

**John Hofsess' experiences with the adjudicating committees at the Canada Council have been less than rewarding. His film *Tenderness* has just been refused financial backing by the Canadian Film Development Corporation. He talks about these setbacks, and about some of the 'enemies within' he has encountered.**

# enemies of promise

by John Hofsess

In an earlier article, "Headless Horsemen", I said that Canadian writers and directors have a largely unacknowledged responsibility for the currently depressed state of the film industry. They are not putting humanly vital things in their screenplays, and they are not making films that matter to more than a few eccentrics who *like* a lot of fog, irrelevance and cultural lag. But in the last few months I have learned in a first-hand and painful way that the enemies of promise exist on every level of Canadian filmmaking and the wonder is that *any* film with an ounce of life and vitality gets made here.



Early this year I wrote a screenplay called **Tenderness** intended for low-budget 16mm production. In its first draft, it told the story about a man who can't stand all "the constraints, cobwebs and conventions of being Canadian" anymore and who, on the morning of his 37th birthday, makes a desperate bolt for New York.

The script went on to describe how the Canadian ("who nibbles at life nervously like a rabbit") meets Georgina Spelvin and Marc Stevens, two of America's most famous porno-stars (she principally for **The Devil in Miss Jones**, he for over 400 "loops" and features). As the hours pass, their conversation gets more personally harrowing. Nothing is held back. By morning they have reached a state of total vulnerability with one another. They are not necessarily friends (they have exchanged thoughts, memories and fears that would drive most friends apart) and may never meet again, but each, paradoxically, is stronger through this psychological ordeal. There's no point here trying to describe all the various observations and insights which the three derive from one another. It is an autobiographical story written simply and directly, like one plain-speaking person talking to another. I knew when it was finished that though it had rough edges, and still needed further development, it was the best thing I had ever written.

During the weeks that followed I received letters of strong support, and official letters-of-reference recommending the project be given funds (from the Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council or the Canadian Film Development Corpora-

tion) from Allan King, Graeme Ferguson, Jean-Claude Labrecque, Claude Jutra, Margaret Atwood, Gordon Pinsent, Kate Reid, among others, and in July, a Canada Council jury consisting of Denys Arcand, Tom Shandel, and cinematographer-director Robert Frank, awarded the project \$2,400 for further script development. It might be thought that any project that had the enthusiastic support of so many major Canadian artists, all of whom have done distinguished work in films and television-drama, would stand a good chance of being funded, especially on a low-budget basis (under \$40,000 in 16mm). Clearly their judgment must count for something. Allan King told me that **Tenderness** was one of the most powerful scripts he'd read in years; Margaret Atwood offered her assistance in any way possible for "this is not just another movie;" Penni Jaques, then head of the Film and Video Division of the Canada Council, told me the jury was unanimously enthusiastic about the project. Peter Morris, formerly with the Canadian Film Institute in Ottawa for eight years as head of the Canadian Film Archives, also wrote a letter of recommendation on behalf of the film. But whatever value or potential these people saw in the screenplay is unlikely to be realized. For while my efforts as a writer and *their* encouraging support may be seen as making a small wave of creativity, there existed a far larger wave of negativity to wipe it out.



The two principal ways of raising money for a film in Canada consist of going to a provincial or federal arts council and applying through one of their periodic competitions for funds, or going to the Canadian Film Development Corporation (in a collaborative deal with private investors). There may be nothing wrong *theoretically* with the way any of these government agencies operate, but in practice bungling snafus are a general rule. For example: earlier this year when McGraw Hill-Ryerson, publisher of my filmbook **Inner Views: Ten Canadian Film-makers** began planning a paperback edition I applied to the Canada Council for a short-term grant (approximately \$2,000) that would enable me to add two additional portraits to the book - Robin Spry and Michel Brault - substantially alter the long introductory essay, and add an index. The Council division adjudicating this request sent the book to two other critics for appraisal - Robert Fulford and Gerald Pratley - one of whom, Fulford, had a rival volume on sale,

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with a section on Canadian films, and the other, Pratley, who was mildly caricatured in one chapter of **Inner Views** and who responded by writing a vitriolic attack on the book. When advised by Penni Jaques that the test given me was not fair, Rodrigue Millette, head of the short-term grant division, requested the advice of two other film critics – Clyde Gilmour of the *Toronto Star* and Martin Malina of the *Montreal Star* – both of whom wrote positive reports. But that left the score two in favour, two against. Finally the book was given to film producer Chalmers Adams for appraisal. Since no book is further removed from Adams' own philosophy of filmmaking, that proved an inauspicious choice. The fact that the book had received 22 favourable reviews across the country (McGraw Hill-Ryerson told me it was the most highly praised book published in their spring 1975 season) and was selling well for a book of its type apparently meant nothing to the arts council. The grant was denied and the revisions and expansion couldn't be completed.

Penni Jaques told me that during her two year stint at the Canada Council (in the division now headed by Geoffrey James) she felt her most important contribution was in the selection of juries for competitions. "It's all very well to pretend that juries are scrupulously fair and objective," she said, "but if the jury members are not *very* carefully chosen – with an eye to politics and personal feuds, and all the rest of the things that influence decisions – an applicant could end up being involved more in a lottery than a competition. In a lottery it would simply be the luck of the draw that would determine a grant's being given or not – if you got a jury full of personal enemies, you wouldn't stand a chance. In a true competition, an applicant is thoroughly and fairly considered, compared to his peers, and the decision is a just one.

"Personally, I think it is absurd to have film critics adjudicate the applications of other film critics, simply because the field is filled with so much competitiveness and even pettiness," she continued, "and in your particular case it would have made more sense to ask film directors for an appraisal since they were the ones being profiled and talked about."

It should be noted that when the "Headless Horsemen" article appeared in **Cinema Canada**, Chalmers Adams told then-editor Agi Ibranyi-Kiss that he was going to write a vigorous attack on it. The difference is that in the pages of **Cinema Canada** varying opinions can be expressed and exchanged; but at the Canada Council level, the same kind of personal attack only ends in *suppressing* an opposing point of view. The wave of negativity rolled in – 3 against 2 – and that was that.



"I'm not sure whether I should tell you this or not," Don Obe, editor of *The Canadian* magazine said to me recently, "but for your own sake I think you have to know what certain people are saying about you."

We were standing at the bar in Joe Bird's restaurant (in Toronto). "I was here the other day, when I heard a conversation going on behind me. It was Bob Fulford and he was talking about you, your screenplay and your work for *Maclean's* and *The Globe and Mail*. It was too loud to ignore and everybody in the vicinity must have heard it. There were several points where I was going to walk over and tell him to shut up – but I didn't, because in a perverse sort of way, I wanted to see how far he would go."

I had a sinking feeling as I asked the obvious question. I had sent Fulford a copy of my first-draft, never suspecting that the intensely personal information it contained would become bandied-about luncheon-chatter to amuse himself and friends.

"The *kindest* thing he said about you," Obe told me, "was that your work was a complete embarrassment and it was completely incomprehensible to him how *any* of it *ever* got published."

I knew that Obe was not a mean, mischievous, or dishonest person, and that when he says something is true, it invariably is – just as he describes it. He then proceeded to tell me all the highlights of my screenplay as Fulford had reported them and I realized that everyone in earshot at Joe Bird's that day had had a loud, indiscreet and thoroughly malicious "preview" of **Tenderness**.

Making any film is difficult enough, and making a personally revealing film is even more nervewracking, without finding oneself being fed into a cheap gossip machine. Unlike a number of my colleagues apparently, I have long been capable of respecting people I disagree with, and just because I disagree with them doesn't mean I would harm or seek to suppress their careers. It was with great dismay that I wrote to Fulford about this incident. His written reply confirmed everything Obe had said by denying nothing. "I had no idea that the material in the script you sent me was to be considered confidential," he wrote. "Whether the terms in which I described your script could be called malicious would depend, of course, on the opinion of the person who overheard them... You might (better) discuss with your friends the ethics of eavesdropping, reporting on private conversations, etc." A man who was once rightly considered the weathervane of Canadian liberalism couldn't see, or chose not to, a basic point concerning human decency; and instead replied like a lawyer talking about technicalities. You didn't *say* the material was confidential, therefore I am free to broadcast it in any way I see fit, and as to malice – well, who knows and who cares? And *this* was the man the Canada Council chose to determine the future of my book!



The adjudication for **Tenderness** by the Ontario Arts Council was done by Martin Knelman, *Globe and Mail* film critic and drama reviewer for *Saturday Night*, and filmmakers Peter Rowe and Julius Kohanyi. The kind of attitude that Knelman has toward me is best illustrated, perhaps, by the following incident. Early this year when the Fulford book was published, and mine was published, *Maclean's* columns editor Elaine Dewar phoned Knelman inquiring about when his book might be expected (he received a \$10,000 grant from the Canada Council three years ago to finish a book on Canadian films) so that she could run a comparative review of all three since they had a common theme, and he replied, "John Hofsess put you up to this, didn't he?"

Dewar said she was flabbergasted by the paranoia of this strangely reluctant author. When she said, "Well, do you have a book coming out?" he replied, "What do you want to know for?" I think Knelman enlivens the film scene in Canada but my future should never be subjected to his judgment.



With this particular vote of the Ontario Arts Council, I lost all opportunity of directing **Tenderness** myself, and with that, virtually all hope of ever becoming a practising filmmaker in this country. For every government agency that one applies to understandably wants to see some recent proof of one's filmmaking abilities. The Ontario Arts Council, however, tries to act as a seeding agency, giving funds to see what *potential* there may be in a relatively inexperienced director. It was my hope they would supply enough funds to

make, at least, a 30 minute excerpt from the screenplay, so that other agencies and investors would have something tangible to evaluate as I continued to put the feature film together.

As a way of keeping the project alive, I took the script to producer Dick Schouten (**Black Christmas**) who proceeded to interest David Cronenberg in directing it, and together they applied for \$10,000 script development funds from the CFDC. Such an investment by the CFDC doesn't mean that more funds for a feature film will be forthcoming, but it does mean they want to promote its growth.

That much encouragement at least ought to have been possible to obtain for any screenplay as well-supported by major filmmakers as this one was, but even at the outset there were cloud formations. "The kind of film we like best," Ted Rouse said, (he's in charge of the script development program for the CFDC) "is something like **Lies My Father Told Me**. No sex, no violence, nothing to offend anyone, just a damn nice story." Whatever **Tenderness** was it was clearly not a "nice" story, nor the kind of film that would tastefully, quietly keep its name out of the newspapers and then tastefully, quietly die at the box office, like most other Canadian films. Whenever a director like David Cronenberg makes a proven money-maker like **The Parasite Murders** (film rights were already sold in 20 countries before the film opened) he is given the cold-shoulder by CFDC officials for failing to express something of the Canadian soul - whatever that is. But if he makes a big turkey about the Canadian soul that hardly anybody goes to see - **Alien Thunder**, anyone? - he is then taken to task for not making money. "The CFDC's role in life," Cronenberg says, "is to offer maximum discouragement to everybody."

One of the things which the CFDC has never fully grasped about the film business, despite the obviousness of it, is that a great deal of tasteless vulgarity and ingenious exploitiveness is involved in many box-office hits. A government agency that is more concerned with its political profile-making "nice" pictures that won't "offend" anyone - than it is with making pictures that pack a social punch, and compete in terms of publicity and controversy with Hollywood and European films, is an agency that is financing the wrong movies, over and over again, while refusing to invest in those which would stir up *too much* public interest. "There's no question," Rouse said, with a nervous smile and looking uncomfortable, "this would be a hot potato for us." On October 10, the CFDC notified Dick Schouten that they would not participate in the **Tenderness** project.

What it comes down to is this: either a good number of the most important Canadian film directors and writers don't know what they're talking about when they recommend that **Tenderness** be made or else a handful of government bureaucrats are gradually choking off vital filmmaking in this country. Somebody is certainly wrong about this movie. And personally it means far more to me to know that Allan King, or Margaret Atwood, Claude Jutra or Denys Arcand, among the others who gave their support, said I had done something valuable and significant, than that a Martin Knelman or a Michael Spencer tried to suppress it.

Canada is not a country short of native talent but it is a psychologically murderous place that devours its artists and tears the wings off butterflies. The arts councils that are supposed to help artists, often function in inept ways inimical to their interests. The CFDC is responsible for financing some of the silliest, insincere and most self-indulgent films ever brought to the screen, simply because they were "safe" and wouldn't raise any political heat. We have smug and petty critics in this country who produce little themselves and ensure *whenever* they can that nobody else will get the chance to produce more than they do. Small wonder, as Atwood pointed out in her famous study of Canadian novels, the dominant theme of our literature is hanging on, near defeat, fighting for survival.

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