

A humble piece of yellow copy paper arrived at the office of *Cinema Canada*:

"The Mourning Suit by Leonard Yakir has been accepted as the Canadian entry to the Locarno International Film Festival. Mr. Yakir will be going to Locarno with his film. The Festival starts July 31 and runs to August 10.

Yours very sincerely,
Leonard Yakir."

Thus a young Canadian filmmaker, 28 year old Leonard Yakir of Winnipeg, re-

ports with modest economy on an experience he is later to compare with "winning the sweepstakes." The Locarno Festival Selection Committee, on invitation from the Department of the Secretary of State, picked his first feature film for their Festival, one known to search for new young directors from young national cinemas.

The struggling young Canadian filmmaker was contacted by the struggling young Canadian film magazine, and the result was a couple of hours of pleasant conversation, some of which follows.

talking with leonard yakir

by Natalie Edwards

Leonard Yakir and Allan Moyle (l. to r.) on location.



Yakir's first film to come to public attention was a short entitled **Main Street Soldier** offering a *cinéma vérité* styled acquaintance with a determined and almost professionally drunk World War II vet.

Cinema Canada: *He seemed like a man who had his own ideas and philosophies and was well able to express them, the kind you find in a beer parlor.*

Leonard Yakir: That's how I met him.

Cinema Canada: *How did that happen? That was decisive to your career.*

Leonard Yakir: For sure. I was working on a script that involved the native population in and around Winnipeg, and I had a studio near the Main Street area... and one day I was sitting in a restaurant and this guy sat in front of me: it was Ray McClair, and he said 'How ya doin?' and started bumming right away. This is the truth, he started eating the remnants of the meal that was left there.

Cinema Canada: *I've often thought of doing that myself. Seems such a waste.*

Leonard Yakir: It does. And you saw the film. I don't think Ray McClair is tainted. He's very much like that. And I just found him so interesting. He said, come and buy me a drink, so I did... I'm making a film, I told him. He didn't believe me I'm sure. It was like a symbiotic relationship, in terms of, he was bumming off me and I was bumming off him.

Cinema Canada: *You were exploiting each other.*

Leonard Yakir: That's right. And he was telling me his story and I was recording it, and I had it typed up and I read it and it was incredible. His language is vernacular, always interesting.

Ray, Ray represented something to me. Here's this guy who in a sense said "Fuck off" to everything. There were no values, like home, family, money, anything, that he gave a hoot about. In that sense he was like a *desperado*, which is a very romantic concept. I think **Main Street Soldier** romanticizes that type of person. In a way it kind of fascinated me. He would be talking, and I'd think, 'does he really believe this?'. But he doesn't though. He doesn't.

Cinema Canada: *He doesn't believe?*

Leonard Yakir: I mean he does, but he doesn't.

Cinema Canada: *You mean he still likes to receive affection and friendship, even as he says this stuff is all crap? The character is rich in complexity...*

Leonard Yakir: Well, the funniest thing, and for years we never told anyone, is that we have strong beliefs that all his war stories are total fabrications. Like everything about that film is a total fabrication. At first you think of all your press things. How can we tell them? People were saying things like this is a story about veterans and war and what it's really like to suffer, an anti-war film, and then we looked into the records of Ray and his war career and we have doubts as to whether or not he ever left North America.

Natalie Edwards has been a regular contributor to Star Week for over seven years, and has also written film reviews for the Toronto Citizen and Guerrilla. Working towards her master's degree in filming at York University, she is Assistant Editor of Cinema Canada.

Cinema Canada: *Great. That's lovely. He's created himself!*

Leonard Yakir: Ray – well he's the greatest actor. He always wanted to be an actor.

Cinema Canada: *The film was made with the aid of an L.I.P. grant, and shot in 16mm for under \$20,000, you've told me. Who shot that for you?*



Norman Taviss in **The Mourning Suit**

Leonard Yakir: I shot, myself, and Stephen Chernicky. It's 36 minutes but when it was shown on CBC it was cut to their requirements, 28 something, for the Sprockets series.

Cinema Canada: *How about The Mourners, or...*

Leonard Yakir: **The Mourning Suit.** The title always was a problem. My writer Joe Weisenfeld wanted to call it **The Mourners**, but thematically, the suit is such an important thing.

Cinema Canada: *Henry Fiks is doing your images. He's been doing a lot of work.*

Leonard Yakir: Yeah. He's very good.

Cinema Canada: *125 Rooms, Monkeys in the Attic – how is he to work with? He seems to enjoy a lot of experimental gimmickry. It seems to me as a director one would have to sit on his head from time to time, to keep control.*

Leonard Yakir: Well, I like working with him, actually, I'd like to work with him again. You want that in a cameraman. I mean, I'd like to have that in everyone, in actors and everything, where they really want to take over. In a way it's the director's job to ride on top of that, maybe. If you have somebody who's asking you what to do all the time, you don't need them.

Cinema Canada: *Do you think of film as a communal work?*

Leonard Yakir: No, I don't think it is.

Cinema Canada: *What about somebody like Altman who tries to get each person to be as creative as he can?*

Leonard Yakir: Well, I think that's somewhat the same idea. I mean, you want them to take over. It's the nicest thing to happen really, sit back and – there's a wonderful performance – and you're not

needed. You know you can go in and walk out. That's the best thing that can happen, I think.

Cinema Canada: *I see you have Brenda Donohue in it. Did you like working with her?*

Leonard Yakir: Oh I liked it very much. She's very good. She's very nice to work with. I found that the best performances come from people who give the least trouble in terms of personality. She was always concerned about giving her best performance and she's always thinking about that transition between stage and film. She doesn't have a very big part, but her part is very isolated and she's important in terms of who she is and what she represents in the film. I think what's interesting is that she comes on very strong for such a short period.

Cinema Canada: *How did you find her? How did you cast?*

Leonard Yakir: Well, I just shopped around. I let out the word. I was shooting in Winnipeg, and Winnipeg, I think, well, it's supposed to be famous for being a theatre town (Manitoba Theatre Centre) but it doesn't really have an indigenous theatrical population. It's a real import town for talent. ... So making a film, I had to shop outside of the city.

Cinema Canada: *Henry Gamer?*

Leonard Yakir: Was the lawyer in Duddy Kravitz, a small part.

Cinema Canada: *And Alan Moyle from Montreal Main, Bozo...*

Leonard Yakir: Yeah. Nice Irish boy plays a Jewish role.

Cinema Canada: *Does the film have a strong Winnipeg Jew flavour?*

Leonard Yakir: I think so. It's really about that. It involves, in one sense, a typically North End kind of situation. It isn't just typical of Winnipeg's North End, I mean it can happen in Toronto, Montreal, New York. It deals with a tailor, a *schneider*, somebody who lives through a European upbringing, you know, orthodox, and suffered the war and has come to Winnipeg, and is trying to maintain his identity in the new world...

Cinema Canada: *Is this a kind of identification of your own consciousness, or is this just looking around you and deciding on a subject that was really interesting?*

Leonard Yakir: It's kind of close in terms of my own upbringing. My father was a *schneider*.

Cinema Canada: *How long was your shoot?*

Leonard Yakir: Five weeks.

Cinema Canada: *That's quite long, isn't it?*

Leonard Yakir: It's forever.

Cinema Canada: *You're on a low budget grant, \$100,000?*

Leonard Yakir: \$125,000. They raised it to \$125,000 just about the time I was getting ready to shoot. The way it works is that CFDC puts up 75 and the producer is looking for 50 and once you have that combination you can go out and shoot.

Cinema Canada: *And you were able to find a producer who could find you \$50,000?*

Leonard Yakir: I was the producer. I got money from the Manitoba government, money from the city of Win-

nipeg, and some private investors, deferred salaries, basically my own and some people working very closely with me.

Cinema Canada: *How do you manage to support yourself. Doing other work?*

Leonard Yakir: I don't. I need a job. Quick.

Cinema Canada: *What do you think can happen to your film at Locarno? What if you got an award?*

Leonard Yakir: It would help.

Cinema Canada: *Who's distributing?*

Leonard Yakir: Well, nobody has it yet. I'm dealing with some distributors right now.

Cinema Canada: *Have you got any sales, to CBC or CTV?*

Leonard Yakir: Nothing like that. CBC has seen it.

Cinema Canada: *And nothing?*

Leonard Yakir: Yep.

Cinema Canada: *What happens when CBC sees it. So they send you a letter...*

Leonard Yakir: No no, it's over the phone. Terrible.

Cinema Canada: *It sounds disheartening. Do they criticize, analyze?*

Leonard Yakir: You don't want that. Analysis from nobody.

Cinema Canada: *You don't have an agent?*

Leonard Yakir: I'm my agent.

Cinema Canada: *I thought so when we got that little piece of yellow copy paper about Mr. Yakir. How typically Canadian...*

Leonard Yakir: It's true. A typical Canadian press release...

Cinema Canada: *Well, I think it's kind of nice compared to the expensive hype we receive.* □

For the review of The Mourning Suit see Film Reviews in this issue, p.48.

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