

## Directorial passion of *The Morning Man*

What separates the great filmmakers from the not-so great, and the great films from the ordinary is the reflection of the filmmaker's character and passion on the screen. This passion is evident in the approach Montreal-based filmmaker Danièle Suissa is using to make the \$2.4 million feature *The Morning Man*, where her directorial intensity is a reflection of her personal character.

*The Morning Man* is the dramatization of the real-life adventures of Robert Lavallée-Ménard's escape from prison to his rise to fame as a popular Québécois radio station "morning man".

"What could be considered different in my approach of this particular subject is that I am striving to bring out and to reach the interiors of the characters which are being portrayed. It is what is inside them that really counts", Suissa told *Cinéma Canada*. "This is what I do best. I love actors and I love working with actors. They're my passion, and I have been able to get what I want from my actors on this film.

"A male director would have probably read the script for *Morning Man* and right away thought 'action film'. But I was more sensitized to the personal conflicts of the characters," Suissa adds.

The location for *Morning man* on this particular day was a room filled with technicians, equipment, props and extras at Ruby Foo's Motel on Montreal's Décarie Boulevard. Through the set's organized chaos pierces Suissa's passion for her actors and sensitivity towards the characters they are portraying.

After each take of a long poker-game sequence, Suissa confers with the film's lead, Bruno Doyon, to see how he felt about the take and to discuss possible adjustments that should be made in the performance, all the while reminding him of what she is looking for.

The scene is repeated over and over until Suissa is completely satisfied with what has just taken place in front of the camera. The smile on her face and the gleam in her eyes let everybody know that the last take was perfect.

The camera is placed at a different angle and the whole scene is repeated. Again, after each take, all eyes fall on the director awaiting the grin and the gleam that gives them the go-ahead for the next set-up.

"The number one priority for me as the director is to make sure that the viewer will understand the story," explains Suissa. "After all, as a filmmaker, I am first and foremost a storyteller. But even though the film is written and produced for commercial purposes with a very North American pace and rhythm, I tend to stay away from just presenting



• Danièle Suissa directing *Morning Man* lead Bruno Doyon: "Being close to the actors is very important"

what lies on film's surface. This is why being close to the actors is very important to me - and to the film. I did not stay close to the actual facts of the real-life story. I prefer to look for the personality of the man and understand

what made him do what he did. This is a lot more important.

"Because you cannot play only on the level of the surface and the dialogues. In fact, I've eliminated useless dialogues. Audiences today are a lot more sensi-

tive to subtext than many give them credit for," Suissa continues.

"There is only as much dialogue as is necessary to tell the story. The same is true for the way I am approaching the visuals. We are lighting only the things which have to be seen to order the story. There are no unnecessary props and dressings.

"I always put in my films things in which I believe. I think all filmmakers put their stamp on their work in this manner. This is also part of the reason I was selected to direct this feature."

Gaston Cousineau, *The Morning Man's* producer for SDA productions Ltée., acknowledges that the choice of Suissa as director was based on her reputation in working with actors.

"The reason we wanted Danièle Suissa to direct this film is because she is the best in Montreal when it comes to directing actors," Cousineau told *Cinéma Canada*. "If we had wanted an action film we would have looked for someone else, but since we wanted a film about people and we had only five weeks in which to shoot it and on a modest \$2.4 million dollar budget. So we had to get someone who is very good with actors.

"Perhaps the fact that she is a woman director makes her more sensitive both to the treatment of the film's characters and in her relations to the actors. I do, however, know that she can make a film which is commercially viable for the North American English market while maintaining a definite artistic integrity."

But, says Suissa, "I do not think of myself as a 'WOMAN' director." Then she grins and gets that gleam in her eyes: "I am a happy director."



• Real-life dramatization of a man's rise from prison to radio morning man fame

photos: Pirooska Mihalka

# Phoenix rising: Larry Kent's *High Stakes*

As the year's frenzy of foreign-sponsored film activity began to wane, a bona fide Canadian feature got underway in Vancouver, with all crew and cast claiming allegiance to the flag.

Simcom Productions of Toronto's *High Stakes* is the second of three projects, all filmed in western Canada this fall.

*High Stakes* is a \$2.5 million comedy-thriller from the collaborative efforts of writers Bryan McCann and John Shepard. As the first days of principal photography pass, the hope that springs eternal is tangible on-set – from the script's potential, the pace of three back-to-back productions and the serendipitous discovery and mix of the actors.

The feature, allotted six weeks' production, follows the hapless adventures of a post-pubescent lad whose guileless enthusiasm pulls him as young hero into underworld intrigue, political altercation and a nefarious web of murder and sex.

A unique atmosphere pervades on-set. According to an unwritten credo, suggestions are encouraged from cast and crew. As the shoot progresses, the story and characters are becoming further defined and fleshed. One or both of the writers are kept accessible throughout, and acting seems to occur on both sides of the camera as ideas arise. The unorthodox method is a tribute to both the director and writers in their active embrace of the comedic process at work.

This all-embracing adventure is shot in and around Vancouver, utilizing the downtown core, the offices and studios of BCTV, the Gibsons area, and the now-famed Dominion Bridge site – subject of so much film industry interest and controversy.

As production puppeteers behind the scenes, Simcom has just completed *Bullies* in Kimberley, B.C. and will follow *High Stakes* with a four-part series in Edmonton called MANIA. Since its inception in 1968, Simcom has been instrumental in television and theatrical projects. To increase returns and markets, Simcom chairman Peter Simpson, in 1983, established the first major Canadian distribution company the past half-decade: Norstar Releasing now oversees theatrical, non-theatrical and home video divisions which have with increased acquisitions integrated some operations and generated fresh activity for Simcom and Norstar both. For 1986 six projects are currently in development.

On the *High Stakes*' set, director Larry Kent, who seems more concerned with the art of filmmaking than matters of dress, attentively oversees operations in mattress-pressed clothing. *High Stakes* marks the return of Kent to Vancouver after 20 years: he first put down



• *High Stakes* leads Roberta Weiss and David Foley

Canadian roots upon arriving here from South Africa in 1957.

At that time, there were neither film courses nor a feature industry in the province. But while studying psychology and theatre at UBC, Kent decided to make a feature. It was, he claims, the first feature ever made here.

*Bitter Ash* (1963) was Kent's first great triumph – made on a \$95,000 budget and a borrowed Bolex. The feature won belated but lasting recognition as a major achievement in Canadian cinema at the Toronto Festival's 1984 Canadian Retrospective.

After *Sweet Substitute* (1964), Kent made *When Tomorrow Dies* (1965), with cinematographer Doug McKay who is reunited with Kent on *High Stakes*. Reflecting wistfully on those "shimmering images" that 20 years ago won an award at Vancouver's Film Festival, Kent says McKay hasn't really improved any: "How does one get any better than being the best?"

After the three B.C.-based features, Kent moved to Montreal where he managed to survive six unhappy months at the NFB. Extricating himself to work on his own projects, Kent faced the ardu-

ous life of the independent. In response to those gaps in his public visibility, Kent says that "the years go by so fast. Things fall apart on you. Things take time to string together. All of a sudden, it's been four years since you made a feature." The congenial and cooperative atmosphere on *High Stakes* may be a product of Kent's personality and the hard-won lessons learned in the exercise of personal filmmaking with smaller crews and budgets. An artist's artist, Kent wants to do films that aren't for everyone, "Not indigenously Canadian," he says "but indigenously individual."

For Kent, contact with Simcom came after the 1973 comedy *Keep It In The Family*, when a director familiar to the company recommended his work.

On *High Stakes*, Kent applauds both the script and the performances of some strong Canadian talent: Jackson Davies from *Beachcombers* and *Constable Constable*, along with Winston Rekert of *Walls* and *Agnes of God*, both of whom are becoming identifiable faces in Canadian production. As the lovely leading lady, Roberta Weiss (*Seeing Things*, *Mike Hammer*, *SCTV*, *The Dead Zone*, *The Terry Fox Story*) has

achieved favorable mention from the powers that be. But the most vocal noises, from all quarters, come from the discovery of young lead David Foley, whose gap-toothed grin is as engaging as his lucid mind.

For the 22-year-old Foley, "who's never ever been an extra", this first film role lands him comfortably in the lap of his chosen profession, utilizing tools he has honed since the age of 17. Foley has worked extensively in stand-up and improvisation comedy at clubs across Canada until his recent unearthing at the Taragon Theatre in Toronto. *The Kids In The Hall* had been playing to sold-out performances for about a year, but news hadn't spread further than their fans until *The Globe & Mail* did a story on them. Peter Simpson and his assistant then came for a firsthand look. The reading that followed was followed by another month of waiting, but the decision finally went to Foley.

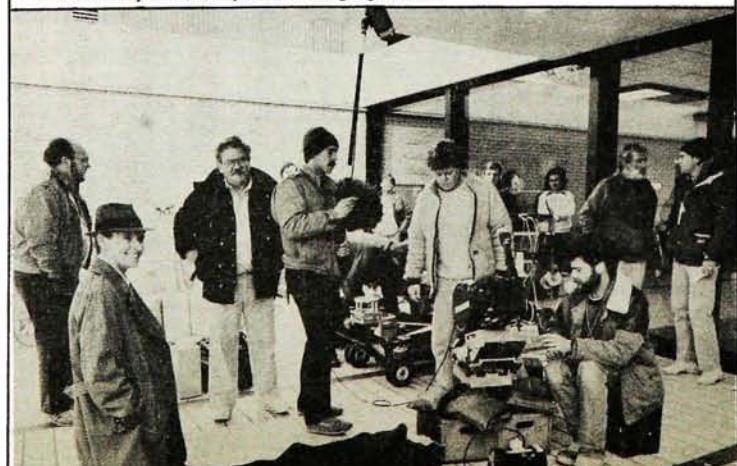
Learning lines for his *High Stakes* role hasn't taxed Foley to any great extreme. The *Kids* troupe wrote a new show every two weeks for two years, demanding the memorization of an hour's – worth of material and the confrontation of another hour's – worth of improvisation.

On set the fifth day, Foley announces that "tomorrow is the first anniversary of the fifty-hour improvisational telecast." Relying on the goodwill of a local cable station in Toronto, and interspersing catnaps and stage calls, the *Kids* again winged their yet-uncontested marathon of improvised banter.

For Larry Kent, it seems he is experiencing that primal moment, that rare time when one works *first* with a discovered talent. At the daily viewing of rushes, when serious contributions are estimated, the laughter says that the *High Stakes* are being won. As the unedited show ends, sighs of fatigue are audible, just under the congratulatory holler across the room that Kent is truly a Phoenix rising out of the bitter ash.

Rona Gilbertson •

• Director Larry Kent, dark jacket, winning high stakes



photos: Jack Rowland