b) party to the lie

by Douglas Fetherling

If one were to put the point of Peter Pearson’s telefilm The Insurance Man from Ingersoll in one sentence, that sentence would go like this: “It’s pointless trying to prove the truth; yet merely stating the truth, without proof, makes one party to the lie.” This film, part of the CBC Performance series, concerns unethical relationships between government and private enterprise. It’s about the shady deals the media never quite pin down because the media are too much a part of the power structure such stories would jeopardize. It’s about the kind of deal we all suspect takes place and suspect so strenuously that it becomes, in our minds, an accepted fact – which unfortunately is not the same as accepted truth.

The Insurance Man from Ingersoll is very good at capturing the feeling of frustration this situation brings on. It’s also good at capturing the mood of one level of Toronto powermongering. It walks close to the edge, cuts close to the bone. It’s a fine example of what television should be used for but almost never is. Whether it will provoke anyone enough to take the message seriously is quite a different matter. The defeat of public spirit the film depicts breeds despair. The film may merely reinforce the belief that the truth is out there, somewhere, but cannot be proved.

The storyline runs something like this: A pseudoinvestigative television journalist of the Carole Taylor stripe (Charlotte Blunt) uncovers irregularities and violence in a Toronto construction union. The workers who are being shortchanged, and roughed up if they object, are erecting the ground was broken. The lease was so long and exorbitant that indeed the conspiracy extends as far as the premier, who is coyly referred to throughout only as “the Old Man.” In the end, this (to the conspirators) unwarranted interference from Magee and the media results in the title character, a political fixer and bagman, forcing the attorney general to resign for the sake of appearances. The big villains have sacrificed the lesser villain (who is also a nice guy) to protect themselves.

It’s a very Toronto story. Toronto after all is a place whose social, economic and political history for the past thirty years has been the transference of power from old Scottish gangsters to new indigenous gangsters, a process that’s often been mistaken for progress. For Toronto viewers the film will have special relevance because the spirit and the implication are true to life and also because the film is, to some extent, a pièce à clef. At least some of the characters are recognizable composites of public personalities and some of the events (though in neither case the key ones) are inspired by stories still fresh in the mind.

For example, Michael Magee as Edward Blake is clearly intended to represent Morton Shulman in his career as NDP member for High Park. (Shulman’s earlier career, as Metro Toronto coroner, formed the basis for the Wojeeck series several years ago.) And of course the name of the character — Edward Blake — is an oddball one in political history borrowed from the nineteenth century Liberal leader whose curious personality was partly responsible for his never having become prime minister. The actual Shulman, it should be said, has never had this problem, though Pearson, like the Wojeeck producers, plays down Shulman’s flamboyance and flair for publicity. Indeed, Magee makes his character flat and almost totally devoid of endearing qualities save earnestness — a sort of Ralph Nader figure.

As for the other characters, Ramsay, the attorney general, seems to be rooted in the Conservative cabinet minister Dalton Bales, who has had dramatic and somewhat silly run-ins with Shulman. But David Gardner, the actor playing Ramsay, bears more than a good resemblance to Darcy McKeogh, who has also held cabinet posts under Tory Premier Bill Davis. The title character is portrayed by Warren Davis, the veteran CBC staff announcer. This character was a bit of a stroke of brilliance. It was originally intended to represent Morton Shulman in his career as NDP member for High Park. (Shulman’s earlier career, as Metro Toronto coroner, formed the basis for the Wojeeck series several years ago.) And of course the name of the character — Edward Blake — is an oddball one in political history borrowed from the nineteenth century Liberal leader whose curious personality was partly responsible for his never having become prime minister. The actual Shulman, it should be said, has never had this problem, though Pearson, like the Wojeeck producers, plays down Shulman’s flamboyance and flair for publicity. Indeed, Magee makes his character flat and almost totally devoid of endearing qualities save earnestness — a sort of Ralph Nader figure.

This precise type of composite, which allows Pearson to get away with an incredible amount of sensitive muckraking for CBC, is present throughout the film in another way. It is used heavily in the plot, for which credit must go to Norman Hartley, who shares writing credit with the director. The simple truth is that there have been no scandals in the Ontario government similar in dimension to those in the film since the days of Leslie Frost. Such scandals as do surface are usually broken by the press (lately by The Globe and Mail, where Hartley is a reporter) and almost never by members of the cabinet. The title character — Edward Blake — is a bit of a stroke of brilliance. It was originally intended to represent Morton Shulman in his career as NDP member for High Park. (Shulman’s earlier career, as Metro Toronto coroner, formed the basis for the Wojeeck series several years ago.) And of course the name of the character — Edward Blake — is an oddball one in political history borrowed from the nineteenth century Liberal leader whose curious personality was partly responsible for his never having become prime minister. The actual Shulman, it should be said, has never had this problem, though Pearson, like the Wojeeck producers, plays down Shulman’s flamboyance and flair for publicity. Indeed, Magee makes his character flat and almost totally devoid of endearing qualities save earnestness — a sort of Ralph Nader figure.

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donations to the party after Cabinet had passed on a govern-
ment contract awarded him. Crown attorneys investigated
the whole cloth. There is even a subplot involving organized
crime, a subject dear to Ontario editorialists. This subplot
also helps make the Blake-Shulman connection. Shulman
once made accusations resulting in a contract on his life,
and then went about for weeks packing a sidearm. What’s
more, even though Pearson was not able to film in the
legislative chamber itself, he has skilfully used other
locations — the actual apartment blocks, the prefect street-
corners — where such devious and quintessentially Toronto
action would, and undoubtedly does, take place.

In one way the film is true to the course of Pearson’s
career to date since it concerns a rebel thwarted by the
dominant society. (This theme predates Paperback Hero
and goes back to his NFB documentary on Saul Alinsky.)
But in another sense, The Insurance Man is a breakthrough,
and should be taken notice of as such. It’s a tight convincing
thriller and non-violent gangster film — more importantly,
a political thriller and an upper-middle-class gangster film.
It’s thus a fine piece of folk art for Toronto, a place that
— in film as in life — has hitherto always taken a back seat
to Montreal in these matters.

The Insurance Man from Ingersoll is the story of high
level corruption in provincial politics and the building in-
dustry. It is an Ontario Rejeanne Padovani with a couple of
important differences. A film about politics, it is not a
political film, a fact which can be considered to its credit
or debit depending on which side of the manifesto your
movie preferences lie. The high level collusion between
contractors, organized labour and the Ontario government
take place during the building of “Ontario Tower”, one of
those multi-million dollar projects in which everyone gets
a chance to line their pockets. It is an exciting story with
lots of fast cars, pretty girls, a dash of blood or two and
wall to wall action. All in all conventional television prime
time fare with one important difference — Pearson co-
wrote the script with long time Globe and Mail reporter
Norman Hartley and while, as the saying goes, the names
have been changed to protect the innocent, the actual story-
line is an amalgam of the truth. In this film, Pearson is
venting his spleen against an establishment which a lot of
people across Canada dislike without entirely being aware
of. This Ontario establishment is represented by a wasp,
cynical smugness and a firm belief that the various ethnic
and regional disparities which make up Canada are some-
how a bit of a mistake. It is God’s will that the mandarins
in Toronto should continue running things. Quebec is hope-
lessly corrupt as are all the greasy Italians, Greeks and
Jews which we have unfortunately let across our borders,
but at least Ontario and its leaders are untouched and pure.

Of course, it’s not that way at all and Pearson (cousin of
Lester B) with his Seven Days muckraking experience and
his old boy connections knows it better than most of us.
Ontario is as rotten as the rest but it has a rottenness with
lots of class. People don’t talk about it, there are very
few scandals, officials quietly resign and are quietly re-
placed with others of their kind. The government-edu-
cational-industrial complex has its gears well oiled and
the kickbacks, patronage and nepotism are an established
way of life. It’s only when a maverick like Morton Shulman
gets in there and starts stirring up the dust that we begin

successful films, his handling of actors is flawless and he
has that rare property of being true to how real people think
and act. Paperback Hero, his first high budget feature,
for all its erratic pace and weak ending had moments which
rank with the best of Canadian dramatic cinema. This latest
action drama, made quickly and on a low budget especially
for television, is still not the definitive Pearson master-
piece, but better a near miss from someone with genius
than a ringer from a hack.

Political it’s not

by Ronald H. Blumer

Television action thrillers are not a Canadian speciality.
Dramas about corruption in high places are also a trifle un-
Canadian but Peter Pearson packed both and a bit more into
one of the most dizzying paced television hours one is
likely to see in a long time. “Canadian films have the image
of being slow moving with no story,” director Pearson
said with a smirk. His answer in The Insurance Man from
Ingersoll was to jam together three stories and pace things
so fast that the viewer is at the edge of his seat just trying
to figure out what’s happening.

Many people feel that Peter Pearson is one of Canada’s
most talented dramatic directors. Starting with Calabogie
Fiddler, a haunting documentary-like drama about what it’s
like to be on welfare in rural Ontario, Pearson has repeat-
edly demonstrated a very special talent. Even in his less

Ronald H. Blumer, professor of film, freelance critic and film-
maker has just completed a half-hour documentary entitled
Beyond Shelter about housing and care for the aged.

Warren Davis as Pearson’s Insurance Man... a political Mr. Fix-It.