

Vancouver

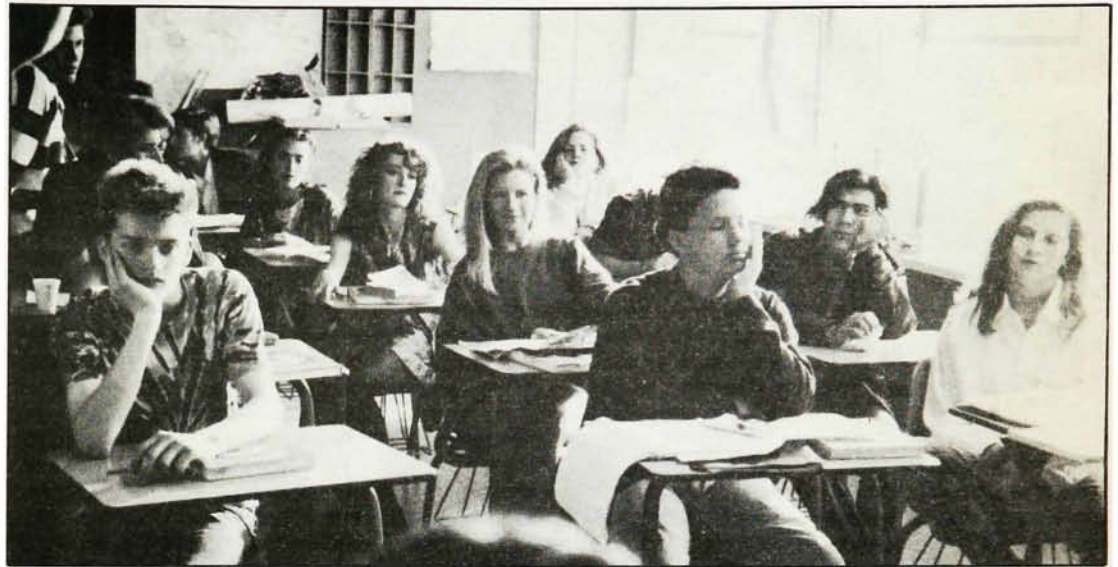
The Teacher

Under normal circumstances, I feel for high schools the same antipathy I reserve for shopping malls and baby showers. So it was with some trepidation that I approached the University Hill Secondary School, the location for some scenes from John Houtman's new feature, *The Teacher*. As expected, students were clustered in the doorways, wearing the clothes high school students wear and giving off the vibes high school students give off.

The cast and crew were on a lunch break, so I checked out the classroom location. It was a typical classroom - utilitarian desks, dusty shelves, the inevitable yellow walls. One of the extras, herself a recent graduate, said that this classroom was messier than most, as evidenced by abandoned textbooks and banana peels hanging off waste baskets. In the film, Martin, the teacher, is uninterested in organization or discipline, and spends most of his teaching time looking out the window while students read magazines, listen to Walkmans and talk constantly.

A lighthearted atmosphere prevailed throughout the set. Obviously, the students liked being there and shooting was progressing satisfactorily. "Director Houtman said the students were a delight to work with, bringing to the production a high level of energy, and a wealth of talent. His remarks were borne out by the acting I saw that afternoon. In the scene, one of Martin's students reacts forcibly to the teacher's condescending manner, and in fact, his whole personality. Martin has just subjected his students to a cynical and embittered dissertation on what life is and what's in store for them.

The performances are first-rate, and the scene goes well. To some of the students, the teacher's outburst is a good show - a break from



Grade 12 students react to their teacher's diatribe with indifference, contempt, and amusement

educational drudgery. But one student, Johanna, explodes with the outrage characteristic of adolescence to her friend, who says, "Maybe he's got you figured out, and that's what makes you so mad." Johanna's reply gives us some insight into Martin's character - "Don't you think he's ugly? Arrogance makes people ugly - it's all those years of looking down on people."

The "ugliness" of Martin (played by Peter La Croix) has its root in the destructive and recriminatory relationship he shares with Nina (Patricia Holland). The couple have recently separated, but continue to psychologically abuse one another with acts of cruelty and hatred. Both parties react politely and cheerfully to all attacks, however, until Nina's final act of revenge, which is impossible to ignore or outdo. As Houtman says, this film shows war at its most sophisticated level - civility.

Houtman had major problems securing a location for the classroom segment of the film.

He met with several school boards, made countless phone calls, and wrote endless letters. One of the school boards even called a special board meeting to review his request. The problem? He was asking for a discount on the school rental rates. Because of the marked increase in B. C. of filmmaking activity, many institutions have established fixed rates for the use of their premises and equipment as film locations. The Vancouver School Board has a rental rate of \$500 per day, a price tag far too high for an independent producer such as Houtman, who, excepting deferrals, is financing this project entirely out of his own pocket.

This policy no doubt benefits the institution involved, but the job of independent filmmakers becomes more difficult, as they try to break through bureaucratic procedure and make the institution understand that they are not in the same financial position of, say, Paramount Pictures.

Completion of the school scenes brings

principal photography on *The Teacher* virtually to a close. It is a first feature for John Houtman, who has several years' experience as a director of photography and teaches film at Simon Fraser University. He is critical of the lack of solid apprenticeship programs in B. C., and believes film students do not receive enough education in film history, graduating without an appreciation or knowledge of cinematic classics. Himself an SFU alumnus, Houtman says that the most difficult part of independent filmmaking is making every decision, from casting to lighting, from scripting to editing, independently. "Noone is looking over your shoulder and saying - that's a good shot. So you have to maintain confidence in yourself everyday for two years and go ahead and make the film."

For the record, I looked over John Houtman's shoulder for an afternoon and thought, "Hm... good shot." Class dismissed.

Theresa Best •

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