The fantastic reality of twins

A
ter the final take, the corpse dons a
green bathrobe and makes her way to
the director’s chair. David Cronenberg
graciously obliges the extra’s request
and provides an autograph while
thanking her for a job well done.

The much-publicized Toronto shoot of
Twins has the city (or at least the tabloids) enamored
of its stars. Jeremy Irons and Genevieve Bujold,
finalizes is in the works. Several false starts,
including last year’s pullout by the the Laurentians
Entertainment Group, delayed the production.
With the participation of Telefilm and advances
from 20th Century Fox and, in Canada, Astral
Films, producer Marc Boyman rescheduled the
picture’s financing and cameras started to roll
February 16th.

They won’t stop rolling until mid-April. Part
of the reason for Twins’ extended shooting
schedule is the fact that Irons plays two roles, the
title characters. Simply, some scenes have to be
reshot with Irons playing the other role.

Other complications include, of course, the
problem of technology and special effects, by
now a prerequisite of Cronenberg’s films. The
swapping effect will be created by the tried
and true split-screen method. By updating the
existing technique with multiple splits in the
screen rather than the standard vertical split
down its centre, as well as computerized motion
control which enables the camera to retrack its
movements with a high degree of precision, the
film’s special effects and optical experts, Gordon
Smith (Near Dark, Platoon) and Lee Wilson (The
Fly), will achieve a sophisticated, perfectly
reduplicated image with newfound mobility for
both actor and camera. It’ll be possible for a
standing Jeremy Irons to bend over a seated
Jeremy Irons during, say, a pan or tracking shot,
and offer himself a drink. Nuances to be sure but
far cry from The Patty Duke Show.

Twins is about the ties that bind the lives of
identical twins, brothers Elliot and Beverly
Mantle, renowned gynecologists. A beautiful
actress, Bujold, problematizes the brothers’
relationship by insinuating into the love
triangle that results in their destruction.

As a psychological thriller, Twins is somewhat
of a departure for Cronenberg. As he says, “the
challenge is the reverse – to make the realistic
seem fantastic.” According to some, his
fascination with the phenomenon of twins dates
back to more than a decade. Part of the research
included a visit to the University of Minnesota in
Minneapolis where a massive study of twins was
and still is taking place. Twins the movie has
itself been in development for seven years.

In Casa Loma, Lady Pellet’s Blue Room has
been rearranged to look like a hotel suite. Two
identical sisters playing twin prostitutes prepare
for their scene with Elliot, the urbane and
extroverted brother. While make-up personnel
fuss with the actresses’ porcelain complexions,
Cronenberg and DOP Peter Suschitzky (Empire
Strikes Back, Falling in Love) fuss with the eyeliner
and the blocking of the actors. “Jeremy! Jeremy!
Have you seen Jeremy?” Between takes, Irons
has taken to roaming the castle.

“It’s like peeling an onion — the layers in
Jeremy Irons’ performance,” remarks Brigitte
Berman. The beneficiary of the Canadian Centre
for Advanced Film Studies Bridging Director
Observer Program is finding the experience on
the $10M U.S. production an invaluable one.

“It’s very important to me to watch how he’s
working with the actors, how David and Jeremy
interact — together they create the role. When
two people click creatively and run on the same
track, nice things begin to happen — little bits of
magic. They give each other the space to find
— David gives it with his actors and his crew.”

Cronenberg is “very giving,” Berman
continues. “He explains patiently.” The sci-fi
master is everything a megalomaniacal director
is not. Although he is generally soft-spoken
on the set, Berman maintains that his presence is
pervasive. Cronenberg’s calm demeanour and
meticulous attention to detail help him gain a
command of pressures, she thinks. “If I can do
even a third as well as my first set,” she says,
“I’ll be really happy.”

What initially intrigued Berman about the
story were its subtleties and Cronenberg’s and
Norman Snider’s tightly written script. “It’s an
interior film.” For Irons, switching roles
sometimes several times daily, the part invites
a particular acting: playing off himself, two
characters just a shade apart. And from all
reports, he was more than approving of Bujold’s
involvement in the project.

There’s a minor spill on the set: the twin
actresses rise simultaneously from the
velvet-upholstered chestersfield and Irons,
leaning on the sofa’s back, jeolts the wineglasses
in his hand. Prop assistants and set dressers
descend upon the disturbance — it’s between
takes anyway.

Even amid the chaos of shooting a film,
Boyman, like Cronenberg, seems remarkably
serene. The production, he says, is an incredibly
smooth one with a happy, unified crew. With
ample studio support and distribution deals
intact, things couldn’t be better. After a troubled
history, Twins is finally being born. The baby is
due this fall.

Helen Lee

Urban cowboy

ollowing his most recent production,
Platinum, which achieved modest
success at the Montreal World Film
Festival, Peter Evanchuck has launched
himself into yet another controversial
new film, Cowboyz. This film, budgeted at
$300,000, is an energetic black comedy about
dreamers and their inability to make their
dreams come to fruition. A story of hope and
despair, Cowboyz vacillates between powerful
fantasy and hard reality.

The most recent shoot took place in Kingston
at the home of one of Evanchuck’s friends.

Within an hour of arriving, he had transformed
the front and back parlour, the porch and the
upstairs landing into a studio. As is his usual
custom, he decided to use the house’s occupants
as actors, along with the female lead Helene
Lacelle, and quickly briefed everyone as to the
effect and mood he wanted to create. He tossed
out a few lines to get things rolling, started the
camera and recorder, and ‘voila’, action.

On location in Kingston, Evanchuck says of
his most recent production, “I’m trying to make
documentaries that look like dramas. What I
mean is that before I write a script, I wander
around the clubs, taverns, streets, stores, and
wherever else one finds interesting people,
looking for people and their stories. When I
think that I’ve met the right individuals whose
stories are interesting and fit into the idea I want
to document, I design the sequences loosely.
I don’t tell them what to say but rather suggest
the general topic of conversation, which
ultimately leaves them with the final draft work.
Scripts by proxy — but it works. For example, I
know that Len thinks he’s the reincarnation of Hank
Williams and the ‘King of Country Music’ when
he’s drunk. I then adapt all these things for the
appropriate sequence. I do the same for all the
characters, since I’ve known them all for at least
three years or more, and have a reasonably good
idea of what they’re capable of handling in terms
of playing themselves, what they like and what
is essential to the movie.”

Evanchuck goes on to explain that in order to
“clean up some of the loose ends, a narrative element has been
developed between Cleo and the cowboy. It
more or less resembles the kind of conversational
dialogue you’ll find in films like My dinner with
Andre or Hiroshima Mon Amour.”

Helene Lacelle comes through the door and
shouts, “Warren, Warren?” Then Evanchuck
shouts, “Slate. That’s it!” The shoot took
several hours to prepare but only about five or
10 minutes of film was shot. Time to move on to
the next location, Ottawa then Montreal, then back
to Toronto, and in all three days! The following
weekend Evanchuck is off to Maniwaki in
Northern Quebec, Wakefield, and Hull, just
across the river from Ottawa. The list goes on as
this road picture goes from place to place
to create the right atmosphere and location.

“We’re a very small crew. Often there are only
two crew members and the performers.
Sometimes I’ll do the shot myself and the actor
will handle the sound. This is just one of the
realities of low-budget filmmaking. You just
do what has to be done.” Next Evanchuck, his
crew and actors, (who are often one and the same),
are off to Nashville and the Eastern United States
where they will do the necessary pickup
atmosphere shots. “I guess it’s many a
cowboy’s dream to make it in Nashville. I
know that Len thinks that he gets the chance to go
there, he’ll end up in the Hall of Fame without
any doubt. That’s his dream. What is a lot of
this movie is about.”

Last month they were at Tic Toe Stables near
Luskville, Quebec. “It was very interesting,”
Evanchuck begins, “because it proved that if a
low-budget producer / director can’t adapt, he’s
in a lot of trouble.” I was told by all these sidewalk