Whether or not Pinball Summer reaches the adolescent, and post-adolescent market it aims down for, is a moot point. I heard one fiftyish matron reach the adolescent and post-think she was bemoaning the film's frightening if you have young kids. "I sigh upon leaving the theatre, "It's reflection of the adolescence never-hormones and unrequited sexuality."

John Huston’s Phobia


An alien being exposed to this super-market of sexual innuendo with no sex might conclude that play, fantasy and consumption with no consumption are what earth creatures do. Or perhaps suburban survival from junk food overdose is the latest adaptation of the Margaret Atwood "survival is Canadian" litany.

Gary Evans

Despite the rather Hobbesian reviews Phobia has received in the Toronto press, it isn't that bad. Despite what Jay Scott would have you believe, it is not the worst film that John Huston has directed (remember, we have here the director of such yarn-inducers as The Misfits, Night of the Iguana and Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison), it is not the worst Canadian film of the year (there's Prom Night, for starters), and although it is certainly negligible as art or commerce, it has a few things going for it.

Phobia's real significance, however, comes from the very precise ways in which it demonstrates exactly what is
wrong with the Canadian cinema. John Huston is without question the best director ever to make a Canadian film. So why did the producers hire one of the last of the old masters, to knock out the kind of story which is regularly knocked out by first-time directors? (The sort of thing that a Carpenter, or a de Palma, does with his eyes closed.) Huston's great virtues are as a storyteller (note the sweep of The Man Who Would Be King, and the relaxed orderness of The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean), and as a director who can get his characters to inhabit real places — as in the extraordinary cityscapes of The Asphalt Jungle and Fat City. He has never been wound tight enough to deliver that remorselessly little horror thriller that Phobia so long to be. Therefore, we must ask why he was hired. For the class of his name? To control John Colicos?

John Trent, in a recent Toronto Star interview, claimed that the Canadian cinema is a producer's, rather than a director's cinema. This would be no problem, if the producers hired the right directors for the job.

Mind, Huston did bring something to Phobia — aside from a mere forty-odd years of experience. He gave it a visual sense, which brought out the best in cinematographer Reginald Morris. One need only compare the bland, television look of Middle Age Crazy, which Morris lensed for Trent, with the mysterioso darkness that crowds the edge of the frame in Phobia. This points the way to a second problem in Canadian movies. With the possible exception of David Cronenberg, there is a single English Canadian director with a distinctive look, or even any visual flair? Phobia is the first Canadian film I've seen since The Brood that hasn't resembled a bad CBC drama; that looks as if someone actually sat down and thought about how a movie is supposed to look. Contrasting the appearance of recent American films to recent Canadian features, there can be no question as to which side wins. Where are our Carpenters, our de Palmas, our Scorseses — directors whose films are both commercially successful and artistically exciting to look at? Even films like Days of Heaven and The Black Stallion, which exist in complete intellectual vacuum, are stunning to look at. Until our producers begin to concern themselves with films as more than tax shelters for dentists, and "packages" of talent with "proven" ingredients (out-of-work TV stars, aging hams, hack directors, and plots made out of elements that weren't very good to begin with), we are doomed to second-rate, cinematic, junk food that nourishes neither the mind nor the adrenal glands. Phobia itself is destined to become a footnote to a great director's career, nothing more.

John G. Harkness

John Guillermin's Mr. Patman


Parker p.c. Film Consortium of Canada (1979) col. 35mm Panavision running time 105 min.

One of the most fascinating aspects of watching mid-level multinational productions (in this case, one American star, one Canadian star, one British character actress, British director and d.o.p.) is observing the interplay of well-known actors with people you have never seen before. In fact, the "unknown quantities" in these Canadian productions often provide some of the major pleasures in what are frequently awful films — Frances Hyland, for example, in The Changeling, blowing the comatose Trish Van Devere of the screen without even working up a sweat.

It is axiomatic that the performances of "stars" are often the same. For stars are not always stars because of talent, but rather chemistry. The ability to sustain a career is a bonus. James Coburn, the eponymous hero of John Guillermin's Mr. Patman, has never been the sort of star whose name guarantees the success of his project. Many of his most interesting projects — Dead Heat on a Merry-go-round, Peckinpah's Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, Herbert Ross's The Last of Shiel, have been his least successful. But he has a fascinating persona and sufficient star quality to often make him the best thing in bad pictures, offering sufficient justification for sitting through appalling messes like Blood Kin.

Coburn is certainly the best thing in Mr. Patman, but nevertheless, he faces competition from Fionnula Flanagan, who plays his landlady like some dementedly erotic avatar out of Sean O'Casey's more lurid wetdreams. The scenes between the two of them have an erotic charge seldom seen in Canadian films not featuring Carole Laure or Celine Lopez. They are certainly far more interesting than the scenes of Coburn with Kate Nelligan, his official girlfriend with whom he plans to depart at the film's conclusion.

Patman is a male nurse in a psychiatric ward of some major metropolitan hospital. He is not only a ringmaster who can work miracles with his patients, but also as they say, a devil with the lady's. This is the good part, and Coburn's performance is a whirligig of movement and expression. The plot's drama stems from the fact that our hero is "haunted by a terrible secret from his past" (gasp) and is prone to strange delusions which