



Visiting the arctic wolves at night



Jack Darcus during his recent visit to Toronto

Two years ago Jack Darcus was in Toronto with his first two features, **Great Coups of History** and **Proxymawks**. After making the trek to Mecca (aka the CBC) and projecting **Proxymawks** on the film buyer's office door, he was painted a portrait of the Average Canadian Worker who goes home to his TV set and beer and told, "We couldn't do that to the Canadian worker."

filmmaking west coast style

This time around, the reaction to **Wolf Pen Principle** was more positive. But as Darcus points out, "I think the reaction is generally more positive because of the CRTC hearings in Ottawa."

At any rate, **Wolf Pen Principle** will be opening in Vancouver shortly and producer Werner Aellen is much more optimistic about its commercial run than he would have had reason to be several years ago.

Jack Darcus is an independent filmmaker from Vancouver. He has three features behind him. All low-budget. All very personal. He has broken every rule in the book, but that has a lot to do with being from the West Coast.

Darcus left university in 1963 to pursue painting full-time. He then moved on to stage designing in Ken Livingston's small theatre, the Algonquin, which produced midnight one-act plays; and finally became frustrated by no-one taking his desire to direct seriously.

"Larry Kent had made three films by that time out there. The guy was a madman to think he could do what he did, but none of us would be making films in Vancouver if Larry hadn't gotten off his arse and made the first one. He just stood up one day, declared himself a genius, and did it. You can do that in Vancouver. So Larry's approach was very tempting."

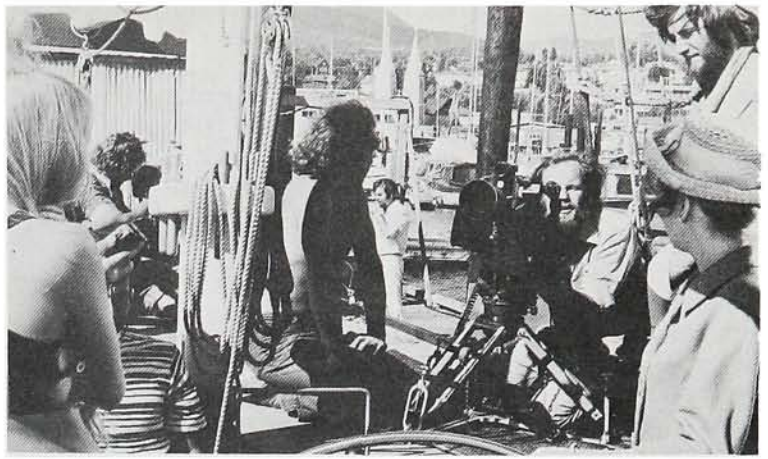
At that time Darcus (never having abandoned painting) was doing figurative art — portraits. He met a fantastic lady who eventually became the lead in **Great Coups of History**. "She was an unpaintable portrait. This lady just talked all the time. So I got the idea of doing a film. The Film Society at UBC had a bunch of equipment, they had shot a couple of Kent's films, and wanted to do another film but didn't have the subject matter. By then, Morrie Ruvinsky started a film out there. Morrie was another one of those types, he had taken on a tremendously lonely thing. He was the only one doing it. He got his film done and when he finished I had managed to get the Film Society to pay for half my film, sold some paintings, raised around \$1,000, and started this film not knowing what I was getting into."

What he was getting into was making a \$6,500 feature film. Impossible? He didn't think so then, and still doesn't.

"It's not unusual in Montreal. ... When Jean-Pierre Lefebvre made **Q-bec My Love** for \$24,000 (12 cash and 12 in deferments) nobody screamed and said you can't do that! If you suggest in English Canada that you can make a feature film on a \$24,000 budget they say you're crazy, it just can't be done. Well, it's being done in Montreal by other filmmakers as well. There's no point in trying to compete with **Jesus Christ Superstar** — it costs too much. We need to develop an indigenous cinema here and all we can hope for is to be rough and fresh."

Great Coups was shot in six weeks, 2-1/2 full-time and the rest on weekends. Nobody was paid, everybody was learning on-the-job. "That was the way it was done in Vancouver. Larry did it, Morrie did it. It was the only way of making a film!"

Darcus laughs now thinking of it. Fortunately, he had an experienced cameraman who became his teacher-on-set – Terry Hudson. “We just started, and Terry taught me the whole thing. He had shot all of Morrie’s films. He said he would teach me the ABC’s. We got it shot, and I quickly picked up on what had to be done. Then I was given the basics of editing, taught how to use a hot splicer, and left alone for 8



On location – Terry Hudson on camera

Á. Ibrányi-Kiss

months in a room.”

When he came out he had his first feature, and became “Odeon’s token filmmaker”. It seems the people from Odeon had attended a screening and agreed to run *Coups* for a week – longer if it made \$2,000 by Sunday night. As soon as the film opened, Vancouver got hit by a newspaper strike wiping out all publicity. Despite that serious setback, *Coups* was only \$40 under by Sunday. What’s more – it made \$3,000 by Wednesday night! Too bad. It was already decided that it would be pulled . . . so it goes. But Darcus has no bitterness about that: “It was nice. Looking back on it, there are elements of naïveté that are simply amazing. But hell, I wouldn’t change much if I had to do it again, and I hope I would do it as well.”

In the meantime, Darcus was staying alive by teaching painting, but he was already hooked on cinema. “I liked the process a lot because I like working with people. Painting is a very lonely scene, whereas film – being part of this group of maniacs – was tremendous!”

His second feature, *Proxyhawks*, also came about in a very unorthodox way. One of his art students, hearing about his difficulties with raising money for the next film, approached him to say she had \$1,000. Darcus was grateful, but refused. However, after three more futile weeks and an initial rejection from the CFDC he called her up asking, “Did you mean it?” *Proxyhawks* was started with \$1,000 cash and a lab’s willingness to extend credit.

“*Proxyhawks* cost me \$16,000. I didn’t pay wages but if you add \$10,000 to the film so people could have been paid \$1,000 each for a couple of months work – it would still have come out cheaply.”

The drive to keep making films is obviously very powerful. But does he intend to keep working that way? And to what end?

“There are a lot of directors with a great roster of films behind them but very few who have built a body of work reflecting their point of view. I’ve expected to do that – to grow and expand and take on form. In North America, that is expected of every other art form – why not film? Filmmakers in Vancouver were always into developing their own subject matter – Peter Bryant, Tom Braidwood, Kirk Tougas, Al Razutis, David Rimmer. . . . Either they’re developing truly experimental films like Rimmer, or dramatic subject matter like myself and Peter Bryant. But people like us are considered freaks by the old pros who have been making commercials for 20 years.”

A great believer in low-budget films for both artistic and economic reasons, Darcus is nonetheless sympathetic towards the CFDC – even though they’ve been pushing “commercial” very strongly. “They’re a bank. I wouldn’t want to trade places with them. All they can talk about on their balance sheet in the yearly report is how much they invested vs. how much they got back. When the CFDC was handing out \$7,500 grants they were emphasizing that it be spent towards



Vladimir Valenta, star of Wolf Pen Principle

developing features. A great conservative pressure was put on young filmmakers to make a short, show it to a distributor and perhaps get a feature going on that basis. That impetus was conservative because it held them down to making something very glossy – and for \$7,000 you can do a feature! If you're working with friends and editing yourself you can do something tremendously experimental and exciting. All this was cut off on those grants. I'm quite sure they're relieved that the Canada Council is taking over film grants. It gets them off that awful hook of having to nurture young ambitious talent while still being a bank."

"I think the Canada Council will be more open to that kind of approach to filmmaking. What is really necessary is for young directors to think in terms of \$20,000 and \$30,000 films. Canada Council leaves things more open – I can go out and make something brilliant or fall flat on my arse – it's my own thing to do. I can grow that way. I've been hammering at this since I came out here two years ago with *Coups* and *Proxyhawks* . . ."

An example of what was wrong with the old system – Darcus pointed to Sylvia Spring, whose CFDC short for *Madeleine Is* was beautiful. But then she was immediately pushed to making a \$100,000 feature under heavy pressure and, he feels, she wasn't ready for that. "What they should have done is given her \$20,000 to do another film. To buy time. She was done a bit of a disservice. She had far greater potential than she was allowed to grow into."

Wouldn't more low-budget features emphasize the great dichotomy between 'art' and 'commercial' filmmaking? Darcus doesn't think so. "My ideal is to make a film that all kinds of people will like. I have to feel that I'm growing from subject to subject. That's pure self-indulgence. That's my reason for staying in it. Offer me a year of directing CBC dramas and I'll say no. On the other hand, I realize I'm learning my craft. I have to learn to be entertaining while I do my act. That's where there's a meeting point between commercial directors and myself. Otherwise, we'd break into two camps – the purists on one side vs. the vicious capitalists on the other. More analysis has to be done to show that there is a hell of a meeting point between the two."

What compromise wouldn't he make? "I don't wish to produce pure pablum, placebos designed to relieve people of their frustrations, get them back on the job the next day and not enrich their world one bit. You can make a work that's intelligent and also entertaining. That's the apprenticeship I'm serving."



Lawrence Brown

With this approach in mind, Darcus made his third feature for \$100,000 – *Wolf Pen Principle*. In many ways, it has far more commercial appeal than either of his first two films. For one thing, he was working with Vladimir Valenta, internationally acclaimed actor from *Closely Watched Trains*. Months after shooting, that experience still gets Darcus ebulliently animated.

"Vladimir is incredible. He does things like – for continuity – if he blinks in the middle of a speech, he'll do it the same way for every take. He never misses. An editor's delight – you can cut any place you want! He could always find his light and work with it. He's an old pro film actor, and he was trained as a film actor."

Lawrence Brown, the other lead in *Wolf Pen Principle*, came from the complete opposite pool of talent. He's a high-school student from Nanaimo who has acted in only one play before, but his audition floored everyone and he was hired immediately. "Vladimir would take Lawrence aside between takes. He was always showing him things. It was a beautiful teaching process. Lawrence did work for Daryl Duke after that, but what he needs is to go to drama school after graduation and get some bloody craft. He's already on the level of a lot of the other young actors out there, but I hope he does it. He's certainly got the stuff."

Wolf Pen Principle deals with a middle-aged theatre manager and a young Indian who both have a fascination for the arctic wolves in the zoo. For very different personal reasons, they conspire to free the wolves, and the film follows their conspiracy and its aftermaths. Darcus came by the story while he was working for Stanley Park Zoo treating injured birds of prey (the subject matter, in part, of *Proxyhawks*). He hates zoos. He seems them as concentration camps.

"I used to go down to the zoo and get really angry at seeing the 6 arctic wolves. In the back of my mind, I was searching for a subject, and all of a sudden it just came to me. The fundamental thing about those wolves is that they've become inept. If you let them out, they'd die. They desperately need their cage. If I could, I'd take those wolves and put them in a halfway house in the Yukon and let them adapt back to nature – they have a halfway house for orangutans in Borneo. Of course the wolves in the zoo were just a nice metaphor for a lot of people. I was getting mad out of self-pity. I was bemoaning their loss of potential, but it was bullshit."

That theme was part of what Darcus was dealing with. His other major concern was over the clash between two cultures – those of the white man and the Indians. "Indian artists are still working according to their traditions but they've lost their connection to what they're doing. When they carve a wolf-mask, it means no more to them than the radio does. It's an object. There's a whole confrontation between cultures that has been lost." Without overly romanticising the lost culture of the Indian people, Darcus does feel it's a terrible loss.

"The government has invested around \$8 million building great shrines for that art out there. And it just sits there mute. I'm glad they're doing it, but nobody has tackled that yet. What is it? Where do the two cultures part ways? In *Wolf Pen* I hint at it without presuming to be intelligent. I would never pretend to be over on the other side. For me to imagine living in a world where totem poles are an everyday fact of life is almost impossible. All I can do is write in a rather ignorant, white way. Essentially, I'm a comic character and that will probably be my contribution in my next film when I try to tackle this problem."

What sparked off the basic thread of *Wolf Pen* was meeting an anthropologist who had worked with Indians in northern B.C. for two years and had witnessed an occurrence where an old woman from the Wolf Clan died and the wolves came around the village and howled all night. As Darcus says, "It's a charming idea and it also doesn't disturb our reality when we walk down the street. We're still connected to our Anglo-Saxon or North European-based world. It's that connection which should be shaken a little bit more. As I say, there's a body of subject matter there that is just immense."



The two "conspirators" of *Wolf Pen Principle*

Jack Darcus would like to see Vancouver filmmakers start working more on indigenous material. With the growing consciousness on the West Coast, this might become possible. "It's like inventing typewriters in Greenland not knowing they exist in the rest of the world and then finding out that everything is computerized — the Canadian film industry has a little bit of that. Where there is some fresh vital energy you also have a very politicized scene, like you have in Montreal. But in English Canada this doesn't exist. If we saw ourselves in relation to Americans as Québécois see themselves in relation to English Canada — we would have all kinds of people standing up and declaring themselves."

As for the Pacific Filmmakers Co-op, he's been working on getting *Wolf Pen* on the road, and has had contact only via the telephone. But he's definitely getting involved, "although I think there is a dangerous direction toward founding a service agency that's going to provide equipment and everything else. I'm afraid of toy shops. Unless the emphasis is towards creating scripts, arguing about them, growing a subject matter which is indigenous — it could fall apart. I'm always driving toward opening up people's subject matter — that's the only thing that sustains people in film. That will be my push. There is a lot of possibility in the Co-op."

Darcus is presently surviving on a Canada Council grant. As for the future, things look pretty good. "I've got a one-man-show touring B.C. and the Yukon now, with paintings and my films. I've got two money scripts I'm almost finished with and a third one I want to make for \$7,000 or \$8,000. Ten thousand maximum. But I could never sell it to a producer." This film concerns two aging stars of porno films who wind up staying after a shoot is completed and spending a night together. Darcus figures he can keep costs down by shooting on basically one location, an abandoned set, and with only two characters the film should stay simple.

Besides, for the first time in six years, Jack Darcus is out of debt! ●

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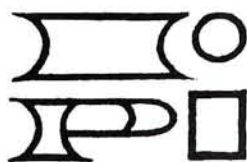
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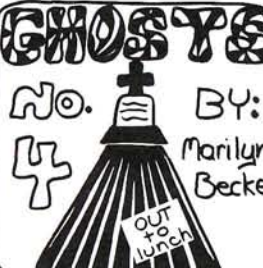
no. 2. by: Jordan Hale
LIFE, LIFE, LIFE



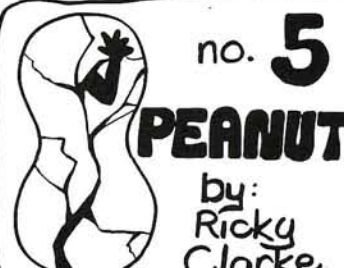
3
TANK
 by: Paul Shapiro




GHOSTS
No. 4 BY: Marilyn Becker
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no. 5
PEANUT
 by: Ricky Clarke.



OLD Folks
 BY: Robi Blumenstein
6.



CHESS MEN **7.**
 BY: Melissa Franklin



PICTURES
 by: Celia Merkur
EIGHT



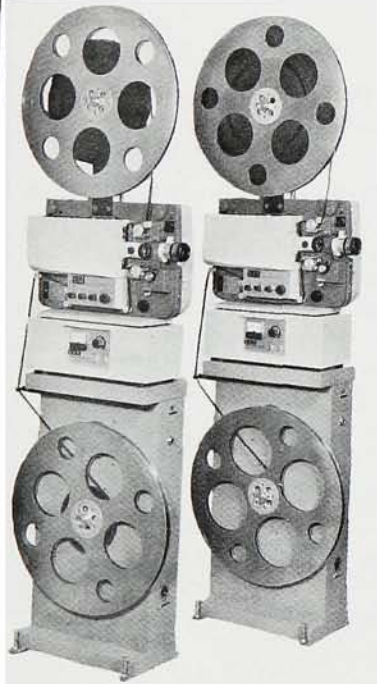
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