



## john wright's visitor

**The Visitor** had its World Premiere in Winnipeg earlier this year during the Canadian Film Symposium. And it's a good thing John Wright, the film's writer/director, isn't very superstitious because halfway through this screening the reel rolled off the projector, the projection booth couldn't be found (God knows what the projectionist was doing in there) and after half an hour's wait and a significant exodus from the theatre, **The Visitor** was then projected for 20 minutes completely out of focus. . . .

This same film was called the sleeper of Filmexpo in Ottawa, got rave reviews in Vancouver, managed to play for two weeks there without any paid advertising, yet was funded by the CFDC only after it had been completely shot in Calgary's Heritage Park.

The film's production company Highwood Films (consisting of John, a production manager, a Calgary lawyer, a rancher, a "marvellous lady from Saskatoon", a broadcaster — and a local vet) was originally going to be called Nineteenth Century Fox. Not that surprising, when you consider that John Wright was born during the Depression in a little town called Pioneer Mine which no longer exists. The son of a gold miner turned Sergeant Major in the Canadian Army, John's childhood was a typical army brat existence.

"Every year we moved. . . . As a kid my playground was the tank warfare area. It was a great life in the camps. It does something to you. . . . That's why I joined the Navy. My father was in the Army, so I didn't want to join the Army but I knew I had to join one of them."

He flew jet fighter planes until his eyes grounded him, but while at sea, he went on a "marvellous cruise to the Orient — Japan. But I was too scared to really do anything while I was there. There was this one guy who used to go out every day, get laid, and come back with a loaf of bread and a new tattoo;

but I never got past the loaf of bread. . . ." At this point, John laughs and looks nothing at all like the University of Calgary professor which he has also been.

After the Navy, "I started out as a professional actor and then decided I really wanted to be a director, and went back to school in order to acquire the skills I needed to do that." So he went to Stanford University, where he got his M.A. while working with people like Eric Vos of the Dutch National Theatre in Stanford's Repertory Co.

"It was a very prestigious operation with people of great artistic integrity. What I learned there were things you can use anywhere. The principles of art apply right across the board, every time. It doesn't matter if you're making films or performing music or whatever."

Whatever, in John's case, was the theatre. Why did he switch to film? "What happened was that it seemed to me I was trying to direct films in my last few plays. I was doing things that were more filmic than they were theatrical. And when I decided that I was going to make a change, I just hung around where they were making films. . . ." He also started working as an extra, and then started playing with Portapaks in the acting classes he was teaching to learn about composition, camera movement, lenses, the effect of light, etc. John firmly believes in knowing all aspects of any medium.

"I have no patience with directors who do not understand techniques and technical matters. When it comes to acting, one should know and understand the techniques involved in acting."

His strong stage background enabled him to get excellent performances in **The Visitor** from Pia Shandel and Eric Peterson. As far as the pitfalls of acting for stage versus for film, "I'll tell you, the first few days of shooting — if I could have been inside the camera, that's where I would have been. I

was quite concerned. I wasn't sure whether they were doing what I really wanted in terms of size and so on. . . . The place where I think actors get in trouble from the stage is not purely a matter of size, since film acting is more face acting, but it's really a matter of whether there's anything going on inside. In the theatre, in small parts, you can get away without it because you're acting with your whole body. The audience is so distant that you can fake it a lot more. But in film, as soon as you bring that camera up close — and there's nothing happening inside — it's as obvious as hell."

There were many other things John learned while shooting his first feature film. The most important lesson came on the first day of shooting, when Director of Photography Doug McKay explained how things work on set, "I call you sir and you call me God." From that understanding grew a rapport which still excites John.

"I just hope when this thing finally appears in print, that Doug McKay really gets a lot of credit. I'd like to spend three hours on Doug McKay! He is a poet, an eccentric, a really extraordinary human being, as well as being a cameraman of some genius. He likes to fly by the seat of his pants and prefers to take chances rather than play it safe. He prefers to work simply — and that's something that appeals to me a great deal. We had a rapport I have never experienced with any other individual."

The story of *The Visitor* deals with a contemporary young

*Pia Shandel*



woman who is fascinated by the past and manages to get permission to live alone in Heritage Park's Prince House for a short while to study the turn-of-the-century period. However, she gets thrown back into the past to the point where intense relationships develop between her and people she's not even sure exist. At any rate, the film is much more sensitive than such a superficial outline can do justice to. What is surprising, however, is that although Gratien Gelinas was reported to have especially liked it, and the CFDC is quite happy with it, originally they not only turned the script down, "they wouldn't give me the comments. I asked for them a couple of times but they wouldn't send them because they thought the comments were all so bad they would be destructive. They did pass on a couple of general comments, such as that I had tried to write a script around a location. Which is true. That's the essence of low-budget filmmaking! I think they didn't anticipate the subtlety with which the story could be told. On the face of it, it seems to be absurd. But it's very hard for the people who are judging those scripts when they don't know anything about you or what you've done. You're just a phone call or a letter as far as they're concerned. Or just a script."

Nevertheless, after *The Visitor* was shot with private money Highwood Films again applied to the CFDC, and this time got funds to edit the film (as long as the Corporation approved of the editor) and finally to finish. What really bothers John far more is that he still isn't working on anything else. "I really want to kiss it goodbye and get on to the next one. We're all of us in the same position — those of us making films. It's impossible at the moment to go from one thing to another, and you have to go from one thing to another if you want to grow. It's been a year and three months since I've directed actors. I can't believe that! In the theatre that would never happen. It has been some time since *The Visitor* came out but I cut three frames of it just recently for the hell of it. And I cut another bit out, and then I cut a whole scene out. I shouldn't be doing that! If I had another film to work on I wouldn't be fussing over this one."

So now John Wright is directing six episodes of *The Beachcomber* series for CBC Television in Vancouver, and has several projects that Highwood Films might be producing should the industry slump ease off. Does he envision any major changes coming soon? "I don't think there's a hope in hell unless there's quite a radical approach to the problem of countering the American influence on Canadian theatres. As I see it, we need in this country people who make films to make money, films whose sole purpose is to make money in order that somebody will kick in a few bucks for the films that other people want to make, that are not so commercial. The CFDC ought to be moving towards where they could make a better division between the attempt to promote film as art and filmmakers as artists and their attempt to create an industry. You've got to have both."

Does John Wright intend to make his next film more commercially oriented? He smiles at this, and then says very seriously, "I don't know. I met a guy in Los Angeles who makes porno films for 4 or 5 thousand dollars. Pays all the actors \$100 a day. He made one for \$2400 just to make his editor mad because the editor said you can't do it and he said, "Sure I can!" He made a film called *Screen Test Girls*. The premise was fantastic for a low-budget feature film! He set up a camera and sat behind the desk. In comes the beautiful luscious girl for a screen test. O.K. he says, I want you to imagine you're a hooker and this is your first night and there's the guy. In walks guy, they go to the couch and everything they do has got to be right! You can make no mistakes and every foot of film is usable! What's cutting?" (laughter . . . exit)●

—edited by Á. Ibrányi-Kiss based on an interview by George Mendeluk who is a freelance writer-director presently completing a 15-minute children's film, *The Christmas Tree*, which stars Mike Mazurki who has appeared in such films as "Guys and Dolls", "Some Like It Hot" and "Murder My Sweet".