

realized quality of the screenplay is reflected in the film's visual style. Henry Fiks' photography is often, in individual shots and sequences, dramatically expressive. The hotel milieu provides natural visual images which are employed to advantage: the stairwells, the empty foyer, the corridors and the frosted-glass fire doors. For a low-budget movie it's often pretty good-looking. But there's a tendency to resort fitfully to various contradictory cinematic modes: heightening effects without point, using dramatic angles on insignificant events, and, paradoxically, failing to handle effectively scenes which call for visual excitement. Examples of this latter weakness are the hide-and-seek sequence in the hotel basement, the scenes of Billy's female impersonation (he wears a blond wig about as indifferently as he might borrow an old hat), and the culminating frenzy of the gang-assault. Apparently some scenes so completely failed to come off that they were cut from the final version, notably a scene of Billy's sensational appearance in drag in the St. Thomas carnival parade.

By contrast, or perhaps by necessity, the editing of *125 Rooms* is consistently crisp and professional, a credit to Tom Berner and Gordon McClellan. The opening sequences and a very classy title-montage deserve special mention. When you have a low budget, limited experience, scanty resources, and no opportunity to extend the shoot, stop and rethink, or take whole sequences over again — a resourceful editor, who can take what you came back with and make it work, is your most valuable asset.

This was my 100th Canadian feature film. I'm grateful to the producer, Don Haig, for arranging a screening for me, and must say that he seemed like a wonderfully humane and realistic person for a young director to be managed by. Despite the generally critical tone of my remarks, I believe that the film deserves exhibition and the attention of Canadian audiences. The future of a worthwhile Canadian film culture remains with the Patrick Louberts and the *125 Rooms*, rather than with any number of *Rocking Boats*, *Children under Leaves*, and *Black Christmasses*.

Robert Fothergill

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Will the Real Johnny Canuck please stand up?

When does the hard part begin? When an empty dream and a few bruises are all that's left to show for forty years of a man's life. When he must face the truth and live with it.

Jim King once had a dream. Like so many others before him and so many more to come, he saw fame and fortune in the world of Country and Western music. Goodbye West Eden, Ontario. Lookout Nashville, Tennessee. And now, years later, he is a singer, the King of "King and Country, the Best in Country and Western". But Nashville is still looking. King hasn't made it yet. This week he's playing West Eden. It's a return engagement.

The Hard Part Begins is something of a road film. And true to that tradition, King indeed finds you can't go back. He takes the gig with some understandable reluctance, knowing that he's due midweek in Toronto to talk contract with Hurricane sound, the most important recording company in the country, and knowing too that it could be both his first and final big chance. And yet here he is, after all of these years, heading right back where he started as if nothing had ever happened. Not an encouraging sign.

He has paid his dues, living the sad little life that he sings of in his sad little songs. Country and Western music has always had an acute, if somewhat sentimental sense of the harder realities, a sense which is clearly reflected in Paul Lynch's direction of *The Hard Part Begins*. It's blue-collar existence. Of necessity, he has become a bit of a con-artist. And taken by his personable charm and persuasive optimism, others have been quick to tie their dreams to his star.

There are the women. Jenny Frame, for one, is his girl-friend and King and Country's "other" singer. She's not just some chick that he picked up on a whim, inevitably to be kicked out of his life on the road between one gig and the next. She is, if he only knew how to accept it, their ticket to Nashville. Ironically, she doesn't share his passion for singing; she's happy just to be a part of his life, hoping someday that they might settle

down together. Someday when he has finally made it. For a long time she wants to believe that he will.

There are the men. Duane Eccles is King and Country's steel guitarist and although he's too busy enjoying himself to be much of a musician, he faithfully believes that King will take him along when the time comes. Together with the band's dope smoking drummer, Roxon, the hard drinking Eccles personifies the conflict between Country culture and the Rock culture which is gradually replacing it on the beer hall circuit and dooming Jim King to obscurity should he fail to leave it behind.

There are others too, old friends and enemies from West Eden who view his return with some, if only passing interest. A bitter ex-wife, a troubled son, a dying friend: all have shared King's dream of success at one time or another. And optimist that he is, King doesn't hesitate to let them all know that his time has come. Nashville, by way of Toronto, awaits. . . . It simply remains for him to learn the truth, that it is Jenny Frame who has caught the ear of Hurricane Sound. Young, pretty and vulnerable girl singers are popular these days. Has-beens, so they say, are not. For a moment, King handles the truth badly, the old charm suddenly wears a little thin, the confidence has been shaken. He still has his pride though, as much in his music as in himself. And there will always be other dreamers who are eager to jump on his bandwagon in pursuit of their own fame and fortune. The show will go on.

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So, what in the name of John A. Macdonald are we going to do with all of these Johnny Canucks, so often and so conveniently thought to be "losers"?

Enjoy them perhaps. And forget this business about losers. It's an easy label and says as much for the Canadian sense of individualism as it does for the Canadian hero. Irrepressible and irresponsible, Jim King and others like him, *The Rowdyman* Will Cole and a *Paperback Hero* Rick Dillon, to name but two who are remarkably similar, are some of the very few truly colourful characters that this country

has created. For better or worse. Dreamers all, they're just slightly out of step, uncompromising individuals and good-natured misfits. And for that reason, they frighten Canadians with their dreams: King's for the Big Time, Cole's for the Good Times and Dillon's for some other Time, ten years ago or fifty. In a country where "why rock the boat?" seems to perfectly express the National Philosophy of Life, it's easy to laugh at these "town fools" with the people of Smalltown, Ontario, Newfoundland or Saskatchewan. And it's reassuring to dismiss them as losers.

But listen to Jim King philosophically writing off an eventful week in West Eden as just a test of his staying power. He has learned something of himself and is prepared to live with, or perhaps in spite of the truth as he now knows it. And watch Will Cole, after all that he has been through, wandering down the road in search of the ol' times and kicking up his heels in anticipation. A loser? Convince *him* of that. Or Rick Dillon, shot down on Mainstreet, Delisle, Saskatchewan, living and dying a crazy dream. If they should suddenly give up on their dreams, if Jim King were to return to West Eden's tire factory, if the Rowdyman were to shake more than just flour out of his hair, if Rick Dillon were to die as any other than the Last of the Big Guns, would that change anything? *Then* they might indeed be losers, true to no one, least of all themselves.

Johnny Canuck as dreamer. It's something to think about. Duddy Kravitz to the contrary, it's really not how you win or lose, it's whether you play the game. Win or lose, Johnny Canuck continues to play the game. Just look at Sir John, our National Dreamer.

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Leo Bachle might once have had a dream. But he's a little older though not necessarily any wiser in his own way than Jim King. He too is an entertainer, a stand-up comic. And very likely he has seen a dream of the Big Time fade as the years pass and the bar circuit that he has so long and often travelled bringing "joy into the hearts of the inebriated" becomes ever more familiar. Now, he has few delusions. He's a different breed of Johnny Canuck, a Canadian Everyman. He's just doing his job, taking the bookings as they come from his Toronto agency. This week it's St. Thomas. The Grand Central Hotel. One hundred and twenty-five rooms of comfort.

Like *The Hard Part Begins*, 125 Rooms of Comfort follows a tradition of sorts. It's the well worn Hail! Hail! The Gang's All Here approach, drawing an assortment of characters together by chance within the confines of the Grand Central. They're not together long, just a day or so, but it's long enough to change the pattern of at least one life. (And yes, it may sound familiar. *Hotel*, however, was never like this!) Leo Bachle is but one of those characters, and like the others plays a specific role in the proceedings. There's something about the man that makes him seem respectable. In any other Canadian film, a night-club comedian would probably be immediately suspect of something. But it may well be that the other characters, a strange and desperate lot, show him in a particularly reputable light. (Of course, anyone who has played the *Juliette Show* can't be all bad.) He is, in a sense, the first to arrive and the last to leave and acts only as a witness to the other's actions, never to become personally involved. Is this the Johnny Canuck we all know and love?

He watches without really understanding. How would he know that the Grand Central Hotel is supposed to be bought by American business interests? That the callous but smooth talking American, Oscar Kidd is here to close the deal. That the Hotel's manager is helping things along. Why would he care that the hotel's present owner, Billie Joyce, is a retired Rock singer. That he's a transvestite and he's cracking up. That he has decided not to sell the grand Central and the old tradition, his father's tradition and, yes, the Canadian tradition that it represents. How would Leo Bachle perceive such a fascinating world when he remains a soul apart, not even obliging a rather condescending offer to get involved from Kidd's more than willing wife. To her, he's just little Johnny Canuck. He's probably the only Canadian she has ever met.

Politics are seldom very far from the surface of 125 Rooms of Comfort. (In fact, change a few names and details, dub in a certain other language and voilà! A Québec film. Well, almost. . . .) But would Leo Bachle realize the significance of all these things around him? How is he to understand the scene which greets him outside the Grand Central? Billie Joyce in drag, beaten by St. Thomas thugs, lies in an alley. Oscar Kidd and his Canadian friend, the hotel manager, stand over him. Waiting for him to die. Waiting for a man, metaphorically the cultural split-personality of

this country, to die. (Director Patrick Loubert readily admits that the metaphor is forced.) And Johnny Canuck looks on. The American pays him off. Of course, it's just the balance of his fee for a night's entertainment, but there's no denying the meaning of the exchange. Johnny Canuck hesitates a little longer and then walks away. Does he understand the truth of what he has seen? Will he be able to live with it? Will we?

—Mark Miller

Les Dernières Fiançailles

Perhaps the first love story of an *old* couple in film history, *Les dernières fiançailles* is devoid of story line. But what it lacks in subject matter, it gains in depth and intensity. The film does not stress the whims and turmoil of a young, or even mature modern couple struggling to stay together, as in Maurice Pialat's *Nous ne vieillirons pas ensemble* or Mike Nichols' version of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, but rather the degree of harmony Rose (Marthe Nadeau) and Armand (J.-Léo Gagnon) have reached after 55 years of marriage. Their lives, from early sunrise to sunset, are a series of simple activities rather than events, each one accomplished as a ritual, with a gravity reminiscent of monastic life. Their modest living quarters, a cottage rather than a house, are located in the unperturbed countryside. The rusticity of the interior may offend the taste of city-dwellers and suburbanites spoiled by an excess of comfort and luxury. But material concern is not of prime importance here. And what a refreshing approach to life since the cheap ill-matched tableware pieces are transformed and enhanced by Rose's noble gestures as she sets the breakfast table. A privilege granted only to those living an undisturbed life close to nature, which is omnipresent in this film. Weather, for instance, is an important factor in the life of the couple, on account of the crops. Never hermetic, indoor scenes always encompass a glimpse of the outdoors, through the many large windows of the dwelling. And many scenes take place in the open air, such as the couple taking a slow walk in their apple orchard, chatting and teasing each other, while attentive to nature's beauty, or the rainy day that Rose plants seeds in the earth, which she caresses with the palm of her hand. Surprisingly touching moments, because we are reminded of a fact that is too often