



● Banned in Ontario: the censor's axing of Dusan Makavejev's mad *Sweet Movie* was an ill omen for the Toronto Festival's late-night series

by Andrew Dowler

Not to put too fine a point on it, the Late Nights Great Nights series at this year's festival was a dud, even in the eyes of its programmers Kay Armatage and Piers Handling. How it got that way, from a fairly promising beginning, makes for an interesting and instructive, though not pointedly moral, tale.

"The original idea that I started fiddling around with in February was a series I called, in its working title, Canadian Sex," said Armatage, who, in addition to being a filmmaker and a teacher of film and women's studies at U. of T., is in her third year as a festival programmer.

"The ulterior motive was to provide a light-hearted, but to some extent a serious context in which to challenge the censors. I wanted to show *Sweet Movie* and *Vie d'ange* and the hard-core *Scandale*, which had all been banned. I thought of showing the skin movies from Quebec which never get shown anymore, except in cut versions."

When Armatage went to Piers Handling, himself an experienced programmer and editor of the Academy of Canadian Cinema's book on David Cronenberg, *The Shape of Rage*, she found he'd been thinking on similar lines, but, she said, he wanted not just sex movies, but a range of Canadian genre films, a series people could perceive as good fun. Armatage liked that idea "because there was a whole cultural movement in Canadian film criticism that denounced these exploitation movies. I remember the scandals around *Cannibal Girls* and early Cronenberg and the 'this is the destruction of Canadian culture; this is no longer the search for the Canadian identity; this is just plain shit' screeds. So, it struck me as good opportunity to look at these films and see if there were good ones among them, movies we hadn't been able to recognize as being excellent in their own genres because of these cultural blinders that everyone seemed to be wearing at the time."

In addition, Armatage talked about

her fondness for exploitation pictures, dating from the mid-'60s when she realized they were a good ground for political statements and political movie-making of the kind that "got smoothed out or written out in the higher-budget pictures."

So, Armatage and Handling, armed with a unity of purpose and a sense of glee, set out to find the films - no easy task with exploitation movies, which tend to be cared for after their initial run about as carefully as a page of newsprint lining a budgie cage. "*Tanya's Island* (a classic piece of lunacy about a love triangle between a girl, a man and a blue-eyed gorilla) just never showed up," says Armatage. "But *The Little Girl Who Lived Down The Lane* (also by director Alfred Sole) did."

"It was a good picture," said Handling. "But we thought it was too mainstream."

*The Proud Riders*, the biker movie featuring members of Satan's Choice and made at Mosport, never showed up, either. Nor did some of the John Hofsess '60s nudies.

But they did find *The Mask*, a bizarre horror movie with 3D dream sequences. Handling called it, "an absolutely essential film. Julian Roffman (its owner) wouldn't let us have it. He said he hated Toronto critics and didn't want to give his film to an audience to laugh at. He seemed to have been badly stung by its inclusion in the Ottawa bad film festival."

They couldn't get *Cannibal Girls*, either, another "absolutely essential" film, not only because it marks the beginnings of Ivan Reitman's career and features early Andrea Martin and Eugene Levy, but because it is, reportedly, quite enjoyable. "Ivan Reitman refused us *Cannibal Girls*, though he did go to the trouble of rescreening it first. He said he'd gone beyond that and didn't want it included even as juvenalia," said Handling.

Thanks, Ivan.

(What Reitman did want in the festival, and got, was *Ghostbusters*, a film that was available commercially all over town during the festival's run. "It was in the festival because Reitman was going to come and he insisted on coming with that picture," said Handling. "Then he

# Programming Late Nights, Great Nights

## The rise and rapid decline of sex in Canadian cinema

cancelled out, two days before the festival.")

Armatage and Handling did find *The Corpse Eaters*, which they both called "energetic," but lost it again, to a question of sexual politics. "I didn't want to show that movie, not because I didn't think it wasn't good enough to show, but because there were absolutely gratuitous exploitative sex scenes which were laughable as sex and were simply there to get women's tits jiggling and which were absolutely repulsive to me," said Armatage.

"I'd be willing to show things I wouldn't support unequivocally in terms of their sexual politics, if we're making some kind of point, challenging censorship or making a thesis about the kind of sex that is constructed in Canadian cinema, but we were just throwing movies up on the screen. We were saying here is the place where you can get down and have some fun and forget all those big ideas.

"In the last analysis, I didn't want to show *The Corpse Eaters* because I didn't like it and I didn't want to be in the position of having to stand behind it or in the position of having to repudiate it."

In Piers Handling's view, the sexual politics problem extended beyond *The Corpse Eaters*. "We looked at two of the Ilsa and rejected them for their sexual politics. I was pushing for Quebec skin-flicks like *Deux Femmes en or* and *Vie d'ange*, but part of the problem was the sexual politics. I thought by the end there just wasn't enough skin on the screen."

Armatage said, "Only the first one in the series, *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the S.S.* is any good and it's American, not Canadian. We looked at *Ilsa: Tigress of Siberia* and it was laughably dull."

Dullness was a big problem. "There were some films that, from the description, sounded great: *French Without Dressing* (a man buys a TV that shows women stripping). We thought, yes, we'll show that. Twenty minutes into it, Piers and I were both asleep. I quite liked *My Pleasure Is My Business*, the Xaveria Hollander movie. The sex in that was very clean, but extremely enthusiastic and quite, quite fun, but it was an awful movie, with an awful, boring comic subplot that just wasn't

funny. A lot of them were like that, they just had no energy."

The other problem was the censor. After Mary Brown and her band of renown put the axe to Dusan Makavejev's totally berserk, scatological *Sweet Movie*, the programmers knew there was no way for the hard-core *Scandale*, one of Armatage's own personal sex film favourites.

What was left, after excluding *Big Meat Eater* and the Cronenbergs on the grounds of recent festival appearances, were *Outrageous*, *Fantastica*, *Starship Invasions* and *Frankenstein On Campus*. The latter two were programmed for their laughability as bad movies, a quality that, in the case of *Starship Invasions*, is sporadic at best. *Frankenstein On Campus* I have not seen; Handling said they wanted it for "the sex and drugs and those wild '60s parties with the camera zooming in and out - the psychedelic '60s," and acknowledged it as a bad movie. *Fantastica*, programmed for its rarity as a Canadian musical, mixed exciting and beautiful Lewis Furey/Carole Laure numbers with a story so naive, so badly shot, cut, directed and, for the most part, acted, that one could have spent half the movie smoking cigarettes in the lobby and not missed a thing. *Outrageous* is still a good movie, but it seemed to have nothing at all to do with the premises of the series.

Late Nights Great Nights might have been longer if Armatage and Handling had looked harder in the horror genre (they did consider *Death Weekend*, but rejected it for its ready availability on pay-TV), but on the basis of personal experience, I'd say not better. Questions of differing tastes between the programmers aside, the failure of the series seems to say something about Canadians as makers of brisk, entertaining exploitation movies. It might be, as Armatage said, that "if you watch any 100 exploitation movies, 99 of them will be awful. It's just that the Americans make so many more of them than we do. Or it might be that they have Roger Corman, who has a real genius for these things and for finding talented newcomers to do them."

Or it might be, as she offered as a final, wild guess, that we simply lack the "guts."