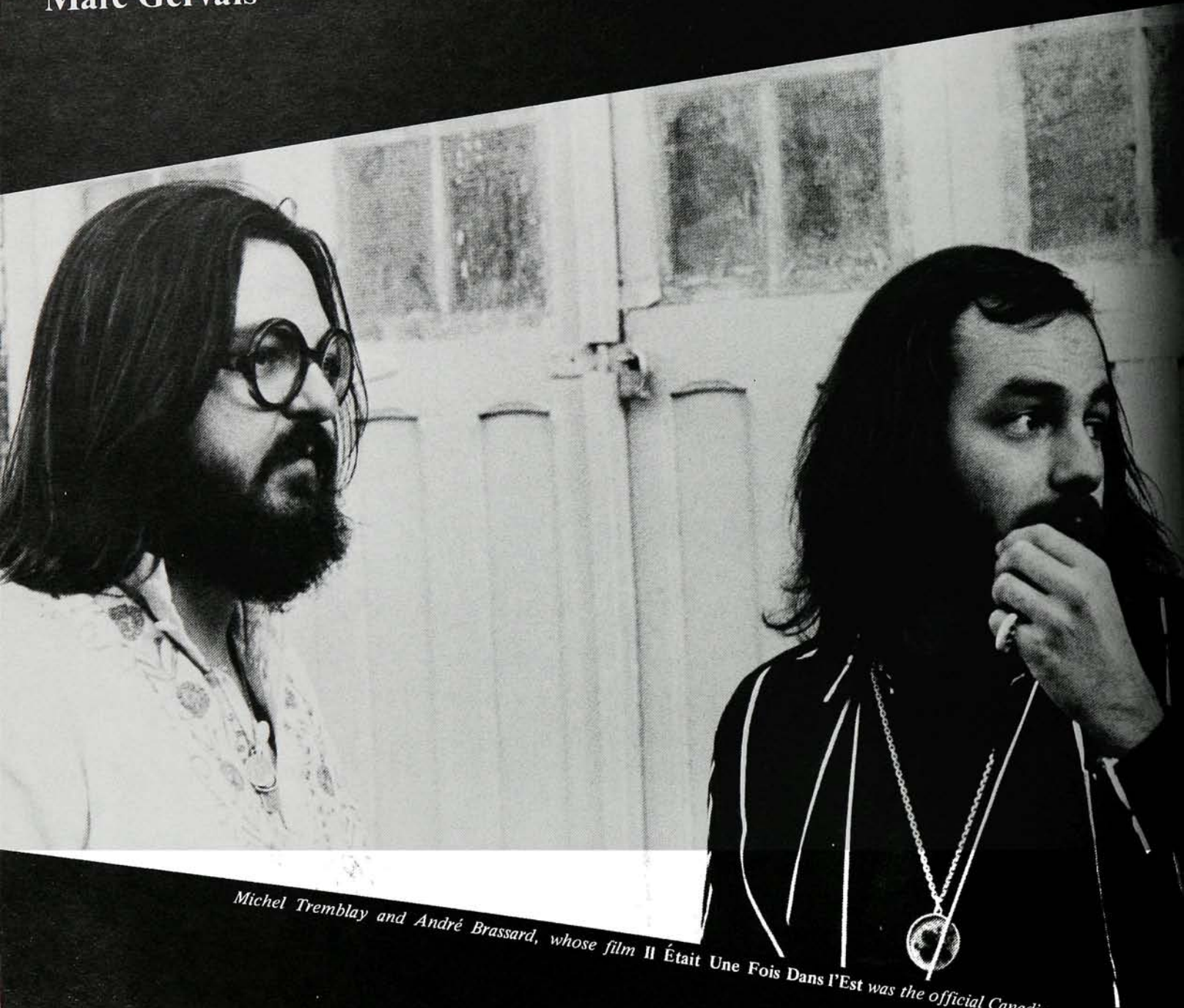


# à cannes, tout est possible

Marc Gervais

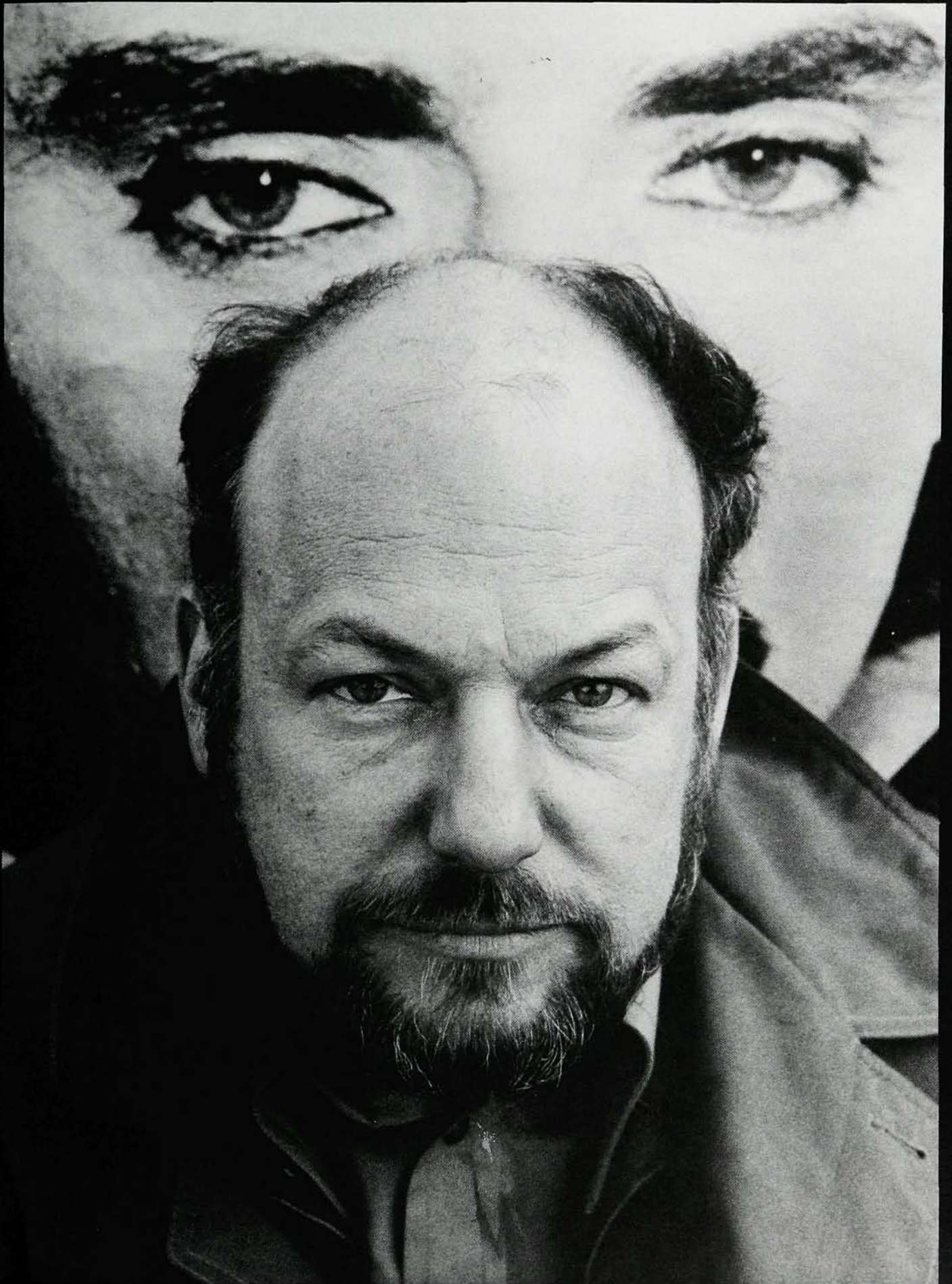


*Michel Tremblay and André Brassard, whose film Il Était Une Fois Dans l'Est was the official Canadian entry at Cannes*

Jury member Monica Vitti and Federico Fellini and scores of other Italians scurry off to Italy for a few days to vote against the anti-divorce bill. Giscard d'Estaing edges Mitterand, and fireworks are expected. Nasty things are expected, too, at the official Israeli film showing, as fresh Middle East horrors appal the world. A certain Stavisky goes on a hunger strike when the film made on his father (by Alain Resnais and starring Belmondo) is not banned by the courts. And Canada is more than a little involved in the biggest "scandale" of the Festival.

But there are moments of the sublime as well. Surely one of these: Linda Lovelace, the *Deep Throat* performer gracing Cannes for the first time, sends, through a Swede she meets, a message to Ingmar Bergman, fortunately safely esconced on his island in Sweden. It reads: "Dear Ingmar: my Virgin Spring awaits your Wild Strawberries. Love, Linda." A Cannes, tout est possible.

So indeed there are the moments. Something out of the ordinary always happens each May as the world's biggest and



*Dusan Makavejev, whose film Sweet Movie caused such a scandal*

most important Film Festival takes over Cannes for two weeks.

Cannes itself has changed from its days of luxury and elegance: high rise apartments are replacing the old hotel palaces, and the palm trees and green spaces are gobbled up \$\$ Montreal style. The Cannois, too, are losing their old, easy-going charm: technology and consumer society values are seeing to that, as they scramble for the big value — money — and take on some of our North American barbarisms.

As we have been repeating the last few years, the Festival, too, has changed radically. Gone is the voyeuristic-exhibitionist ritual of the disrobing starlet. What chance would she have, now, in the age of the monokini, and in competition with what is going on much of the time up there on the silver screen? Fewer big stars, too, and less glitter, and watered down receptions. If the circus still exists (as it surely does), it now belongs to filmdom's thousands of businessmen, wheeling and dealing in the centre of it all, the Carlton Hotel-become-Babylon for a fortnight.

So it is two mad weeks of running, making contracts, and (if you are a critic or a distributor) seeing films. *Working*. Some 400 features, in the official competition, or in the prestige side festivals, or on the market. What used to be called general entertainment, or art, social protest, ideology, or pornography, or Kung Fu — from Hollywood or Rome or Hong Kong — it's all there.

\* \* \* \* \*

Canada is now very much part of the Cannes picture. Not only because of the 200-or-so Canadians who make the annual pilgrimage thither. But take our Canadian films this year. The NFB short, Péter Földes' *Hunger*, received a major award, thereby confirming Canada's marvelous, and long-standing reputation in animation. This time, it was a brilliant computer creation, in a field still at the experimental stage.

Still from Péter Földes' NFB film, *Hunger*



Our official feature entry (features are what count at Cannes), the Brassard-Tremblay *Il Était Une Fois Dans l'Est*, did not do nearly as well. But that was more than made up for by what happened out of competition. For example, a documentary by Montrealer Jerry Bruck, *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, was cheered by audiences, and was surely one of the two best films (out of the 400) shown at Cannes. And *Les Dernières Fiançailles* won yet more critical acclaim for Jean-Pierre Lefebvre in the Director's Fortnight, one of the side festivals.

The big Canadian news, however, is what happened on the market, where some twenty Canadian features were shown, to get them sold. Good news indeed, and nothing less than a major break-through for especially the English-Canadian films.

Over the past ten years I have watched the Canadian presence in Cannes evolve and grow. First came the revolutionary young Québécois cinema of Lefebvre, Jutra, Godbout, etc., and the work of Pierre Perreault and Allan King, all in the side festivals. Then, in the late sixties, with George Kaczender's *Don't Let The Angels Fall*, Canada had its first feature entry in the official competition.

"Cinema Canada" was set up, a sort of official Canadian bureau at Cannes; and with it came a big, brassy, splashy publicity campaign: Cannes knew about the CFDC, knew that there were lots of feature films being made in Canada, even though it seemed most of them were skin flicks. Now there was even a special "Canadian" theatre rented, and big receptions, and so on. There were now, also, plenty of Canadian producers, distributors, directors, actors, and critics in attendance, some two hundred of them.

The Canadian presence in Cannes this May, 1974? "Cinema Canada", headed by Jean Lefebvre and David Novak, was big (some 16 people), quiet, and the most efficient bureau of any country represented at Cannes. The money spent seems to be paying off by helping give Canadian features a *credibility* among foreigners. Everyone now takes for granted that Canada has a serious feature film industry, and everyone, critics and distributors alike (often for different reasons), is mightily interested.

As the Festival ended, it was becoming increasingly clear that this was indeed the year of the break-through for Canada. Sales of Canadian features to other countries would easily clear two million dollars, something unheard of before — and over eight times last year's sales. Jean-Claude Lord's *Bingo* was doing well on the French side. But it was the English-Canadian side, always the poor sister in the past, that was scoring the big financial successes (by Canadian terms, it must be added, and not by Hollywood standards).

Films such as *Child Under a Leaf*, not yet released, sold well. And of course the film everyone knew was the best Canadian feature, the one that should have represented Canada in competition, but was not even in Cannes at all — *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* — was receiving bids sight unseen.

All of this means a tremendous shot in the arm for Canadian feature film-making, and especially on the English-Canadian side. The Cannes sales, the remarkable success of *Cry of the Wild*, and what seems in store for *Duddy Kravitz* means that at long last English-Canadian features are selling internationally.

And that means more money coming in at a time when film money in Canada is exceedingly tight. More money means more opportunities, more films. And with the growing expertise, quite possibly better films.

That is one side of the story. However, there is another side, one that should make us all pause and reassess. At a meeting organized by "Cinema Canada" toward the end of the festival, and attended by Canadian producers, distributors, and critics, as well as by Sydney Newman (NFB) and by Michael Spencer (CFDC), an American agent who was selling many of the English-Canadian features (with great success) was setting down the ground rules: "You gotta have more co-productions; two or three international (which usually means American)



Scene from Fellini's *Amarcord*

stars per picture; fast cuts, lots of chases, action, etc. You do that and I can sell your product sight unseen."

You cannot blame Canadian producers for wanting to make their money back, and there is nothing wrong with a good entertainment film, whatever the ideologues may say. But are Canadian film makers bound to follow the recipe? Is film only a marketing product, and is the only criterion of value how much money it will make? Is there any room at all for the other ideal, *i.e.*, notions such as film as art, as the expression of the human spirit, or of social consciousness and reform?

The problem in English Canada is that it is already wholly dominated by American films. Are the Canadian films as well to be nothing but pale imitations of their American models, and to be controlled by American marketing demands? One need but speak to George Kaczender, Paul Almond, or Allan King, for example, to see how real this problem is for Canadian filmmakers.

\* \* \* \* \*

The problem is not merely a Canadian one, however. Cannes makes that abundantly clear. There was a time when Hollywood films (perhaps justifiably) controlled the world, and the Americans felt no need to bother with Cannes and other international festivals. But when Hollywood lost its quasi-monopoly, and when national cinemas burst into prominence, above all in the sixties, Hollywood re-organized, and moved into other countries, with such success — the Americans are matchless in this respect — that American financing once again dominates the film world. The Americans have moved into Cannes in force, and to a large extent have taken over the Festival: more films, more stars, more publicity, etc.

This is surely one of the reasons why world cinema now is so much less exciting, so much less deeply rooted in the in-felt, lived, local situation, and hence less creative, innovative, and personal, than it was in that great period between the mid-

fifties and late sixties. The name of the game now (at least in the Western countries) is "Hollywood international", as the pressure is exerted to go for "safe", mass popularity values. Too much, the more artistically (and humanly) satisfying work is relegated to the fringes. A glance at just how films are distributed in our major Canadian cities bears this out with painful accuracy.

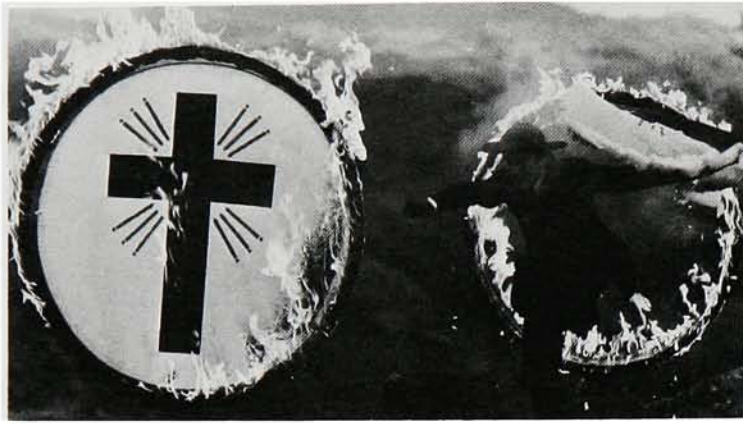
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But there was a *Festival* after all, and there were interesting films, some of them worth talking about.

The *Names*: Fellini, Antonioni, and Pasolini! Bresson, Resnais, and Tati! And (I suppose) Ken Russell and Claude Lelouch — surely this was going to be some Festival, with such name directors in attendance.

Alas, such proved not to be the case. If two years ago one was stunned by the fine work of the old guard, not so this year. Antonioni, for one, did not show up. And Fellini's *Amarcord*, though a good film, worth seeing, and marked by touches of the Fellini genius, was really a minor working over of what Fellini had done so much more brilliantly twenty years ago in *I Vitelloni*. In the last decade or so, Fellini's marvellously warm human beings have crossed the line into grotesquerie, the humour is more laboured and strident, and the sympathy and love has become almost extinct.

Pasolini has finally terminated his "trilogy of life" with *The Arabian Nights*, a long, sumptuous production that somehow won the Special Jury award, perhaps because it is such a sublime incarnation of the decadence that now runs riot in Italian films. "Life"? No, rather a long aestheticizing trip, brilliant but empty, Pasolini's anguished, moving quest for meaning amidst the contemporary contradictions now reduced to a sort of homosexual fantasy dream. But watch out. Pasolini told me: the next films will be vastly different. One



Scene from Ken Russell's film *Mahler*

hopes so.

France's Jacques Tati, the greatest film comedian still in action, also played in a minor key. His film, *Parade*, is likable, gentle, miles removed from the contemporary vulgarity. It has, in a word, the Tati touch; but it is really nothing more than a T.V. special with a few mime acts by the great clown.

After a six year absence — he could not finance a film — Alain Resnais, former giant of *La Nouvelle Vague*, returned with *Stavisky*. Stylish and at times beautiful, *Stavisky* simply fails as a movie, its falseness magnified by Jean-Paul Belmondo's wretchedly matinee-idol performance. One can only hope that the enforced absence has not ruined a once great talent, and that Resnais does not become a symbol of what happened to a world cinema that only a few years ago was experiencing its golden period.

Claude Lelouch's *Toute Une Vie*, on the other hand, was that flashy, entertaining, and rather shallow director's most ambitious and expensive film to date. In spite of the severe criticism heaped upon it, *Toute Une Vie* is an enjoyable experience, especially when Gilbert Beaus lights up the screen.

And then there is always Ken Russell. Can bad taste be so bad that it becomes good? Once again that is the Russell question, as he continues his musical "biographies" with *Mahler*. At moments a thing of beauty and brilliance — and no question about Russell's talent and ability to keep an audience awake. Russell's problem as a film director is that he seems to lack a mind. His real talent time and again is given over to creating sophomoric cabaret acts played out against some of the great musical compositions of our heritage. The adolescent sensibility is fine for adolescents, but when those adolescents are in their forties. . . .

Robert Bresson is everything in a film director that Ken Russell is not. Bresson avoids easy effects like poison; he is doomed to having no appeal for a mass audience, for his art is demanding, and alienating, too, until one is willing to contemplate. But when one does catch on, the result is sheer magic. Thus *Lancelot* will bore some, and elicit cries of "masterpiece" from others. The outstanding film shown at Cannes this year, *Lancelot* was kept out of the official competition by the selection committee. This raised fierce criticism by Bresson and many others, Bresson damning the Festival for worshipping mammon (commercialism) and neglecting authentic cinema art. — Anyway, his film of seething passion contained in cold steel explores the deepest human mystery — love, loyalty, betrayal, guilt, death, life, sacrifice — through the tragic, final days of Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. The love story of Lancelot and Guinevere more than belonged to this, or any other, festival.

There were other fascinating films as well: Alexander Kluge's *A Slave Woman's Occasional Jobs* (Germany), a political essay about women today; Victor Erice's *Bee Hive* (Spain), about a little girl's love for Frankenstein's monster; *The Land is a Cursed Garden* (Finland); the outstanding *Mean Streets* (USA); and Peter Davis' *Hearts and Minds* (USA), an attempt to examine objectively the Vietnam War. These, however, will

fail, in most cases, to reach Canadian viewers, because of the economic laws that govern our film distribution, at least for the major theatres. The same old story: we are allowed (because of commercial imperatives) to see only certain kinds of movies — and the conditioning goes on, the circle becoming more and more vicious.

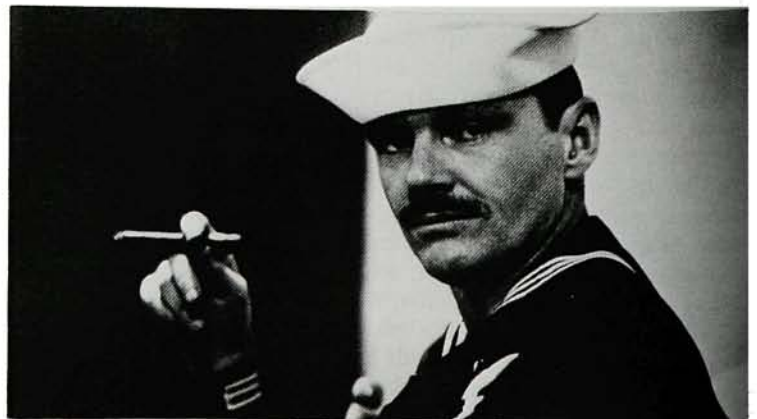
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But let's terminate on a further Canadian note. Dusan Makavejev is certainly no Canadian, but his film, *Sweet Movie*, involved Canada in the Festival's major "scandale" (as mentioned above). A Canada-France-Sweden-Germany co-production is filled with Canadian locations, and Canadian actors, with a Montrealer, film critic Martin Malina, helping Makavejev with the English script. As everyone knows by now, Montreal actress Carole Laure sued Makevejev for pressuring or tricking her into doing pornographic scenes; and she quit the film. Actually, *Sweet Movie* has deep political involvement of sorts, fiercely (and despairingly) rejecting both the Russian-style Communism and the American (Canadian) way of life. Makavejev starts out as a moralist, I think; but the film quickly runs out of control, becoming more of a scatological exhibitionist horror display, an almost unrelieved regurgitation of defecation, vomit, and sick sex. Makavejev is a very interesting director, to be sure. Perhaps with *Sweet Movie* he has finally purged himself.

And then there is *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* story. Why was this film not invited into the official competition, even though the Canadian selection committee chose it to represent Canada? Rumour has it 1) that the French felt it looked "too much like an American movie" — a silly, dishonest reason, especially when one sees some of the inferior films that were invited; or, 2) that there were already three films accepted with Jewish themes — equally silly. My 3) guess: the French still love to have a certain image of their "petit québécois cousins" as crude, primitive, violent. Hence, they invite Gilles Carle and this year's film (not a bad one, surely), *Il Était Une Fois Dans l'Est*. But *Duddy* belonged at Cannes, one of those rare Canadian films that combines popular appeal with human (and artistic) depth.

A final, very positive note. The best film shown in Cannes, next to *Lancelot*, was, I feel, a sixty-two minute documentary by a young Montrealer, Jerry Bruck. *I. F. Stone's Weekly* is the type of film we have seen often — the direct presentation of events and people, and so on — but, somehow, the magical combination of the man himself, I. F. Stone, and the treatment given by Bruck, had audiences cheering. Stone, an American journalist, was almost a lone voice raised against abuses in the McCarthy and post-McCarthy era; and his spirit fairly shines throughout the film. Political cinema at its finest: humanly warm, intelligent, fascinating. Like too many of us, Jerry Bruck is more intrigued by the American political scene than by our own. And he has not received too much support in Canada. He, however, is one film director well worth encouraging. More than anyone else, I feel, he contributed to Canada's good showing at Cannes this year.

Jack Nicholson, winner of Best Actor award in *The Last Detail*





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