

photos: Pamela Gawn

Let there be light

Mark Irwin, CSC

by Donald Martin

He's not too tall. Stocky, in fact. And his full grey beard fools one into thinking he may be older than his 33 years. He probably is. He has been nick-named "the prince of darkness" and, at first glance, his feature film credits seem to support such a label: *Blood And Guts*, *Mutations*, *The Brood*, *Scanners*, *Deathbite*, *Videodrome*, and *The Dead Zone*. But look closer—Mark Irwin, one of this country's top Directors of Photography, is much more than the foremost photographer of things that go bump in the night. He's a naturalistic cameraman who seems to never stop working, quite a feat considering our sporadic film industry. When he's not on the set for a feature, he's shooting documentaries or children's films, one of which earned him the Golden Hugo Award for best TV documentary at the 1978 Chicago Inter-

Toronto writer Donald Martin is a frequent contributor to *Cinema Canada*.

national Film Festival (*Young and Just Beginning*—Pierre). "The prince of darkness" has, in fact, displayed a mastery of lights and cameras that takes him far beyond such a restrictive label.

Irwin's close association with director David Cronenberg ever since *Fast Company* has led to one of the most productive and successful relationships in the business. Having made five films together, and with many more to follow, Irwin and Cronenberg often need not even speak in order to come up with a shot that is 'just right.'

"We just know what we want to shoot," explains Cronenberg, very pleased after his recent return from France where *The Dead Zone* picked up three awards. "It feels so right. We're friends as well as professional colleagues. We've grown together in our art and that provides a closeness that is unusual. It has always interested me to see other films he's worked on—and they're totally different—and I must admit that it'd feel strange if Mark

could go off and do exactly the same thing with other directors."

Cronenberg, oddly enough, attributes Irwin's success behind the camera to his ability to do unusually precise voice impressions. "Mark can almost intimidate an actor because of his great impressions," the director states, "a fabulous Indian accent, a Cockney accent—which most film actors cannot do. This might sound frivolous but I believe his voice impressions have something to do with the exact rightness of his rhythms with a camera. A very ephemeral thing. When I look through the lense and if it's wrong—it almost makes me physically ill. Like nausea. But Mark is just never wrong. His rhythms are always dead on for me. Rhythm, timing, and detail—whatever it is in his nervous system that makes all that happen is connected to the exactness of his voice impressions."

Jock Brandis, a gaffer and former cameraman, met Mark Irwin when he was hired on as Brandis' assistant for Ed Hunt's *Diary of a Sinner*. Ironically,

Brandis now works as Irwin's assistant on set and together they have made twelve films. "Mark had an interesting quirk to build up some confidence on the part of the potential producer/director as soon as he walked through the door," recalls Brandis, "He had a full, fashionably greying beard by the time he was 19 years old! So when he strode into people's offices, they got the impression they were talking to an accomplished man of the world. I would certainly not want to say that's the only reason for his success, but I think he realizes that it has helped him somewhat."

If it's not his vocal impressions, then it's his silver beard! There must've been more to Irwin's quick rise in the industry—and Brandis agrees, adding quite seriously, "In describing Mark, the word 'professional' is wrong. For him, making feature films is almost a monastic pursuit."

Irwin resides in Toronto, where this interview with *Cinema Canada* took place.

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Cinema Canada: Your work always seems to have a very specific and unique 'look' to it. How has that 'look' changed over the years? And why?

Mark Irwin: Interesting question. My first five feature films were a learning experience. Most of the films I have worked on have been with directors who were developing too. We were all making these films together – in a developmental sense. Each of us was building a career. The 'look' we created – together – was going to progress from film to film.

The one thing that I have tried to avoid is to provide one 'look' that people must come and choose. I consider an American cameraman like Gordon Willis as having a 'look' that is etched in stone. With the exception of the work he's done with Woody Allen, everything he does has that same 'look'. Whereas Billy Williams, Owen Reitzman, or Conrad Hall have an adaptable style – undeniably creative. With Conrad Hall, who d.o.p.'d *The Marathon Man*, *Day of the Locust*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*: they're totally different. They all have incredible style. But *Kluge*, *All the President's Men*, and *The Godfather*, all have the same Willis 'look'.

The 'look' depends on the subject. What I have been able to do with David Cronenberg is refine his imagery. Imagery is not on the page. When I talk to a director about shooting something I want to know how they want to feel when they're seeing this scene on film – as opposed to telling me that they might want this cross-lit or top-lit. The only time I've ever had a specific request was on *The Dead Zone* when David said: "I want it to look like a Norman Rockwell painting."

With *Videodrome* it was totally different. So was *Scanners*. Cameramen don't want to be pigeon-holed. I like to collaborate. I don't just do bloodthirsty movies, though people in Canada are glad to pigeon-hole you. The most important thing, for me, is to be in the same room with the actors and the director for blocking. David, for one, hates storyboards, that whole pre-planning thing, because it's all based on what someone else can visualize with a sketch-pad, instead of what someone is seeing in the room standing there. As soon as you see this blocking you realize the coverage evolves out of where everyone ends up standing, turning. The motivation of their actions motivates the camera moves, motivates the coverage. We will change certain things for certain effects.

On *Scanners* we did a lot with extreme wide-angle lenses (14mm and 20mm) and on *Videodrome* we tried to stay away from that. With *The Dead Zone* the widest lens we used was a 35. Just to keep the more formal approach. With David, once his blocking is set, he has enough faith and understanding of 'the look' to go away and talk further with the actors, or just work on the script, or go to his Winnebago, and I can build the lighting up from there. I can get it all together and do a full run-through with all the bells and whistles. It's much more relaxing in that type of collaboration. But it's the same thing every cameraman does with every director – so to elaborate is just to say the same thing. There's no secret. It's just a logical approach which everyone employs.

The negative side of the collaborative approach is that if directors or producers have enough money they're glad to hire someone else. The unions are very open. Phil Borsos wanted the British d.o.p. Frank Tidy to shoot *The Grey Fox* – so there he was! And the union supports

such a move just so that they'll work. In that sense, the Canadian cameraman is an endangered species. Because a director can always bring in a cameraman from Hollywood, Britain, or France.

Cinema Canada: If Canadian cameramen are an endangered species, what would you suggest to put a stop to that?

Mark Irwin: That wasn't the case in 1979 or '80 when everything that was being made was a Canadian production – albeit with what now looks like questionable financing. We were making films in any case and there was no need to import a lot of technicians. Now there are fewer films – mainly co-productions or totally American – and producers want the living-legend cameramen. Those living-legends made their legends in their own countries. I guess, to be honest, we have to start building our own legends. It won't happen if we keep importing people. It's a vicious circle. I don't see an immediate solution. What I like about David is that he values the collaboration aspect more than the superstar aspect. I can't say that I can shoot better than Billy Williams, who only did an adequate job on *Silent Partner* – but I would have to say that I could've done as good a job on *Silent Partner* and that was a Canadian film. For instance, in directing *Phobia*, John Huston did an adequate job as a director but he certainly wasn't up to the standards that he had set with *The Man Who Would Be King*. If you compare *Gandhi* – for which Williams won an Oscar last year – to *Silent Partner* you'd see a vast difference and I don't think it's just the subject material.

Silent Partner was well shot for what it was but many cameramen in Canada – not just myself – can provide the same 'look' and do as good a job, if not better. There's yet to be a Canadian cameraman who's won an Oscar for shooting a feature film – never mind a Canadian feature film. It's the slow process of becoming legendary, perhaps, in one's own country. The route usually taken is out of the country first, to become famous in the United States or Britain, then come back. And Johnny Coquillon is a perfect example of that – he shot the film *The Wars*. He shot a number of Sam Peckinpah films – he became a legend by leaving town. If you stay in town they bring in the superstars to take our place when something lucrative or demanding comes along. We're defeating the whole purpose in staying here – trying to provide a service to the Canadian film industry. It's mostly Canadian producers who feel that way, that they need to import talent, which is tragic, I think. I really do. I look at François Protat on *Running Brave* or Reg Morris on *Christmas Story* or myself on *Dead Zone* or *Special People* and see Canadian cameramen shooting American films in Canada. That's the whole point in staying here.

Cinema Canada: If you had to assess what you bring to a picture – what your power and strengths are so that a director wants you specifically – how would you describe it?

Mark Irwin: The ability to translate exactly what the director wants. There's a lot of pressure on a film set. The sad reality about filmmaking is that you have an eight-to-nine-hour day and you have to hit the ground running, knowing exactly what shots are needed. I have to expedite what the director wants as quickly and as well as possible. There's only so many shots you can get in a day – the more shots you get the better the film will be. That's my theory

– if a director wants material to cut, the more I give him the better. In this translation process my role is both very artistic and technical. To bring to a film a very fast pace and quick decisions. I get things done and, on top of that, I provide the 'look'. But you have to keep refining things – and you always have to keep in mind the leading lady. With *Scanners* – an outright horror film, a chase film – the leading lady factor had to be dealt with very delicately. The 'look' can therefore alter, you see.

That's one thing that David and I discussed heavily with *Scanners* – how do we treat this problem, which wasn't a problem. It was made into a problem. The film is dark, a chase-mystery picture, and one way of dealing with 'the leading lady' issue is fog filters. Or we could've filled the room with smoke and lit the smoke. David didn't want any of that. David wanted it as clear and as crisp as possible. It all turned into a lighting factor. Make-up was out of my hands, so I had to light it in a way that would be much more flattering to the leading lady (Jennifer O'Neal). When she was in a number of scenes that were in

actors don't mind when it's integral to their role in the film.

Cinema Canada: Do you sometimes have to fight with a director to get what you feel is the 'look' for a movie?

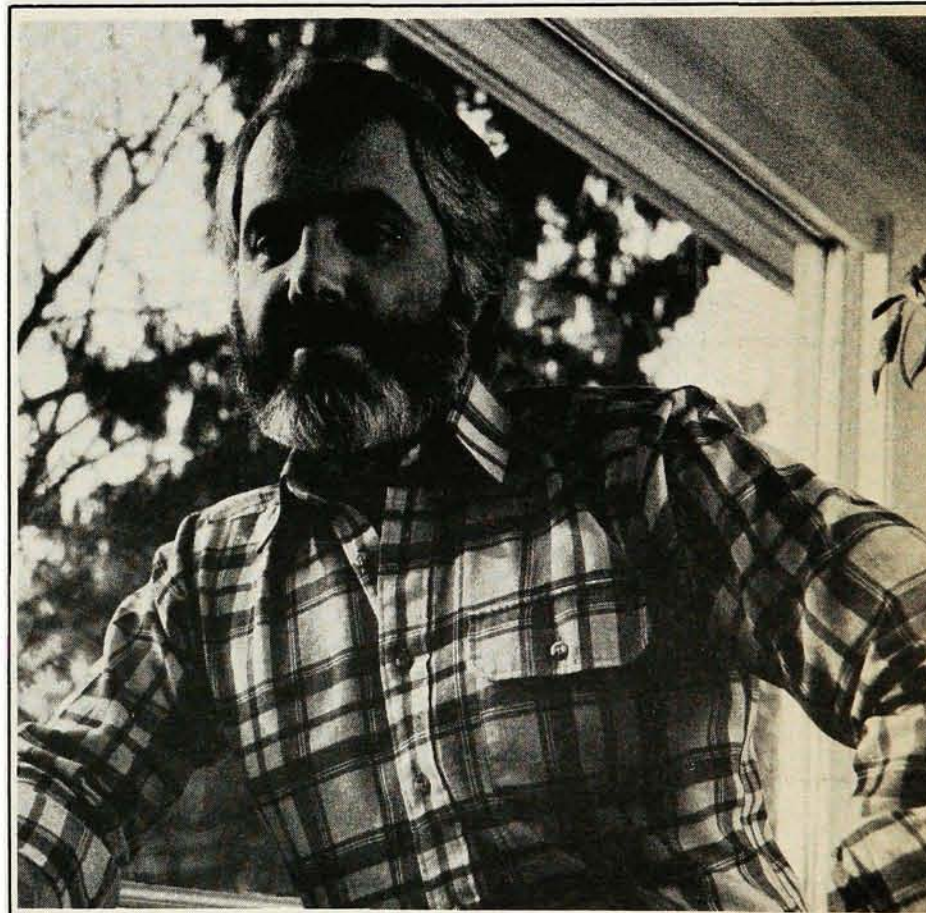
Mark Irwin: I guess it's a version of 'the customer is always right.' The film set is the most immediate parallel to the military. The director is the general. The first a.d. is the regimental sergeant-major. Everyone else is enlisted in this artistic army.

Cinema Canada: What rank is the d.o.p.?

Mark Irwin: (Laughing) Well, hopefully, the d.o.p. is the second-in-command. But you can't countermand your superior's orders. If you can collaborate with this battle plan – then anything's possible. I don't want to fight with a director. I want to collaborate.

Cinema Canada: What have been the influences on your particular style?

Mark Irwin: British cameramen. Italian cameramen. New York cameramen. Hollywood cameramen. The



keeping with the mood of the film – dark 'n dirty – the lighting, overall, to have a kind of lighting continuity, had to match. It's very, very difficult to keep something moody and basically flat-lit at the same time. We did it, I think, and Jennifer O'Neal looked as beautiful in *Scanners* as she does in every film.

Cinema Canada: Do some actors find it difficult to deal with your lighting techniques when they may not necessarily be complimentary to the performers?

Mark Irwin: Yes. Sometimes. In Christopher Walken's case in *Dead Zone*, we were playing around with lighting to make him progressively more and more wasted throughout the film – because he was shriveling up. The other nice thing is that they kept putting clothes on him that were a size too big, then two sizes too big, etc., so that he looked even smaller. Little things like that. Most

Hungarian-Hollywood connection. They all have incredible ability. Obviously natural light, source lighting, is what we all aspire to use. The British cameramen, who've come mainly out of commercials, have developed a style that's become legendary throughout Europe. New York cameramen most resemble the British 'look'. Then there's Hollywood cameramen, as typified by Haskell Wexler and Conrad Hall, you can't say that one is better than the other. They have all been an influence on my work. The most obvious photographic style not to emulate is turning on the TV and watching *The Love Boat*. I usually try to let the location dictate the lighting for me.

Cinema Canada: You prefer a source-lit shot then?

Mark Irwin: Invisibly lit. Natural. A film like *Heaven's Gate* was very elegantly lit. It was overshot. You couldn't help but notice and be overwhelmed by all that back-lit dust, the

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crane shot, and the smoke. That's unfair to the story. A film does have its own dynamics. With *Videodrome*, for instance, if everything had had weird and squirmy sort of lighting – the film wouldn't have had as much impact in those specific weird and squirmy scenes.

Cinema Canada: Do you see any trends happening in terms of lighting?

Mark Irwin: Yes. More and more things are becoming more and more realistic. Look at *The Verdict* – everything in that is realistic. *The Wiz* – a fantasy – but everything about it was totally realistic. *Never Cry Wolf* – you couldn't get much more realistic than

in order to get an exposure – at which point, the ambience and the feel of the room have been subverted.

Cinema Canada: Do you prefer certain types of equipment over others when working on a picture?

Mark Irwin: On features – unless I'm boxed in – I stay away from this newer high-speed Kodak stock (Kodak 5294). I prefer Kodak 5291 – the slower speed. As a cameraman, I can't understand why film stock – the essential ingredient to our craft – is constantly being changed. Camera-wise, I prefer using the 35 BL just because it's easier and more flexible. For my assistant, I prefer the Panaflex.

is that the calibration of the lenses is in extremely minute detail – the calibrations are down to 5 inches, 4 inches, 3 inches, 2 inches. Everything is there, very visible, very logical... which is not to say that the BL is illogical, but the focus scale on that goes from infinity to 30 feet, six feet, then very minute calibrations from then on. You can't compare the two negatively. They're equally sharp – equally crisp – but the design that went into them is worlds' apart.

Cinema Canada: Do you find that many of the new changes in technology in film and video are going to be a help to you in your work or a hindrance?

Mark Irwin: Good question. The

film called *Diary of a Sinner* – clapper-loader/focus-puller... two jobs rolled into one for \$50 a week. I didn't light that film, but it was probably more 'quick 'n dirty' than most. That's the term used not just for skin flicks – it's based on doing a full-length feature in 15 days in 35mm. You just have to come in, light it and shoot it – next location, next set-up. A lot of the lighting that I learned at that time was performed by the d.o.p. (Jock Brandis) who ended up being my gaffer for many of the features I've shot. It was kind of a closed loop in terms of education. I learned a lot from him and then, in turn, we collaborated a lot and created our own lighting designs and fixtures.

That was eleven years ago. That eventually led to *Starship Invasions*, which – because it was released at about the same time as *Close Encounters of The Third Kind* – was renamed *Alien Encounters*. My first feature in 35mm was shown all over the place – amazing! Ed Hunt had faith in me. I've always believed that what you have to do is not wine an' dine people – or join them in terms of cocaine – I don't do that! All I do is keep on working, producing more things for people to see and judge. In this wild and crazy film business, I'm – regrettably – on the straight and narrow.

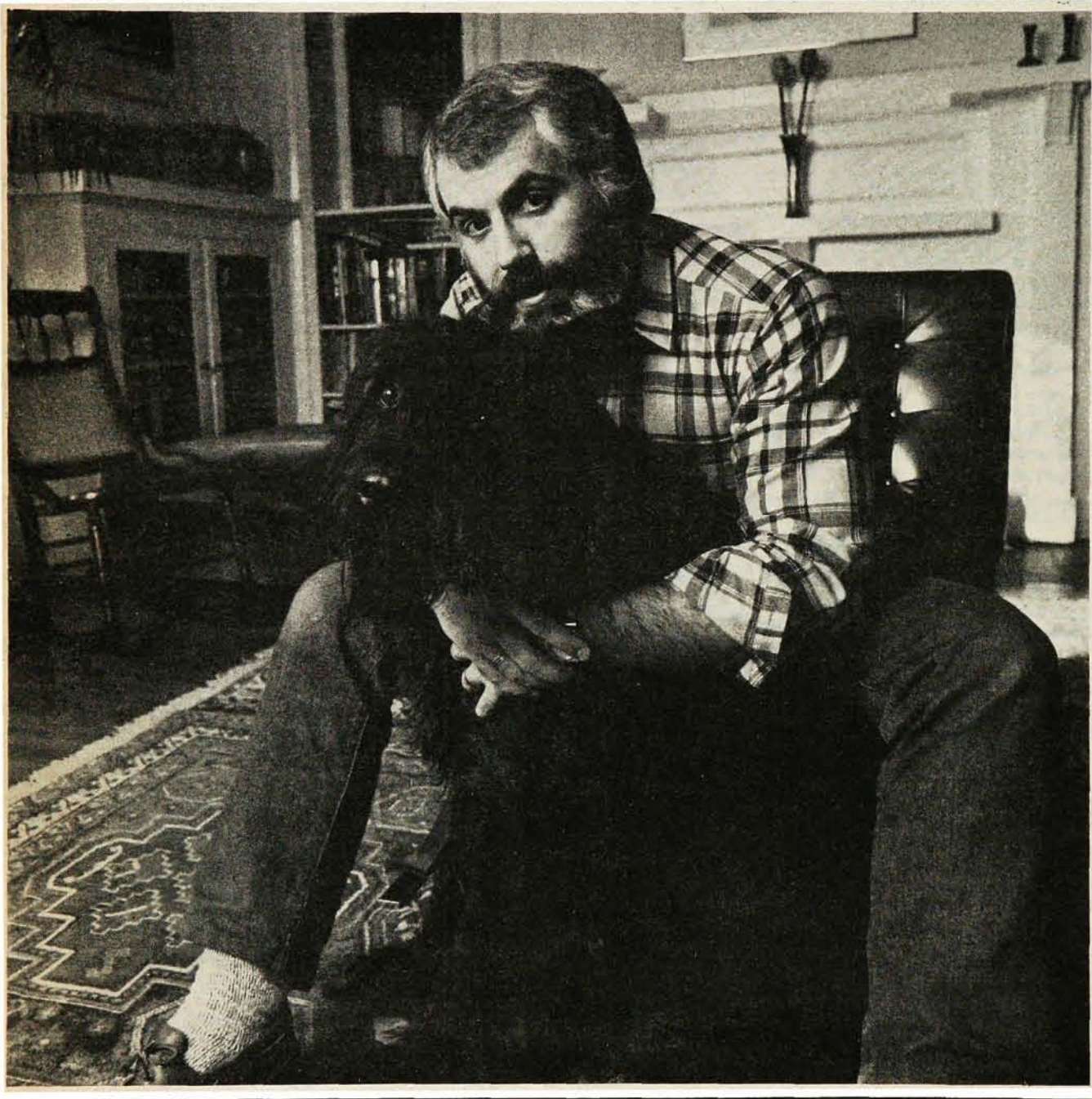
Cinema Canada: A while ago, you had refused to join IATSE. Is that still the case?

Mark Irwin: Well, IATSE (cameramen's local) in Canada has now become its own master. It's basically autonomous. I'm still not a member of IATSE. I'm a CIC member, a Committee for an Independent Canada member – I have always believed that Canada's trade unions should not be run from another country. Before IATSE became a legitimately run branch of an international union here in Canada, we created our own cameramen's union and it has flourished. It's called The Canadian Association of Motion Picture and Electronic Recording Artists (C.A.M.E.R.A.). IATSE services big American films in this country and television commercials.

Cinema Canada: You had previously expressed an interest in going to Hollywood. Does that still hold true?

Mark Irwin: Yes – in a way. There's not a lot here that's not connected with Hollywood. We are, basically, working for the same employer. I think there'd be more range and opportunity there. I had to turn down one film recently – a big Hollywood picture – because it started shooting at the same time my wife was having a baby. There'll be other movies. I want to work there for one simple reason – it can lead to other things. What's happening in Canada is that it's all leading to the same thing – another low-budget film. I like to try new and different things. But I have no regrets about the big boom and bust film cycle that took place in Canada, because I built a career on it. On the strength of that big boom of horror films I could say that I'd done nine, ten, eleven feature films. Not bad. But then, there is Hollywood.

I think of it in the same way that Canadian mountain climbers aren't content with Mount Robson (the highest peak in Canada). It's the same as Broadway – it's the same as sailing around the world alone in a sailboat instead of Lake Ontario. You can say: 'I'm the best there is in Toronto' and probably be correct – but the attribute of the best of the world is obtained by people who've won international awards – the Oscar being the



that. *Silkwood* – again! invisible lighting. *Star 80*. *Gorky Park*. That's the trend. Real.

The lens manufacturers created the possibilities for this trend about five or six years ago with high-speed lenses – so you could shoot in a room that had real available light. Then Kodak brought out higher speed stock without any extra expense or loss of quality. The trend toward 'reality' is just taking a room as it is and shooting it as it is. Now you still have to recognize the fact that shooting six pages of a script in one room makes certain demands – the sun is going to change position in the sky all day long. So you have to start supplementing reality – but you can still deal within the level of, say, 10 to 20 candles instead of trying to heavily amplify the light level

Cinema Canada: Why 35 BL? And why Panaflex for the assistant?

Mark Irwin: The 35 BL is a German camera designed for the ultimate precision, as are most cameras. I have to share the views of most British cameramen, John Alcott among them, who has done advertisements for this product. He enthuses about the camera. He won an Oscar for *Barry Lyndon* shooting with it. It's just human engineered to different degrees – it's the difference between a Cadillac Eldorado and an Audi 5000 Turbo S. Both are extremely luxurious, well-designed, well-engineered cars but their design philosophy is radically different. The Panaflex is a wonderful example of American design. It's the perfect system camera. The nice thing for the assistant

technical changes in film are obviously fast emulsions and fast lenses. But videotape editing is phenomenal. It's ironic when you think of rock videos – they're all shot on film! And they're almost all cut on film too. Television commercials have surpassed all of that though with advances in video and in computer-generated graphics. The advances in video are never-ending. It's going beyond a flat image – quite wonderful. But for my work, in dramas and television documentaries, video technology hasn't really affected us... yet. It will.

Cinema Canada: Who gave you your first break in the business?

Mark Irwin: Ed Hunt. I had assisted on what I shamelessly call an X-rated porno

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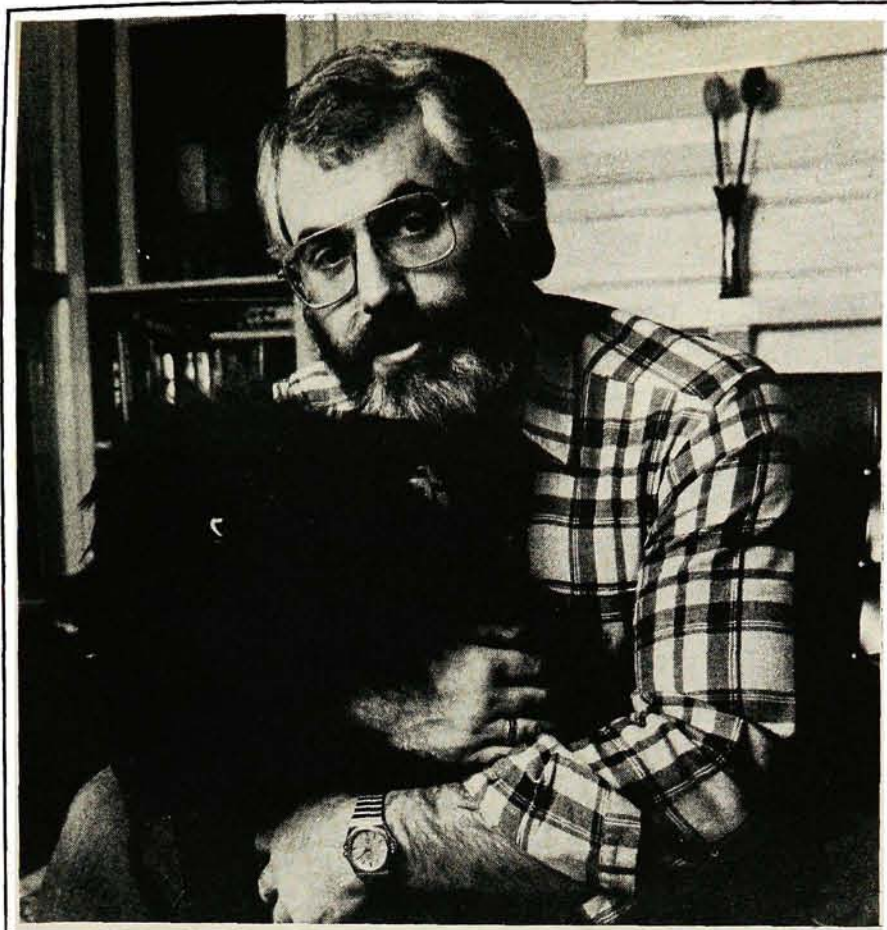
most visible. And the only way into it, obviously, is to be in the system. And that system is in Hollywood. The whole point in shooting a film in Hollywood is to get into that system and achieve all there is to achieve in it – and, in a way perhaps, make things better for Canada as a result. Donald Sutherland, Margot Kidder, Daryl Duke – name-brand Canadians proving that we can do it.

I don't want to get out there and wave the flag for no reason at all. Staying here and hoping you get discovered – while people who've already discovered others are importing them on top of you – seems to be the wrong approach. My immediate feeling is to stay here and build up the standard of quality so that no one feels obliged, especially Canadian producers, to bring in a British or American cameraman – or a technician on any level – to make their film better.

To be honest, shooting a film in Hollywood or anywhere in the States or Britain is just shooting a film in another environment. I don't intend to work in the States in order to get out of Canada, although if I were to believe the many films I've shot in Canada I'm already in the States with stick-on license plates and the Stars and Stripes on every flagpole. I have already shot a feature for UA in Boston and look forward to working with new people in a new setting again.

Cinema Canada: Do you enjoy juggling feature films with television documentaries and children's films?

Mark Irwin: Yes. The reason that I go from one to the other is that I can't sit around and do nothing. A lot of people sit and wait for that big phone call – not me! I'm the one making the phone calls to other people. It's like Richard Lester doing commercials between features. He wants to keep his eyes alive. I feel the same way. You can get rusty and lose so much while waiting for something to



happen. You've got to make it happen yourself.

Cinema Canada: What's one of your biggest gripes about the industry?

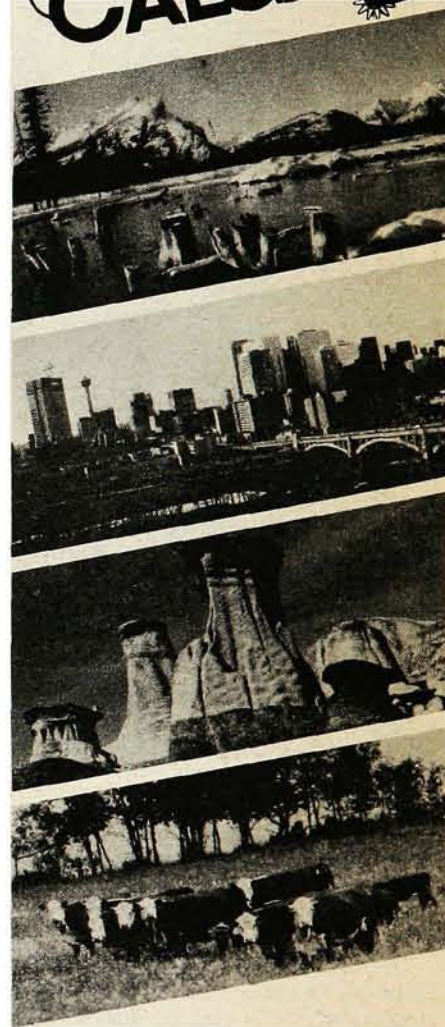
Mark Irwin: The tradition has always been in advertising films that the writer, the associate producer, and the composer get credited in the fine print – but the cameraman rarely gets his name in there. It has always mystified me because people go to see movies – they don't go to listen to the words – they don't go to

recognize the work of the associate-producer – and yet nine times out of ten the cameraman doesn't get his name up-front. It's not as if we're begging for recognition or that we just happened to be there while the film was being shot – it wouldn't have been shot without the cameraman! The audience is going to see our work.

Cinema Canada: What are some of your future plans? Do you wish to get into directing films?

Mark Irwin: Shooting a sequence is not enough for me as a cameraman. Pretty pictures are definitely not enough. You've got to cover something so that it'll cut in the editing process. To that extent, I already am directing – but I don't think I want to go any further. It's a very time-consuming thing. I'm gratified to know that in this career I have established I'm able to satisfy the demands of producers and directors who make elaborate feature films, as well as those of another producer with an intricate documentary. If I can broaden that base as far as possible, then I'll appeal to a wider range of producers and projects...

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