

by Patricia Michael

Sitting among the snazzy pink and glass tones of Café Coco on Toronto's Yonge St., Leon Marr rather abruptly says, "Why don't I start at the beginning." An appropriate enough place for a director and screenwriter who, for the first time, has just found himself plunged into a whirlwind of publicity as a result of his (first) feature, **Dancing In The Dark**, being selected for the Director's Fortnight in Cannes.

For Marr, the 'beginning' began in the middle of March when **Dancing In The Dark** was shown as a rough-cut and mix for preliminary judging in Montreal. But when the excitement of making the shortlist reached executive producer Don Haig, producer Tony Kramreither and Marr, with it came the sobering realization that weeks of post-production were going to have to be radically compressed. Editors worked around the clock and other clients were bumped so that the mix could be accomplished. All of this towards completing a print that would still have to be subtitled in Holland before going to Cannes.

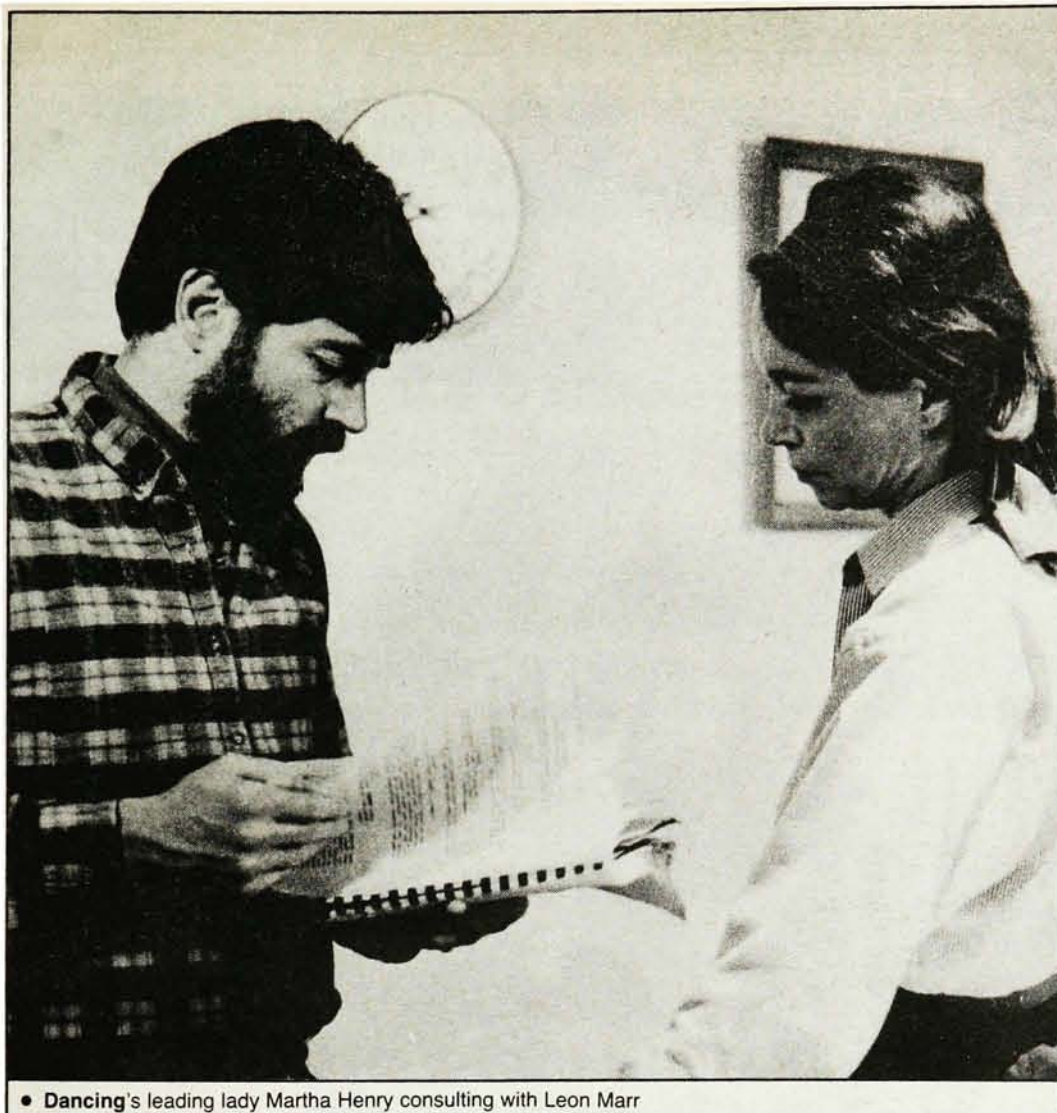
So when Marr talks about going back to the beginning, there is a real bewilderment at the remarkable turn of events that have taken place in his life.

"Who am I?" he asks and laughs. "I've made two half-hours five years ago and I haven't directed anything since 1980 until **Dancing In The Dark**."

Born in Toronto's Leaside district, he attended the local high school, did two years of psychology at the University of Toronto before giving it up to travel around the world. "Somewhere between New Delhi and Japan, I decided that I either wanted to be a director and make movies or be an actor," he remembers. The deciding factor was the plentitude of starving actors, a distinction he today recalls with some irony.

He returned to Canada to enroll in Ryerson's film course where he made a 10-minute experimental film entitled **Fountain**, which ended up going around the world and being bought by the Department of External Affairs. But when the film course ended he was faced with the Director's Guild conundrum of 'How do you get in?' 'You get a job.' 'How do you get a job?' 'You

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• **Dancing's** leading lady Martha Henry consulting with Leon Marr

Dancing In The Dark's Leon Marr plunges into Cannes whirlwind

join the Guild.' But he broke that cycle by badgering the production manager of Xaviera Hollander's film **My Pleasure Is My Business** who eventually hired him as third AD.

The years that followed saw him doing commercials and working as second AD at the CBC with some of Canada's finest directors - Allan King, Claude Jutra, George Bloomfield and Francis Mankiewicz, an experience he found highly educational, though occasionally frustrating. "The CBC basically films radio plays," he says. "If there was a problem with the script what they did was they changed the dialogue."

"Claude Jutra was the only person at that time who seemed to have his head screwed on. He threw everyone off the set, and he took the actors and rehearsed them until he felt the scene was ready. Then he brought in the cameraman to show him what he was doing and then brought in the rest of the crew."

Two half-hour dramas followed - **Clare's Wish** about two elderly people whose children want them committed to an old-age home and **Flowers In The Sand**. Both were made with Arts' Council participation, with some private investment in the latter. CBC bought **Flowers In The Sand**, a film about a mentally retarded boy who must be able to travel to a training centre in order to be accepted there, and it won a number of certificates of merit.

But Marr remarks that his time spent as an observer on Jewison's **Best Friends** was the best thing that had happened up to that point. He spent a considerable amount of time in dialogue with the director about the film and came away from the experience with a greater degree of confidence and a crucial realization. "There are only two differences between the movies I had made up to then and that one - the size of the budget

Arcand's hat trick

The second Canadian feature selected this year for the Director's Fortnight is Denys Arcand's **Le Déclin de l'empire américain**, a Corporation Image M&M-NFB production.

In contrast to Leon Marr's excitement, the three-time Cannes veteran laconically told *Cinema Canada*. "I'm old enough to know it's best not to expect anything. Each time I

thought one of my films would encounter destiny, it turned out the opposite."

The 45-year-old Quebec director agrees nevertheless that Cannes is still an important launching pad for a feature film: "There are many foreign journalists so you get coverage; it's where most festivals select their programming; and it's an excellent place for a French launch."

and the size of the egos," he notes dryly.

Then, two and a-half years ago, he came across a book review of Joan Barfoot's novel **Dancing In The Dark**. Having read the book and negotiated rights, he set out to write a script, doubting that it could be translated to film.

"Even Martha didn't believe you could make a script about it," he says, referring to Martha Henry, the film's leading lady. "It's all interior monologue. It's so literate nobody was going to want to put money into it."

Undaunted, however, with a yellowing newspaper picture of Henry sitting beside his typewriter, he wrote the script and a revised first draft is what was ultimately shot. While Telefilm paid out a script development grant, it was quickly paid back. The CBC, the Film House Group, Brightstar Films and Film Arts shared production costs. Marr is particularly grateful to Don Haig and Tony Kramreither for taking a chance and betting money on him.

The film examines the secure and happy marriage of perfect housewife Edna Cormick until it is undermined by a fatal flaw.

"I seem to have an affinity for women, women's issues," he reflects. "I feel more comfortable with women, the sensitivities they have. In order to treat this theme (of feminism) you have to understand it, and what better way than going into the mind of a woman who is totally content with her life. Yet I knew right from the start that Edna would never watch this movie."

Or, as he writes in the program book for the Director's Fortnight "I felt as if I was right inside the mind of a woman whose whole being and way of life were totally foreign to me. The sense of intimacy was quite astonishing: I shared her thoughts, experienced her emotions and understood her actions - even the ultimate one which irrevocably altered her existence and became the symbol of her rebirth. After reading the book, her world was still alien to me, but she was no longer a stranger."

The film will probably be screened at the Toronto film festival and has been picked up for distribution by Simcom. But Leon Marr is only beginning to get a perspective on the eruption of attention toward his first feature.

"I've always had to generate enthusiasm myself, but it's nice when other people are reflecting it back at you," he notes. "Sometimes I feel very detached from it, but generally I'm overwhelmed by it all."