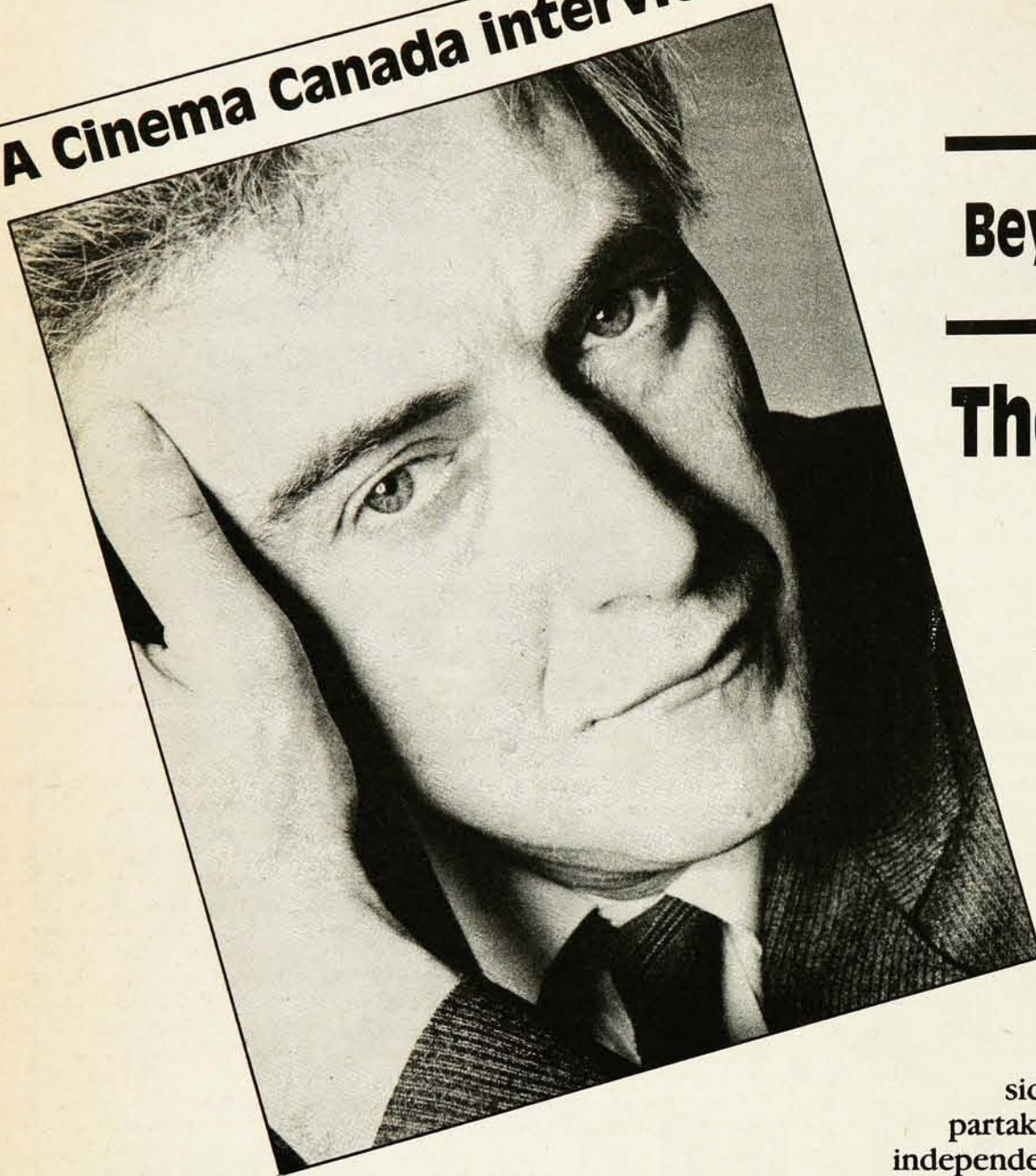


A Cinema Canada interview



Beyond sex and violence

The compassionate filmmaking of Vancouver's Jack Darcus

Better known in Vancouver as a painter whose art commands a considerable reputation, Jack Darcus, 45, also partakes of the Canadian auteurist tradition in independent feature filmmaking. With four features behind him – *Great Coups of History* (1969), *Proxyhawks* (1971), *The Wolfpen Principle* (1974) and *Deserters* (1983) – Darcus' most recent feature *Overnight* (aka *The Universal Statement*) will be among the *Perspectives Canada* offerings at this September's Festival of Festivals. Hot on the heels of Quebec director Denys Arcand's 1986 Cannes hit, *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, in what might be a trend in Canadian films lashing out at our too numerous sacred cows, *Overnight*, among other things, takes a look at the humourous industry of Canadian filmmaking. For this interview with *Cinema Canada*, Darcus spoke with the magazine's Western Bureau chief, Kathryn Allison, in Vancouver.

by Kathryn Allison

**Cinema Canada:** You live in Vancouver and work in Toronto. Why?

**Jack Darcus:** Well, the broadest possible answer is that, around 1979, I found myself more and more on planes to Toronto to try to get distribution, up-front sales and all of the things Toronto offers independent filmmakers. I wish it weren't so. Everyone who lives and works here hopes for some autonomy in the West, but the fact of Canada is

Vancouver-based Kathryn Allison is Cinema Canada's Western bureau chief.

that it has a very small population and the wealth, the power and, to a great degree the expertise, is in Toronto. They've been at it a lot longer and there's a hell of a lot more interest in Canadian cinema there than we have out here.

But I live here because I love it – I love walking my dogs on the beach, and I love the civilized climate. Also, I went to university and art school here and I got into working on films here. There's a quality of independence here that somehow fosters the kind of work I've done. And in terms of writing and painting, Vancouver is a wonderful place to

work. It isn't, though, a possible place to produce films out of as an independent filmmaker, without the aid and assistance of people in Toronto. So one goes back and forth. I have flirted with the idea of living in Toronto, but at the same time I'm always immensely happy to be back here. I guess one is spiritually from a place, too.

**Cinema Canada:** Your films are like plays; a lot of attention is paid to dialogue and language. Is that part of your strategy of low-budget filmmaking?

**Jack Darcus:** *Deserters* (1983), and

*Overnight* (1985), are essentially closer to theatre than to film, in that both were written around one principal location, and they're both very dialogue-heavy. In broad terms, plays turn on what people say to each other while the drama of film turns on what people do. Film has got the power to make a look, a reaction or an emotive photograph register a thematic point in a way like theatre can't. Still, the script is the heart of anything you're doing; the very possibility of whether the film can be made is dependent on whether the script works or not. Given that I've tried to do inexpensive productions

that hold your attention from beginning to end, one of the assets I've got as a writer is dialogue. Also, I love good plays and dialogue that catches my attention. I get very bored when people don't say interesting things. My heart goes out to a lot of what I see in British television - I love Monty Python. I love wit - that kind of fierce intelligence. So there's always that impulse when you love something, to try to do the same thing yourself just to see if you can make it work.

**Cinema Canada:** A number of the actors in *Overnight* come from live theatre and you have a background in stage design. Do you find that helps in making films?

**Jack Darcus:** Certainly for performers, the people I've particularly enjoyed working with, like Alan Scarfe for instance, have a strong theatre background. Their concentration is different from film or television actors. Mind you, it's a different craft. It takes a while for a theatre person to get what they're doing right for film, and there's that devilish thing about continuity in film - that you have to repeat it the same every time. But the craft of film acting doesn't take a good theatre person very long to pick up. Also the film business has an awful lot of hype, hoopla and nonsense, whereas theatre people have a great tradition of professionalism behind them. So they tend to be a little more connected to what they're doing.

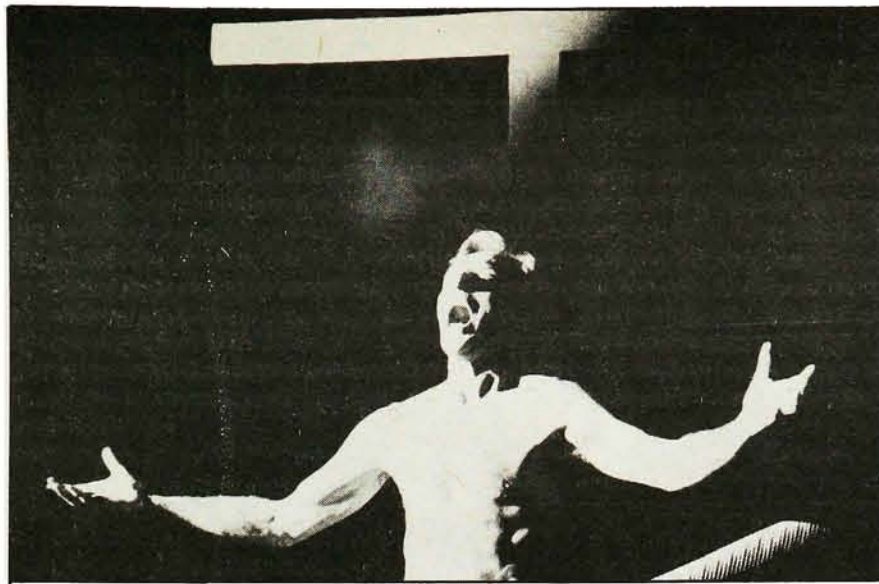
**Cinema Canada:** You really get into the hype, hoopla and nonsense of the film industry in *Overnight*. I enjoyed the director, Jezda, who is always slipping positions vis-à-vis the skin flick he's making. He'll say to the producer, "You only understand money and selling and yet you tell me to change my vision." And then he turns around and says to an auditioning actor who's got his pants down, "You're very good, but my vision is different."

**Jack Darcus:** Jezda is a lovely character because he's a man who's going for the main chance - he's a manipulator all the way. The whole thing is, in some sense, a satire on the film business. So many people in entertainment are desperate to do what they believe in, and at the same time they're desperate to get ahead and they'll do bloody-near anything to get there - sell out at a moment's notice. It is both the saddest and funniest of businesses.

**Cinema Canada:** Is that the theme of *Overnight*?

**Jack Darcus:** Oh, no. The further I get from my work, the clearer I become about what I was doing, and with this one, I'm still at the tail-end of 11 months of working on the bloody thing. I suppose, in a way, it's a very dark view of redemption. That sounds pompous, but it's about a person who accepts his own limitations and finally comes home to himself and what he is. It's about a man who has to make a choice. He wants the very best and the most ideal thing to happen, yet he is also intensely ambitious and therefore corruptible, so he's willing to take a chance that he might be making the wrong choice. And everything turns out far more awful than he could have thought.

**Cinema Canada:** Why did you choose



• *Overnight*: "a test of the Christian community's sense of humour"

to have a skin flick as the film-within-the-film?

**Jack Darcus:** I guess I was looking for a working definition of pornography. The one great part of our culture that has been absolutely misrepresented is the whole question of sex - and the pornography and obscenity that goes with it. I'm against anybody being used as an end. In every way, I'm against coercion, and I'm against violence in films, especially when it's prettified and when the pain is taken out of it - like the death of *Bonnie and Clyde* where they go down in a kind of writhing, slow-motion ballet. To me, violence and sex are two separate issues. The problem in our culture is that an audience has been created that is repressed and so incapable of sexuality that they need a violent outlet for their own sexual problems. So the market is created for "get-off" violent films. You know, where there's a beautiful woman walking through the park and you see the mugger or the rapist waiting for her. A frightened woman on screen will trigger a knee-jerk response in an audience and some filmmakers exploit that. Now rape has nothing to do with sex - it's assault and shouldn't be treated with any sexual overtones, but often is because there's an appetite for that. It seems to me that our humanity is tied to our compassion and if we're stimulated by blocking out our feelings of pain, then the filmmaker has created a blind spot in us, or at least is playing to it.



• Night for day in *Overnight*: Barbara Gordon, Victor Ertmanis and Alan Scarfe with his pants down

In this film, I was trying to drive a wedge between sex and violence, which often get muddled, and just take the sex side. If you take someone who exposes themselves willingly and participates in a sexual act, is there anything wrong in that? I wasn't dealing with the problem of coercion at all. I wouldn't go to see the film-within-the-film because it would be a waste of my time. But is an actor discrediting himself less by doing a soap commercial than dropping his pants in a piece of explicit sex? What's the difference? Both are lies. Where does dirty start? Where ought we to get upset? By using that as the central theme, it allowed me to open up some questions which disturb me. I don't know the answers to them. I have no axes to grind in art, it's a matter of just stating feelings and confusions and putting them up there and hopefully creating debate.

What I tried to do in this film was create a film about the people who purportedly make hardcore skin-flicks, and at the same time make it an innocent film. And deliberately so. Because we are dealing with a subject that ought to be trivial. If we could treat pornography as trivial - and by that I mean explicit sex without violence - it would go away. A lot of what people get worried and upset about is not worth it.

**Cinema Canada:** In *Overnight*, the passive sex object is a man - there's no female nudity and no violence in the

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Photos: Doane Gregory

skin-flick. By making such choices, you diffuse the issue. For the sake of comedy?

**Jack Darcus:** Yes, I tried to make it the very gentlest of treatments. Also, it's an amazing amount of fun to deal with the fact that men are modest. Men are self-conscious about their bodies - everyone is. It just seemed like perfect material to work with. I wanted to make it about a bunch of people, not an issue. The question of sexism is something that... I just assume naively that we're all the same underneath. I don't go around thinking of myself as male first, then human. I try to get it the other way around. So I'm glad that the film, not by deliberate design, but just by dint of the things that I found enjoyable to say and do, managed to turn out to be either inoffensive to both men and women, or equally offensive to both.

**Cinema Canada:** Telefilm was offended by something in the film, wasn't it?

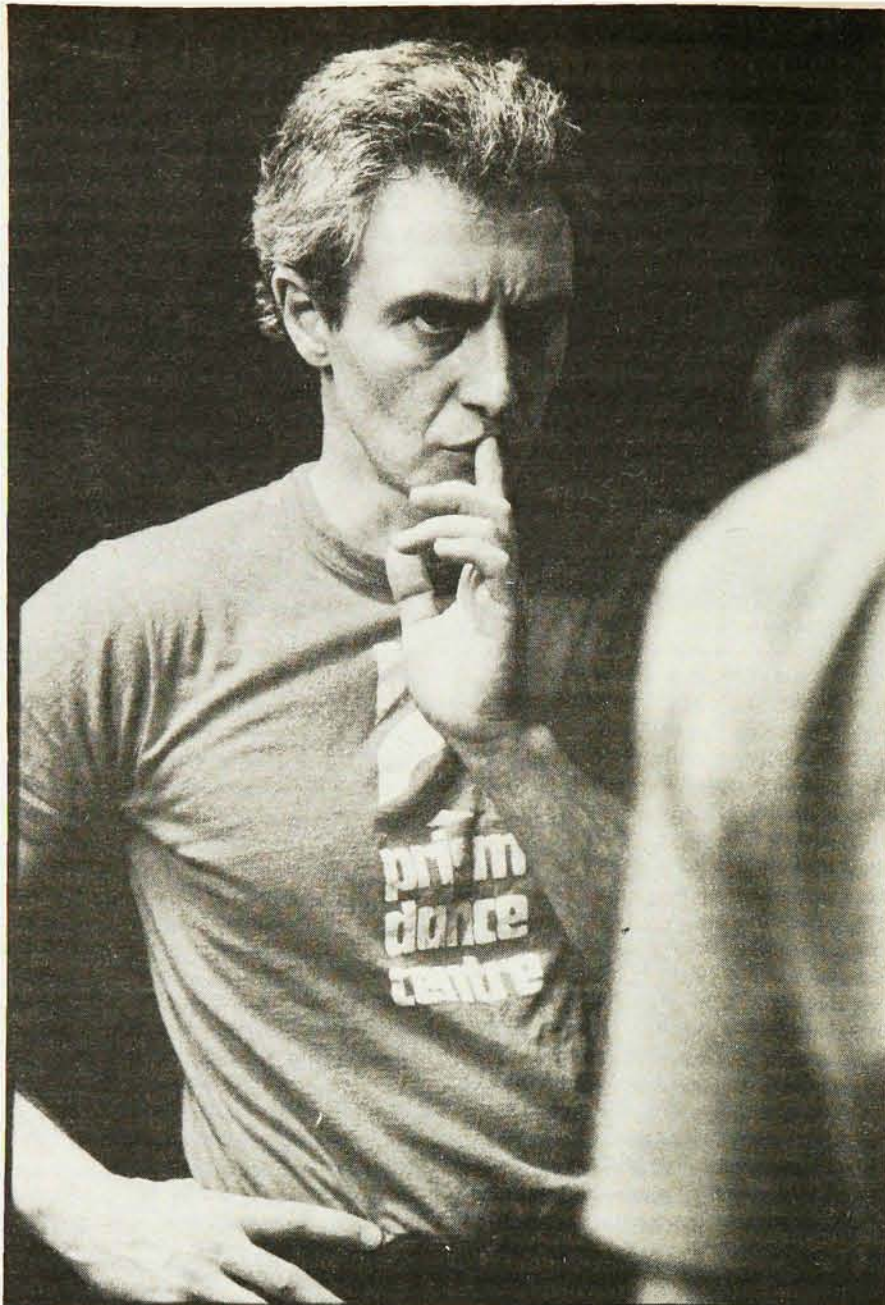
**Jack Darcus:** There is a scene at the end where a man ejaculates before a cross. When we shot it, one of the actors said "Well, this will get rid of the Presbyterians." But the scene wasn't meant to be offensive. It was right for the characters and the situation - and I suppose it's a bit of a test for the Christian community's sense of humour. The Toronto censors found that scene troubling, and there was a minority opinion that it should be cut. Telefilm took their name off the film. They have no credit. I believe it was because of that scene, but they stonewalled and wouldn't say why, which is silly of them.

**Cinema Canada:** Though you have a reputation as a maverick filmmaker, do you feel that in your career so far you've had to compromise to get the films made?

**Jack Darcus:** No, not really, though maturing as an artist and as a filmmaker are often roads that split. That's partly because of the nature of films and the

usage made of them. Television is a great, open mouth that devours material, and so film is often seen as disposable, something you do and then chuck away. Very few filmmakers manage to take themes that they live, and develop them and grow with them. Bergman, Fellini, Kurosawa and Woody Allen are all great filmmakers who managed to build a body of work because they took

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I wrote it into sawdust. When you're naive and inexperienced as an artist, you tend to keep writing just to see something different on the page. You just don't know when to stop and say, "There, it's finished. Like it or not, that's it." So by the time I got the money for **Wolfpen**, it had turned to sawdust. It was a very unhappy experience in many ways. I knew that if I wanted to get on, I'd better learn how to write, because it was all very fine to have a head full of ideas and images and junk, but you have to communicate it to other people on paper. So I settled down and started writing.

At the same time, I was continuing to paint. Now, painting is the most seductive way of life because you do the art, and then you go out and hustle. You are free to do what you wish on a painted surface any time you wish, and there is a wonderful freedom in that. Also, painting is wonderful because you're looking at life as it happens and you're responding to it. It is a great luxury to be able to do that. But I had all these subjects that I wanted to write, and so between 1974 and 1979 I wrote and rewrote many of them. The first outline of **Overnight** was written in that period. There were some five subjects that I wrote about in that time that will probably pop up as films in the next while, hopefully.

**Cinema Canada:** Can you say more about the specifics of what you were working on during that time, in terms

of technical problems, themes or whatever. You said earlier that low-budget films require scripts that are rich in dialogue. Was it then that you discovered that?

**Jack Darcus:** Growing as a writer and becoming a little bit more confident as one is a matter of realizing and trusting that one essentially has a point-of-view. It's not anything one applies consciously to work, but after you've done enough writing you realize that there is in your work a point of view a certain ironic twist about life. That's what I mean about developing themes. Where I felt a bit bereft after **Wolfpen** was that I had been going on pure instinct, but without craft. And you have to know enough about your craft to do a good job on a bad day, when you don't really feel all that inspired. I didn't know enough about my craft to trust my ideas, and it was a case of doing enough work to let those things start to come together. I'm just starting to feel that it's locking in. I've developed some sense now about how long scenes can be and whether they work or not, or whether an idea can actually hold for 90 minutes or not. You start to develop an instinct about your work, and that takes time.

**Cinema Canada:** Okay, you've accounted for five of these years, until 1979. But you didn't make **Deserters** until 1983. What was going on before that?

**Jack Darcus:** In 1979 I tried to get a

production called **The Falcon and the Ballerina** going, and that was where my inexperience as a producer came home to roost. I was a relatively inexperienced director, and had been out of the business for five years. I had produced three, well, two small features, and had worked with another chap on **Wolfpen**, so I sort of had to start from zero.

*"But in B.C., the government we have here is on the level of Labrador in support for the arts. It's very pathetic. There is virtually no concern in Victoria, no awareness, no interest - nothing. It's a desert. And given the minds of the people who are in charge, it isn't going to change"*

It's funny. I wanted to do it for about \$450,000 but every time I talked to someone the budget should spiral up to \$2 million almost instantly. I had to learn how to say no, which was really hard, because when someone comes to you and says, "Oh no, we can do this for a million," your ego gets involved and you lose track of what you really intended to do. You get involved in the hype of the business. And so **The Falcon and the Ballerina** was my apprenticeship with the other side of filmmaking. It fell to bits about four times over the next three years, in different guises and for different reasons. I found that I was just another little filmmaker with a script under my arm, rushing about trying to find the wherewithal to do it, and going through hundreds of meetings that led to nothing. That happens to all of us.

You learn finally not to listen to the people who make promises but do nothing. I learned to go for a negative answer if one was there, and get on with it, instead of holding onto all the fantasies.

So those nine years were really five years of writing and painting, and another three-and-a-half years of trying to do a project I couldn't raise the money for. Finally I went and did **Deserters** which we shot for almost nothing but we got it done. The whole thing centered me about doing things that I *could* do as opposed to doing things that I *wanted* to do. I'd love to go and make a \$5 million picture tomorrow, but it would be another nine years before I had the money, right? If I'm careful and sensible and cautious, I might be able to go and make another \$400,000 picture this summer.

**Cinema Canada:** What about younger filmmakers? Do you follow their work? Did you see anything during

*National Film Week, for instance?*

**Jack Darcus:** I was in Toronto, unfortunately, so I missed the week. I'm particularly sorry I missed Kirk Tougas' film **Return to Departure** because I've heard good things about it. I did see David Winning's **Storm** recently, though, that I liked very much. I thought he's got his hands on the language and if he can get his voice going, with more practice he'll be very good. It's a solid piece. Brevity might help him, but his ideas are all fresh.

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you think enough is being done for younger filmmakers? For instance, is it fair that Telefilm funding is so closely tied to filmmakers' track records?*

**Jack Darcus:** That's life. If you want to get a job as a welder, you have to have had a job as a welder, right? Telefilm is politically vulnerable, in that they're investing the public's money in people who say they're going to make a film that's going to make a profit, and pay the money back to Telefilm. Now if Telefilm puts that money into people who haven't done it before, or who haven't proven they can do it, that's making them politically vulnerable because they're answerable to the government for their budget.

I do think there is a gap between the people who have, after a long struggle, managed to surface as filmmakers with a couple of films and all those ones who are super-talented and have made their first films in their basements for no money at all. How we get those young people to grow one step at a time in-

stead of forcing them to try to make quantum leaps is very difficult. Telefilm, historically, doesn't know what to do with the really high-risk end. They are supportive and they've lost money on a lot of people helping them learn their trade. But that's not Telefilm's main goal. There is a funding gap for the high-risk newcomers. We don't have a film school. We don't have funding in the West, though the Alberta Heritage Fund has helped Alberta filmmakers enormously, and so have the Alberta film awards every year. Ontario has just put \$20 million into a fund for Ontario filmmakers, and the stated goal of this fund is to do high-risk, low-budget dramas. That would do a lot of \$200,000 pictures. But in B.C., the government we have here is on the level of Labrador in support for the arts. It's very pathetic. There is virtually no concern in Victoria, no awareness, no interest - nothing. It's a desert. And given the minds of the people who are in charge, it isn't going to change.

**Cinema Canada:** *What about the politics of film in Canada?*

**Jack Darcus:** I think we should try to make films that can make their money back in this country. That's very difficult to do, but that's what we should push for. We should fight the government to give us access to our own theatres so that we have a chance to make our money back in this country. We should fight the distributors so we can get into our own theatres and on to our own television screens for a fair price. Canadian producers politically

need to have access to their own marketplace.

Our government has been inadequate for many years in its defence of culture as cinema. Every other film-viewing country in the world has some kind of protective legislation that compels the foreign films that play there to leave some money behind, as the price for using the cinemas. We don't have anything and we're America's best film customer - all the money people pay here to see films leaves the country.

So as a political stance, it's necessary for film producers to make inexpensive, small films that can attract an audience in Canada. If we can build a reasonable body of work, then hopefully our federal government will allow those films a chance to see the light of a projector, and then perhaps we'll find ourselves able to grow.

It's an awful dilemma because film is international. And we've heard all the arguments that film is an international language that crosses borders and all that. Yes, it is, but that is the argument used to defend the *status quo* in the business of film and marketplace control. But film is also ideas by individuals who come from certain backgrounds - that's what makes Czech cinema so wonderful - or Swedish cinema; you get different flavours and views of life. Quebec has it - my God, they're 15 years ahead of English Canada in terms of what they've done in film! English Canada has to develop its own film literature.

**Cinema Canada:** *What is the social*

*purpose of making films? Why do you make films?*

**Jack Darcus:** I think that the world becomes more predictable for people the more they live their lives. You know, we stop looking at the world and we just start getting the world that we expect. And then the arts come along and shock us awake. That's the social function of the arts - to wake us up. And people thrive on being awakened. The term "expanding compassion in people" is the one that serves me best, because that's what the best work has done. It's made me open myself up in a way that really is more healthy and caring than I was before I walked in. The really great art changes one's vision of things - it shocks you so awake that you're not seeing your world; you're seeing the artist's world. Fellini does that to me. When I see a Fellini film, I see Fellini people everywhere for hours afterward. Or Emily Carr - you can't see cedar trees without seeing them her way after you've seen her paintings. That to me is the really exciting thing, when that can happen. Art has an overwhelming effect on me. I'm intensely grateful that Kurosawa made **Ran** or **Dersu Uzala**, and I came out of Woody Allen's **Hannah and Her Sisters** feeling so good to be connected to film because here was a great, lovely statement. But there's an immense responsibility in the tradition of any art that is passed along from person-to-person. If you are inspired, moved and overwhelmed by an artwork, it's an indictment - Okay, what are you doing? So, in answer to your question, I'm easily inspired.

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