

Cowboys Don't Cry

A French-Canadian actress was recently quoted as saying that "films shot in Toronto and Vancouver and Alberta have an identity crisis. People are worried about how they are different from the Americans."

Obviously, the actress has not spent much time in western Canada. If she had, she would realize that true westerners are not concerned with being different from Americans. True westerners are paranoid enough, or maybe just stupid enough, to believe that they are different from everyone. And true western films do not have an identity crisis.

Cowboys Don't Cry, the \$2.9 million feature Anne Wheeler directed for Atlantis last August/September should prove the point. The whole production is about as purebred-western as you could find. (As purebred, in fact, as the palomino colt that was raffled to attract extras for a rodeo scene.)

Anne Wheeler is a western director by geography (she was born and has lived in Edmonton all her life), and by attitude. Her films do not discuss the problems of Americanization, they discuss her world: **Loyalties** followed the relationship of two women in a small Alberta town, **A War Story** described her father's World War II experiences, and her next project, **Bye Bye Blues** is based on her mother's wartime existence. **Cowboy's Don't Cry** deals with the relationship between a down-and-out bull rider and his 15-year-old son, and, although Wheeler's rodeo experience is limited (she admits to barrel racing), she says the focus of the story is the relationship, not the occupation. "These people could be anybody."

Wheeler agreed to direct **Cowboys** for two reasons: first, because it gave her a chance to work with Atlantis films. Second, and more importantly, because she was allowed to write the script. The story is an adaptation of a novel by Alberta writer Marilyn Hoverson. A popular children's story, it effectively captures the Southern Alberta landscape and the lifestyle of its ranchers and cowboys.

The cast has a strong contingent of westerners. Of the lead players, Janet Laine-Greene is a University of Alberta grad, Zachary Ansley is a Vancouverite, Ron White was born in Dawson City. The proportion of western Canadians was "more than a coincidence," Wheeler said. "Those people play those parts more truthfully...My role is the watcher - to have a relationship with my actors that is very open, hopefully, and devoid of ego."

On set in Fort Saskatchewan there was a remarkably open atmosphere. Between takes Ron White, **Cowboys'** star, chatted about livestock with a wizened local extra; Janet Laine-Green cavorted with the sound recordist. Part of that

open atmosphere is due to the fact that Wheeler has the trust of her crew.

"On the last project (**Loyalties**) I felt a lot of people were watching, judging but there's really no time to think about that," Wheeler admitted. Despite rumours that **Cowboys** was behind schedule, the difficulties of working with kids, animals, and inclement weather, it was a remarkably happy set. The crew, which spent several weekends "slogging around in mud and shit" in rain-soaked rodeo grounds, liked working with Wheeler. One crew member who worked with her on **Loyalties** said simply, "She's good. She learns more every time out."

Wheeler, according to Alan Stein, has got an egalitarian spirit and technical sense common to western filmmakers. It comes from working up from the bottom. "With the exception of Wendy Wacko, almost every producer in the province has come up through the crafts...Anne Wheeler was an editor and then a cinematographer."

According to Wheeler, the shoot was a labour of love for a lot of the crew. "A lot of these guys turned down projects in Vancouver that paid a lot more to work on this. It's given them the chance to come home and do something they feel part of."

The subject, and not just the location, comes close to home. "All of the guys who drive for movies in this province are rodeo guys," said Wheeler. "I knew a lot of them without knowing (it)." John Dodds, head wrangler on **Cowboys** and a film veteran, was a four-time Canadian bull-riding champ.

While **Cowboys'** pedigree can certainly compare to that of western films like **Loyalties** and **My American Cousin**, it will have to prove its quality. The script competently outlined the struggle between father and son but tended to lack bite: some journalists were warned not to mention 'Disney' on set.

Nevertheless, it managed to offend Marilyn Halvorson, who was apparently unhappy with Wheeler's emphasis on the adult relationships.

Regardless of opinions about the script, the final judgment of **Cowboys** will come when it airs on CBC next March. (Producers are hoping to distribute it as a feature internationally.) The point, however, is proved. **Cowboys** is a western film; whether it is a good western film remains to be seen.

Stacey Bertles •

Pin

A house is perched along the banks of the Richelieu River in Iberville, a small town southeast of Montreal. It's an old stone mansion, grandiose and imposing, colored by local legends about mysterious escape tunnels that no one has ever been able to find. The cold look of the stone is eerie even in the sunlight. The house's grey facade lies in stark contrast to the autumn colors in the trees that surround it. On the inside, made to look like the residence of a doctor and his over-meticulous wife, the rooms appear to be museum displays. The furniture looks unused, monuments to the obsession with perfection they are obviously meant to reflect.

It is here that **Pin**, a psychological thriller, written and directed by Sandor Stern, is shooting. Two-thirds of the film take place inside the house, making the set almost one of the characters.

The title character Pin isn't human. It is an anatomical dummy used by the doctor to amuse his two children. But the doctor and his wife are failures as parents. Driven by an unreasonable sense of order and propriety, they have tended to neglect their children's emotional upbringing. Pin then becomes a surrogate for the affection lacking in their lives.

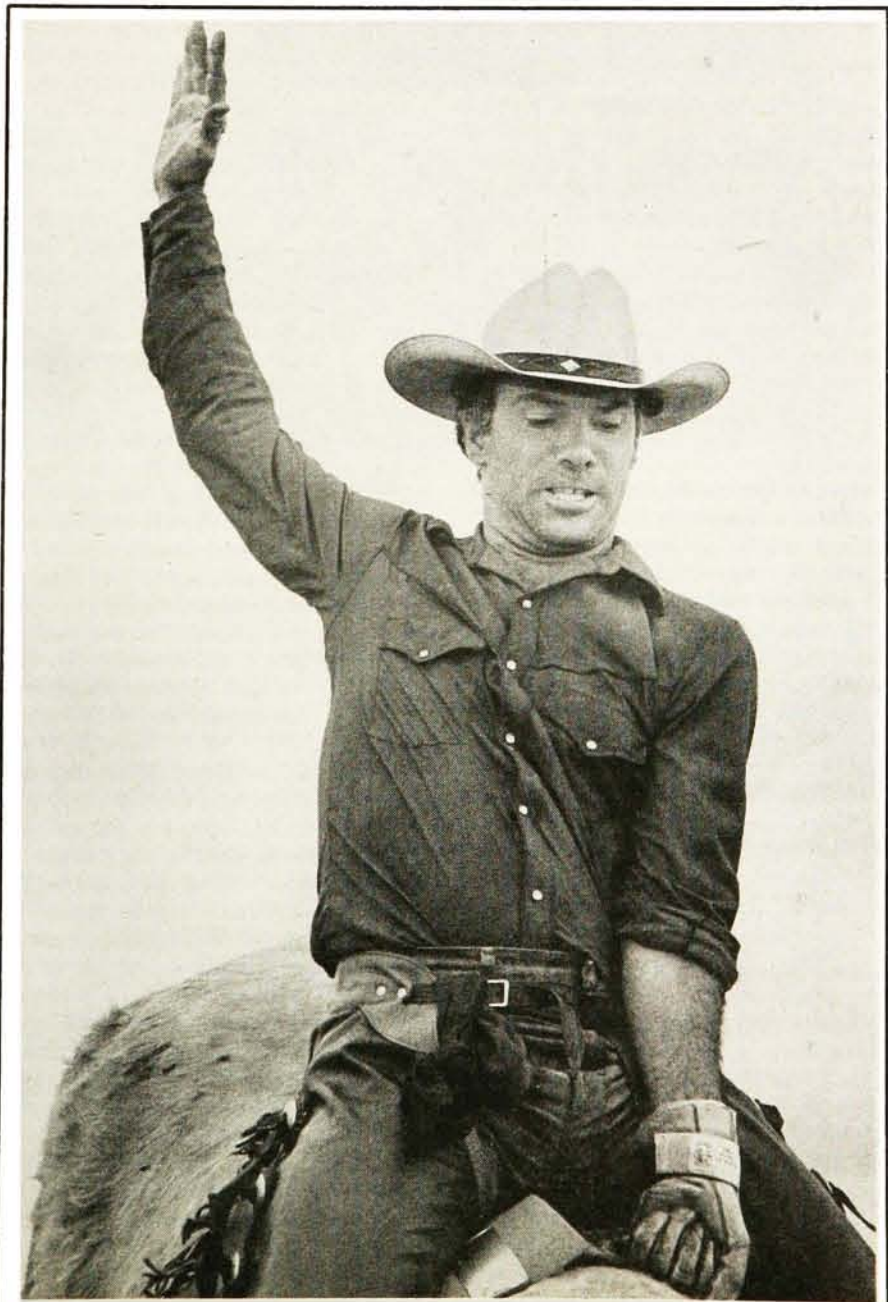
When the two children, Leon and Ursula (David Hewlett and Cyndy Preston), become young adults, their parents are killed in an accident. It is then that Pin alarmingly becomes more than a mannequin. Leon then withdraws into a world where all of his psychological problems deepen, finding focus in his increasingly disturbing relationship with Pin.

Pin's writer/director Sandor Stern was born in Ontario, but now lives in Los Angeles. Stern was a medical doctor who gave up his profession to become a scriptwriter. He eventually graduated to directing, and is responsible for the TV programs **Easy Prey**, **Assassin**, and **John and Yoko: A Love Story**. He also wrote the screenplay for **The Amityville Horror**, so he is no stranger to subjects designed to unnerve the viewer.

He is making the film for the perennially busy René Malo, who this year has no less than five films in different stages of production.

A key ingredient in **Pin's** hopes for success is director of photography Guy Dufaux. As director of photography on two of the most successful films ever produced in Quebec, **Le Déclin de l'empire américain** and **Un Zoo la nuit**, Dufaux now has a reputation that makes his presence on this project prestigious.

Dufaux was born in France, and moved to Quebec in the '60s with no ambition to get into movies. But the Quebec film industry was less hierarchi-



• Ron White is ridin high in **Cowboys Don't Cry**

Photo: Douglas Curran