Mad dogs and innocents
Lulu Keating, Chris Zimmer and the making of The Midday Sun

BY SILVER DONALD CAMERON

n our next film," declares Lulu Keating, "the cast will consist of two deaf-mutes, both nudists, who will be kept in a white room for the entire duration of the shoot."

Lulu Keating's first feature film is emphatically not like that. The Midday Sun is showing this fall at film festivals in Chicago, Lisbon, Montreal, Guelph, Vancouver, and Halifax before being released in Canadian theatres. Keating and her producer, Christopher Zimmer, are both headquartered in Halifax. The Midday Sun, however, was not shot somewhere along Nova Scotia's jagged coast; it is the first Canadian feature film ever shot in Africa, and aside from its merits as a film, it represents a triumph of organization.

During the final countdown before shooting, Keating was in Zimbabwe with her production team, working out of an administrative office in Harare and a production office in Bulawayo. Zimmer was still in Canada, putting together the final details of the deal, flying back and forth from his offices in Halifax to meet with co-producer John Hunter and executive producer Don Haig in Toronto and with Telefilm in Montreal. Then he would ship equipment via London to Zimbabwe before returning to Halifax to sit hunched over the fax machine, studying the latest reports from Keating's team in Zimbabwe.

And always there was the worry about the financing. The work of an independent producer, smiles Zimmer, often seems to have more to do with making deals than making films. The financing was a real cliffhanger: the last piece fell into place just a week before the first day of shooting. When Zimmer finally arrived in Bulawayo, Keating was afraid he would come off the plane in a basket.

"It was the most difficult thing I've ever done in my life," Zimmer concedes, "but it was very satisfying to get it all together and start shooting on the starting date." The shoot began on Monday, September 26, 1988, at 7:15 a.m. — the exact date they had established months before.

WEBS OF CORRUPTION
A thin, short whishing sound, then a sharp crack. The Canadian girl jerks and cringes as though she, and not the African villager, had been lashed with a switch.

"It's wrong!" she cries. "Back home, you can't — "

"But here, it works," interjects the African clergyman. "You cannot go around interfering all the time."

Silver Donald Cameron is one of Canada's best writers of both fiction and non-fiction. A resident of Halifax and Cape Breton, Mr. Cameron makes his first contribution to Cinema Canada with this article.

Director Lulu Keating and producer Chris Zimmer on location in Zimbabwe, filming The Midday Sun.
The Midday Sun is a very personal film, in some ways, and that exchange lies at the heart of it. The film follows the experience of a young Canadian volunteer, Maggie Cameron (Isabelle Mejias), who is away from home for the first time, serving as secretary to an African minister, Julius Okimo (George Seremba). Decent and well-intentioned, but horrendously naive, Maggie applies her own notions of justice and liberty to the African situation, only to find them wholly inadequate to its cultural and political complexities. Her already precarious position is further compromised by her open involvement in a torrid affair with a young German sociologist (Robert Bockstael).

Maggie's house is robbed and her servant arrested. Convinced of his innocence, she attempts to right the injustice—but her crusade reveals a web of corruption and deceit which shocks her profoundly. Her European friends break with her. She quarrels bitterly with her lover. The conflict ruins Okimo's career, and African officialdom ultimately requires that Maggie leave the country. Before she goes, however, she achieves a kind of reconciliation with Seremba atop a mountain, in the midst of ruins which evoke the antiquity and sophistication of African society.

The Midday Sun is a quiet, low-key film—no deaths, no gunshots, only one punch and a couple of slaps. But it evolves large issues. What is justice? What is honesty? What is real, and what is only apparent?

The respectable whites prove morally disreputable, for instance, deeply compromised by their economic exploitation, outright theft, and an easy life of private clubs and servants. The blacks are no angels, either, bullying the powerless and scheming for petty advantage. Still, the most attractive characters in the film are all Africans: Maggie's domestic servant Anthony Kacula (Dominic Kanaventi), his wife Elizabeth (Kathy Kuleya), Julius Okimo. Despite the apparent injustices and occasional cruelties of African society, the Africans are rooted in their place and their culture, deeply related to one another. The displaced Europeans, by contrast, are colonial leftovers and international driftwood.

As her abortive little rebellion dissolves into nothing, Maggie herself conceives—with a fleeting reference to Donald Marshall—that racism, injustice and the abuse of power are not only African phenomena; they poison the air in white, liberal Canada, too.

AT A CROSSROADS

"For me, it's important to make films that are entertaining but also challenging," says Lulu Keating. She is a striking figure, tall and redheaded and deep-voiced, with a fluorescent green headscarf to match her green and shocking stockings. On this bright autumn afternoon, she sits in the sunlight of a renovated Hollis Street attic. The suite of offices houses several film-related companies—including Keating's Red Snapper Films, Chris Zimmer's Images Inc., and Missing Piece Productions, the jointly-controlled company which owns The Midday Sun.

"I want to make films that discuss important things," says Lulu Keating, "things that people should be thinking about—but in a question form, not an answer form."

Lulu Keating has been thinking about those issues for a long time. Her African odyssey began in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, as one of 11 children of a geologist who had grown up in India. The family always had a "sense of international community"—indeed, the household often included Third World students attending St. Francis Xavier University and its internationally-oriented co-operative training centre, the Coady Institute.

In the middle of her own university studies, Keating had an opportunity to travel on an international exchange with Crossroads, an organization "set up to send people out who are at a point of flux in their lives, people who will use their experience to change their values or their focus. Most Crossroads volunteers are students, but some are older people who are changing direction. Crossroads concentrates on how you learn and change, not on what you do in the Third World. It has a rather holistic view.
of international development.

Keating left Nova Scotia for what was then still the Belgian Congo "with that one-world, we-are-all-brothers view," but soon discovered that the African reality was unimaginably remote from her own outlook. Western business was reaping large profits in the name of "development." The police were lazy and corrupt. The country had two economies, one legitimate and one underground.

"A lot of people actually had two businesses, one corrupt and one straight," she says. "There were so many restrictions on imports, for example - that almost everyone seemed to be doing something dirty."

The Congo included hunter-gatherers who ran terrified from the approach of an automobile, as well as Canadian businessmen interested in cutting down the forest environment to make pulp and paper. Keating concluded, unashanfully, that the 20th century was a missed blessing, and that some societies were not ready for the 20th century and didn't need it.

"We have to stop dealing in platitudes and become realism," she says now. "We have to learn to listen. We're always trying to 'develop' other people, but very often we destroy what they have and give them something they don't want. If our way isn't the right thing for them, we should leave them alone."

That lesson applies not only in the Third World, Keating notes, but also in Canada.

"I had a lot of trouble in Africa trying to explain what we've done to our own native people," she says. "But it's the same thing. Years later, when I was studying at Ryerson in Toronto, I was in a development group, and someone suggested, 'Hey, we're students of design, we should design something for the Inuit.' So they designed this prefab bungalow structure; it was modular, flexible, it had interior partitions that could be moved around and so on.

But it had never been put to the Inuit whether this was what they really wanted. They're a nomadic, hunting people. Do they want to be settled in towns and living in bungalows? Really basic questions like that weren't even being addressed."

On her way home from Africa, Keating stopped in Paris for two weeks of "re-introduction to the West." She was shocked by the opulence: the restaurants, the shops, the jewelry, the expensive cars. The police were lazy and unscrupulous. Zimmer eventually persuaded her that "the 20th Century and didn't need it."

"I don't understand why it's been so difficult," Bishop says. "It should be a winner. Every dollar invested by the province in a film project is matched by at least two dollars from other sources, and usually by three or four dollars. The objectives of the program would be much better served by a separate agency. But for some reason, the proposal has yet to make it through the system."

A GHETTO OF THE IMAGINATION

Keating's themes are large, but her story is personal, almost private, closely related to the real-life incidents from which it arose. The cinematography reflects this personal scale: almost all the events are seen in close-ups and medium shots. Maggie sees elephants only fleetingly, from the deck of a river ferry; the only other exotic animals are small ones - seagulls, seagulls - slowly revealed behind the titles. Until the final scene, Keating deliberately ignores the grandeur of Africa.

This quiet, disciplined style is appropriate for the story Keating wants to tell, and it also seems to be deeply imbedded in the Canadian approach to storytelling. Year after year, our best films are realistic, intimate, often autobiographical. Don't dream the road, Nobody Wore Goodbye, Man O' War, Antoinette, Why Shoot the Teacher, Duddy Kravitz, My American Cousin.

But Bypass, even relatively big-budget productions made by returning expatriates, such as The Bay Boy and Joshua Then and Now. In the U.S. and Britain, on the Continent, filmmakers are drawn to grand sagas, heroic quests, sweeping vistas, intergalactic imperial battles. Canadian films rarely seem to treat large subjects. There are exceptions: we have Jesus of Montreal, and we are about to have Betrayure. But those are rare ones: more frequently, the Canadian imagination seems confined by the epic, the heroic, the mythic.

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phenomenon to the Canadian documentary tradition. Perhaps - but then how shall we account for the Canadian novels from which many of these films were derived, or for other splendid Canadian novelists who work within the same stylistic boundaries? The legacy of John Grierson and the National Film Board did not shape the imaginations of Margaret Laurence, Ernest Beckler, Morley Callaghan, David Adams Richards, Alice Munro. Even Timothy Findley, who takes Noah for a hero and small budgets, provided the bards are burning to of course, are cheap, while films are expensive; gives dialogue to God, even Margaret Atwood, Laurence, Ernest Buckler, Morley the same stylistic boundaries tradition. Perhaps - but then how shall we

Arcand are harbingers of change, a confirmation of its recent international acceptance. And novels, of course, are cheap, while films are expensive; the Canada Council might support Findley to write Not Wanted on the Voyage, but it would take God or George Lucas to finance the film version. All the same, big stories can surely be told on small budgets, provided the bards are burning to tell them. Perhaps the recent successes of Denys Arcand are harbinger of change, a confirmation to Canadian filmmakers that Canadian stories, brilliantly told, can command the attention of world audiences.

All of which is meant to locate The Midday Sun in its cultural context, not to complain that it fails to achieve what it never intended to do. The film certainly has its uncertainties: it squanders some potentially electrifying confrontations, it sometimes lingers over forgettable moments, and rushes through crises. But it sets itself important and humane objectives, and it achieves most of them. In the end, it is poignant, thoughtful and convincingly a deeply respectable film.

COMING SOON
Keating and Zimmer have always worked together on a project-by-project basis, and they have no commitment to make another film together. But she's currently working on a new script, and she'll show it to Zimmer when it's ready.

Both of them have plenty of projects on hand. Zimmer is doing 60 two-minute shows on cooking for children, called Out to Lunch, as well as The Lap, a feature by John Hunter which Zimmer describes as "an existential gangster film set mostly on an island off the coast of Nova Scotia."

Keating, meanwhile, is working with Dartmouth poet Maxine Tynes on a half-hour drama for CBC TV's Inside Stories. And once again, she's working on short films at the Atlantic Filmmakers Co-op - a little nature film, and a short, funny film called How to Eat a Lobster, little projects which address my own weaknesses. My understanding of cameras, lenses and filters needs to be strengthened so I can have a better relationship with a cinematographer and be sure my vision really gets to film.

She pauses a moment. Then she smiles. "This is a good time," she says. "Intellectually and emotionally, this is a very alive time for me."

Maggie (Isabelle Mejias), a gets a lecture from Lilian (Jackie Burroughs) on how to treat beggars, played by Zimbabwean extras

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COMMUNICATION ARTS
Lulu Keating: The Midday Sun

Lulu Keating’s first feature, despite its serious flaws, is a landmark picture. Although Keating’s protagonist is a young Canadian woman, the movie has the audacity to portray, in a fiction film, non-Canadians on their own turf. By its mere existence, The Midday Sun illuminates an obvious truth: “we” filmmakers can, and should—should they wish to—explore terrain far afield from life in the Great White North.

In The Midday Sun, Keating, who once lived in Zaire, observes inter-cultural shortcircuits in Africa. Her anti-heroine, Maggie Cameron (Isabelle Mejias), travels to an unnamed country as a do-gooder volunteer worker, fails to grasp the realities of life in a new environment, and screws up the lives of people she thinks she wants to help.

Keating is looking critically at smug, unquestioning “idealism.” An interesting theme considering that Canadians, filmmakers and scholars among them, do occasionally become sanctimonious about the correctness of their moral and political values.

Maggie Cameron makes her first gauche moves before she’s even started her job as assistant to an earnest missionary, Julius Okimo (played convincingly by Ugandan-Canadian George Seremba). At a nocturnal tribal celebration—during which the rather door Okimo surprisingly dances bare-chested with the other men—Maggie takes snapshots and upsets as if she were attending a folklore show back home. The next day, Maggie sees a man who loudly objected to her intrusive camera, being punished by the local authorities. She takes one look at the poor guy, trussed to a tree as he’s punished by the local authorities. She takes one look at the poor guy, trussed to a tree as he’s punished by the local authorities. She takes one look at the poor guy, trussed to a tree as she looks over the lives of people she thinks she wants to help.

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When Anthony’s wife Elizabeth (Kathy Kula), says to the woman, “You are still whining. Smarten up!” you want to shout back at the screen, “Say it again!” The character up there is still and opaque. You have trouble “reading” her, understanding what she’s doing in Africa in the first place. She’s supposed to be a person motivated by altruistic zeal, but Maggie seems more like a tourist who got stranded on the way to a Club Med.

Bruno, the object of her presumably uncontrollable passion, is equally vacant. Interestingly decadent Germans can be found on all continents, but this one is so dull, you wonder what Maggie sees in him. She and Bruno are the smug couple in the hotel room next door. As they buzz around on his motorcycle, Keating indicates their excitement with jump-cuts that would be clichés even in a chewing gum commercial. When they have sex, it’s strictly soft-core in an aura of Ivory soap.

Naturally, one can argue that the vacancy of these central characters is the point of the film. Maggie, in particular, is a superfluous creature out of her depth. But what about that introspective voice-over narration? Isn’t it meant to imply she has a heart and a brain? During the film’s dying moments, set on a mystic mountain-top, we hear her say something to the effect that she has caught a glimpse of herself in the clarity of the African light. We see the light, but very little of that self.

The Midday Sun’s bland central characters stand in contrast to Steven (sex, lies, and videotape) Soderbergh’s or Atom Egoyan’s creations, who, although missing something at the centre of their being, are compelling nevertheless. We follow their sluggish thoughts and absurdly twisted emotions; we feel an emptiness. Keating’s movie, with its too languid rhythm, seems restrained, cautious, as if the director were holding back. The story-line, with its interesting potential, never really tightens into a grip on the viewer. These are surprising problems in a film made by a woman whose short sport titles like Lulu’s Back in Town and Fanny Things People Can Do to Themselves.

Despite The Midday Sun’s failures, it is a forthright movie that portrays another culture, while avoiding dehumanizing, propagandistic idealizations. The black characters are presented without condescension, and with a pragmatic understanding of a social culture in which you must play certain games to survive. At the same time, without sentimentality and romanticizing, the film’s visuals and sound intimate African beauty.

Ironically, Lulu Keating has made a movie that touches Africa, but has trouble illuminating its female Canadian protagonist.

Maurie Alieff •

THE MIDDAY SUN

Lulu Keating, Christopher Zinnov, Bob Kastner, Jane Hunter, Robert Kastner, George Squires, Isabelle Mejias, Leo Cottrell, Francis Dyggs-White, Lulutaxa, Senunu, Simon, Isabella, Sue Suranne, Maggie Cameron, Julius Okimo.