

ontario gothic

Dennis Zahoruk's first feature, shot in rural Ontario, is only the beginning. He's a young filmmaker on the move, as Gunter Ott tells us.

by Günter Ott

"Sin, I...smell...the dank...foul...odour of Sin...Sin right here in this room..." chants Jed Winwood as he weaves the strands of Old Time Religion and casts it out like a fisherman's net over the onlookers in the austere, shadow-strewn church. "There are sinners here... I smell twelve of them who must come forth. Come forth sinners and confess... There's one, come forth brother... there's another... there are ten sinners still in this room. Come forth and be saved!"

At first Jed paces self-consciously before the altar. He is aware of the mockery in his voice as he imitates the bible thumper's spiel in front of another man, his devout brother.

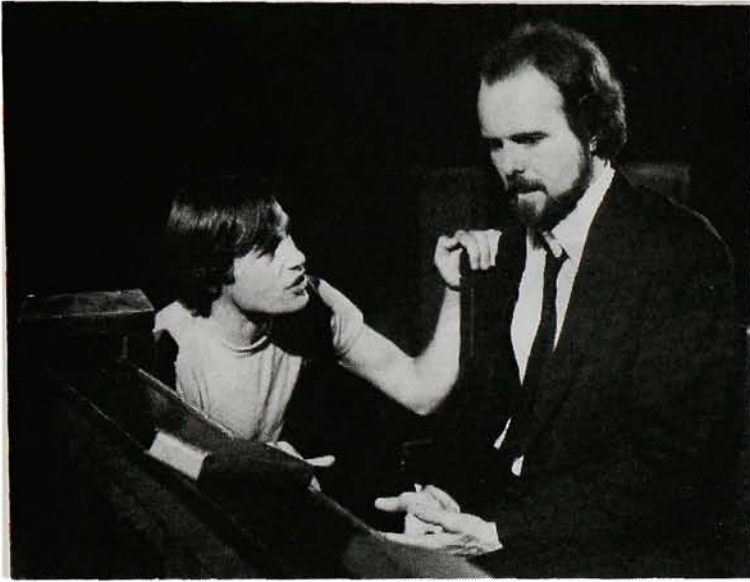
Günter Ott is a free lance writer and photographer who has had a regular column of film reviews in That's Showbusiness for several years. He has contributed to various film periodicals and his photographs appear in Glitter magazine and are used by the Ontario Film Theatre collection.

But gradually the cadences of his own voice seize him, explore his inner uncertainties and touch at roots he has too long denied. The brother remains immobile in the first pew as Jed's fervor grows into a raging tempest of emotion. Jed's own identity is being submerged in the torrent of words. His body strains toward the vaulting roof of the church, his arms reach out to embrace the shadows as he cries out in the voice of the possessed: "Redemption is thine, Redemption!"

As the final cry echoes and re-echoes in ever diminishing volleys around the church, a soft voice whispers "Cut." Jed blinks twice, drops his outstretched hands. As they travel to his side, he watches them as if they belong to someone else. He is bewildered: the softly whispered word has destroyed him and given him back his own life. He is no longer Jed Winwood but actor Tom Hauff playing a role in a feature film called **Brethren**. Quickly, quickly Hauff glances at the man for whom he has just performed.



Left to right: Candace O'Connor, Larry Reynolds, Sandra Scott and Kenneth Welsh in a scene from **Brethren**, a Tundra Film Company production in association with Clearwater Films, written and directed by Dennis Zahoruk, with G. Chalmers Adams as Executive Producer.



Thomas Hauff (left) and Richard Fitzpatrick (right) in a scene from **Brethren**.

The man who whispered is staring intently at the scene, reliving the sequence in his mind. He leans back, smiles and begins to whistle. A sigh of relief ripples through the congregation of technicians and hangers-on that surrounds him. A smattering of enthusiastic applause breaks out for the performance. Everyone knows it is a good take. The scene is crucial to the film and the director likes it.

The director, Dennis Zahoruk has the lean thoughtful look of a Buddhist monk, or of a man who knows exactly where he is going and has chosen the best route to take. Things are proceeding smoothly today, so Zahoruk is still whistling as he walks over to Hauff to discuss the next set-up.

The film **Brethren** is a CFDC-funded low-budget feature, both written and directed by Zahoruk. Shot in 16mm in six weeks during late summer, the film concerns three brothers who return home for the funeral of their father. The father, a prominent citizen in a small Southern Ontario town, had been an exceptionally powerful force in the lives of the three brothers. On being reunited for the funeral, the brothers find themselves swept up in the same conflicts that drove them apart initially. But now, circumstances have forced them to confront the reality of the contrasting moral and emotional legacies their father has bestowed upon them.

The idea suggested itself to Zahoruk on a visit to a small Ontario town. The claustrophobic atmosphere of rural Ontario with its gossipy neighbours, the constant threat of censure and the sense of lives left un-lived appealed to the filmmaker. In addition, gothic Ontario was something that just might loosen the purse strings of the Canadian Film Development Corporation.

Zahoruk admits that the subject matter of the film was a conscious attempt to cater to the tastes of the CFDC. He had spent some time studying the type of material usually funded under the low-budget features programme and shaped his submission accordingly. After a few rewrites, the script was finally approved for funding in April of 1975 with the CFDC kicking in 60% of the estimated \$125,000 budget.

Originally, Zahoruk had planned to produce the film himself but this idea was scrapped when he interested G. Chalmers Adams in the script. Chalmers Adams stepped in as Executive Producer and took over the financial department thus allowing Zahoruk to concentrate fully on directing the film.

Of the film itself, Adams claims that among English-Canadian films "...it has the lowest budget since Shebib's **Goin' Down The Road** - it also has the best script."

Dennis Zahoruk began making films while enrolled in the film course at York University. He set up his own production unit, The Tundra Film Company, to make short films such as **The Last Freak In The World**, the award winning (Yorkton, Famous Players) **Jason Borwick** and the as yet unreleased **The Shakespeare Murders**. **Brethren** is Zahoruk's first feature film and represents both the culmination of his work to date and the beginning of his career as a professional filmmaker. To succeed in the Canadian film industry, Zahoruk has developed a methodical career plan which builds on his resources and previous achievements. He views **Brethren** and the low budget features programme as a stepping stone to bigger and better things.

"My next film will be a 35mm feature," he asserts confidently. "I wrote **Brethren** to show producers that I was competent as a director. If they want me to do a comedy as my next film, I can do it and make money for them. With **Brethren**, I wanted to make a good film both technically and artistically, one that would satisfy me as well as find an audience."

Zahoruk feels that the film is primarily suited to a television audience. He describes it as essentially a character study with heavy dollops of melodrama. To keep the film on a consistently high level, ("heavy" Zahoruk calls it) the director devoted considerable attention to casting. He feels that the time spent in selecting actors has paid off rather well.

Most of the actors have extensive theatrical but little film experience. The role of Jed was an especially difficult one to cast. Zahoruk found that there were many young actresses about but incredibly few young men who could handle the part of a rebellious but sympathetic hedonist. "When I first saw Tom Hauff, I knew he was perfect for the part," says Zahoruk.

Hauff has appeared in two Theatre Passe Muraille seed shows; "Almighty Voice" and "Family Entertainment," the Tarragon Theatre production of "One Crack Out," and he is currently appearing in Larry Fineberg's "Human Remains" at Toronto New Theatre. He has also been directed by Peter Rowe in a programme for CBC's Peep Show series and by Allan King in a TV dramatization of Barry Broadfoot's book **Six War Years**.

Other members of **Brethren's** cast include Kenneth Welsh, recently acclaimed for his sensitive portrayal of Stanley Kowalski in the Theatre Plus production of "A Streetcar Named Desire"; Richard Fitzpatrick, most recently seen in the Theatre Passe Muraille production "Alive"; Sandra Scott, a 28-year veteran of Canadian theatre, radio, television and film; Candace O'Connor who has been both an actress and a past artistic director of Ontario Youtheatre.

For their part, the actors are quite enthusiastic about the film, some even admitting that they identify on a highly personal level with the subject matter. They seem willing, like Tom Hauff in the church scene, to channel generous quantities of their emotional resources into the film. The director has succeeded in inspiring his actors to create superlative performances in a shoestring budget film.

On the set Dennis Zahoruk is quiet, unassuming. He could be somebody's friend who has just drifted in off the street to watch the making of a film. But as soon as one scene is finished, Zahoruk becomes a model of effortless competence. The few succinct words he tosses to First Assistant Director Bill Corcoran and Director of Photography David Ostriker suffice to establish the next shot while Zahoruk devotes considerable time to a methodical working out of the blocking with his actors. Dennis Zahoruk gives the impression of a man knowing precisely what he wants and how to get it - a real professional. □