



Sidney Furie in 1965

Sidney Furie now

furie then and now

by Clive Denton

Sidney J. Furie was born in Toronto on February 28, 1933 and made his first two features in Canada before striking out for fame and glory abroad. Clive Denton follows his development from Canadian unknown to British grade B filmmaker to Hollywood success and reviews Furie's most recent feature, *Gable and Lombard*.

Sidney Furie was the first film director I interviewed. It was back in the spring of 1959 when there were very few Canadian feature films being made. In fact, one that had just been released – **Now That April's Here**, from Morley Callaghan stories – was being touted in some quarters as “the first Canadian feature”. Though this statement was incorrect to an extreme, the ground was not then so thick with native-made pictures that every moviegoer would immediately know differently. It was in this primitive context that I, as a sort of cub reporter, went to see the young Sid Furie, who was being a cub director.

In a pioneering studio-cum-lab off Dundas Street West in Toronto, not actually built out of logs but suggesting that sort of hardy enterprise, he was editing his second, independently made, low-budget feature. This was **A Cool Sound from Hell**; the previous picture, **A Dangerous Age**, was about to be shown by the Toronto Film Society. Neither of these adventurous stabs at making a professional Canadian feature was destined ever to be shown commercially in this country. Both, however, would be released in England. Ironically, the British distributor was one specialising in imports from “the continent”, unequivocally named “Films de France”! This didn't matter much. The two films *were* shown and to some acclaim – including more credit to Canada in general than was really deserved.

One reviewer wrote about this country giving chances to a young director. Hell, giving! Furie had to take what he could get, and pay with money raised by himself and friends. He made this clear in our conversation, though without bitterness or rancour. In fact, he made a very good impression in those days, being friendly, direct and not afraid to say that *love* makes the world – and the movies – go round. I hope he still thinks so; recent evidence still suggests it.

The tape of that immortal interview has unfortunately been lost somewhere, on the river of *nó* return. But I do retain some impressions of it. Furie, 25 years old, dark and – shucks – handsome, seemed energetic and pleasantly aggressive. His shirt sleeves literally rolled up, he was working at a moviola where we were both interested but he was also professionally concerned that a young actress in the unedited **Cool Sound** footage was showing the outline of a breast rather markedly. (Remember, this was 1959).

In conversation, Furie said he was glad that the film society had chosen to present **A Dangerous Age** but that he was “pissed off” that nobody else



Gable and Lombard as personified by James Brolin and Jill Clayburgh in Furie's latest movie

Gable and Lombard

Gable and Lombard is an enjoyable film, a Hollywood success story from “Toronto's own” Sidney Furie, who has himself become a Hollywood success. Concerned with American movies in their heyday of entertainment glory, **Gable and Lombard** carries something of the pizzazz and enjoyment of those days in its glossy style and colorful manner. It is not exactly a *documentary* about the two great stars of its title, Clark Gable (played by James Brolin, who looks and sounds quite a lot like the model) and Carole Lombard (played by Jill Clayburgh, who doesn't). Rather, what the script does is to take some basic facts about them – their hidden romance while Gable was unable to get a needed divorce, their quarrels and reconciliations, her tragic plane crash death and his heartbreak because of that – and, embellishing like mad, turns the pair into characters in the sort of make-believe, emotionally modulated scenario that was so often manufactured for us way back when.

The film is adroitly pitched between screwball comedy and “three handkerchief” thwarted romance. It paints a vivid, affectionate but just slightly acid picture of vintage Hollywood's behavioral madness, which always blended with acute financial sanity. Some of the details are true, such as Carole Lombard's love of practical jokes and penchant for mildly crude language. However, the truth is stretched in the interests of what used to be called “audience appeal”. In this picture, it still can be.

Gable and Lombard lacks enough in-jokes or detailed moviemaking references to satisfy avid buffs, though there is a nice sarcastic nod to **Gone with the Wind**. What it *does* have, in general terms, is style and expertise. Sidney Furie contributes some of those qualities, I feel, but also a more naive (and valuable) outsider's quality. For all his years of travel and success, he still shows a characteristic Canadian curiosity about the world and its strange corners; a sort of sceptical wonderment. □

had shown any interest in it. Never again would he make a film with so few selling angles. He compared his story (written by himself) of a youthful marriage, threatened by a snobbish family because the boy was not wealthy and the girl under age, with **They Live by Night**, the Nicholas Ray film, not yet accounted a classic but liked by most film buffs (who are, naturally, always ahead of prevailing opinion). **A Dangerous Age** had no crime in it, whereas the Ray picture did and **Cool Sound** would. "I should have made the kid rob a service station", Furie had decided. He thought the public – or at least the exhibitors, without whom there was no public – would like a bit of crime with their sociology, and the critics wouldn't mind! As you can see, he was learning fast.

Perhaps because England was encouraging to him – and Canada, emphatically, was not – Furie moved to Britain the day after our interview (well, almost). He had a chance to make films there, small-scale, journeyman films, certainly, but *films*. **The Snake Woman** and **Doctor Blood's Coffin** were cheap horror pictures, set up in the wake of Hammer's extraordinary success, but not suggesting Furie's talents lay in that particular genre, especially without a good script. (Every aficionado knows that few horror movies *have* a good script). After a little comedy, **Three on a Spree**, two musicals with the pop star Cliff Richard were bigger and better. In fact, **The Young Ones** did his reputation a lot of good as a "rare and robust shot at a British musical".

But Furie's best work in London eventually developed from what he had begun to do well in Toronto. His *forte* was, simply, real life, particularly the life of young working people, closely and compassionately observed.

During One Night was an unusual and affecting drama, starring his friend (They had been Best Men at each other's weddings) from Canada, Don Borisenko. Sold on the posters as a sex picture, this was actually a sympathetic study of a young man who doubts his virility in casual encounters but has his fears banished by genuine love. (Susan Hampshire, later famous for **The Forsyte Saga** on television, represented genuine love touchingly).

Even better were two subsequent films, similarly (and confusingly) titled **The Boys** and **The Leather Boys**. In the first of these, a group of young men is charged with murder; metaphorically, Furie kids now do "rob a service station". Their trial brings

Filmography

In Canada

- 1958. **A Dangerous Age**
- 1959. **A Cool Sound from Hell**

In Britain

- 1960. **The Snake Woman**
Doctor Blood's Coffin
- 1961. **Three on a Spree**
During One Night
- 1962. **The Boys**
- 1963. **The Leather Boys**
- 1964. **Wonderful Life**
It's Wonderful To Be Young
- 1965. **The Ipress File**

Hollywood-based

- 1966. **The Appaloosa**
- 1967. **The Naked Runner**
- 1969. **The Lawyer**
- 1970. **Little Fauss and Big Halsy**
- 1972. **Lady Sings the Blues**
- 1973. **Hit!**
- 1975. **Sheila Levine**
- 1976. **Gable and Lombard**

A Dangerous Age

Produced, directed and written by Sidney J. Furie. Photography by Herbert S. Alpert. Edited by Dave Nicholson. Art direction by Harry Maxfield. Music by Phil Nimmons. With Ben Piazza, Anne Pearson, (both American players), Aileen Seaton, Kate Reid, Shane Rimmer, John Sullivan, Austin Willis, Barbara Hamilton, Lloyd Jones, Claude Rae. 69 minutes.

"Directed by a twenty-four-year old Canadian who has preciously worked as a television writer, *A Dangerous Age* is probably the first Canadian feature to rate serious criticism... As a first film, and from a country where so little has been done in the feature field, *A Dangerous Age* seems distinctly encouraging".

Penelope Houston, *Monthly Film Bulletin* (British Film Institute), June 1958.

A Cool Sound from Hell

Produced, directed and written by Sidney J. Furie. Photography by Herbert S. Alpert. Edited by Dave Nicholson. Art direction by Harry Maxfield. Music by Phil Nimmons. With Anthony Ray (American player), Madeline Kronby, Carolyn Dannibale, Ron Taylor, Mel Benstock, Albert Dannibale, Murray Westgate, Tom Harvey, Walter Massey, George Carron, Alan Crofoot. 71 minutes.

"Too reminiscent of similar ventures in its immaturity and reliance on gimmicks... but, as in *A Dangerous Age*, Furie promisingly combines a sensitive awareness to atmosphere with a feeling for contemporary dialogue and mood".

Monthly Film Bulletin, February 1960.

out some unexpected points within the framework of a neat social thriller which says some worthwhile things about prejudice and the damning idea of guilt by association. The director by now demonstrated a growing skill and rapport with actors, both the relative unknowns who played "the boys" and such British regulars as Robert Morley, Richard Todd and Sir Felix Aylmer. **The Leather Boys** might also be termed a social thriller and again was relevant to issues of the day, including one of the earliest of the 1960s screen's overt considerations of homosexual affection. (Actually, it drew short shrift – the gay boy was unreliable – but one must start somewhere). Although the references to crime and social unrest among young people in these pictures were not gratuitous, one sensed a commercial compromise. Furie's main concerns were still with ordinary people in mundane but interestingly studied milieus.

He might have gone on to great work (as opposed to plain damn good) in this line, except that the whole cinema was changing around him. His next mid-sixties films were transitional, not only in that he was becoming more famous and about to move from London to Los Angeles. **The Ipcress File**, in particular, was a quite enjoyable spy thriller but also strangely voyeuristic; people in it were forever peeping around and through things – doors, windows and crowds. Both spies and voyeurs were about to run rampant. Ordinary working people, even with slight criminal tendencies, were being passed by. To rob a service station would be no longer enough. Furie's recent films are too well-known to need much comment here. They are a string of confident, smoothly-turned movies, and have been mostly quite successful at the box office. Yet, while I welcome his survival in a tough show business world, I can't discount some disappointment with his later work, and hope I'm not misreading certain signs that it may be entering a different phase right now. **The Lawyer**, which brought Barry Newman to prominence, spawned the TV series, **Petrocelli**, but was uncomfortably close to televisual fakery and evasions in doing so. **Little Fauss and Big Halsy** had its protagonists on bikes again but, in thus harking back to **The Leather Boys**, showed a clear regression from the freshness and compassion of the earlier film. **Lady Sings the Blues** had some good scenes but was often at too many removes from reality, and without (like **Gable and Lombard**) fairly candidly signalling that fact.

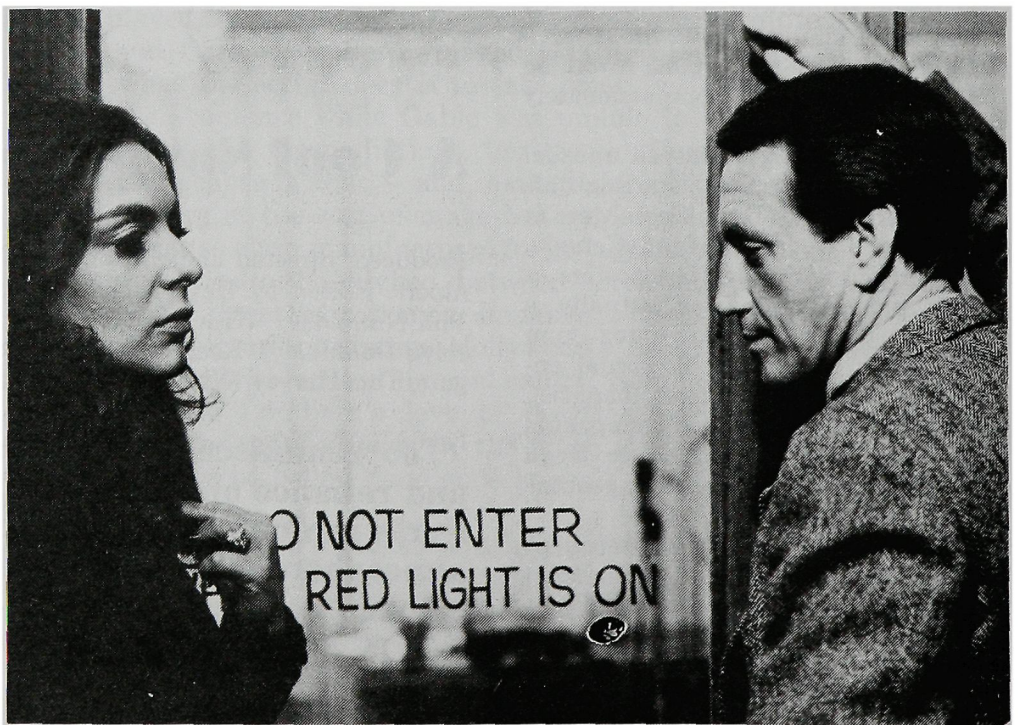
After all this, a commercial failure, **Sheila Levine**, seemed perversely encouraging, being closer to an artistic success. Not that **Sheila Levine** was consistently cheering. Some of it was very frankly boring, perhaps because the persona of Jeannie Berlin is extreme for ready identification. But a Furie trademark – respect and caring for his characters, reasserted itself strongly. Another of his fruitful styles – people working – is oddly enough evident through the gloss of **Gable and Lombard**. And both these latest films of his remind us that *love* makes the world – and

the movies – go round. I think that Sidney Furie may, figuratively, be coming home.

And literally? Back in 1966, **Canadian Cinematography** (forerunner of this magazine) put the question to him; "A great many people have asked if Furie wants to come back to Canada to make films". His reply; "I would travel anywhere to make a film if I believed in that film. I don't care where it is being made". That's a diplomatically double edged answer – and it scarcely suggests homesickness. □



Working class romance: Rita Tushingham and Colin Campbell in **The Leather Boys**



Lovers divided by modern life: Jeannie Berlin and Roy Scheider in **Sheila Levine**.