

# *The Shakespeare Murders*

by Laurinda Hartt



Dennis Zahoruk in Jason Borwick

*Produced, directed, written, edited by Dennis Zahoruk. Assistant Director – Don Brough; Production Manager: Barry Clavir; Director of Photography – Josef Sebesta; Assistant Cameraman – Ivan Martin; Soundman – Richard Flower; Assistant Sound – Susan Reeve; Gaffers – Jim Fisher and Susan Wolfson; Grip – David Leach; Props – Pegi Trowsse; Continuity – Laurinda Hartt; Production Assistant – Kathy Wing; Music – Michael Snook. A Tundra Film Company production featuring Gary Peterman as David McKay, Alan Raeburn as Brian Castle and with Moira Sharp (Lilian McKay), Rita Floren (Julie), Ron Scott (Richard Beavis), Arnold Wild ("Junior" Beavis), Beverly Murden (Wanda Sheridan), Tony Miller (Henry Foxworth), Edith Jones (Celia Scofield), Bob Yarwood (Johnson), Curt Jacobs (Tom Duncan).*

Sometimes they met in the dead of night, working swiftly and solemnly in the shadows of skeletal dinosaurs or knee-deep in a village of miniature Elizabethan houses. Meetings were held regularly every weekend for seven weeks from late June to mid August but rarely at the same location. No fewer than 14 and generally not more than 25 people were directly involved. Each meeting lasted anywhere from seven to 18 hours. Leading the group was a 23-year-old university graduate; his 14 primary group members ranged in age from 20 to 28 years. And yet what emerged from these clandestine meetings was not a comprehensive plan to overthrow the Trudeau government, but a 55-minute 16mm colour film, **The Shakespeare Murders**, written, produced and directed by Mr. Dennis Zahoruk.

With a basic crew of 13 and a cast of 11, the film's principal photography was completed this past summer during the aforementioned seven weekends – 14 shooting days in all. The entire film was shot on location in Toronto, Hamilton and

Stratford Ontario, with the specific locations carefully selected to enhance the film's visual style. The most striking of these included Shakespeare's Restaurant in Toronto, a restaurant decorated to resemble an English pub in the time of William Shakespeare; Hamilton's Dundurn Castle; Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum; and Stratford's "Shakespeareland", a miniature recreation of Shakespeare's village birthplace.

Before the end of 1973 most of the editing had been completed and the murder mystery parody was ready for scoring, sound mixing, negative cutting, etc. Total cost of the film to this point: \$3,600. But back in November, Zahoruk's money began to run dangerously low and he applied to the Canada Council for a \$4,600 grant to cover post-production costs and thus enable him to complete the film for a remarkably low total budget. Presently, while Dennis awaits the Council's decision, Michael Snook is preparing a detailed and complex musical score that will be crucial in establishing and enhancing the film's overall style.

Dennis is determined to complete the film. He will not let it die, especially after the remarkable energy and dedication displayed by his crew and cast who, with relatively little professional film experience, had worked long and hard every weekend for free to make a film of which they could be proud. Television distribution is a strong possibility and if the film should make a profit, the cast and crew will receive some financial remuneration on a share basis. But getting rich was the last thing on anyone's mind – they were working together to make a film and that film was their prime concern.

Dennis Zahoruk was a member of the first graduating class

to emerge from the four year honours BA film program established in 1969 within the Faculty of Fine Arts at York University, Toronto. By the time of his graduation in 1972, Dennis had made six super-8mm films (two silent and four with sound, including an ambitious 24-minute opus entitled **Vacuum**); he had sold his first 16mm film, **Thirtieth of February** (a 12-minute black and white science fiction film "about the day time comes to an end") to CBC television; and he had made **Jason Borwick**, a stunning 24-minute film (16mm, black and white) which won him second prize for scenario at the 1972 Famous Players Student Film Festival and served as an indication of his promising filmmaking talents. **Jason** now has two Canadian distributors: The Canadian Filmmaker's Distribution Centre and Universal Education and Visual Arts. It was shown at the 1973 Stratford (Ontario) and Yorkton (Saskatchewan) international film festivals and is part of the Ontario Council of the Arts' (or POCA) film package – a collection of some of Ontario's best short independent films – which the Canadian Filmmaker's Distribution Centre will be promoting and distributing throughout Canada.

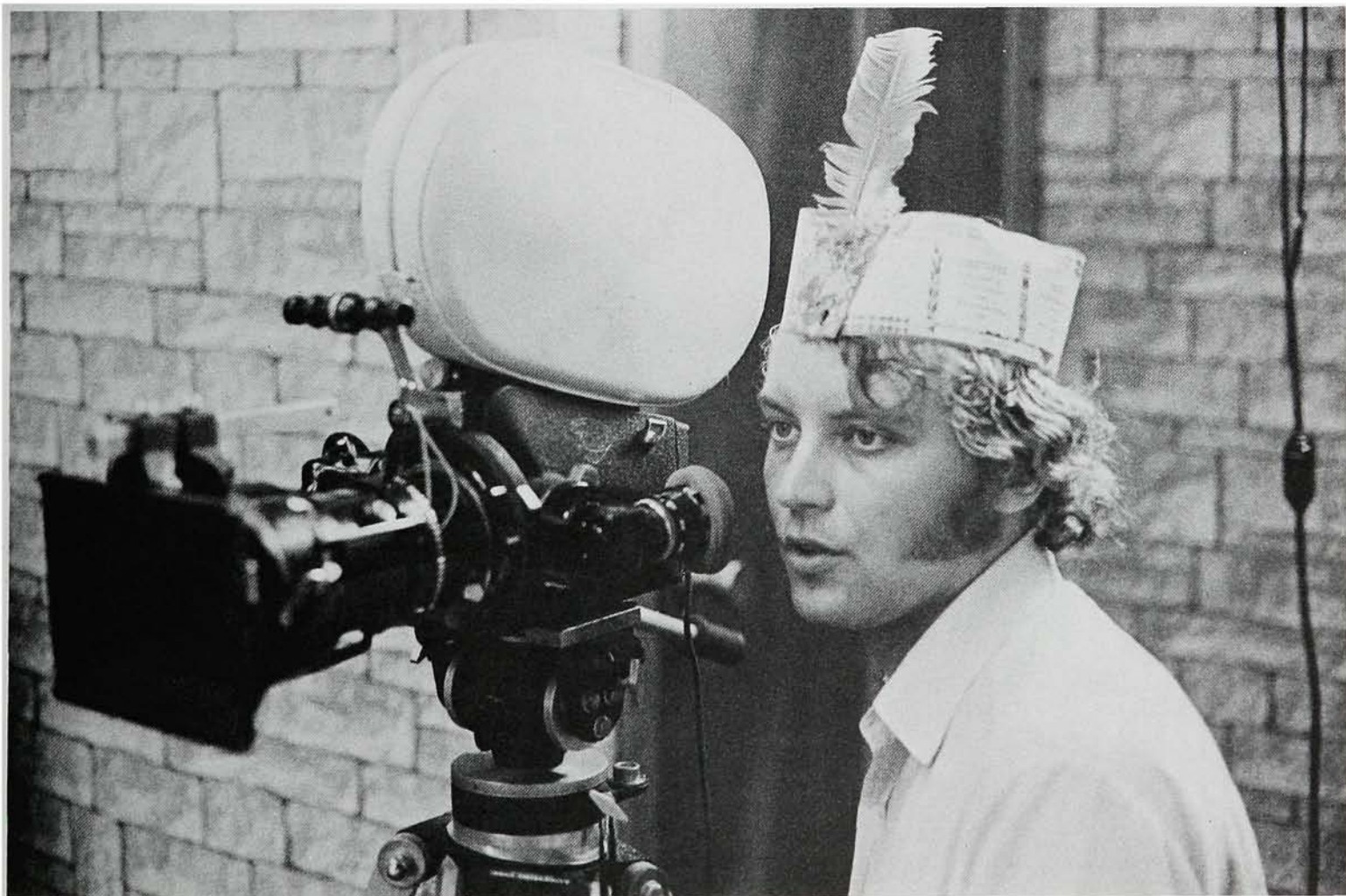
**Jason Borwick** is a witty fantasy about a game of billiards played between two characters who represent two different aspects of one man's personality. Control of that personality goes to the winner of the game. Dennis considers the film to be "partly about the destruction of ego", because the apparently stronger and aggressive alter ego is defeated by the meeker challenger.

It is a remarkably ambitious film – certainly one of the most intriguing films to emerge from York's film production courses – and it merits a more detailed analysis than is possible here. **Jason's** strongest assets are its off-beat characterizations, imaginative and perceptive script, and unusual visual style. All the action takes place in a darkened room which is apparently illuminated only by a single shaft of light shining through the crack of a partly opened door. The billiard balls and cues, and the faces of the bearded alter ego and the meek spectacled challenger, are lighted just enough to make them

visible in the enveloping darkness. The lighting creates an eerie atmosphere of psychic introspection and establishes the limbo in which the duel for the control of Jason's personality takes place. The script, direction and editing are Zahoruk's as are the performances of the two characters – the actors originally selected proved unavailable at shooting time. Far from being a self-indulgent ego trip, the film benefits from Dennis's omnipresence in front of and behind the camera, although he did not work alone. The contributions of his five-person crew (including production assistants Kevin Townshend and Lynn Powell) are equally impressive, particularly those of cameraman Stephen Franklin, lighting wizard Ivan Martin and sound-person Candy Conacer. This film played a key role in arousing interest in **The Shakespeare Murders** and may have been one of the sources of the optimism and enthusiasm maintained by the crew throughout filming.

After graduating, Dennis worked as a production assistant on **The Neptune Factor** (he'd worked in a similar capacity on **The Crowd Inside** in 1970 and on **Another Smith for Paradise** in 1971) but left after three months in hopes of putting together a \$100,000 project based on **The Novelist**, a script he had written. His submission to the CFDC was turned down and he began writing another more elaborate script called **Skits** which he only recently completed. But in the spring of 1973 he decided he could not go another year without making a film:

"It was a vital period. To make that first film after graduating is probably the most difficult and the most crucial. You need an outlet for the development of the skills learned during your studies; if there isn't any money or an opportunity as soon as possible, then your growth as a filmmaker will be stunted. The real skills of being a director are so subtle that if they are not exercised on a fairly constant basis, you interrupt the process of learning through osmosis – a process that goes on primarily during the actual making of a film. So it was important that I make a film at this point and I decided to put up my own money. The basic idea for **The Shakespeare Mur-**

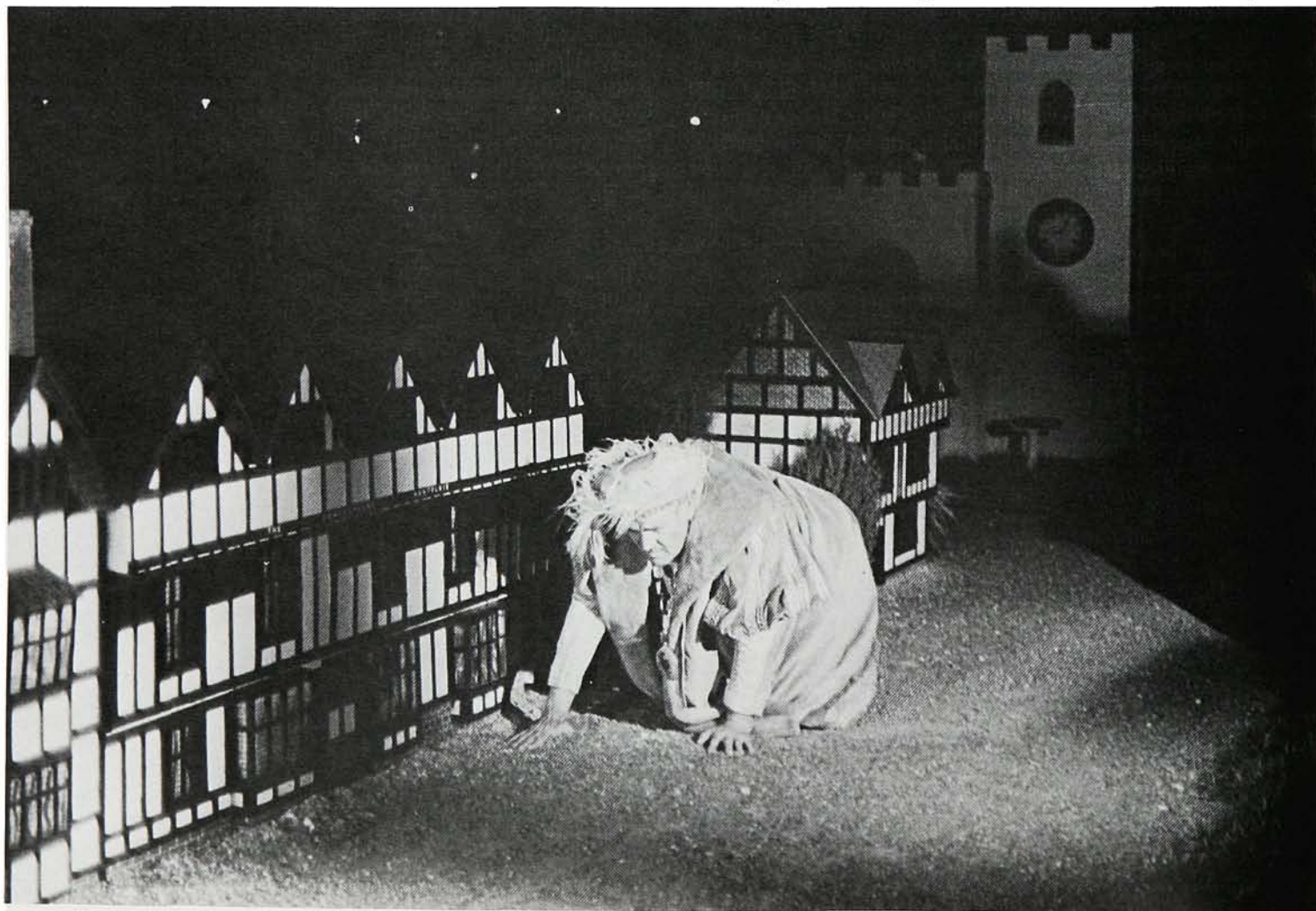


*Josef Sebesta, director of photography on Shakespeare Murders*



*Alan Raeburn as Brian Castle*

*Tony Miller as Henry Foxworth – on location in Shakespeareland*



ders was conceived in mid April; the script was then written and we started shooting on June 28th."

With the prize money from Jason and the rest of the money from personal sources, Dennis managed to pull together \$3600, enough to make it through the shooting and initial editing of a modest 16mm colour film, if he juggled everything carefully.

He talked with Mr. Stan Fox, Assistant Director (in charge of production) of York University's Film Program, and renewed an agreement originally established when Dennis was preparing the \$100,000 project for submission to the CFDC. "For *The Novelist*," says Dennis, "it was a very loosely written agreement – essentially a letter of commitment on the part of the Program – indicating they would make their facilities available to me during shooting. I made a verbal agreement that if the project were accepted, I would include some York film students on the crew and show the rushes to summer film students as shooting progressed. Although the film was changed (and this time there was no CFDC submission), the basic framework of the agreement did not."

The facilities provided by York included film equipment (an Arriflex BL, an Arriflex ST, a Nagra, lighting equipment, microphones, etc.) and editing facilities. These were made available until the resumption of regular classes in early September. Zahoruk's only expenditures on equipment were: \$100 insurance on the equipment, rental costs on additional equipment used, rental fees for editing facilities outside of York after the September deadline. As a member of the Toronto Filmmaker's Co-op, he saved additional money by making use of the co-op's agreement with Quinn Labs to have a majority of the processing and workprinting done at a 25 per cent reduction. Film stock (purchased at regular prices) and processing were by far the major expenditures. On-location shooting involved some cost but comparatively little in terms of the number and variety of the locations employed. Dennis found the people in charge of the various locations to be "really very nice, very co-operative." Such co-operation made it possible to give the film an ornate visual style and a look of quality which belies its restricted budget.

Dennis discusses some of the realities involved in shooting **The Shakespeare Murders**:

"A big problem was getting actors; union actors were out because I couldn't afford them. Most of our cast were amateur or semi-professional theatre people. The problem in casting the lead was that the actor would be required almost every shooting day. When Gary Peterman came to the audition, I thought he was very good and looked the part of David McKay, but there was no guarantee of his reliability once he found out that filmmaking is a lot of hard work, a lot of standing around, etc. As it turned out, Gary was a real professional in terms of his attitudes, and this was one of the fortunate things: the person in the role which demanded reliability was in fact very reliable."

"Working with actors was a new experience; this was the first time I had gone through the processes of auditioning actors and communicating with them in terms of performances. I had no base of reference so a lot of it was just winging it, looking at the results and learning lessons in retrospect. I think I've now become more aware of the subtle areas over which a director has control . . . And in so far as this relates to acting, it was during the making of **The Shakespeare Murders** that I really became aware of the importance of the pacing of performances. Before this I had been aware of the pacing of a film mainly in terms of how it is affected by editing. . . ."

"Of the people I personally chose for the crew, one of the prime requisites was that they be even-tempered. The rest of the crew were suggested by the people I'd chosen and fortunately they were of the same easy-going disposition. That made such a big difference especially considering some of the conditions under which we had to shoot, and that occasionally the nature of the production did impose some strange hours.

*\*Just before this issue went to press, we were informed that Mr. Zahoruk has received his grant!*

. . . One cannot overlook how marvellous a crew it really was. What one normally would expect when people are working for free is that as the film progresses they would become irritated, grow less contented with the project and lose their enthusiasm for it. In fact the opposite seemed to happen, and as the project progressed, people grew even more cohesive."

"Technically, I think the film will be quite competent. There might be a few lapses in those areas in which we were still learning as we were going along, but generally, once the film is completed, I think viewers will be seeing a fairly polished film. When I talk about this 'learning process' I don't want to create the impression we were making a training film! Our set was not much different from the sets I've observed on larger professional productions. In fact, at one location, our crew was complimented on being more efficient than professional crews that had been there to shoot on prior occasions."

"There was very little room for playing around and working things out through experimentation. Knowing the severe limitations we had in terms of time, money and the amount of film required to be shot, I had to pre-plan everything very precisely so that I was essentially editing the film ahead of time, in my mind. That way I could reduce the amount of coverage needed while at the same time trying not to make the takes so short that the actors wouldn't have enough time to develop their performances. Then, in the actual editing, this allowed me to cut the film fairly quickly. . . ."

"We were shooting the film as quickly as it was physically possible to shoot and yet maintain the good visual style we were hoping for. The only thing we weren't equaling in pace were perhaps some of the television shows. But quite often they shoot on studio locations and we were shooting entirely on-location in many different areas. One day we would shoot seven minutes of usable screen time, and on another day we would shoot almost nine minutes of screen time. Problems during the course of shooting were very minor; they came primarily when we were forced to shoot at an even faster rate than planned. Then I think the film suffered, perhaps not in the eyes of those viewers unaware of the specific problems, but from our stand point, that is when things became uncomfortable and unpleasant in what was otherwise a very smooth-running production. Our more severe problems have been in post-production but even then they haven't been particularly large. . . ."

"Basically the film is set in the modern day and is very stylized. It is a parody on the detective murder mystery genre but it is done very straight-faced. . . . To appreciate the film, the audience must become involved in a very particular way because in this film the imperative of discovery falls on the audience – the 'clues' in the mystery come from Shakespeare's plays, but the real significance of these clues is something the audience must discover rather than the detective. They should be recognizing the clues and saying, 'Ah, there's **Romeo and Juliet** and there's **Macbeth**! But what does this have to do with anything?' So the mystery is not 'Who is the murderer?' but rather what these Shakespearean clues have to do with the film's action. . . ."

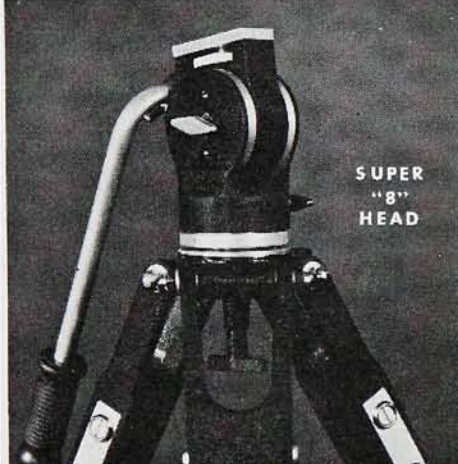
Does Mr. Zahoruk have any future plans? **The Shakespeare Murders** has already earned him the nickname "financial wizard", but Dennis does not want to become known as a director of extremely low-budget films. Now he would like to make a film without the tight restrictions and limitations dictated by lack of funds. With the script for **Skits** completed, he has commenced work on another script entitled **Brethren**. Both scripts are feature-length efforts. There is a possibility he might make another submission to the CFDC in the \$100,000 category, and if he does he is willing to act as his own producer although he would prefer to have someone else produce. "With any luck", says Dennis, he might be shooting a half-hour film in February for which he has completed the script. So while he is waiting for an opportunity to complete **The Shakespeare Murders**, Dennis Zahoruk is not fretting or twiddling his thumbs unproductively. ●

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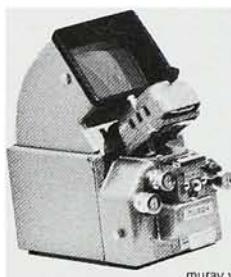
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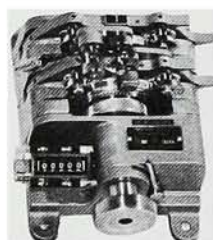
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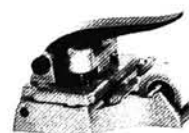
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Resumés should be submitted no later than February 15, 1974 to: Search Committee, Film Department, Faculty of Fine Arts, York University, Downsview, Ontario.

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