

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 1972.

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 continually in its ephemeral glow, 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 Geneviève Bujold were media darlings, the Beautiful People; she a rising superstar, and he the auteur, the authentic producer/director/writer/artist. Some (to Almond's embarrassment) had him tabbed as Canada's very own Ingmar Bergman.

But even then Almond was to an extent the Outsider, the charming, gracious, out-going, rugged individualist who went his own way, in both how he lived and how he worked. There he was, an Anglo film 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 intensely 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, Shigawake, on the Gaspé coast—Paul Almond's life, to say the least, has been colourful, the stuff for popular biography. The boy who spent his summers on the Gaspé 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, *Isis*. Not bad for a colonial. But Europe meant not only literature, history, attempts at theatre or acting: the red-blooded Canadian Almond also played semi-pro hockey in Italy for a while. To this day, as a matter of fact, the tall, lean 50-year-old can be seen jogging (no, loping indefatigably is better) on the mountain near his Montreal home, or along the Pacific sands of Malibu.

From 1954 to 1967, Almond worked in CBC-TV drama, in its early Toronto glory days (Sydney Newman, Jewison, et al.). His drama garnered awards, and the actors he worked with are 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 Geneviève 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 Québécois 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 Geneviève Bujold. Gradually, however, new scripts and projects began to develop—and new chapters in his life. From his travels in Morocco he scripted *Solstice*, an allegorical serio-comic adventure romance that Almond confidants 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* (Tyndale) 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, of course, that the mid-'70s were dreadful years for Canadian film financing. And the Boom which followed (capital cost allowance, deferred 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 auteur.

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 in California, surrounded, 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 and assignments. Life, vitality, creativity, and new dreams—the Almond world goes on.

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 Canada commercial, in French, won a Coq d'Or award, thus rewarding Almond's occasional dalance with the making of commercials.

In 1980, after Silvio Narizzano parted company with the producers of *Final Assignment* one week after the beginning of shooting, Almond was made an offer he (literally) could not refuse. After completing the shooting on schedule and within budget, he too eventually left the project, without control of the final cut. In that sense, *Final Assignment* hardly 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, as 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 Piehler calls Almond's allegorical cinema), Ups & Downs nonetheless has a humanity, a concern and love for human beings, and a dedication to filmic craftsmanship that are typically Almond-esque. Whether or not his film, by its relative accessibility, its "popular" approach, actually reaches the 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 mind and heart; and this cinema is miles removed from the rather cynical and vulgar (though sometimes amazingly financially successful) recipes that dominate so-called "youth" films. There is no playing down.

And so, Cinema Canada's up-date on Paul Almond. The following pages are in no way a complete study of Almond's work. His enormous output in TV, for example, is passed over. And there is no exploration of many of the more strictly cinematic graphic, aesthetic aspects of his films. Paul Piehler, McGill University's noted specialist in allegory, looks back at what probably stands as Almond's most significant achievement (and certainly what he is most identified with), his *Trilogy* from the point of view of literary culture and allegory. As a complementary piece James Leach's treatment of the *Trilogy*, from a perspective of contemporary aesthetics and sensibility, is included, but only in free-wheeling summary form. Almond himself comments on the *Trilogy* and speaks about his present situation in film and about many of the facts and aims pertaining to the making of Ups & Downs. Peter Benison, cameraman for the film, discusses the cinematography in this, his first full feature as D.O.P. And to wrap things up, Cinema Canada associate editor Michael Dorland adds his film critique. Cinema Canada's Paul Almond section coincides with the launching of Ups & Downs (its world premiere) in Vancouver, and in the area where it was shot, beautiful, gracious Victoria, B.C.

by Paul Piehler

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.

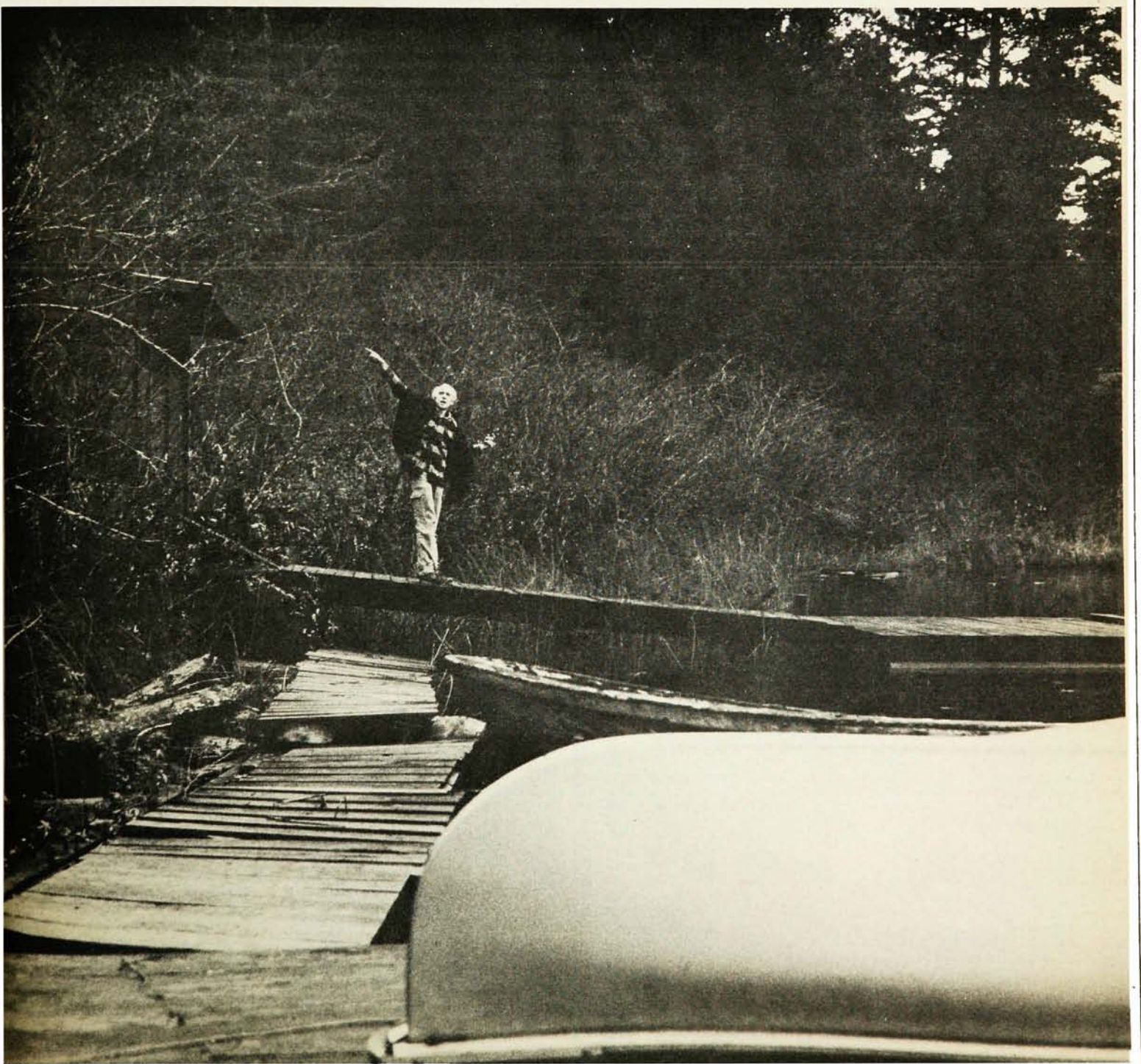
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Paul Almond's heroic quest

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 shone 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 "Bujold" 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 Kareeda, or a Martin Knelman – which were amazingly vitriolic in 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 ethics involved in critical demolition before release. Far more important, however, is the lamentable fact that critics don't have to state their criteria, aesthetic 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 another example of the old colonial game of Canadian put-down of things Canadian. Rather, a whole complex of highly dubious critical or philosophical tenets slipped by unchallenged.

To caricature the implicit position: film must be clear, it must fit nicely into easily assimilated genres or entertainment packages, it must be readily explainable in the tidy rationalisms of the critics' reductive sociological or psychological terms of reference.

Reflecting on these sad facts of past Canadian critical history (perhaps better left forgotten, except that they need exorcizing, since they have helped create an enduring negative climate), James Leach, film professor at Brock University, goes a long way in showing what may be the shallowness of such an approach. In a remarkable article (entitled "Paul Almond's Fantastic Trilogy," soon to be published in Canadian Film Studies), Leach borrows an analytical tool, at once aesthetic and semiological, from Tzvetan Todorov – the notion of "hesitation" – which he then applies in great detail and with exemplary precision to each film of Almond's trilogy.

To resume with extreme brevity: the idea of "hesitation" has been

effectively applied to a number of films which call into question (consciously or unconsciously) the comfortable spectator/screen relationship of commercial cinema. In all three Almond films even the secure notion of genre is undermined: are they "natural" or "supernatural," is "the apparently supernatural event given a natural explanation," or is "the presence of the supernatural confirmed," and so on.

In other words, the Bujold character in each of the films never definitively decides which is which; and, more important, neither can the audience arrive at the comfortable, reassuring interpretation.

A semiotician – if I may be permitted – might put it this way: Almond creates a certain kind of film language, he creates, then structures, cinematographic signs in such a way that they cannot fit adequately into any category or explanation. He is an allegorist, if you will, who cannot find the allegorical terms that have totally satisfying and totally shared meaning today. And this simply because our desacralized universe has no commonly accepted keys, no way to interpret certain levels of experience – except to deny their existence. Consciously or unconsciously, Almond is too "honest" to pretend.

Thus the what one might call tragic plight of the contemporary artist whose roots are in mythic sets of beliefs that transcend the ages, but who also shares the contemporary doubt, the inability to affirm unequivocally these beliefs. Nonetheless, he cannot reduce the experience, dismiss the mystery in neat little explanations which cannot go beyond the psychological or sociological.

The "hesitation," then, resides in the very nature of the films themselves, or, more accurately, in the creation and structuring of the film language. Naturally, the films threaten certain types of critics, attacking the limited and reductive bases on which their critical systems rest. Hence, the violent reaction.

The merit in Leach's work resides, not in my cavalier and polemical rephrasing (using 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. His article is a must for those who see serious merit in Almond's trilogy.

Two concluding, if somewhat repetitive, comments. First, Leach's work is a fine example of what is best in contemporary film analysis. And secondly, the very criticisms of those most vehemently opposed to Almond's trilogy, far from underlining real weaknesses in the films, may well testify rather to their being uncannily powerful (add "honest," "profound" reflectors of a contemporary artist's sensibility, and indeed of nothing less than the sensibility of the modern western world in its tragic groping for meaning.

Marc Gervais ●



● In the House of God, an Almond leitmotiv: Geneviève Bujold in *Act of the Heart*

ning struggle against isolation and misunderstanding, especially in materialistic societies like our own which have lost any cultural tradition for exploring the world beyond form. Thus the quest of the allegorist will inevitably require that particular type of heroic energy (a constant in western culture) which sends a man to penetrate the wilderness lands beyond the confines of his civilisation. This is the energy that pushes back the frontiers of the unknown, whether by means of an expedition to Everest or Mars, or, alternately, to those altogether vaster realms of the inner human consciousness, whose character and dimensions remain opaque to any analysis other than through the perhaps not entirely arbitrary use of external form to explore internal realities.

My earliest encounter with Almond dates back to the fall of 1970. I'd been in Montreal a couple of years already, a refugee from the Berkeley counter-revolution of the late '60s, and at that point not quite clear about where the action had got to. I didn't have long to wait. A phone call. "Yes. My name is Paul Almond. I work in films. Someone has just told me that you're the professor who knows all about allegory. Can I come over and talk to you?... When? Well, just as soon as possible."

I agreed, astounded. Someone outside academia who finds allegory important, in fact urgently important, was something requiring most immediate, pressing, drop everything and let's get together right away kind of action. Even inside academia, hardly a commonplace event.

The Almond energy vortex is highly addictive. Whatever your interests, your talents, in the Almond ambiance they

take on a fresher, brighter glow. In the fourteen years I have been privileged to take a number of forays into this vortex, I have seen a surprising range of different types of people getting themselves irradiated by that energy – somehow through the Almond experience finding a direction and a forcefulness in their careers that testifies to the extraordinary intensity of his interest in them as individuals and not less as sources of ideas and inspiration. Around Almond, everyone is "twopence coloured" – even those who believed themselves to be irretrievably "penny plain."

And yet, and yet, there is of course in Almond's career an extraordinary paradox. How is it that a filmmaker who believes so intensely in himself, in his friends, in ideas, in life itself, has produced so little in the way of films since the great "trilogy" of *Isabel*, *Act of the Heart*, and *Journey*, of the years 1968-72? Partly, of course, one can blame the notorious "ups and downs" – the play of chance – in the overblown, capricious world of film financing. But in the case of Almond, there is, I believe, more to it than just the operations of fickle fortune, but rather something in the very nature of his own allegorical quest: something that can be best discerned in the character of the trilogy itself.

In many respects *Isabel* is the most "solid" film of the trilogy, solid, that is, in the sense that it concerns an experience, a rite of passage, that most of us can understand and identify with. Set in the Gaspé of the '60s, essentially it owes little to specifics of time or place. The girl returns from her comfortable secretarial job in Montreal in order to look after an ailing relative. In the family farmhouse, decaying along with its owner, she finds her city identity de-

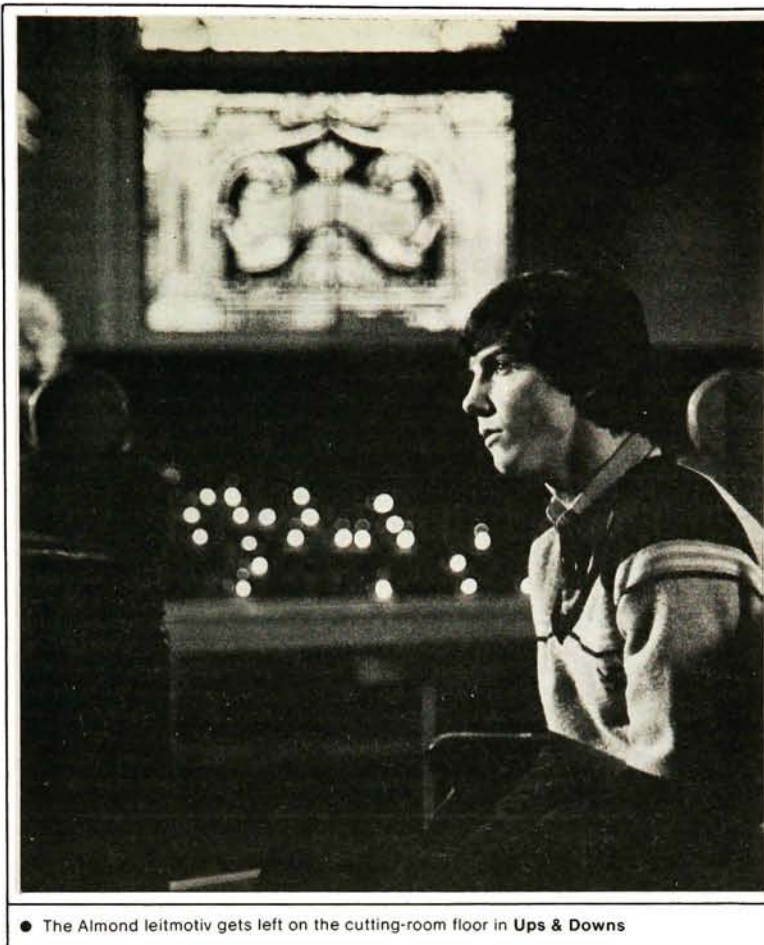
creasingly relevant among the memories and associations of the past – the faded family photographs, the solemn ticking of the grandfather clock, the long oppressive silences broken only by sudden oddly unaccountable noises more oppressive than the silence itself. So dim, so hushed is the present atmosphere of the household that the voices of the past, the ancient obscure passions and tragedies, start to impinge on her in a manner that threatens a temporal breakdown 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 titillate our emotions in a predictably creepy manner. Rather, we gradually become convinced that, in this very plausible human situation, this is how any 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 nothing better than 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 up 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 to force the "ghost" into manifestation, whereupon we challenge that manifestation with a cry in which defiance finally overcomes our fearfulness.

In all this, we feel ourselves in the presence of a minor masterpiece, a work in the vein of allegory which, in penetrating the frontiers between formed and unformed realities, takes us to realms beyond the reach of common art, whether commercial or avant-garde – a work that extends our sense of the scope and range of human experience. And in an industry set up on the principle of confirming rather than extending existing views of reality, it is a matter of surprise and congratulation that the film ever got itself financed and distributed at all. Indeed Almond harmonizes the unlimited acting powers of Bujold unobtrusively with the performances of relative neophytes and local Gaspé personalities, creating a sense of integrity in character and setting which could surely have secured for *Isabel* far wider audiences than its distributors could acknowledge – in spite of all the praise lavished 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 arising out of its final crisis. 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



● The Almond leitmotiv gets left on the cutting-room floor in *Ups & Downs*

her friend and lover, the mysterious Jason. They meet in a passionate embrace in which the major images of the film coalesce, dissolve and re-coalesce before our eyes, and for a time Jason 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 at 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 borderlands between outer and inner worlds, and makes us aware how disturbingly insubstantial that frontier can be, *Act of the Heart* depicts a lonely voyage into the realms of the spirit, the *pneuma*. In *Isabel* the heroine receives no valid help from any spiritual institution in her perils and distresses. The face of her nun sister, dead and dessicated, it would seem, not only 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-preoccupation even to be aware of her plight. The local Protestant church, warm and welcom-

ing as it seems to be, is simply too limited in its spiritual range to be relevant in her crisis. But in *Act of the Heart* spiritual institutions become alive, finally all too alive, for the heroine. Wrought up into an extreme state of spiritual tension through her participation in the sublimities of her local church choir, she loses her sense of discrimination between *agape* and *eros* and falls in love with her choir director, an Augustinian monk. When he reciprocates, and runs away from his city parish to start a new life with her in a small provincial town, taking up some vague plans of social work in place of his priesthood, she finds herself having to exploit her singing talents in a smoky tavern in order to support them.

Her lofty spiritual aspirations now seem to have brought nothing but disaster to herself and her lover. But may not everything be redeemed by one great gesture, one sacrifice to shake the world out of its torpor, awaken it to spiritual reality? And so we reach the shocking, supremely controversial, conclusion of the film in the heroine's ghastly self-immolation alone on a snowy hill, as in the background the indifferent automobile traffic continues on its way unknowing, uncaring as the world itself.

"But why on earth did it have to end like that?" One remembers the talk at the time the film first appeared in 1970. After the first shock, however, certain reasons began to surface in the mind. It dramatized, surely enough, the lack of contiguity between youthful idealism and conventional institutions, failures of understanding particularly acute in this period. At a deeper level, however, the film seemed in a curious way to justify those institutions, for all their banality or insensitivity. The church, product of millennia of social evolution, indifferent or hostile as it may often seem to genuine spiritual endeavour

(particularly on the part of those not yet safely dead and buried) nonetheless provides outlets for religious energy which are relatively safe, if rarely exciting. Almond's heroine, in seeking freedom from the trammels of institutional conventions, has perpetrated the horrendous error of exchanging the kindly if somewhat ineffective Church of St. Peter for something considered safely dead and gone millennia ago. Having confused *eros* and *agape* in what amounts to a revival of the worship of *Astarte*, she now goes one fatal step further, and succeeds in unconsciously recreating within herself what seems to be a kind of atavistic Moloch-worship, finally consecrating herself to that horrifying spirit through physical fire. Once more interior and exterior realities have intermingled in savage confusion, this time in the world of the *pneuma*, the spirit, rather than the *psyche*. For the mystical body of Christ at the altar she has substituted the physical body of the priest; for the spiritual fire of God's love she now substitutes the fires welling up from ancient religions of frenzy and terror, fires in which the aspects which we term physical or spiritual are mingled together in deadly 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 and water. From the first unforgettable scene of the heroine's manifestation, drifting naked and semi-conscious on the great tree-trunk down the massive flow of the Saguenay, the heroine is associated with fluidity, flux, passivity – potentiality not actuality, becoming not being – here even more so than in the earlier films of the trilogy. Rescued from her perilous conveyance by the leader of what appears to be a pioneer back-to-Nature agricultural commune, she makes a gradual recovery from her mysterious trauma 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 person of Boulder, its authoritative and sometimes headstrong leader. This interest is fully returned by Boulder, who seeks, however, with only indifferent success to learn something of the girl's mysterious, perhaps tragic, past history. Somewhere in her background lurks, we understand, the figure of a lover, Damian, 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 Boulder and Saguenay (as she has now been named), which, however, appears to undergo an abrupt termination as the always impetuous and unpredictable heroine is suddenly discovered on her way down-river once more, en route, it seems, to some new and equally mysterious destination. However, as she does finally succeed in making a landing on shore again, who should she find awaiting her but Boulder, and their rapturous re-encounter assures the audience that in spite of all her previous hesitations and misgivings she will now belong to 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. If allegory employs the forms 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 Undersky is, finally, just about as mysterious as the heroine, Saguenay, 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 resolutely materialistic age audiences found *Journey* difficult to comprehend or relate to. Who in the film can you identify or empathize with? Admittedly, Elizabethan audiences doted 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 Spenser'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 Undersky 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 husbandry as subjects of mutual toil and mutual celebration. But essentially and allegorically the community can only exist as a response to her traumatic deracination. 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 temporary 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 lacks, 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 stale or irrelevant 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 forbidding if not unassailable Olympus are as much as we have any right to expect from any artist of our generations. No wonder then that Almond has sometimes preoccupied himself with lesser projects in the years subsequent to *Journey*. But the taste for the heights, the refusal to accept conventional or banal answers, the intoxicatingly infectious enthusiasm for what looks like a new idea – a new route for an ascent – all this is still with him as much or more than it ever was. And so, if he ever decides to cap the trilogy with a new film in these dimensions of earth, psyche and spirit, we may have confidence that this time there will be no turning back on even the most dizzyingly inaccessible routes up those great mountains of the gods that fringe our earthly existences. ●



● Bubbly time at the 500th slate: Almond and d.o.p. Benison

D.O.P. Peter Benison

The shooting of Ups & Downs

"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' when there's a cloud cover. There's always a bright patch. Not necessarily sun coming through, but different densities of cloud; as a result, you get a brighter light on one side than another. This gives you a brighter overcast all over, with a certain amount of modelling as well. We thought it would all help us achieve that overcast 'New England' look.

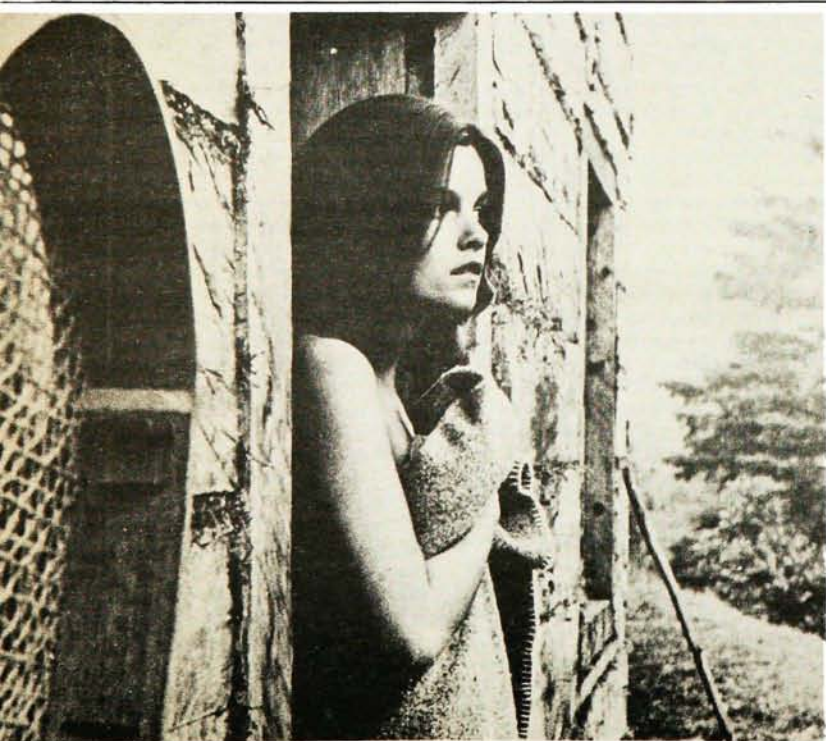
"That 'desaturation' of colours was carried through in the set design. Art director Glenn Bydwell repainted the school inside and out, changed all the lighting fixtures. It's an old school that had been modernized, and now we were 'demodernizing' it. Everything was redone. All the colours are very muted greys, 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 LCs, nothing. It was all in the lighting. We were going for a soft, warm look, without filters. I'd used them in most of the other 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 heaven knows what, without the same 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 obviously gives more of a 'bar' atmosphere, but 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.

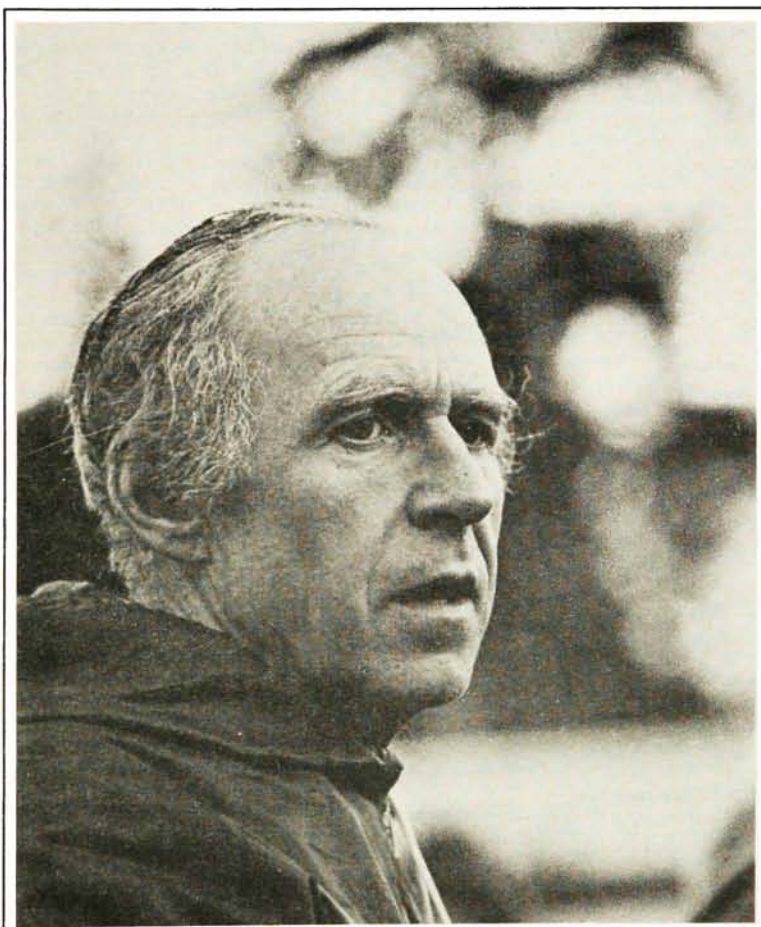
"Some people have said they think the film is too 'sombre', that it should have a 'lighter' feeling to it. Which may or may not be true; I don't know. What I'm pretty pleased about is the fact that the film looks what we set out to do. We initially had a certain idea in mind, and the tone of the film reflects that pretty consistently."

Peter Benison, CSC ●



● Evolving soul: Genevieve Bujold as Saguenay in *Journey*

Paul Almond on the up-and-up : An interview



● Almond: "Hey fellas, in filmmaking it's the filmmaker that counts"

Cinema Canada: What are your thoughts on the evolution of the Canadian film industry since you completed your trilogy?

Paul Almond: The trilogy ('68-'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 "industry") who are not filmmakers - i.e., not Canadian artists who know they are doomed to a life of poverty, and struggle on regardless... So of course, we had the "boom" years, when the industry went bust. I find it had 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. (How the most simple truths can elude us...)

But 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*, *Meatballs*, 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 it does that, 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 150% 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, I figured my first job was to get them to reverse that decision! I felt then as I do now 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 firm 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 reason for being "in Hollywood" is the wonderful person I married, who happens to live in Malibu. It's kind of like Gaspé there... the beach, dogs, sea, nice hills behind, friendly people from whom you borrow dishes of butter; 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 Québécois. I make films in Quebec, with Quebec crews, and I live in Montreal.

But it's funny, a lot of quite interesting and "non-studio" films are made. My ex-wife's last 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 non-union 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 so on 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, fires 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 about it 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, one mind and soul, they give the whole thing the shape it deserves.

If you don't believe me, that is how David Lean, Kubrick, Lucas, Spielberg all work, as well as Bergman, Truffaut, 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...



● Santi gets direction in *Ups & Downs*



● Drifty pipes in the rugby team



● Almond: "It rained all the time"



● Emmie has a wake-up shock

Now Bishop's College School is an elite English school in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. My friends on its Board were worried about its future. A good film could help. And, if it got rid of the rapidly accumulating debt, we'd have achieved something...

The immense irony of all that is the Headmaster, like many others we've all met, said yes all 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* financed?

Paul Almond: Private offering memorandum, and some rather creative interim guarantees which I arranged with Alpha Cine Lab, Famous Players, the CFDC, and some of the participants in the film. Finally, a brilliant investment counsellor (Lynne 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 Canadian adolescence because all the research was done in Canada; it was directed, written and acted by Canadians.

But of course, the thing about boarding schools, whether in Canada, England, or anywhere, is that the problems and lifestyles are similar. The concerns of teenagers in the different schools are also similar—and not so far from the concerns I felt at that age. Growing up, as we say on the poster, 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 it was like any school of that kind.

A more important question is: does this view of adolescence cross national boundaries, and—one step further—does it cross economic boundaries?

Well, it's clearly not about growing up in an "inner city" (Newark, Watts, Chicago). Kids from those environments may not relate. But market research so far indicates that Middle America does, and the suburban areas too. Mind you, we were careful to choose stories that were universal: a boy having trouble with his coach, a girl who feels she's too fat, a school "nerd" who becomes a hero through his music.

Now if 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 in as disturbing a fashion as possible." This would hardly apply to *Ups & Downs*. Why the change?

Paul Almond: Anouilh wrote what he called *pièces noires* and *pièces roses*. *Ups & Downs* is sort of a *pièce rose*.

You see, before *Ups & Downs* came the two scripts, *Solstice*, and *Eye of the Falcon*. Which meant I spent years in other dimensions 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 Gilgamesh roamed) and into diplomatic circles, and archaeology.

It meant I'd lingered in baking Be-

douin villages, pried into early Islam, and created a vengeful Moslem 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 shaped Doyle, a Sherlock Holmes of the past, who loved nothing more than to lie of a night with his beautiful young Arab lad, or shuffle pots/herds 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 challenge 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 commercial market: targeting an adolescent audience, making the film funny, re-editing the ending and keeping it upbeat. Do you see these as compromises of a (perhaps) different, original intent, or is it all part of a conscious strategy? Either way, do you believe that this will make your film potentially more profitable than your other films?

Paul Almond: Because the film was made by teenagers, for teenagers, its potential in today's market is greater than, say, the story of a repressed girl forced back to her roots on the Gaspé to find herself. But I didn't make *Ups & Downs* in order to make money. As 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, so maybe I've changed in that regard 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 Penel? Jed, 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 kids! With such a natural joyous sense of being alive. Cut out the laughs, and you've got half the picture of adolescence. There are lots of downs in the film, so why not ups? If 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 (never mind that our distrib "refuses to do it"). But it was because I was making the film with teenagers and for them, and I wanted to know what they thought. Kids today are way ahead of where I was then. And now. They are so 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 no financial pain (though their "creative accounting system" has given me some). But *Ups & Downs* was made with private money from real people, and I feel a very strong 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 a successful *Ups & Downs* allow you to do next?

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

What will it allow me to do next? Find a producer. Get a studio who'll fund me in developing my ideas and in making the films I've already developed. (Pinch me—I'm dreaming.)

Cinema Canada: *Ups & Downs* can be seen both as an innocent film made by a cynical director and as a cynical film made by an innocent director. Any comments?

Paul Almond: Have I stopped beating my wife? Well... a lot of adjectives have been thrown at me in the last thirty years of directing—"cynical" makes a nice change from any of them, however far-fetched. And innocence? Well, it is supposed to be a major, if not the integral, component of any (great) artist (see your issue of Norman McLaren) so I accept that with pleasure.

Cinema Canada: You have always had a rough time from Canadian critics. What sort of response do you anticipate this time? How do you feel about the nature of critical responses to your filmmaking?

Paul Almond: I can't help but be a little dazed, and grateful, from the terrific reviews my films have (so far) got in the U.S., both in New York and Los Angeles. The press book on *Isabel* has to be seen to be believed—what compliments! And what a pleasure to read a well-written review by a fine critic who likes one's film!

As for the rough time in Canada, what serious Canadian filmmaker hasn't? Looking back, a lot of Canadian critics who wrote about my films were on the "Living" beat the next year, or assigned to Sports. Or were out for personal notoriety, and ended up as somebody's assistant. Or just faded out. But we filmmakers seem to "keep on truckin'", in spite of it all.

It's tough for the committed film critic—most Entertainment editors don't understand, or take seriously how important a good critic can be to our industry. So they don't really have much security—or space. That's why I say thank God for Cinema Canada, which at least, with its longevity, has developed the needed perspective on the industry and its filmmakers.

What sort of response this time? I have no idea. The Canadian critics won't matter much to our teen-age audience. But I sure as hell hope they don't kill it for people of taste and quality who will like it. So I'll probably try to get the film out in the U.S. before hitting the east of Canada.

Cinema Canada: It's the first time you've worked with another writer. Did this change the way you thought, or result in a different film, and how was the relationship? Would you do it again?

Paul Almond: It was just fantastic. Actually, you know, Lewis Evans, the co-writer, 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 he has a real ear for the chat and a real nose for the truth; we had a great time. And not having written before, he had no ego. Believe it or not, neither did I.

We tossed the scenes back and forth – “Hey, can you save me on this?” or “Gad, this is rubbish, but I think I can fix it.” We wrote really fast and well.

But he's got a wife and kids, and a job, so for more funny reason he doesn't want to join me on the soup-line to make masterpieces...

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

Paul Almond: My raw material is to go away, figure it all out. I put out antennae. I pick up on the planet waves, the ideas circling the globe, waiting to be realized. Where are we now? I receive. And I write. So far, it works, because I've been ahead of the game. *Solstice?* Miles ahead, when it started. *Ups & Downs?* Way before the spate of preppie films. 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 brokerage houses and distributors for as long as I have, one doesn't brook fools gladly. Or meddlers – I hate to see mistakes made and money wasted.

But yes, my prime search right now – is just that: a producer! Someone who can handle the financial aspects, get my projects on – then get on with his job while I get on with mine. It's my one passion in L.A. – to find that guy.

Cinema Canada: *You spoke earlier about a team. You have one?*

Paul Almond: Different teams for different jobs. First of all, Quest (Almond's production company) has a group of terrific advisors, who read every project, work it over with me. They're all brilliant minds, much more brilliant than me. They help me shape it.

Next comes my production team, and family, but early on: my brother-in-law, Bo Harwood, terrific composer and very wise in many ways, who does the music (and also location sound if he feels like it); Glenn Bydwell, brilliant production designer, whom I first worked with ten years ago while in his first year architecture at McGill; Peter Benison, whom I've known seven years, and the great Ann Pritchard, whom I always try to involve, but she's getting wary.

Son-in-law, Dermot (Stoker), chief grip, always there with encouragement and advice; sister-in-law Joanne (Harwood), great continuity girl, watching it all like a hawk; then Joan, my partner in all things, she's also a great stills photographer, so she comes on the crew too. I could keep on, but I guess you get the idea... We all trust each other, financial details are not hidden, we travel economy, live the same. We make films on time and budget, because no one tries to screw anyone; and when the going gets tough, no one complains because we all know that's how you make a film you care about.

Everyone is invited to screenings, so they see how it's going, and talk it over with the editors. Now I've found a wonderful one with a heart as big as an elephant, Yuriy Luhovy, who works till midnight because he loves cutting so much. There is one four-minute sequence of about a hundred cuts he did all one night long, and much as we tried to mess him about, not one cut was chan-

ged – he's that kind of genius.

There are so many hassles in the simple making of a film, that you've got to load all the chances on your side from the very first. Also, since it's a rare experience, you try to help it be as much a pleasure for everyone as it can be.

Cinema Canada: *What was it really like, shooting Ups & Downs?*

Paul Almond: Great, actually. After I got the finance, which was not great: I was so exhausted the last week when it all came together, I was hardly ready to start eight weeks' shooting. Most of my energies went on trying to get the promise of help from 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 over a number of weeks, set up a little office, had “seminars”, met and talked to the kids. Trained a TV crew there too, taped improves: then, we started writing.

You see, I had gone to Bishop's College School from 1944-48, boys only, and quite strict: four cracks (of the cane) for unpolished shoes, six for cheeking a prefect, and ten for smoking. (I 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 now, and how they spoke, and what was uppermost. Most of the things were much the same – except the girls: it being co-educational, they were slightly more real.

The shooting day started with the crew and actors (i.e., school kids) having “breakfast in hall”, i.e., school food, on benches, with the kids. Lunch was the same.

Joan (my wife) found us a place overlooking the harbour, super-elegant but in financial difficulties, so she got an excellent arrangement. We all had 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 dark. In fact, outdoors, in the woods, Peter (Benison) was shooting with high-speed lenses, at T/14, and we got up to that light level around eleven and lost it around two.

It rained all the time. The one nice day (the day of the Big Game) it was hot and sunny, and we were thrilled – except we had to throw it all out as nothing matched. The Headmaster played the Headmaster, and a couple of teachers played a couple of teachers, and none of the kids had ever been in front of a camera before...

Cinema Canada: *You mean you made a feature without one person who had been in front of a camera before? That's a bit hard to believe. And if it is true, wasn't it very unbusinesslike? Risky for your investors, and foolish for you as a filmmaker?*

Paul Almond: Big risk, yes. And compounding it, the cameraman, editor, or co-writer had never done a full feature either.

But several people in *Isabel* had never acted before. Nor the boy in *Act of the Heart*. And when I was doing TV, lots of performers had never been in front of a TV camera when I cast them, like Susan Clarke, Donnelly Rhodes, Roberta Maxwell, Sharon Acker, Heath Lamberts, the list goes on.

Since *Ups & Downs*, Andrew Sabiston has played the lead in a series for Disney and a TV movie. Leslie Hope a role for John Cassavetes in *Lovestreams*, and Gavin Brannan two features in Europe. So maybe they're carrying on the tradition...

And of course, the parts were written for real kids: Santi was written for him, and so was little Mouse; Sam was constructed for the beautiful Margot Nesbitt. The part of Biff naturally emerged through the terrific acting of Steve Wright.

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

The Headmaster, bless his soul, a brilliant man actually and very supportive of the film, cancelled all the 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! In a way, he was right, they did learn quite a bit (and wrote the exams in January instead). They also have the best school rugby team in North America. Chuck Champlin of the “L.A. Times” said the film has the best sports footage he's seen since *This Sporting Life*.

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



● Santi shows his Latin temper



● The Ups & Downs ending that got cut



● “Sherlock” Holmes (Colin Skinner) finds the Johnnie Walker



● The revealing Miss Natalie Ramone (Kim Prowse)

Paul Almond Filmography

Features*

Isabel (1968)

35mm colour, 108 mins. **p./d./sc.** Paul Almond **p.c.** Quest Film Productions, **dist.** Paramount.

Act of the Heart (1970)

35mm colour, 103 mins. **p./d./sc.** Paul Almond, **p.c.** Quest Film Productions, **dist.** Universal.

Journey (1972)

35mm colour, 97 mins. **p.c.** Quest Film Productions **p./d./sc.** Paul Almond, **dist.** Astral Communications.

Final Assignment (1980)

35mm colour, 101 mins. **p.c.** Cinema One Films Inc. **d.** Paul Almond, **dist.** Pan Canadian.

Ups & Downs (1983)

35mm colour, 97 mins. **p.c.** Quest Film Productions **p./d.** Paul Almond **sc.** Almond & Lewis Evans **dist.** Astral.

* 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.

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 simplifies 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 pubescent school-girls represented a nadir in the fetishization of youth in a context of institutional bankruptcy (and a declining national cinema). Yet Lindsay Anderson could still filmically 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 so far has been *Porky's*, a celebration of the swinishness of adolescence that largely epitomizes the reckless immaturity of Canadian filmmaking.

Now 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 Canadian cinema's lamentable pandering to the worst aspects of the North-American youth market.

A low-budget (just over \$1 million), non-union, privately financed (though with some CFDC support) film, *Ups & Downs* represents Almond's contribution to the second new wave of Canadian filmmaking. (Almond's film trilogy - *Isabel*, *Act of the Heart* and *Journey* - were part of the first Canadian wave that began with Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Goodbye*.)

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 red-brick buildings the intimacy of tradition and the healthy expansiveness of wide playing fields. Here, in this Canadian version of the British public school, gone 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 context through which the young rich learn about the games people play.

The kids of *Ups & Downs* are stolidly WASP, with nicknames like Mouse, Chip and Biff. The landscape is evocatively Etonian, the religious atmosphere faintly Anglican; and there's plenty of emphasis on character-building sports (rugby for the boys, lawn hockey or show-



● The kids from *Ups & Downs*: front row, Sam (Margo Nesbitt), Mouse (Alison Kemble), Penel (Leslie Hope); back row: Derek (Eric Angus), Jed (Bobbi Permanent), Chip (Andrew Sabiston), and Drifty (Gavin Brannon)

jumping for the girls). The remote outside world is symbolized by Santi (Santiago), the scion of a wealthy South American family; the Canadian world beyond by Miss Natalie Ramone (Kim Prowse) 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 Hemingway's sarcastic reply. Within these parameters, the kids of *Ups & Downs* experience some of the ups and downs of life that lie ahead: obesity, friendlessness, death, sex and the breaking of taboos. It's all done with enormous affection 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 rosy 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 view of the world from the more vulgar apperceptions of the lower classes is class. Had it been made by anyone less accomplished than Paul Almond, *Ups & Downs* could be hailed as a qualitative leap in the maturity of Canadian filmmaking.

But it is a Paul Almond film, and if there is a quality that accurately describes the films of Paul Almond, at least until *Final Assignment* and even there with qualifications, that is the quest for truth. But *Ups & Downs* is a film whose truths are only secondary: even if every incident in the film is based on true events, even if those are real students 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 not 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 media, suggesting a rather intriguing subtext. That Sam (Margot Nesbitt) has an alcoholic mother is communicated by telephone, as is the news of the death of Drifty's (Gavin Brannon) mother; Santi's (Santiago Garcia de Leaniz) torment over the socio-economic privileges of his family is communicated by a book on terrorism. Even the accidental discovery of Emmie's (Sandy Gauthier) epilepsy occurs through (the theft of) the medium of her pills. Further terror and violence is signified by gruesome sounds excerpts 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 intrusion of such 'realistic' considerations, since they are not explicitly developed, only casts a tremor of calculation upon the sincerity of the film's reflections.

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 produces a *Porky's*: instead of a *Porky's* about lower-class slob, *Ups & Downs* becomes a nice, wholesome *Porky's* about preppies.

On the other hand, in an institutional and market context that has largely reduced filmmaking to the luscious portrayal 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 Waved Goodbye* and in Almond's characterization 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 longing for an innocence that, whatever its compromises, is at least our own. And that must be a sign of hopefulness in the surrounding dark night of Americanization.

Michael Dorland ●

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