

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 Sheppard. 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.

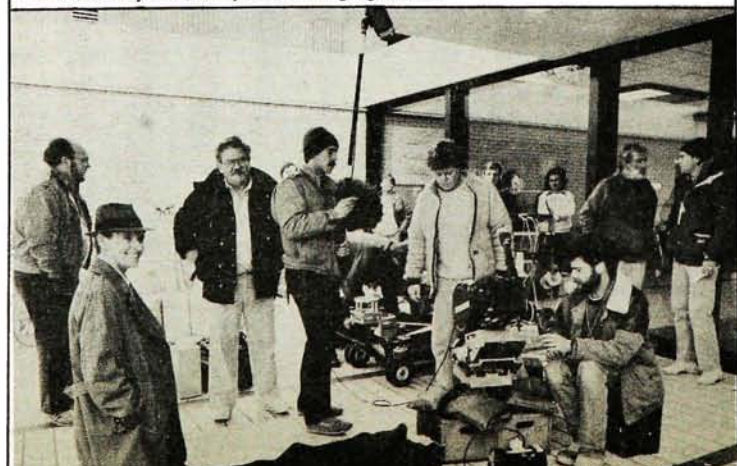
Learning lines for his *High Stakes* role hasn't taxed Foley to any great extreme. The *Kids* troupe wrote a new show every two weeks for two years, demanding the memorization of an hour's – worth of material and the confrontation of another hour's – worth of improvisation.

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