

On Location

Edmonton City of Champions

Today is the wrong day to shoot this scene. It's one of those hot, cloudless, summer days. (Although a week later it will snow). The actors are all wearing black and their costumes are effectively soaking up the heat. Director and writer Joe Vismeg has his actors playing on a set of swings in "Gyro Park," Edmonton. The cast and crew look tired (and hot) but remain enthusiastic.

Vismeg leans back and sighs. "We're almost out of shoestring," he says, contemplating his budget.

The film could be seen as self-reflexive, as the narrative is "about money, love, or the lack of both." "The film is about what money – or the lack of money – drives people to do," explains Vismeg. "The production of the film is about the lack of money too. I think they feed each other nicely."

In fact, the film opens with the lead character, Gabrielle, robbing the "Klondike Bank" armed with her Lady Schick razor. After she does so, she picks up two lonely and alienated hitchhikers. The three immediately click, but their bond is based on dishonesty; Gabrielle tells them nothing of her bankrobbing past and pretends to be wealthy, and West and Dixie pose as lovers. West and Dixie are soon unwittingly drawn into Gabrielle's crimes, and after robbing a bank at West Edmonton Mall, their lives take a turn for the tragic. The title of the film is somewhat misleading, as the plot has nothing to do with hockey.

The style of *City of Champions* is difficult to pin down. It is at once a melodrama, a black comedy, and a campy send-up of bank-heist movies.

"About four years ago I began writing the script," explains Vismeg. "I had worked in Nicaragua on *With Our Own Hands* (with Peter



Gerald Carr, Phil Zyp, and Kathy Fraser toast the *City of Champions*

Raymont) and had assistant edited on Anne Wheeler's *Loyalties* and was very active, and then all of a sudden I had no money. I was broke, and had to get a job in a sleazy hotel as a desk clerk. I started writing there."

While the film's storyline reflects the producers' story, it also seems to be a comment on post-boom Alberta. The financial predicament the characters face seems to be reflective of the province's present slump.

While Vismeg has received no provincial government grants, he is "blown away" by the cooperation he's received from Albertans. "We've had so much consideration. You wouldn't believe how much equipment and how many free services we've had for nothing. And all of our locations have been free. At one point, we needed to film on the street. We started

setting up, and redirecting traffic. The police rolled by, and said 'What's going on?' 'We're making a movie' we told them. They didn't give us any hassles, they just wished us luck. We've managed to cut so many corners."

While this is Vismeg's first feature, it is not his first film (or his first experience with cutting corners). Most notable is *This is Not a Test*, the NFB documentary about the Cruise missile protest movement. "It outlined the various levels of political involvements – rallies, marches, from civil disobedience to direct action. I had a really hard time with that one. At one point the NFB wanted to shelve the project due to lack of money, so I began to work for free."

Vismeg says his experience with actors has been an interesting one. With the plot being

somewhat melodramatic, Vismeg's predominant use of stage actors seems appropriate. "It's a matter of getting the actors to play for the screen and not for the proscenium – to internalize their emotions and not project them quite as much."

"The script has action, but it is still definitely character-driven, therefore the acting is extremely important."

The director of photography calls, and Vismeg must return to the shoot. The sun will soon be gone, and they're a bit behind. A welcome breeze blows by the visibly relieved actors. A reflector is blown over and one of the actors helps a technician reposition it.

"Ultimately," says Vismeg, "this wouldn't be possible without the people who are investing their sweat equity in the production."

Matt Hays •

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