

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 not fury but increased dejection and apathy. 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 a huge highrise office complex. This leads the journalist's lover, an avenging MPP played by Michael Magee, to try getting to the bottom of what promises to be a first-rate scandal.

What lies at the bottom (and what the provincial member never quite succeeds in making public) is that the developer has leased several floors to the government even before ground was broken. The lease was so long and exorbitant as to pay for the building, in effect, before it was begun. In prearranged gratitude, the developer then kicks back \$100,000 to the party in power. The party thus gets a hundred grand; the developer has a free building; and nearly everyone is happy.

The unhappy one is the crusading MPP, who appeals for help to the provincial attorney general unaware that he too

is involved; 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 **Wojeck** series of several years ago.) And of course the name of the character — Edward Blake — is a somewhat hallowed 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 **Wojeck** 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 casting was a brilliant stroke on Pearson's part. Even though Davis is awkward in some of his delivery, it is only natural that a man who once read the national news should make a convincing heavy. This character, who we're led to believe was a crony of the premier's in their home district, doesn't actually correspond to anyone in the present government. Rather, he seems to harken back to the London, Ontario, advisers and hangers-on who cultivated and were cultivated by the Conservative Premier John Robarts, a native of that city.

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 legislature.

But despite this, **The Insurance Man from Ingersoll** avails itself of two important recent foofaraws. The first centred around the fact that a friend of the premier's had been given the edge in bidding on the new Ontario Hydro building. In the end little damage was done to anyone; and, anyway, it was proved that the taxpayer was still getting reasonable value for his money. In the second and rather more complicated scandal, it was learned that another developer, a friend of several ministers, made sizable

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donations to the party after Cabinet had passed on a government contract awarded him. Crown attorneys investigated but found no grounds for charges.

The important fact, however, is that the film works this tissue of actuality into what passes quite convincingly for 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 blocs, 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. □



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 repeatedly demonstrated a very special talent. Even in his less

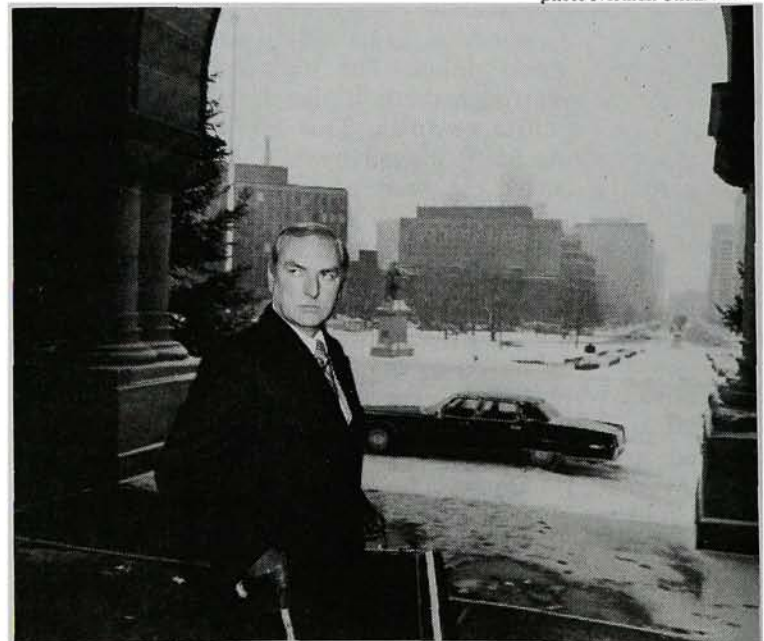
Ronald H. Blumer, professor of film, freelance critic and filmmaker has just completed a half-hour documentary entitled **Beyond Shelter** about housing and care for the aged.

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 masterpiece, but better a near miss from someone with genius than a ringer from a hack.

The Insurance Man from Ingersoll is the story of high level corruption in provincial politics and the building industry. 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 somehow a bit of a mistake. It is God's will that the mandarins in Toronto should continue running things. Quebec is hopelessly 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 replaced with others of their kind. The government-educational-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

photo Norman Chamberlin



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