



photo: Dougald Dunbar

• Bogue (Greg Malone) answers reporter's questions for a dazed President Bidgood (Andy Jones) as they leave the Capitol Theatre

The Advent of Faustus Bidgood

by Joan Sullivan

"If Ingmar Bergman had directed Monty Python, he might have come up with something like *The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood*," (Robert Joy, *The Journal*.) To expand on that, if Ingmar Bergman had read a lot of James Joyce, asked Monty Python to work with him, and then involved one of CODCO's mentors, Andy Jones, he might have come up with something like *Faustus*. He might. But Michael and Andy Jones got there first.

It took a while, ten years to be exact. Their determination to make an independent film made it even harder. And whether all the intensive work and dynamic energy that was poured into keeping *Faustus* independent came from a need "not to be taken over by other forces," or as a "rebellion against the formulae that pervade American media," Newfoundland's long-awaited

first feature film has been viewed, reviewed, celebrated, dismissed, slotted into the cult film category, toasted, hosted, and seen in several film festivals in Canada and Europe.

And what is *The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood*? What is Total Education? Where is the poet Premier? Who has Billy's boots? Who are Michael and Andy Jones, and what are they doing to Canadian cinema?

"There is no luck, there is only grid reality." (Fred-Bonia Coombs)

Michael and Andy Jones are brothers from St. John's, Newfoundland with two decades of involvement in film and theatre. They have written, acted and directed in a myriad of plays and films. Andy, acting since university, toured Europe with Ken Campbell's *Madhouse Company* before returning home and joining CODCO, Newfoundland's premiere comedy group. He wrote and performed a one-man show, *Out of the Bin*, alternately shocking and hypnotising audiences as he lay on an unmade bed, surrounded by the gory

remains of a junk food gorge, and grunted "If the Christian Brothers could see me now..." He also directed Mary Walsh in her one-woman show *Bloomsdays*, a tribute to the female characters of James Joyce.

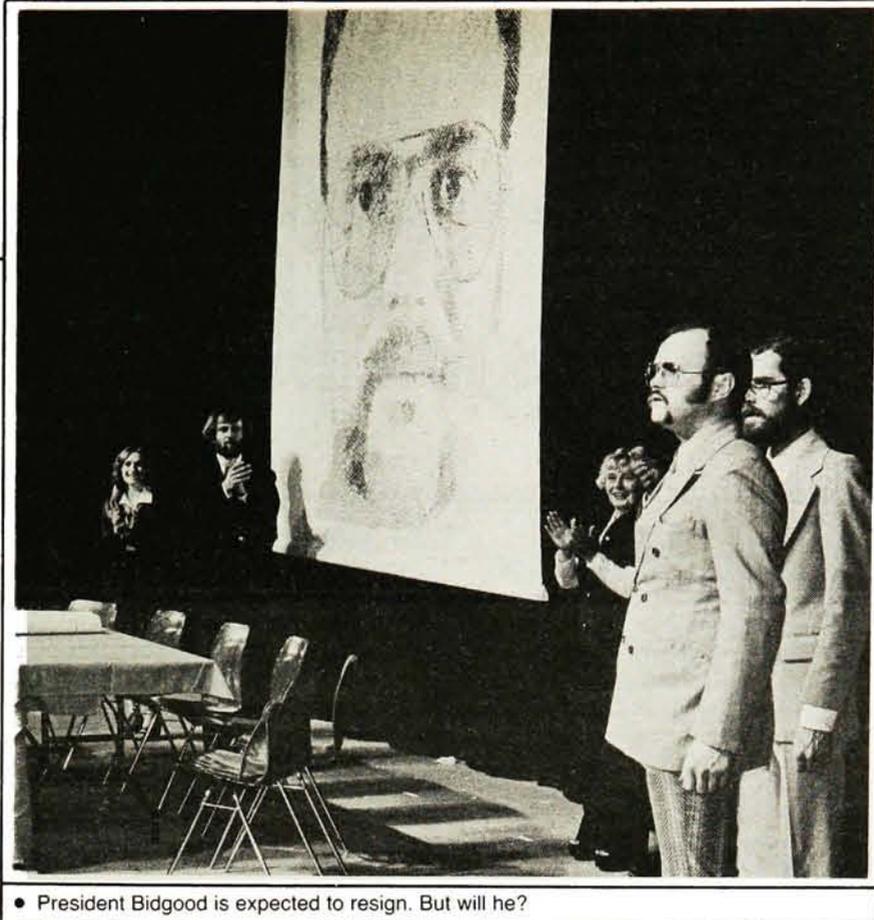
Michael helped form the 11-year old Newfoundland Independent Film Co-operative (NIFCO). As a high school teacher in the early '70s, he made several films with his English students, including *The Bullies* and *Grand Larceny*. By the mid-'70s he had combined forces with CODCO on several short films.

As for what they are doing to Canadian cinema, they have created an independent feature film which charges the rear guard of mass-produced, processed cheese film stories, and challenges anyone's idea that Newfoundlanders exist solely to provide some joke's punchline.

Faustus Peebles Bidgood, "closet human being" and ex-patient of The Mental, has found a niche in the Newfoundland Government's Department of Education Special Curriculum Development Branch. Brimming with quiet

malevolence, he sits behind his desk. His co-workers Phyliss Meany (Maisie Rillie), Heady Nolan (Mary Walsh), Frank Dollar (Tommy Sexton), Henry Harry (Beni Malone), and Margaret Mary Stackdeck (Cathy Jones) ignore or torment him. Unable to respond in any normal manner, he wrecks bloody havoc on them in his mind. His Mephistopheles, Bogue (Greg Malone) visible only to Faustus, urges him to catch hold of reality in his swirling fantasies, before he is swept into the Dark Ward.

But Bogue is helpless against the designs of Faustus' boss, Fred Bonia-Coombs. This raving lunatic is determined to inflict a system of Total Education on the province, and involves Faustus in a black-mail plot to this end. Total Education is based on grid reality, a concept that bloomed in Bonia-Coombs' mind after witnessing the death of a close friend, accidentally beamed on the head by a bag of frozen soup thrown from a window during a lovers' quarrel. Faustus' only escape from this violent and demented man is to fantasize that he is President of a free Newfoundland.



• President Bidgood is expected to resign. But will he?

Photo: Ron Fitzgerald

President Bidgood is also a troubled man. It is his last day in office, and the masses are agitating for him to stay. En route to the office he is disturbed by a dream that he is actually a clerk in the Newfoundland Government Department of Education Special Curriculum Development branch. Vasily Bogdonavitch Shagoff, the philosopher/conscience/brain behind the revolution, wants him to resign and preserve the spirit of the new regime. The President wants to finish his dream before he decides.

As both men are drawn toward their personal catharsis, Newfoundland searches for her poet Premier, Jonathan Moon (Nelson Porter). The Find the Poet Premier Crisis Centre has been reactivated by the Minister of Culture, Claud Squires (Bas Jamieson). Viewers can write or phone in their suggestions on the premier's location. The right guess could win you...a waffle iron from West Brook! The local paper gives daily coverage of the search, along with a series of child murders. The killer has completely stumped the police and claims to be the famed child educator, Uncle Henny Penny. Meanwhile, government employees prepare for their annual Crippled Childrens Benefit, while the cabinet ministers rehearse their traditional roles in Billy's Boots, "a great epic that spanned generations." At one point, Faustus imagines President Bidgood viewing a movie that contains scenes of an earlier documentary and glimpses of a childhood birthday party, which Faustus has flashbacked to several times earlier.

Interpreting and structuring this network of plot lines took many years of work. Michael and Andy started working together in 1975, after both had spent years away from Newfoundland. Andy studied at universities in Halifax, Alberta and Toronto while Michael spent nine years with the Christian Brothers in New York and Vancouver. They returned at the time of Newfoundland's "cultural renaissance," which was especially evident in theatre. Alongside a renewed interest in folk music, and an explosion in the visual arts where emerging artists challenged traditional boundaries; groups like CODCO, The Mummer's Troupe, and Rising Tide were born. While Andy, as a member of CODCO, was presenting audacious and riveting shows, Michael was helping to build NIFCO, along with filmmakers like John Doyle, Michael Riggio and Derek Norman. In 1975, CODCO and Michael started working together. The result was three short films, *Codpieces*, *Sisters of the Silver Scalpel*, and *Dolly Cake*.

Then in 1977 Andy began writing *Faustus*. After a test shoot in late 1977, the Faustus Bidgood writers workshop began in the spring of 1978. Improvisational writing and acting workshops were held creating and assembling the cast. Once the cast was created shoot-

ing began on *Faustus*. It was mainly a hand-held shoot - collective, improvised and exhausting. Writing and filming *Faustus* left both Michael and Andy impoverished and exhausted so Andy returned to the theatre while Michael had a "pseudo mid-life crisis." 50,000 feet of negative was not developed until 1980.

It was 1982 before they started editing *Faustus*. After a year editing together Andy returned to the theatre again, and Michael spent two more years in the NIFCO (Newfoundland Independent Film Co-op) editing room in St. John's editing, re-writing and shooting new material. Finally in March, 1985, Barry Cowling and Les Halman came to St. John's from the NFB's Atlantic Studio in Halifax. After a day of watching *Faustus* they invited Michael to Halifax for final editing.

When the Atlantic Studio ran out of money they sent Michael to Montreal to seek further funding and services. After several screenings at the NFB in Montreal, the NFB agreed to provide post-production services, sound edit, mix, prints and blow-up to 35mm.

It takes 10 months and in August 1986 the first print is ready and 10 years of work heads for the world premiere in St. John's, Newfoundland.

Scene: *The Find the Poet Premier Crisis Centre. Squires, assisted by Claude Hickman (Gerry Curnew), notifies the public that the Premier has gone missing again. They invite responses from people. Suggestions will be checked out by the Newfoundland Constabulary or the RCMP, depending on the location of the suspected hiding place. They show the Premier's videotaped message providing clues to his whereabouts. "Well Newfoundland and Labrador, he's gone again," says Moon. In part his clues, revealed in bad poetry, run "I am fun at parties/though I do not drink/I have no brain/and yet I tink."*

(The following interview took place in St. John's.)

Michael Jones: There is a satirical element in the film. I delight in hearing "A Great Big Sea Hove in Long Beach" sung on the stage (during the annual Government Benefit for Crippled Children). That sort of prim and proper arrangement and presentation (of folk music) has always annoyed me a lot. It pleases me to have that there, with the jazz dancers dancing to it. That's a minor one. There's certainly a very black view of politicians.

People talk about it being very surrealistic too, but the film seems very normal to me. It gets very strange at the end, the way the whole crowd ignores Faustus when the premier comes out of the piano. It's a very odd thing, we're obviously in another world by then, we're swept away by reality."

Andy Jones: An idea I had for another script had again that love for Newfoundland and the beauty of Newfoundland, but the underlying theme was that someone was using that theme as a seduction. I'd like to have all these beautiful shots of landscapes, and underlying it, the seduction and the violence. That juxtaposition appeals to me. You want to be totally romantic, but at the same time you want to be totally unromantic.

Michael Jones: I have felt disappointed that we were part of Canada and so closely associated with Canadians. But now I feel angry that we haven't been given a chance. It's so difficult to make a point when you're speaking from Newfoundland. So much of the resources for idea development go into the big cities, and so little to what they call 'the regions.'

Andy Jones: And there's an attempt to homogenize everything.

Michael Jones: There's a big rebellion against the formulae and sameness that pervades American popular media. The popular culture that dominates the country is based on control, on providing limited access to ideas. Change comes at a very slow pace. I've always resisted that. We made this film for Newfoundlanders, in the belief that Newfoundlanders have a good sense of judgement as to what is funny.

Andy Jones: There was a feeling of not explaining things, of leaving the references as they are, as if there were thousands of movies made in Newfoundland and this was just one more. Like we all know New York from movies, that gets shoved down our throats all the time, we all know Fifth Avenue. So that was a consistent theme from Day One, and that's the most chancy thing we've ever done.

Michael Jones: The whole film turns on Eddie Peddle having rejected his homeland and posing as a flamenco dancer in Toronto. That's the most dicey scene in the film because it really gets local at that point.

"I'm a Spaniard. I'm a real Spaniard. I'm from Spaniard's Bay!"
(Eddie Peddle)

Andy Jones: It seemed to be a real flaw, but I think people will just say 'Oh, that must be something to do with that place.' You do that all the time, watching films. It doesn't seem to be that important.

Michael Jones: I think in the end we see the whole film as one connected piece. There's an energy running through it that I hope makes that unimportant. There's so much more to the film than those particular plot details, because the fact that there are so many plots details is a factor, and the fact that there are so many levels is a factor, and the ideas in the film are a factor. The grid, for example, is a large idea on which the system of total education is based.

Andy Jones: It's also a very foolish idea.

Scene: *Fred Bonia-Coombs explains his system of Total Education. As the light from his slide projector flashes on his face, he explains how the sky is divided into even squares, forming a grid. People are killed by things falling through the grid, like his friend who was killed by a bag of frozen soup. His system would "unlock the mysteries of the grid," allowing advocates to "cheat the grid" and escape these falling pieces of fate. "Total Education, gentlemen, is eternal life."*

Michael Jones: "It's a very large and foolish idea, which is played seriously, so that is a style and an approach.

First person plural

Andy and I opted from the start to share the final artistic say 50-50. We figured one plus one would equal more than two. When I see the film now and ask myself whose film this is I arrive at the same percentage - 50-50. The script was mainly his, with help from me, and my edit with his help. But the other person who put a great deal into the film was Robert Joy. Although he was in N.Y. a lot of the time, he was there for the script and almost all the shooting and he did everything and anything that needed to be done. He wrote lots of script, got props, found locations, phoned people, was production manager, as well as a principal actor. Later he directed the music, composed all the songs and the main musical themes that Paul Steffler composed around.

We were having a lot of problems getting the script together. This was 1978. A whole bunch of us, the *Faustus* Bidgood script workshop we called it, Mary Walsh, Rick Roland, Neil Murray, Mack Furlong and others, were meeting every day and going over the epic 8-hour screenplay that Andy had written in a creative fever in early 1977. It had the whole history of the Bidgood family in it, a big revolution with the politicians all put in work camps, an organization called the Hate-Sorry Group who hated mainlanders but felt sorry about it, the Canadian army invading Newfoundland, the Beothucks still alive, watching us on TV, stuff like that. I was frustrated and unhappy because I considered it virtually unfilmable, especially with our limited resources. But one big idea after another kept being pumped out at the sessions and I kept resisting. I wanted something simple, like you would. I was also frozen with fear that I wasn't up to the task at hand. This went on for months.

The turning point came suddenly at my house in Horse Cove. Andy and Mary and a bunch of other people had come to supper and they had brought their dog Bert, who went everywhere with them. Unwittingly I made a disparaging remark about Bert's intelligence and quick as a flash Andy socked me in the face. I ended up on the floor in a daze and very surprised. He murmured something about my "superior attitude" and left the room. I ran after him demanding an explanation and he hit me again. Eventually I got him down on the floor but I couldn't hit him because he was my little brother. Everyone was horrified and they all went home.

The next morning I reported for work as usual. I had a black eye and

a chipped tooth and Andy had one lens missing out of his glasses. We made no reference to the incident. The whole approach to the script changed. We immediately began to cut and simplify and devise a plot and structure capable of carrying as many of the disparate elements of Andy's screenplay as possible. Within weeks we knew enough about the film to begin shooting.

We broke the script down into 250 scenes which we listed on huge sheets of paper and stuck up on the wall. We had already shot the historical footage of Dempster Peebles, the dancing priest and more than 30 classroom scenes detailing *Faustus'* education the year before. That was the "test shoot." Then we sat back and decided which scenes were absolutely necessary and which ones could be cut. Then we began to shoot them in order of priority.

We filmed about 120 I think, shooting two or three days a week over a six-month period. We knew about a week in advance which scenes we were going to do. People would go out and find props and locations, and make or find the costumes. The actors fleshed out the scene in rehearsal, improvising lines. Then the night before the shoot Andy would sit down and write out all the dialogue. Often there were about 10 or more pages of dialogue per day. I always freaked out, because there was always too much. Except when we were shooting MOS, I never felt like I was able to film things properly. The camera was always on my shoulder. I would do one actor's lines, then walk around and shoot the reverse in the same take. "Say that line again." "Say all the lines again."

We paid people in shares in the film. We only had enough money to buy film stock and food for the cast and crew, plus have the occasional party. Gradually, of course, they wore out and at the end of the shoot we were down to me on camera, Jim Rillie on sound and one assistant. All the gear, which NIFCO (Newfoundland Independent Film Co-op) invested in the film, could fit in the back of my Volkswagon beetle.

I remember the last night of the shoot. We were absolutely exhausted. It was the 59th day of shooting. We did the elevator scene

and although we had many more scenes scripted, we knew it was all over. We had a little meeting and Andy said, "This is it, then, OK? Let's say principal photography is finished." We were a certified Canadian feature film, you see, and the completion of principal photography was important. Really we just couldn't shoot any more.

The exposed stock sat in the freezer all through 1979. We processed six rolls to see if there was an image. There was, but the office scenes, about 40 minutes of material shot after I had dropped the camera, were slightly out of focus and especially the closeups. They turned out to be unusable, actually. But it all seemed like such a filthy mess and I didn't have the heart to work on it. I thought we should maybe forget the whole thing. But it nagged at us, and the next year we made a deal with a Toronto film lab to process and print the footage - about 40,000 feet of color and b&w negative, and transfer the sound, all for \$3,000, the cost of the stock used. But we didn't even have the money to pay that, and after a year of sending bills the lab people went backstage at the O'Keefe Center where Bob Joy was doing "The Diary of Anne Frank" and asked him for the money. He phoned us in a panic and we paid fairly soon with a grant from the Canada Council.

By 1980, I was working on *Stations* with Bill MacGillivray and Lionel Simmons. I really didn't care if *Faustus* ever got edited. I was incapable of even walking into the editing room at NIFCO. All we had was a pic-sync, and the thought of dealing with that much material on a little hand-cranked machine paralysed me. I was also going through all kinds of personal changes at the time. But people kept asking about the film and it began to worry us that if we didn't finish *Faustus* we would never do anything else. Finally Andy suggested we get away from St. John's.

Raymond Gravel at Les Productions LaGauchet offered us a good deal on a Steenbeck rental and we headed for Montreal. We lived in six apartments in five months, chasing places vacated by people who were out of town. We reconstituted all the scenes we had partly edited. The NFB edge coded it for us. Then we

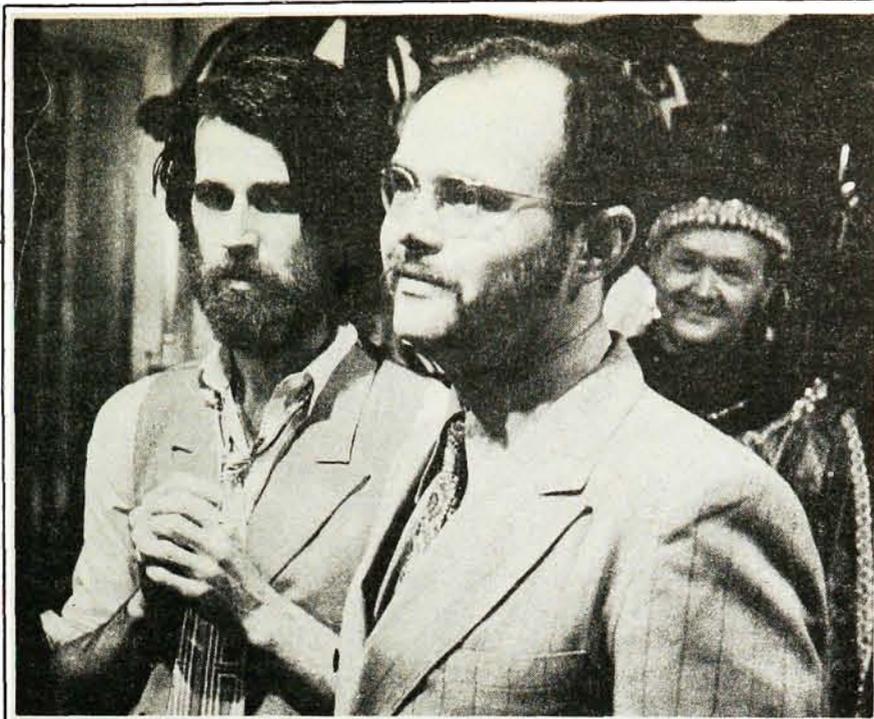
spent two months looking at the footage - it took a whole week just to watch it once through.

We spent many days trying to figure out what it all meant, what the film was about. It was a 24-hour story like the Greek tragedies, with the office staff being the chorus. There were two films, a black/white one about the President of Newfoundland and a color one about the same man who was a clerk in the department of Education. It was a *Faustus* story - a Memorial University German professor who had studied the *Faustus* myth and also read our script outline assured us of that. But what were we going to do with the Dempster Peebles footage? It was a vestige of the old screenplay. What was Eddy Peddle watching on TV? We couldn't remember. We worked days and nights, different shifts different weeks, and drank at the Skala in the late night. In November I got pneumonia. We went home at Christmas with three minutes of edited material.

Andy stayed with the editing all through 1983. Every day, bum on the seat at 10:00 precisely. But I was into cutting individual sequences, trying to make them work, and we had no vision of the overall structure. It was such drudgery that he finally couldn't take it any more, especially watching me going over and over the cuts. He finally went back to writing and acting full time and I carried on alone for two years.

They were hard years because I had a mountain of work ahead of me all the time and I couldn't convince anyone with money that there was anything there. Finally the NFB came in. Without them I don't think we ever would have finished the film. People don't know how to watch cutting copies and when they see a rough cut they think it is your best and final effort. Wayne Clarkson, for example, told me point blank that I didn't know how to edit. Get a professional, he said. They all said that. Potential investors came to the cutting room and they were inevitably repulsed by the crudeness of what they saw on the Steenbeck screen. I went to the CFDC and they just patted me on the head and wished me luck. The CBC and distributors said come back when you finish it. These things are normal enough occurrences for filmmakers and they didn't disturb me unduly, but it made the whole thing difficult because in my heart I knew that we had something that was at least as good as a lot of the stuff that gets money in Canada. But nobody, except for a few friends in St. John's and Halifax, could see that.

Michael Jones •



• Faustus and Bogue backstage at the Crippled Children's Benefit Show

Photo: Ron Fitzgerald

Andy Jones: It's a tone, and you've done a lot in terms of the tone of the film. What you've done in a lot of cases is removed the punchline, you don't give the audience a chance for release. And sometimes it goes on for a long time before they can say 'ahahahaha.' One example is the line 'I feel so calm,' and the line that's cut is 'Gosh, I feel so calm,' and that's the laugh line.

Michael Jones: That's the laugh line, but it was overdone.

Andy Jones: And you don't want to go for that. I would have gone for that, of course. And the same thing with the l-e, l-a scene. I would have left another l-e in there.

Michael Jones: I had it in there, and I had 'Gosh, I feel so calm' in there, and the final level of cutting was to take out the repetitious material, or what I eventually came to see as going one step too far. That's the beauty of editing, I went through a process of distilling it down. I think there are a few more cuts I'd like to do.

Andy Jones: But that's your humour, you're never sure where the ground is. You get a chance to decide when you're letting the audience off the hook. That comes out in the movie really strongly.

Michael Jones: The editing was my way of dealing with a mass of incredibly funny and interesting material.

Andy Jones: From an analytical point of view it goes beyond that, it has to do with what you wanted to see in the movie.

Michael Jones: Someone asked me the other day if the original vision of the movie was fulfilled in the final creation, and I said yes.

Andy Jones: The vision was, yes.

Scene: A Christian Brother, teaching a French class, asks a student to spell 'bicycle.' The student begins 'l-e-b-i-c' when the teacher stops him. 'L-e? Did you say l-e?' 'Yes, sir.' 'Good, very good. Perfect. Gerard, I went to school, I went to university on the mainland for five years...the archiepiscopal board built this school, built that staircase out there, so we could come up here and be here today in this classroom, to hear you tell me l-e? L-e!'

In the corridor, another teacher repeatedly pushes a student while asking 'Did I push you? Did I? Did I push you?' Until the student says no, she hasn't, although she has and is still pushing him.

Michael Jones: We established that we were going to play everything straight, that we would never, never, not once exaggerate or fool around. Even when Faustus is picking his nose with Heady's

(Mary Walsh) finger, it's done seriously. It's a serious scene, and there's a poignant moment in there, that one shot where Faustus realizes what he's doing. He's confused and you feel sorry for him. It's a gross scene, a wonderful scene for laughs although some people are repulsed by it, but there's a poignant moment there. We get away with exaggeration in the school scene because that's a dream, although there's not much exaggeration there, all those things could have happened.

Andy Jones: The 'Nine! Nine! Nine!' scene where the teacher bangs his head against the wall, we saw that in Grade Two. And the strapping was all true, and the 'Did I push you?' thing, that was normal.

Michael Jones: The chemistry lab monster is a bit exaggerated.

Andy Jones: That's a metaphor.

Michael Jones: It saves the l-e, l-e scene. I spent three weeks cutting that sequence, and it's only a minute long. I picked the low-key take. But the school scene is an accurate reflection of the Catholic School system in St. John's in the 1950s. We were prone to exaggerate the effect that the Brothers had on us. But I did see a Brother slap a boy right down against the back wall, slap, slap, slap, backhand, forehand, backhand, forehand.

Andy Jones: There were other things I saw too. I saw a boy get strapped right across the face. And there's Dad's story about when he was boarding at St. Bon's. He went to complain about the butter because the butter was rancid. They went up to the house, and the principal opened the door. He said 'We've come to complain,' and the Brother said 'What, you've come to what?' And he said 'to complain about the butter, the butter was...' and slap, slap, slap, they were all over the floor. I don't think they ever got the word 'rancid' out of their mouths. It was a very brave thing for them to have done, to consider making a protest at that time.

Michael Jones: There were many things like that. It was a very well-discussed thing in the 1960s and 1970s. The people who'd been through the system were very angry, and the church was starting to lose its influence then. I don't know if children going to school today would understand it. Someone told me that they loved the movie but they thought the violence was unnecessary.

Andy Jones: In the axe scene, people know that's coming and they turn away. I remember doing that scene, and going down to get the axe carved to fit Maisie's head. The guys at the foundry were watching me fit the axe to her head, and were quite intrigued by that. It seems like nothing to me now, but people get taken aback by it. The reason for the violence in the film is that the main character can't deal with anything, he can't carry on a conversation. His only way out is to kill the person that is in the way. Rather than being in any way noble, he fantasizes about someone who is extremely noble.

Michael Jones: Which is himself, of course.

Andy Jones: That is the seed of a problem I have, you know when the person you're living with doesn't do the dishes for six months, and you don't say anything. You hold back. And one day they drop a cigarette ash on the floor and you're shrieking at them. That's where the violence came from, but I don't know why it's in the film. I forgot there was so much of it. There's a lot in there about murdering children. I don't think it's in there because I want to kill children, but probably because, when I was a child, I was afraid I was going to be killed. I know I was constantly afraid as a child. I was so relieved to get out of school. I thought university was wonderful, no one was going to beat me. At school, everything I did was based on guilt and fear. Of course, the film is about more than that. It brings people down a lot of different roads.

"There's a show going on, and

you're in it." - (Newfoundland Government Dept. of Ed. Special Curriculum Development Branch Employees.)

Michael Jones: That to me is the most important thing. I can remember reading *The Magus* and being so delighted that the ground was constantly being taken from under my feet. I was led to believe in a world that was not really that world at all. The main character had a false idea of what was happening.

Scene: Phylliss (Maisie Rillie) tries to bring Faustus out of his daydreams by grabbing him by the hair and shaking his head. Faustus is supposed to bring some papers to the archives for Bonia-Coombs. Faustus plays this into his fantasy, where Phylliss is a devoted and loving servant who kisses the cuffs of his trousers. He comes out of it when Phylliss gives him a final crack and shouts "Where are you all the time anyway, when you're not in there kissing Fred's ass?" He retaliates by imagining her staggering around with an axe imbedded in her forehead.

These fantasies, daydreams, nightmares and alternating realities added up to nearly 40 hours of film.

Michael Jones: There were well over 30 teacher scenes shot, and there are only nine left. I remember knowing that it would be at most an eight minute scene but we went ahead and shot an hour of material anyway. The amount of cutting there was vast. The lunchtime walk through the city had 45 minutes of usable footage. If we stretched all the material together it would probably last about six hours. After screening it with outsiders, I found we were repeating ourselves a lot.

Andy Jones: The lines from Billy's Boots are repeated several times.

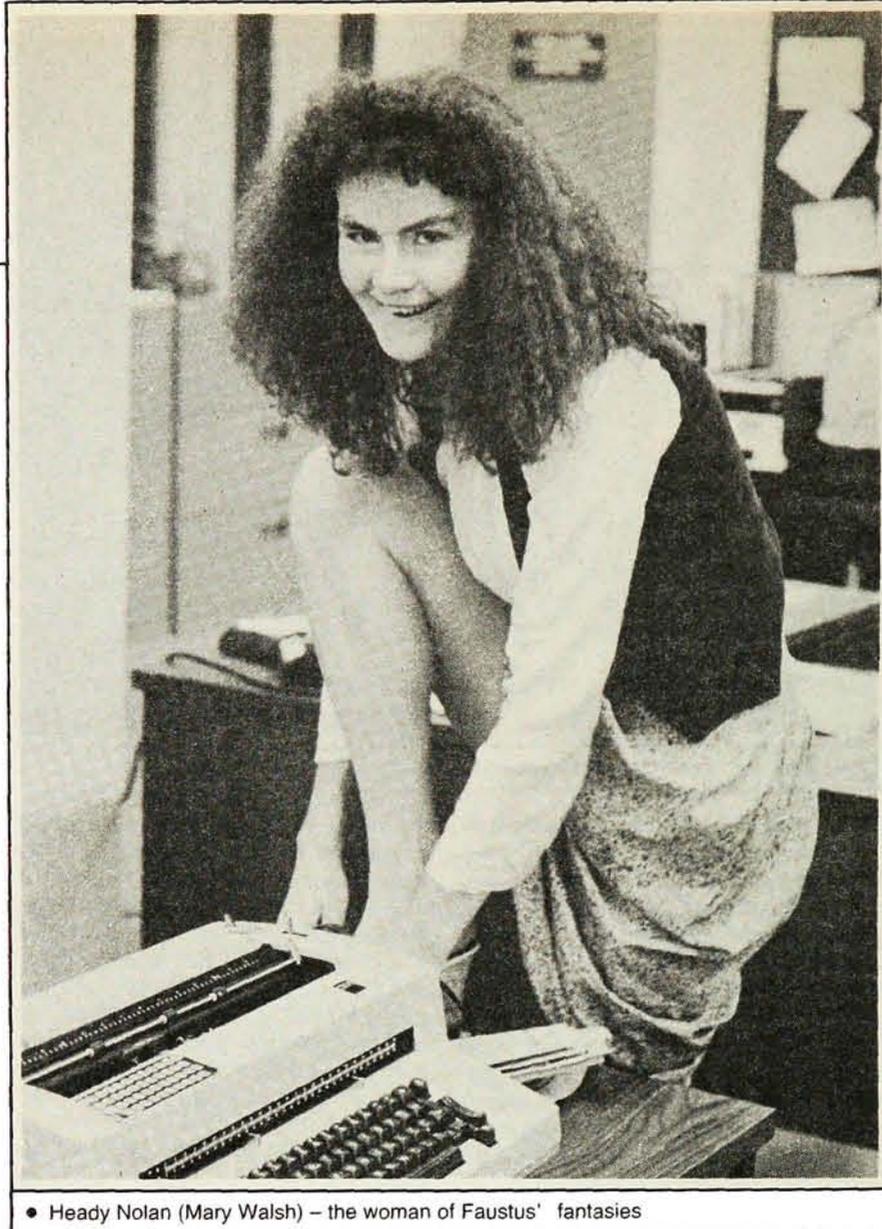
Michael Jones: By the time Billy's Boots is performed on stage, you've already seen the cabinet ministers rehearsing it, and the people in the office fooling around. Several lines are familiar to you.

Andy Jones: Billy's Boots is satire on the traditional thing done every year. We actually wanted to shoot scenes of Frank Moores, Joey Smallwood and Sir Richard Squires performing it.

Michael Jones: Billy's Boots was a great epic that spanned generations.

Andy Jones: It was just that we had too many scenes to tell the story and each scene within that was in itself too long.

Michael Jones: In 1982 we spent a lot of time trying to figure out what was going on. We discovered clues in the material, and reasoned our way back to what it must have been we intended.



• Heady Nolan (Mary Walsh) – the woman of Faustus' fantasies

Photo: Ron Fitzgerald

Andy Jones: Or what information we should give the audience at what point. We began with a chronological approach. Dempster Peedles started the movie off because he would be the first thing that happened historically. There was a lot of time spent on the issue of what was real and what wasn't, when exactly the fantasy began, what past the colour Faustus and the black/white Faustus shared. Eventually we decided the Dempster Peedles scenes would become a movie that was made in 1929 in Newfoundland. Excerpts of which are shown in another movie, a docudrama about the President which he goes to see on his last day in office and the film now exists only in President Bidgood's mind, although they both had a grandfather named Dempster Peedles.

Michael Jones: The President goes to the film and dreams that he never became President, that he remained a clerk in the Department of Education and got involved in a blackmail plot. The docudrama contains a movie version of the birthday and mother's death scene that we've already seen in flashback.

Andy Jones: We were going to do a Soviet version, where his mother was a forewoman in an ice cream factory in the Ukraine and she dies when she's ohit on the head with a tub of ice cream.

Michael Jones: I remember the day we were editing and we decided the whole film was a psychological problem, it was about Faustus' mind. A certain freedom happened then. Eventually we were able to link the black and white fantasies directly to Faustus' mind.

Andy Jones: There's a man fantasizing about another man, and that man is dreaming him. That's the reality of the film. But one thing I would never do again is portray mental illness the way we did. People laugh at the line in the movie 'Mental illness can be beaten.' But that's the TV announcer saying that, Faustus would never say that. But it is important to the story that we strongly show his feelings about mental illness and that he's very much afraid of going back to the hospital.

"Mr. Bonia-Coombs, what's the Dark Ward?" (Faustus Bidgood)

Michael Jones: He's fantasizing that he's beaten his mental illness, that's what he's doing. The doubt in his mind is that he's doing too much fantasizing, and he tempers that through Bogue.

Scene: *Faustus and Bogue stand in the Colonial Building, looking down at Faustus' fantasy as President Bidgood, assisted by Vasily Bogdanovitch Shagoff, gives his first press conference and announces Newfoundland's imminent separation from Canada. "I'm*

not sure I like my role in this one," says Bogue. "Cautious, simpering, intellectual figure." Below, a journalist asks Shagoff if he has had any particular jobs. "Yes," he says, "I've had several particular jobs and many others of a more general nature."

While Andy, Greg Malone and the rest of CODCO had a few years of acting experience, many of the important parts were played by people who had never acted before. With some inspired casting, Nelson Porter was given the role of Jonathan Moon, and Val Ryan played Faustus' real father.

Andy Jones: Nelson came to the audition with his daughter, and we persuaded him to join in on some improvisations. Val Ryan doing the father is beautiful. He's a natural actor, he's not afraid of emotions.

Michael Jones: That's an amazing scene, and we had to do it in one take too, because it started to rain. But most major parts were played by people with experience. It was a lot of work, but the energy we put out at that time was a mad energy. I can never believe how much energy it took to keep going against incredible odds. Every day was a crisis. No one had that energy before or since, to keep going in the face of so much. It seems impossible to do that again.

Andy Jones: I was wondering today if we would have to do some version of

that again, to avoid being taken over by other forces.

One way to protect a film from invasion from other forces is to keep the financing independent. There are not a lot of resources for Canadian filmmakers; the Canada Council, the NFB and Telefilm, which has such a reputation for rewriting scripts into mass-digested formulae that creative filmmakers steer clear of this Crown Corporation. Many cities have a film co-operative. NIFCO, in St. John's, has had a hand in more than 50 films, many of them fine productions. Its catalogue includes Michael and Andy's work, films by Francine Fleming, Derek Norman, Paul Pope and the famous underground film by John Doyle – *Extraordinary Visitor*, where John the Baptist is dispatched from the Vatican to St. John's to investigate the meaning of the Message of Fatima: (*"Terra Nova exito subito de Confederatione – Newfoundland must leave Confederation at once."*) *Faustus* is significant not only as Newfoundland's first feature film, but also as an independent film that came out of a co-op.

Michael Jones: There are a number of independent films being made in Canada, although no one in their right mind would try to make a film exactly as we made *Faustus*. Many filmmakers working with co-ops are making films with a minimum of resources. These filmmakers are the most creative, they could be part of a very fine national

cinema if there was assistance to develop ideas without interference.

Filmmakers are forced to rely heavily on the Canada Council, who have a small budget for assisting filmmakers, and the NFB, who have a program for assisting filmmakers, although they haven't always had it and they may not always have it. It's very small in comparison to the large amount spent by Telefilm.

What we're asking for is that independent filmmakers be recognized as a legitimate cinema, and that a significant portion of Telefilm funds be used to develop the creative independent sector. And don't account us to death, don't mess with our scripts and don't force us into standard large-scale production structures. Use the money to seed new filmmakers.

We maintained complete independence. It was an awful price to pay but if the film is good enough than it was worth it. We did have several opportunities for funding from people who had the money and were interested in the CODCO group, but who frankly told us they'd like to have a hand in the story line. We very quickly and with no hesitation refused the money.

Andy Jones: We actually started off not wanting to take money from the Canada Council.

Michael Jones: We were forced to go to them to get the film processed. They eventually gave us the maximum amount available for film, 50,000. There's a lot of things that really bug me about the Canadian film scene – mainly the resources being concentrated in central Canada, the failure to see that a vibrant Canadian cinema could already have been established if the money had been used differently. There's a film co-op in every major city. If the money had been shared out to grassroots projects...instead money went into films that were supposedly marketable, films that imitated American products. It was a shame and a terrible waste of money.

There are so many barriers. To get script development money you have to have a track record to begin with. The people who make these decisions are very clean people who eat well. On the other hand the Canada Council runs on a jury system that's relatively fair. You get judged by five different filmmakers, from different parts of the country.

It would be a simple matter for the government to help the film industry to flourish. Some of the films you'd get would be useless of course, but you'd also get very good films that would represent Canada as a culturally separate place that has control over its cultural destiny and its soul. Some of them would be less marketable than others, but there would be an interesting crop of films to offer the world. The world offers stuff to us, especially the Americans with the bags of mindless films

which seem calculated to keep people from thinking.

I'm very angry about this. It enrages me that the sources of creative money in this country have shrunk so much, especially lately with this government. So many people are going with so little, and we know because we went with so little for so long. I'll do it again, because I'm not after the bucks. I'd just like to be able to keep the production rolling, to not have to keep stopping all the time.

Andy Jones: I'm not sure I'm willing to go through what's necessary to get the funding up front. To make that kind of film is useless anyway. I'd rather make a poverty-stricken film that's got something in it.

Michael Jones: There was a point where there were 50 or more feature films made a year in Canada. The structure was in place and then it collapsed. All we really need is an idea, a camera and some actors. That's all we had. Then you need to process the film, and eat while you're doing it. That's the great thing about NIFCO, it provided the production facilities and kept us independent. Although when we started the film they had no Steenbeck, or flatbed editing facilities. But as long as you could survive, you could work.

"You're telling me I'm sane? But you're a figment of my imagination!" - (*Faustus Bidgood to Bogue*).

To date, \$100,000 was spent on *Faustus*. The artists' investment adds up to \$1,000,000. Most Canadian feature films cost at least twice this, with *Joshua Then and Now* peaking at \$13,000,000.

Michael Jones: There was \$200,000 from the NFB, easily. There's a problem with them putting money into films like this. People in private companies object very strongly to the NFB doing the lab work which they feel they should be paid to do. But the industry wouldn't look at us, because we had nothing and we needed a lot. There were a few exceptions, but we needed vast resources and we were nowhere as far as they were concerned. It was very fortunate for us that the NFB was there and was able to assist our kind of production, which they did with intelligence, graciousness and no editorial interference.

Scene: Fred Bonia-Coombs visits a Toronto cafe. On stage there is a flamenco dancer, moving to the Spanish music. Suddenly the dancer becomes confused, his movements are disjointed and he starts stepdancing. Bonia-Coombs, intrigued, invite the young man to his table and gets him drunk. The man turns out to be Eddie Peddle, soon to be a popular politician who fuelled his rise to power with a joke about a Newfoundlander, a main-

lander, a wheel-barrow and two tea bags.

CODCO's members play the main roles in *Faustus*. The flexible art scene allows people to cross over disciplines and frequently they do. The structure also allows filmmakers to express their different talents. Andy, for example, acted, wrote, helped with the casting, and penned many of the songs in the film. Michael has written, directed and acted in several films, including acting in *Extraordinary Visitor*. Many names in the credits appear two or three or even half a dozen times.

Michael Jones: The film community in Newfoundland is closely related to the theatre community, which is the mainstay of our artistic environment and our most advanced discipline. Mary Walsh says every Newfoundlander is an actor...people say that about the Irish too. A man connected with the Dublin Film Festival said something very interesting about *Faustus*. He said it was a pastiche of the Irish Rebellion of 1916. That started when a small group of foolish people, well, two intelligent people and six fools, declared themselves the Irish Republic. They were not taken seriously, even by the Irish, until the British came over and shot them. The course of Irish history was changed because of the actions of a few people, and this was echoed in *Faustus*.

While Newfoundland, like Quebec, was under the arm of the Mother Church for the better part of this century, Newfoundland was also in the shadow of Great Britain when it came to the arts and academics. This colonialism was expressed in the reviews of *Faustus* after the premiere in St. John's. There are few film critics in St. John's, but three of the most prolific theatre critics are from Great Britain. They have never been infatuated with the local arts scene, and when *Faustus* had its world premiere in LSPU Hall, they called it 'self-indulgent,' 'a prodigal waste of talent.' One of them predicted the film would never get anywhere outside of its local audience and advised people to just catch the final few minutes of credits. Another critic said, "Andy Jones plays the part of the fantasizing bureaucrat, but on the obverse side I had to notice the possibilities that he was acting out a fantasy of his own - that of being a film star."

Michael Jones: We were severely battered by the critics in St. John's. They were what I can only describe as vindictive. It was very discouraging. But we ended up doing very well in Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa and selling out our night screenings. The film critics didn't always praise it, but they treated it seriously as a significant part of the Canadian film scene. And that's all we ever wanted, for the film to be taken seriously, and to have a life of its own. ●

Michael and Andy Jones'

The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood

"To work such wide enchantment - who can doubt it -

You, Poet, are the man, So set about it."

- The Director in the Prelude in Goethe's *Faust* (Part 1).

My last real connection with Newfoundland was sitting in The Newfoundland Bar on the Danforth in Toronto's Greek neighbourhood, confusing enough in and of itself, discussing oceanic cinema-life with friend Robert Frank, which helped clear up the confusion. Beyond that, in my earlier days, I had hitch-hiked to Newfoundland three times. It was always a paradise to me: a land of good people, hard life and good times. The national motto on its coat of arms could very well be 'life's a bitch, and then you die...laughing.' It is a funny place, (as in humorous). It is also a sad place, ruthlessly exploited and culturally colonized before and since the genocide of the original Newfoundlanders - the Algonkian speaking native Beothuk Indians, called "Red" because of their custom of daubing their bodies with red ocher. I've always had it in my head to retire to Newfoundland - to Ochre Pit Cove where the fisherman's committee recently sought a million dollars of foreign aid from the U.S. State Department, after a rejection from its Canadian counterpart. The people of this small community thought that their request was reasonable because Newfoundland is a "Third World Province."

I want to make personal cinema in Newfoundland because of these people and because the first film I saw in film school was shot there. I think it was actually shot in Newfoundland before there was a Canada. I remember the film had a lot of waves and boats and pirates and things in it. But more than all of this, I saw my first whale while on a ferry to one of those now disappeared out-port towns. O, Magnificent Cetacea, Where is Your Song Now? Which brings me to Canada's own epic and visionary whale of a tale, *The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood*, a new feature from The Island.

Faustus Bidgood is our *Moby Dick*. The Jones' our Herman Melvilles. *Faustus Bidgood* gives Goethe's *Faust* a last name. The Jones' and the other creators of this truly wonderful, wonderfully true tale have taken Faust by the tail.

Taken Faust by the horns and tossed him into a soup of cod-tongues where the characters also speak in tongues. And, Boy, do they speak volumes about our culture and to the possibilities of our future cinema.

They also wanted to open the film at The Berlin Film Festival because they thought Faust himself would be able to afford the airfare. But, instead, they opted for the Cinema Today and Tomorrow Section of the Montreal Festival because Montreal is more like Berlin than it realizes, and because the film is more like tomorrow than yesterday. It also played at Toronto's Festival of Festivals of Festivities.

Faustus Bidgood incarnates all classic storytelling techniques, from Shakespeare's prelude, five acts and epilogue to the Grecian diurnal cycle, all the right mechanisms and struggles, all the right twists in the road, the right cinematic verve and swerve. What has been served to us should be a huge popular success, if it could just dawn on the hosers in high places to don the right support hose apparatus to allow for the proper distribution of this important film. People should be forced to watch this film. Tied down into their seats and attached to laugh-o-meters. If they don't laugh their genetic codes off then they have no connection to the Founding Fathers of this Confection or to the Floundering Fathers of Newfoundland's own Confederation. Yes, folks, it's a million dollars of surrealistic mayhem. It's great and transformational story-telling. This is what *Faustus Bidgood* is. It is a "yarn" as opposed to the "yawn" that so characterizes our national cinema. Of course I'm unabashedly biased. I wear my *Faustus Bidgood* button on my sleeve. The film caught me in a fishnet of intrigue and lingerie. It is a fish story without the fish. A fish story where WE are the fish. In keeping with the natural aural/oral story-telling traditions of the Eastern part of this new world, *Faustus Bidgood* is a film about St. John'sian dream theory, the internal workings of the cosmic comic-tragic psyche, fate as "the" ultimate fisherperson, and everything from A to Z (Aristotle to the Zoo). It is Kabuki-Newfie theatre, under the influence of Newfoundland's sister zen island, Japan.

I went to see *Faustus Bidgood* at 9:00 am on a rainy morning at the Montreal World Film Festival. The place was almost packed, due in part to great advance word and work. The audience was unusually appreciative. I knew I was in for something so I made notes and notes trying to write down what was happening. More notes than I ever made in University. 20 pages.

It is a film which is impossible to describe. It is romp, pomp and rage. It is Cinema de la Rtpy. to describe the plot in a word... "Wild." To describe the film in a sentence... "It was wild." To describe



• Soundman (Jim Rillie) and cameraman (Michael Jones) with Faustus and Eddy Peddle (Robert Joy).

it in minute, a day or week would take a lifetime.

I knew **Faustus** was a good film by the audience's reaction and fulfilled expectation. I knew **Faustus Bidgood** was a truly great film when the American critic left halfway through the screening just as the film was starting to get really interesting.

Over and beyond the obviously effusive, yet obfuscating objectivity that has characterized this review so far, if one is to examine **Faustus Bidgood** as a purely phenomenological experience, then it is both a phenomenon and logical. That is to say, it is determinism with a demented face-lift. And above all, one must quickly be attracted to the deft and sure way in which the film is structured and edited. This is the strength, genius and power of **Faustus**. Speaking as a sophomoric sophist and as an editor of films which turned out unintentionally funny I realize how absolutely impossible is the task to cut pieces of supposedly comedic celluloid together to make people laugh. I worked with Ralph Rosenblum for a while in New York City. Here was a man who taught Woody Allen, through his good nature and good gene splicing, how to make it funny. I remember asking Ralph what the secret was to cutting comedy. He said, "Leave the Joke on the Screen." It was worth getting mugged in NYC for that information. And now it seems, the secret is alive and well and living in an editing room in this country as well. Jones has discovered it. And it is on the screen. The jokes in **Faustus Bidgood** work. They work because they are multi-planar. The timing is right. They are ahead of the audience, but not over their heads. Just when you thought you had it all figured out, another element is added, another punchline, or non-sequitur or change-up, or it gets down right serious again. And then it furiously moves forward. The juggling and jostling of the various plots, sub-plots, sub-texts, sublimals all divinely intertwine, juxtapose and extrapolate, as if it were legal to juxtapose and extrapolate. You sit back in awe as the film drives literally to a climax. It all makes sense, perfectly. The black in white imagination of a film within an imagination within a television studio within a dream within a...it all makes perfect sense.

Although it is a much overused word, I think the film is a stylistic "break-through." **Faustus** breaks through a number of heretofore stereotypic Canadian style systems. Scripted in workshop and improvisational rehearsal before the next scheduled shooting, Andy would arrive on the set with pages of (trans)script onto which was already superimposed "the Plot" i.e. what was necessary and needed. The shooting went on, in fits and starts, for a year with much downtime for reflection and reworking. Thus the process developed. Without the luxury of seeing rushes which, for financial reasons, were kept

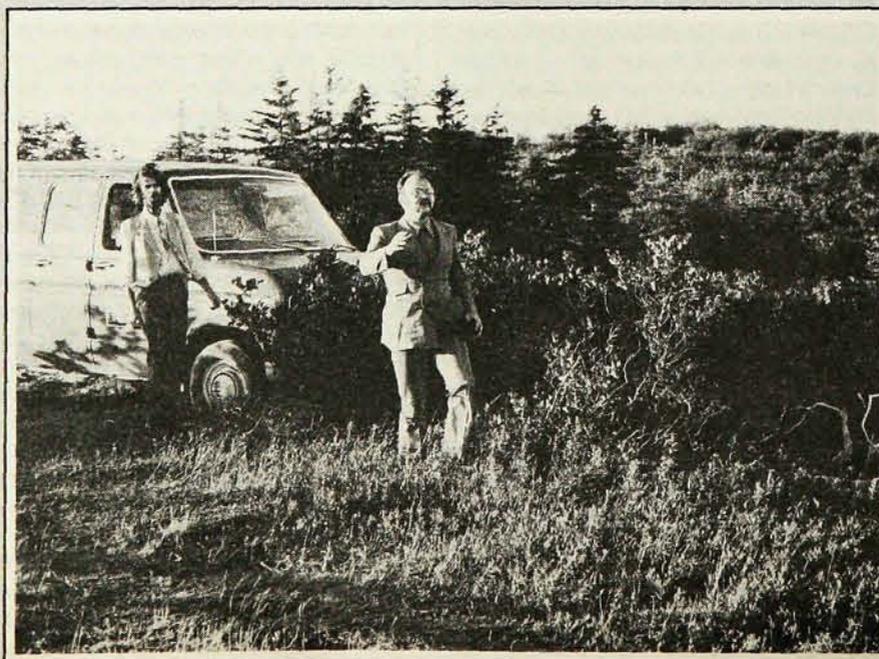
undeveloped in the deep freeze for a year the **Faustus** team relied more on intuition and narrative risk to complete the shooting phase of the production. With the developing and workprinting came more headaches. Earlier trial demo versions, necessary for continued fund-raising, had to be scrapped and reconstituted. At one point the negative went missing, someone claiming it was used as "gash" or sound track spacing. It eventually turned up in one lab's vault, an archive before its time. They weren't so lucky with their original 1/4 inch recording tapes. Has anybody out there seen...? As I say, it was hard, slow work. It wasn't that they lacked advice. Certain of the Institutional Cinematic Culture Creatures told them to "get a professional," that "they couldn't edit," and that it was the type of film that "I despise."

But, there were others who saw in **Faustus** an original film just waiting to be born and it was their assistance that got it made.

You can read elsewhere in *Cinema Canada* about the trials and tribulations of the Making of **Faustus**. You can read all about NIFCO, CODCO, NEWFCO, NFBco, and all the other acronymic ele-

ments that came together to produce this film. But what you can't read is the film itself, without going to see it, or demanding it be shown on the National Network or buying the video. If Michael Jones is right in stating that "in the next ten years Newfoundland-made features will take their place in the off-beat cinema of the world," then I think there is hope for the resurrection of our national cinema as long as its dressed up in its own indigenous truth. It is only yep to the cultural yuppie-czars to discover themselves what **Faustus Bidgood** and other films of its ilk are about and then begin again to finance our own filmic future. Jones and Jones and the rest of their fellow travellers are as talented as any Woody Allen, Monty Python or Brian Mulroney ever were. Their only sin...being from a "region" of "Canada." Their only fault...being seriously funny. If audiences in Ottawa, Canada's Disneyland, can watch the South African film **The Gods Must Be Crazy** for over 106 weeks running, then there should be a place in every moviehouse for the **Faustus Bidgood's** of the country that Ottawa purports to be the capital of...

Perhaps, after this examination of the



• Faustus meets his mother Mary Bidgood (Jane Dingle) returning from the dead.

films' dexterous montage, its sinuous and comedic plot and the revelations of its making for which there will never be a "Making of the **Faustus Bidgood Film**" film, the most important thing to be said about **Faustus Bidgood** is that it is a serious work. It examines psychological reality and cinematic time as Alain Resnais does. It dismantles media, politics, religion and education as few others dare to. It turns the "Newfie joke" inside out, replacing self-depreciation with angry, artistic self-assertion. It takes on the "big" questions and makes them absurdly questionable. **Faustus Bidgood** is a film made on a dream by dreamers for dreamers. It creates a reality in that dream life and that is what cinema is supposed to do, isn't it? You can expect much more from the New-found-lands of this land. **Faustus is Brave New Cinema**. It is revolutionary. It is pure. And it is free from dogma as the rest of us go to the dogs. To use that horrible, centralist Canadian word it is a "regional film." But that phrase also speaks to a nation's funny bone. To its cultural viability. To its future. It is time to Overthrow the Culture Barons. Take back the night and the day. Take back our stories and our screens. Let's have more and more from the Jones' of this land and more and more films as valuable as **Faustus Bidgood**. The whales just might be happy again.

Peter Wintonick •

THE ADVENTURE OF FAUSTUS

BIDGOOD d./p./sc. Michael Jones, Andy Jones orig. screenplay Andy Jones "The Adventures of Faustus Bidgood" assoc. p. Robert Joy d.o.p. Michael Jones film ed. Michael Jones loc. sd./mus. rec. Jim Rillie music d. Robert Joy orig. mus. Paul Steffler, Robert Joy, Pamela Morgan prod. man. Robert Joy, Michael Seaborn, Bryan Hennessey, Wayne Hynes, Mack Furlong, Mary Walsh, Scott Strong, James Lewis lighting Derek Butt, Jim Maynard cont. Susan Hoddinott, Valerie Winter cast. Mary Walsh, Rick Boland asst. cam. Derek Norman, Michael Riggio, Scott Strong 2nd unit cam. Stuart Allen additional cam. Nigel Markham, Scott Strong, Keith Whelan additional sd. Keith Whelan, Michael Riggio, Michael Seaborn, John Doyle asst. ed. Dominique Gusset additional ed. Les Halman, Dominique Gusset additional sc. by the Faustus Bidgood writers workshop Rick Boland, Mack Furlong, Susan Hoddinott, Andy Jones, Michael Jones, Robert Joy, Greg Malone, Neil Murray, Mary Walsh set dec. Michael Kearney, Bawnie Oulton, Susan Hickey stills Scott Strong, Denys Short set graphics Kent Barrett, Peter Breckon, Scott Goudie, Dave Roe set cons. Bren Blackmore, Gerard Janes, Randy Follett, Jules Drake, Phonse White slide show art Michael Sraga grid animation Chris Hinton newspaper Dave Roe additional music Noel Dinn, Don Wherry, Brian Griffin additional mus. rec. Wallace Hammond, Bill Harris mus. ed. Dominique Gusset sd. ed. Les Halman, Eric Emery sd. mix Jean-Pierre Joutel, Adrian Croll op. efx. Michael Cleary, Susan Gourley neg. cutter Robert Shipley timer Guy Destroismaisons titles Val Teodori post. p. services National Film Board of Canada post. p. co-ord. Richard Michaud p./NFB Giles Walker l.p. Andy Jones, Greg Malone, Robert Joy, Brian Downey, Maisie Rillie, Mary Walsh, Beni Malone, Tommy Sexton, Cathy Jones, Judy Parsons, Mary Whitten, Bryan Hennessey, Nelson Porter, Bas Jamieson, Gerry Curnew, Jane Dingle, Val Ryan. p.c. Faustus Bidgood Productions Ltd. Produced with the assistance of The National Film Board of Canada, Atlantic Region Production Studio, and the support of The Canada Council. **The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood** was filmed and edited in St. John's, Newfoundland at the Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers Co-operative. Colour, 35/16mm running time: 110 mins

photo: Ron Fitzgerald

photo: Ron Fitzgerald