror-pornography, the conclusion is perfect. The evil forces have simply played cat-and-mouse with the poor girl, and this is the payoff. But the story as it has been presented to us up to this point has far transcended the irresponsibilities of avant-gardism or the self-indulgencies of pornography. It is in its truth to life the further boundaries of human experience rather than its adherence to fashionable formulaic cop-outs that the greatness of the film resides. But one leaves the theatre not totally convinced that the ending, brilliant as it is, has sustained the extremely high level of integrity attained by the work as a whole.

Where Isabel takes us into the realms of the psyche, the strange borders between outer and inner worlds, and makes us aware how disturbingly indubitable that frontier can be, Act of the Heart depicts a lonely voyage into the realms of the spirit, the pneumata. In Isabel the heroine revives no valid help from any spiritual institution in her perils and distresses. The face of her nun sister, dead and desiccated, it would seem, not to this world but to all worlds, conveys the sterility of the Catholic institution, too abstracted in its holiness to lend her any support, too busy indeed in its self-promotion even to be aware of her plight. The local Protestant church, warm and welcoming, is no better able to save her, for all its spiritual fire of God's love she now learns the fires well up from ancient religions of frenzy and terror; fires in which the aspects which we term physical or spiritual are mingled together to create an archaic fusion.

In the final work of the trilogy, Journey, we return from the harsh realities of psyche and spirit to a gentler world of earth. Here Almond presents to us the first unforgettable scene of the heroine's manifestation, drifting naked and sensitive on the great tree-trunk down the massive flow of the Saguenay. She is associated with fluidity, flux, passivity - potentiality not actuality, becoming not here even more so than in the earlier films, in the perverted and her perverted conveyance by the leade of what appears to be a pioneer back-to-Nature agricultural commune, that man is a nascent sexuality among the friendly and accepting beings of this simple community.

Over the following months she becomes progressively drawn towards the farming life of the community, to its open and honest friendships, and more specifically to the state of independence, authority and sometimes headstrong leader. This interest is fully returned by Bouldier, who seeks, however, to prevent Isabel from learning something of the girl's mysterious, perhaps tragic past history. Somewhere in her backhats lurks, we understand, the trilogy. If Almond employs the form, evidently a sinister though fascinating personality, whose ambiguous attractions have cast a spell on her mind she is finding hard to break. Nonetheless, a brief, torrid love affair breaks out between Bouldier and Saguenay (as she has now been named), which, however, apparently fails to cure the heroine, conjugation as the always impetuous and unpredictable heroine is suddenly discovered on her way down-river once more, still to break, to some new and equally mysterious destination. However, as she does finally succeed in making a landing on shore again, who should return but the mysterious Jason, and their rampant re-encounter assures the audience that in spite of all her previous hesitations and misgivings she is none the less determined to be with him (and the community?) for ever.

Even this brief summary makes it evident that Journey is much more radically allegorical than its predecessors in the trilogy. Almond employs the form of this everyday world to explore and manifest realities beyond this world,
then Journey could be criticized for having too little contact with the everyday at all. For the community of Under-

sky, it is finally, just about as mysterious as the heroine. Undersky herself, in fact one of the most attractive interpretations of the film is that Saguenay is simply the Isabel or Martha of the earlier films in some mysterious state of afterlife existence, perhaps - a possibility reported by experts on these things - unaware of her own death. At all events it is not surprising that in this thoroughly materialistic age audiences found Journey difficult to comprehend or relate to. Who in the film can you identify or empathize with? Admittedly, Elizabeth audiences do on this kind of thing; they would have loved the tragi-comic idyll of Saguenay and Boulder, with its reassuring Ovidian overtones - its geographic mythopoeia of a love affair between rock and river underlying the allegorical mysteries. It reads in fact like an episode out of one of the more pastoral sections of Speranza's Faerie Queene, an allegory, let's remind ourselves, that both children and adults considered prime recreational reading until it finally no longer spoke to the consciousness of the age.

Nonetheless, the audiences of Journey ran into one problem that can hardly be attributed to unfamiliarity with allegorical modes of expression. Once more the question one heard raised was 'Should the film really have ended that way?' For Saguenay, life in the Under-

sky community has been powerfully and effectively recuperative. Her agonising rootlessness, her amnesiac disorientation has largely been healed. It seems, by her association with and finally participation in the (lovingly filmed) solidities of community life - the planting, the harvesting, the household as subjects of mutual soil and mutual celebration. But essentially and allegorically the community can only exist as a response to her dramatic denaturalization. If she is, as it seems, finally healed through these processes, then inevitably she must pass on to wherever her fates direct. She cannot return to Boulder - the epitome of Undersky - any more than one returns to hospital after one has recovered from the disease. For Undersky can be no more than a temporarily, experience, a 'detour' as the French title indicated, for any modern man, and most certainly for an evolving soul like Saguenay. Rock and river have encountered in brief an uneasy juxtaposition, but the film suggests no real synthesis and the polarity of fixed and fluid is not transcended. Thus the ending of the film on one level denies and reverses the implications of the 'journey' that it has up to this point portrayed with such profound insight - the same problem, indeed, as we discerned in both Isabel and Act of the Heart.

In the case of a serious filmmaker such as Almond, this is a conceptual rather than an aesthetic flaw. In his defence, it must be said that our age lacks, painfully, the images and rituals of transcendence that the 'journeys' of these films take as their implied goal. Thus it is profoundly to Almond's credit as an artist in film that he has avoided the temptation of fashioning 'positive' endings to these films out of static or irredeemable image structures - the besetting cause of failure in so much neo-religious art, visual or narrative. Three massive, sustained, indeed titanic attempts to scale the heights of a forbidden if not unsalvageable Olympus are as much as we have any right to expect from any artist of our generation. No wonder then that Almond has tactfully, painstakingly lost the images and rituals of transcendence that the 'journeys' of these films take as their implied goal. Thus it is profoundly to Almond's credit as an artist in film that he has avoided the temptation of fashioning 'positive' endings to these films out of static or irredeemable image structures - the besetting cause of failure in so much neo-religious art, visual or narrative.

When the schedule landed us in the middle of a B.C. autumn, we didn't have much of an option as far as sunlight was concerned. I wasn't initially convinced that overcast skies would do when we first discussed the whole thing, but in the meantime, I went to England to do some shooting and that really turned me around. Unlike Montreal, which is very flat when it's overcast, the B.C. sky is very broken up, there's a cloud cover, there's always a bright patch. Not necessary sun coming through but different densities of cloud, as a result, you get a brighter light on one side another than. This gives you a brighter overcast all over with a certain amount of modelling as well. We thought it would help us achieve that overcast 'New England' look.

That 'desaturating' of colours was carried through in the set design. Art director Glenn Bedwell repainted the school inside and out, changed all the lighting fixtures. It's an old school that had been modernized, and now we were 'desaturating' it. Everything was redone. All the colours are now muted, grey, greens and browns...we were going for a very 'down' tone all the way through. And one thing I particularly like is the use of 'practicals' in a shot, so Glenn and I worked very closely on that. I think there's one in every single interior. I would go to rehearsals and block the lighting out, and then get the practicals to motivate the light from whatever direction I wanted. The whole film is just pockets of light, little localized light sources. I was trying to create a difference in colour between the light and the backgrounds, and to go for a three-dimensional effect. So I always had a consistent modelling effect, no matter what scene we were in.

'With the exception of an 85, we didn't use any filters at all on the film. No fogs, no LC's, nothing. It was all in the lighting. We were going for a soft, warm look, without filters. I'd use them in most of the stuff I'd done, and decided I wanted to shoot this one clean. I didn't want to get into a situation of shooting one scene now, and having it cut with heavy fog, now, and with the exception of the fog, what, without some filtration being used on both. The only filter I used was in the bar - I smoked it up. But that wasn't through the lens. It gives more of a warm atmosphere, let it also had a gradation to it that a filter doesn't have. So the kids up front are sharper than the kids two rows back, and that gives you a depth. And with filtration, a light source in the frame that hits the filter can have an uncontrollable effect. Since I wanted practicals in the shots, I decided to shoot it clean. The only practicals is the fact that the film looks what we set out to do. We initially had a certain idea in mind and the tone of the film reflects that pretty consistently.'

Peter Benison, CSC

CLOSE-UP

D.O.P. Peter Benison

The shooting of Ups & Downs

• Bubbly time at the 500th slate: Almond and D.O.P. Benison

• Evolving soul: Geneviève Bujold as Saguenay in Journey

10/Cinema Canada - December 1983
Cinema Canada: What are your thoughts on the evolution of the Canadian film industry since you completed your trilogy?

Paul Almond: The trilogy (‘88–‘72) actually marks the beginnings of the boom. *Isabel* was made just prior to the formation of the CFDC (it got a “quality prize” because it was too early to get anything else) and *Act of the Heart* was the first film to receive assistance from the CFDC.

The lawyer representing *Act* was Donald Johnston, now of the Treasury Board. It was he, single-handedly, who went on to dream up the Capital Cost Allowance plan, which started the whole “boom”.

Unfortunately, whenever there’s real money to be made, all sorts of people rush into the medium (or “boom”). You have all sorts of people who are not filmmakers — i.e., not Canadian artists who know they are doomed to a life of poverty, and struggle on regardless... So, with that, we had the “boom” years, when the industry went bust. I find it hard to blame anyone. In theory, it did all make sense.

The problem lay in the “McCabe Myth” — put out by the new accountants, lawyers, and other suddenly blossoming “producers”: that in the filmmaking, it’s the entrepreneur that counts. Hey, fellas, in filmmaking, it’s the filmmaker that counts. I’ve found the most simple truths can elude us... And I wander from the track. So, recently after the bust, they’ve cut the CCA back to 50%. People blame this for the end. But working just before that on the financing of *Ups & Downs*, I talked to those friends and relatives who were CEO’s of the major brokerage companies: they all told me that private finance for films had already dried up by then. Not that the Canadian industry averages were worse than elsewhere (Porky’s, Meantails, etc.) but that in the investment community, films were (and still are) perceived to have lost money.

Now the money is going into shoring up the CBC and CTV, an aim which appears laudable (unless you happen to know the buyer at CBC...). If that is the case, and helps Canadian filmmakers actually explore our Canadian environment with authority and security, good! But having to get the crucial third of the money from — guess who the American networks — well, it’s unlikely. Though let’s not discount Peter Pearson yet...

In Quebec, our new 15%CCA nets out at a fairly respectable figure, so it’s possible that this province will continue to be the heart and soul of filmmaking, both in English and French.

Cinema Canada: In terms of the films that preceded it, making *Final Assignment* was surely an aberration. Why did you take on the job, and what did making that film mean for you in terms of your career as a filmmaker? Paul Almond: When the producers called me to take over *Final Assignment* after the first week’s shooting, they were considering my film job was to get them to reverse that decision! I felt then as I do now, that the only way to get a good film is to stick with the filmmaker. But the film was already half a million over budget, and they were equally adamant. It was me, or someone else.

Most of the other Canadian directors were working. And a friend of mine’s film was involved in the financing; he needed me to help out. The performers wanted it pulled together, and the money I was offered for six weeks’ work would help pay off part of the loans I’d built up on my own films. All good reasons, though I knew in some quarters the effort would be misunderstood. So I plunged in with both feet.

We did actually finish on time and on budget, and I did a couple of “cuts”. The reaction at screenings were quite good, so there were two courses of action open — throw myself fully into the completion, or let the producers do it. They picked the latter.

I feel badly because they probably didn’t end up with what they wanted. The adventure element was not strong enough to carry the film. So we’d opted for more of a flavourful piece, with character. The Hollywood editors the original ones were of course fired! chose to delete all that character bullshit and fabricate a “snappy” narrative line. As such, the film plunged — more rapidly than perhaps it deserved — into oblivion.

As for my career, I have no idea what anyone else thought about it. Nor did I care, really, because anyone who saw this as the way to make great films could not matter: for myself, it taught me once again how important it is to control your own projects.

Cinema Canada: Several years ago you moved to California, discouraged by the difficulties your projects were having here. What have you gotten from your experiences in California, and what are the chances of a Canadian filmmaker making original Canadian films — like your trilogy — in that atmosphere?

Paul Almond: Discouraged! I prefer to think of it as a natural extension. To finance pictures, you need to have your foot in all doors, even France and Italy. Where I’ve also spent time. My real concern about being in Hollywood is the wonderful person I married, who happens to live in Malibu. It’s kind of like Gaspere there... the beach, dogs, so nice buildings, you borrow dishes, some of them are even in film themselves...

I don’t make films there. I write, work on distribution, “deal-making” and so on. I am a Quebeccie. I make films in Quebec, with Quebec crew, and I live in Montreal.

But it’s funny, a lot of quite interesting and “non-studio” films are made. My ex-wife is in a picture before this Clint Eastwood one for a young filmmaker cost around $750,000 I believe, and my Canadian son-in-law keeps getting on international films. If I wanted to make a film there, I’d probably find it easier than in Canada.

Cinema Canada: What made you develop a project like *Ups & Downs*? Paul Almond: Okay soon one level. I’d spent years developing projects dear to my heart, pouring in all my money, mortgaging my houses and so on. Big films, films for stars (and they take time to land) and distant places, important and worthwhile films — but somehow films that did not actually get made. (They’re still poised, waiting!) It was time actually to do another one. And it was just at the end of the boom. Most of my gang, after doing a variety of garbage, were waiting for something they could all believe in. Not just the subject, but made in the way a film should be made.

You see, the method most often used in the industry is: the producer gets a subject. He hires a writer. Once the screenplay is written, he hires a director. Then he hires a production manager, who hires a crew. This hodgepodge goes off and shoots... (I’m trying not to load the dice, but it’s hard). The film comes back, the director has “his cut.” Then the producer, entirely baffled by it all, hires the editor, hires another, and together they try to make sense out of it (the blind leading the blind).

The other method is the filmmaker finds a subject he loves. He researches it, develops a script, discusses it with his team. Then, somehow, he gets the money. He picks his crew who have known him all along. Together, they all go off and “make a movie.” They come back, the filmmaker has picked the best editor he can find, and together end up with the whole thing the shape it deserves.

If you don’t believe me: that is how David Lean, Kubrick, Lucas, Spielberg all got into business. And De Broca... So, although it appears like wandering from the point — it is the point.

But to go on... Isabel had drawn upon my early childhood, *Act of the Heart* on my days at Roslyn Elementary School. The next step was High School. I had gone to BCS.
Now Bishop's College School is an elite English school in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. My friends at its Board were concerned about its future. A good film could help. And if it got rid of the rapidly accumulating debt, we'd have achieved something.

The first three months of all that is the headmaster, like many others we've all met, said yes down the line - until the very last minute, when he said NO!

Mind you, it was actually a godsend, because I found St. Michael's University School, and we never looked back.

Cinema Canada: How was Ups & Downs received?

Paul Almond: Private offering memorandum, and some rather creative interim guarantees which I arranged with Alpha Cine Lab. Famous Players, the CFDe, and some of the participants in the film. Finally, a brilliant investment counsel (Lyne MacFarlane) in Victoria put most of it together.

Cinema Canada: Do you think the film says something about Canadian adolescence, or were you just making another international film for the U.S. market?

Paul Almond: It must say something about adolescence, but all the research was done in Canada. It was directed, written and acted by Canadians.

Dennis, the thing about boarding schools, whether in Canada, England, or anywhere, is that the problems and lifestyles are similar. The concerns of teenagers in foreign cultures are also similar - and not so far from the concerns I felt at that age. Growing up, as we say on the postcard, is just full of Ups & Downs.

In fact, the U.S. marketing experts were worried that the film seemed to be too Canadian. But luckily the audiences said Otherwise. "We'll go through this."

A more important question is: does this view of adolescence cross national boundaries, and - one step further - don't these schools ever close?

Well, it's clearly not about growing up in an "inner city" (Nexark, Watts, Chicago). Kids from those environments may not see life through our market research so far indicates that Middle America does, and the suburban areas too. Mind you, we were careful to choose stories that were real: a boy with a troubled coach, a girl who feels she's too fat, a school "nerd" who becomes a hero through his music. Now in fact it does say something to people of other countries, then maybe we'll have achieved what we're all trying to do - make a Canadian film which is both truly Canadian and international.

Cinema Canada: You have said that the trilogy "asked a number of potent questions - about holding a fashion as possible." This would hardly apply to Ups & Downs. Why the change?

Paul Almond: Anonull wrote what he called pieces noires and pieces roses. Ups & Downs is sort of a piece rose.

You see, before Ups & Downs came the two scripts, Solstice, and Eye of the Falcon. Which meant I spent years in other decisions of space and time (the paranormal, months on other continents (Africa and Europe) and in other climes (the Atlas mountains and the Sahara). It meant going into the past (Dilmun, where Gilgameh roamed) and into diplomatic circles, and archaeology.

It meant I'd lingered in baking Be-

douin villages, piered into early Islam, and created a venerable Modern fundamentalist; I'd thought up exploits for Darcy, a brilliant driven materialist, screwing every young lady in sight in his longing to find love; I'd played Doyle, a Sherlock Holmes' of the past, who loved nothing more than to be rich with his beautiful young Arab lad, or shuffle potsherds for insights into the origins of our belief in God.

So the nice controlled world of the teenager in a private boarding school - well, it did look inviting.

Cinema Canada: You once said that for Isabel the cynical change of her life was to control the elements and not be dominated by them. One could say that with Ups & Downs you have succumbed to the pressures of the competitive market: targeting an adolescent audience, making the film funny, re-editing the ending and keeping it upbeat. Do you see these as compromises of originality, or is it all part of a conscious strategy? Either way, do you believe that this will make your film more profitable than your other films?

Paul Almond: Because the film was made by teenagers, for teenagers, its potential in today's market is obvious. But, you know, the story of a repressed girl forced back to her roots on the Gaspe to find herself. But I didn't make Ups & Downs in order to make money. Many of our so-called "commercial producers" have found out the public has a way of completely disregarding the intentions of a producer about profits.

Phrases like "targeting the adolescent audience, making the film funny" don't have a lot to do with one's impulse to make a film. If you've been following my drift, the film has a happy ending because the characters deserve it. (Okay, maybe I've been a bit too harsh ever since Act of the Heart.) Samantha is a really fine person - why not let her get Derek at the end? And he's a worthwhile young man, why leave him with the horrid Pelly? Yet, he's put up with so much shit through the film, why shouldn't he get a whack at being a hero, through his music.

Making it funny? Kids are funny. Whenever I'm with my son (now 15) we spend half the time laughing. They're so funny, some of them - I mean, just look at those kids! And I think it's important that makes it commercial, tant mieux! But that won't be because we set out to make a commercial film.

Take test marketing, which we did over and over. Prudent business practice, of course none never mind that our distributor refuses to do it. But it was because I was making the film with teenagers and for teenagers I wanted to know what they thought. Kids today are way ahead of where I was then. And now they are sharp. And were they a help?

Also, Isabel and Act were financed by studios who know what they're up to: as they controlled the distribution, I knew they'd feel the financial pain (though their "creative accounting system" has given me some). But Ups & Downs was made with private money from real people, and the real sense of obligation to them. In fact, in the fifteen months since I went off salary as it were, I've spent twelve unpaid on the marketing of the film.

Cinema Canada: Are you pleased it has worked out this way? What would successful Ups & Downs allow you to do next?

Paul Almond: Everything always works out for the best, of course I'm pleased. But... I confess I'll be even more pleased when the film breaks in.

Cinema Canada: Are you interested in producing next? Or how was a different film and what was the relationship? Would you do it again?

Paul Almond: It was just fantastic. Actually, you know. Lewis Evans, the co-producer, was the son of Lewis Evans the teacher who taught me English at BCS! And he (young Lew) was born when I was a student there. Now he too spends his life teaching in a boarding school, so I have a real nose for the truth, I've had a great time. And not having written before, he had no ego. Believe it or not, neither did I.
Emails to the get on section...

"Hey, so for more funny reason he doesn't want to join me on the soup line to make a head, when it started, a head of the game.

'I've essential to have one. Why don't crew, one doesn't brook fools gladly, that one regard, I mean when one has night because he loves cutting so much.

Terrific advisors, who read every project, talk to the kids, get an idea of how they felt, and how they spoke, and what was uppermost. Most of the time, four cracks of the cane for unpolished shoes, six for choosing a prefect, and ten for smoking, it never smoked. So to make a film about that time in my life. I had to go back and research, and talk to the kids, get an idea of how they felt, and how they spoke, and what was uppermost. Most of the time, four cracks of the cane for unpolished shoes, six for choosing a prefect, and ten for smoking, it never smoked. So to make a film about that time in my life. I had to go back and research, and talk to the kids, get an idea of how they felt, and how they spoke, and what was uppermost.

But yes, my prime search right now is just that a producer! Someone who can handle the financial aspects, get my projects going, and get filming. My job is to write the script and research for the CFDC, and when I got that, trying to make them honour it. The real fun began with the making of the script - I researched at my old school for a year and a half of weekends, set up a little office, had "seminars", met and talked to the kids. Trained a TV crew, too, taped impressions. then, we started writing.

You see, I'd gone to Bishop's College School from 1944-48, boys only, and quite a few kids of the school kids having "breakfast in half". i.e., school food, on benches, with the kids. Lunch was the same.

So I married my friend, who joined me on a survey looking at the harbour; super-elegant, but in financial difficulties. So she got an excellent arrangement. We had all kitchens, and cooked filmmakers are notoriously good cooks. The production offices were rooms in the school, for free. We worked eight-hour days, rarely more, because it got so cold. We'd go to parks outdoors, in the woods. Peter (Brenson) was shooting with high speed lenses, at T-1.4, and we got up to that light level around eleven and left in the early afternoon. It rained all the time. Then the day of the Big Game was the start and sunny, and we were thrilled - except we had to throw it all out as it all was washed.

The Headmaster played the Headmaster, and several teachers played a couple of teachers, and none of the kids had ever been in front of a camera before.

Filmography

**Paul Almond**

*Filmography*

**Act of the Heart (1970)**
35mm colour, 103 mins. p.d./dc. Paul Almond p.e. Quest Film Productions, dist. Universal.

**Journey (1972)**
35mm colour, 97 mins. p.e. Quest Film Productions p.d./dc. Paul Almond, dist. Astral Communications.

**Final Assignment (1980)**

**Ups & Downs (1983)**

*While at the CBC from 1954-1967, Almond directed over 100 TV productions from shorts to many award-winning dramas. He has also directed commercials.*

We tossed the scenes back and forth - they can save me on this? or "Gad, this is rubbish but I think I can fix it." We wrote really fast and very well.

But he's got a wife and kids, and a job, so I came to the rescue and joined him on the soap line to make masterpiece.

**Cinema Canada:** How do you get the ideas for your projects?

**Paul Almond:** My raw material is the get on, figure it out. I put out antennae, and I pick up on the planet waves, the ideas flying around, waiting to be realized. Where and how, I have no idea. I just write. So far, it works, because I've been ahead of the game. Solstice? Myles ahead, when it started. Ups & Downs? Way before the soup line to make a head.

But by the time I find the money, then make the film, then market it, I'm at the tail end.

**Cinema Canada:** Being your own producer then hurts as much as helps?

**Paul Almond:** It's only essential in that one regard. I mean when one has been setting up films, negotiating with crew, dealing with caterers, brokers and distributors for as long as I have, one doesn't brook foolishness. It can be a job.

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**Cinema Canada:** You mean you made a feature without one person who had been in front of a camera before?

**Paul Almond:** That's a bit hard to believe. And if it is true, wasn't it very unbusinesslike? Risks for your investors, and foolish for you as a filmmaker?

**Paul Almond:** Big risk, yes. And comounding it, the cameraman, editor, or composer had never done a full feature before.

But several people in Isabel had never acted before. Neither the boy in Act of the Heart. When they were casting, the performers had never been in front of a TV camera before.

Theampa's going to be a camera, like Susan Clarke. Donnelly Rhodes, Roberta Maxwell, Sharon Acker. Heath Lambert's list goes on.

Since Ups & Downs, Andrew Sabiston has played the lead in a series for Disney. And TV movie. Leaded a role in John Cassavetes in Love Streams, and Gavin Branman's two features in Europe. So maybe they're carrying on the tradition.

And of course, the parts were written for real kids. Sam was written for him, and so was little Mouse. Sam was constructed for the American Margot Neshit. The part of Puff naturally emerged through the terrific acting of Steve Wright.

Mind you, I did first of all train a student TV crew (from scratch) actually, used the school's portable TV camera. So I was able to work with the young performers for several weeks, fairly improvising, and testing, before going forward. And kids, remember, at that age, they do have a lot of natural talent. It was a bit tougher casting, Steve is quite a bit older, and tough. Actually, one of them had done a lot of stage acting which was almost more of a problem, though he turned out wonderful well.

The Headmaster, bless his soul, a brilliant man actually and very supportive of the film, cancelled all the children's Christmas exams for the whole school. He said well, how often do you make a major motion picture at your school? This is a great opportunity. And when I was right, they did learn quite a bit and wrote the exams in January instead. They also have the high school rugby team in North America. Chuck Chamblin of the L.A. Times said they had the best sports footage he's seen since This Sporting Life.

The screening I must say is, was the school ever unattractive at first. Glenn Rydwall had to totally repaint everything, the outside included. He did over the dining hall, actually built a whole centrum hall, and several sets. That's his art - you'd never know it. He'll probably miss another genre again, because it all looks so natural. So much so that, when we left, the school asked us to leave everything exactly as he designed it.
Paul Almond's 

Ups & Downs

The contemporary youth film is an anachronism that's ahead of its time. Because it trades off images of innocence against an uncertain future, it simulates the inflated reflections of our adult state of bankruptcy. The youth film thus becomes an excellent place for filmmakers to hide their shame and perhaps to expiate their embarrassment at having betrayed their own youth by growing old. This makes the youth film an accurate measure of the degree of cynicism prevailing in a national film industry at a given moment.

In the England of the late '50s and mid '60s, the St. Trinians cycle of films about pulchresque school-girls represented a madbird in the fetishization of youth in a context of institutional bankruptcy (and a declining national cinema). Yet Lindsay Anderson could still filminically explode all that in If... Contrariwise, in the U.S. films like Blackboard Jungle or Rebel Without A Cause would only help develop a thicket of Gidgets and worse.

In Canada, the greatest triumph in the genre was the celebration of the swinishness of adolescence that largely epitomizes the reckless immaturity of Canadian filmmaking.

For Paul Almond's most recent feature, Ups & Downs, offers a diametrically opposing view of adolescence in a film that single-handedly attempts to reverse recent trends in an endless pandering to the worst aspects of the North-American youth market.

A low-budget (just over $1 million), non-union project with some CDFA support, film, Ups & Downs represents Almond's contribution to the second wave of Canadian filmmaking. It's a film rooted in the expanded scope of The Sweet Hereafter, Act of the Heart and Journey — were part of the first Canadian wave that began with Don Owen's Nobody Was Watching.

In Ups & Downs, there are no stars, no names (save that of the director), and no American flags. The cast is resolutely non-professional, drawn from the staff and student-body of St. Michael's University School in Victoria where the film was shot over the last two years.

Instead of the anonymous institutionalism of the North-American high-school, St. Michael's — redubbed St. Martin's Prep for the film — offers with its 1908 brick building the intimacy of tradition and the healthy expansiveness of wide playing fields. Here, in this Canadian version of the British public school, goes co-educational in the spirit of the times, the rich for a substantial fee exile the little creatures they have had the misfortune to bring into the world until such time as the young can finally do something useful with the family money. The small universe of the School, where the teachers function in loco parentis, becomes the canvas on which the young rich learn about the games people play.

The kids of Ups & Downs are stolid WASP, with their snobby nosh and Brit. The landscape is evocatively Ethiopean, the religious atmosphere faintly Anglican; and there's plenty of emphasis on character-building sports (rugby for the boys, lawn hockey or show jumping for the girls). The remote outside world is symbolized by Santi (Sanctions), the son of a wealthy South American family; the Canadian world beyond by Miss Natalie Ramone (Kim Provos) who for a living removes her clothes in the local drinking establishment.

"The rich are very different from you or I," Scott Fitzgerald once sighed. "Yes, they have more money," was Reming way's sarcastic reply. Within these parameters, the kids of Ups & Downs experience some of the ups and downs of life that lie ahead; obesity, formlessness, death, sex and the breaking of tabos. It's all done with enormous afffection and enthusiasm; the kids are wonderful, the teachers remotely eccentric, and Peter Benison's sublime cinematography delivers the images with nostalgic clarity, from fresh faces and puffy cheeks to the lush B.C. rainforest.

Ups & Downs is a nice, skillfully made film that demonstrates once again that what distinguishes the upper-class and real teachers, even if it takes place in a real school. For the film itself seems to present a false face: it wears its innocence as a mask.

In part this is because all the hard truths underlying the film are only alluded to, and while there are references to the unpleasant world beyond the cocoon of the school (or the making of the film) they are oblique, if merely parenthetical, which reverses the fact that being in school is itself the parenthesis. And yet these glimmers are arresting because they are all structured around the presentation of footage, suggesting a rather intriguing subtitle. That Sam (Margo Nesbitt) has an alcoholic mother is communicated by telephone, as is the news of the death of Drifty's (Gavan Brannon) mother; Santi's (Sanctions) Garcia de Leon) torment over the socio-economic priveliges of his family is communicated by a book on terrorism. Even the accidental discovery of Emmie's (Sabrina Lane) epileptic fits under the (the theft of) the medium of her pills. Further terror and violence is signified by gruesome scenes excepts from horror films and television voice-overs that sonorously point of the media's sinister and lurking presence, as though the world would otherwise be a peaceful place.

Is this Almond's hint that media, and that includes film, compromise life? Is that why he re-edited Ups & Downs to give it a more up-beat and up-market ending? The paradoxical intuition of such 'realistic' considerations, since they are not explicitly developed, only casts a troubling reflection upon the sincerity of the film's reflection.

Not that this will especially matter in terms of a young audience, and in a genre where Porky's has set the standard, perhaps all Almond could do was over-compensate. The result, though, is to lock Ups & Downs into some of the same set of determinants that pervade modern cinema; a Porky's: instead of a Porky's a lower-class slabs, Ups & Downs becomes a nice, wholesome Porky's about prepubescence.

On the other hand, in an institutional and market context that has largely reduced filmmaking to the lurid purveyors of stereotypes, it may just be that Ups & Downs, by devoting an entire film to young people whose chief characteristic is not their stupidity, points in the general right direction.

For something does appear to be stirring in Canadian film. There's a restlessness for its own roots exemplified by Don Owen's update of Nobody Was Watching and in Almond's characterization of his return to feature film with some CFDC support) film, Ups & Downs represents Almond's update of Nobody Was Watching and in Almond's characteristic of his return to feature film as an attempt to go "back to the way films used to be made in Canada."

If Ups & Downs does not of itself augur the dawn of the second Canadian new wave, it does suggest the long ing for an innocence that, whatever its components, is at least our own. And that must be a sign of hopefulness in the surrounding dark night of Americanization.

Michael Dorland