

# a healthy case of craziness

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**Outrageous. Many people have thought it was, and for a variety of reasons. John Locke caught it in New York and was wowed. Ted Fox saw it in Ottawa and wasn't so impressed. And then there's Jim Kelly, c.s.c., who tells us about the shoot and about the investment made by the crafts-people.**

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by John W. Locke

Robin (Craig Russell) calling from New York about his job in the Jack Rabbit bar.



While I was waiting in line to get into the theatre to see Richard Benner's **Outrageous**, a classical little old lady stopped as she left the film, turned to the waiting crowd and said in a thick European accent, "It's the best show you've ever seen." This is not a typical reaction to Canadian films, and it is not an expected reaction from a little old lady to a film about the love between a schizophrenic girl and a female impersonator. The unsolicited testimonial proved to be very close to the truth: **Outrageous**, while not the best film I have ever seen, is the best Canadian narrative film I have seen, and forgetting about nationalism for a moment, it is a very good film indeed in 1977 international terms. It manages to be enormously entertaining and moving while offering insights about an unusual relationship between two unique people. And it manages to do this while acknowledging, rather than disguising, that it is a contemporary Canadian film.



Martin (Allan Moyle) and Liza talk with Robin in a Toronto streetcar.

The lady on the street critic referred to the film as a show, and again she proved to be very perceptive. A significant portion of the entertainment value of the film comes from watching the stage shows which are integrated into the film. Craig Russell, who plays Robin, does impersonations of entertainers and movie stars which are hilarious in their exaggeration of mannerisms of such women as Bette Davis, Barbra Streisand, Mae West and Carol Channing. Although Robin's impersonations are the best shows in the film, the lesser acts are unforgettable: A man who weighs perhaps 300 pounds plays the owner of a New York bar catering to the leather crowd. His normal attire includes a World War II combat helmet with his name, Jimmy, inscribed on it in glitter. And he does an extremely raunchy strip tease, in drag of course. **Outrageous!** A black drag queen dances to a song called "You Can Set the World on Fire" with such energy that it is difficult to notice the narrative significance of the lyrics. The routine is repeated later in the film with the hope that the audience will stop being overwhelmed by the sound and energy and think about the words.

All this is very showy stuff and it accounts for much of the momentum of the film. The stage acts are interspersed

with the development of the narrative in a way which keeps the film moving. It is a very serious story of the relationship between Robin and Liza (the schizophrenic girl beautifully played by Hollis McLaren), but the serious development of the story is neatly balanced by the shows and by the wit of the characters.

At one point, a poster for De Mille's **The Greatest Show on Earth** is seen in Robin's New York apartment. The poster can be taken as a reference to the showy facet of the film because characters often seem to be doing their act on and off the stage: Martin, played by Allan Moyle, shocks trolley riders with his mascaraed eyes; Robin and Liza play in the snow on Yonge Street; Liza acts sane for a social worker. The film is also filled with characters who want to amuse, and who are not bothered by making a spectacle of themselves; it is really like a circus at times. Finally, the structure of the film is like a circus in that we watch a circus by shifting our attention back and forth from one ring to another. **Outrageous** has this circus structure, or in filmic terms, it is structured by parallel montage. We alternate between seeing Robin's life and seeing Liza's life. The film opens with them apart, then they come together, then they move apart when Robin goes to New York, and finally they are together again in New York. Parallel montage is used to develop both their periods of separation and the details of their periods of living together. It is a



Robin on stage as Carol Channing.

very good choice of a structure because it allows the necessary freedom to repeatedly move back and forth between the serious parts and the spectacular parts without explaining to the audience exactly why the transition is being made at that particular time. The audience accepts the editing style, and with it, the abrupt transitions. These abrupt transitions keep the film moving, and it never seems quite as serious as it is. The structure accounts for much of the film's success.

*John Locke is a film professor at Concordia University.*



# Seen from Behind the Camera

by Jim Kelly

From my standpoint, as director of photography, the first thing to consider is the budget of the film in relation to its ambitiousness. The film was extremely ambitious in terms of the number of locations, the extras, the size of the entire thing. There have been lots of low-budget films, like **Sudden Fury** which I did. But that one only involved one farmhouse and one barn. In comparison, **Outrageous** was extremely ambitious, and so the money really meant time, and knowing how to do it.

The public figure of \$165,000 is not what we had for production. I have it on good source that \$30,000 of that was spent at Cannes for publicity, and probably well spent. We had to produce the film for \$130,000. So, first of all, we had to work quickly and compromise. In terms of the camera, I chose an Arriflex 16M, which requires a large, bulky blimp, a blimp being the casing that goes around it to deaden the noise. It was a large camera that looks like a Mitchell because of its size, and this is the disadvantage, because it's bulky. The advantage is that you can get much better sound than by using the Arriflex BL which makes a lot of noise. Another advantage was that we were going with prime lenses to try and get the best quality possible for the blow-up. We sometimes used a second camera when we had to, and we used the BL then with the zoom lens so there are some zooms in the film, but that was a back-up camera.

In terms of lighting, again because of the production situation, the decision was made to go with minimum or simple lighting levels, using few instruments. In other words, low light levels, few instruments. I like to use low-light levels. The barn sequence in **Sudden Fury** was entirely at that low light level — all shot at 2.8 — and it was marvellous. I notice somebody has already pointed out that, in **Outrageous**, he couldn't see the face and he didn't like it. That's exactly what I do like.

Now the advantage of this choice was simply freedom for the actors and director. You have no large lighting instruments around which burn up when people get close to them and so there's more freedom for them to operate; plus it's faster. We can come in, work off the practicals, add

one other light and go. The disadvantage is that there is little depth of field. And the focus puller, my assistant, Richard Wincenty, did a fantastic job. There are many shots in the film that seem soft; this is because of the lens, not Rick.

We have one regret. We requested a test on the lenses and wanted that test blown up to 35mm and viewed in a theatre. Because of the time and money situation, this was never done. In fact, the arrangements for the lab were not made until almost one day before the film started, and so we were unable to really do anything.

So, although I think my lighting in **Outrageous** is far superior to what I did in **Sudden Fury**, the blow-up is atrocious because adequate time was not spent at the lab. I was given the opportunity to criticize, which I did, and that was the night before they went to Cannes. I assumed that, based on what we talked about, the blow-up would be changed. I learned later that because of the producer's rush to make sales and so forth, they didn't have the time. I think it could have looked as good, if not better, than **Sudden Fury**. As it now stands, I think it is a horrible thing. I didn't go to the gala or anything. I just wasn't going to sit through it; it was just too upsetting. It's unsatisfactory in terms of the colors and the tonality. Besides, the cropping they did badly affects my composition. When you blow up, you can't get the entire frame; you only get a portion of it. The blow-up was just set kind of in the middle. Now, if you're going to just do it on one pan without adjusting every shot — and adjusting costs money which they probably didn't have — it should have been set at the top. I mean, obviously, no cameraman sets a shot in which the actor's head pops out of the frame!

The director, Dick Benner, is a very sensitive, intelligent, rational guy whom I like to work with. I think he did a fantastic job considering that he's only done one minor film before, and no features.

One of the things that I like to do when working with a director is to work out what might be called the leitmotif. In other words, how can we embed in the visual, the conflict or the internal state, which is usually carried at the narrative line or in the dialogue? Some of the things that we were able to achieve might be of interest. Hollis McLaren continually

finds herself in corners, in an entrapment. You see the Toronto tower and then you think we're outside, and then we pull back and we're in one of those little narrow tight constructions with bars and so on. And then in the house, there are corners. She gets herself into corners trying to get away from the bone crusher. There were many things, like when she goes into the centre of the Toronto Dominion Centre, but they were forced to edit them out apparently. Other things, like barriers between people — the doors, and open spaces, separating people from contacting each other. I don't think that was effectively carried out in the film, but at least we were trying. And then, the other thing was the circular motif — like in the title and in the end — the unity and togetherness.

Dick was very susceptible and interested in trying to deal with the camera as more than a simple zero of the actors. He's a guy who knows what he wants. So I could suggest things, but he was very much a director's director. He wanted this and he wanted that, and I think that's good.

The craftspeople feel that the investment of money at Cannes perhaps went to sell the film, but there is a conflict between protecting the investment of the investors or protecting the investment of the craftspeople. It's often thought that only the investors have an interest in the film, but on a low-budget feature, the pay does not compensate. A large number of people on the crew were really interested in doing things well, they have pride in their work. That's where I feel I've been sold out.

The producers had no real respect for the film medium or the craft of the film. They could have postponed the opening date in New York and gone back to re-do the blow-up. They could have said, "let's get this thing to work better". Instead, they decided, without consultation, that a poor blow-up would not affect sales, so they went with it. They feel they owe me nothing because I've been paid. Well, in fact, I have not been paid fully in terms of having had to invest a lot of myself.

Nevertheless, every producer in town had a shot at this and Dick Benner told me that none of them thought it was anything. Bill Marshall and Henk Van der Kolk were the only ones who recognized that **Outrageous** was something special, and would back it, which is to their credit. □

*Jim Kelly was Director of Photography on **Sudden Fury** and **Outrageous**, and worked second unit on **Rituals** and **Coup d'Etat**.*



Liza (Hollis McLaren), nutty as a fruitcake in New York as Robin's agent (David McIlwraith) looks on.

Another ingredient in the success of the film is the quality of the acting. The acting is so uniformly excellent that it is positively "un-Canadian." I have noticed that almost all Canadian films contain at least one atrocious performance; at least one person in each film seems to be unable to say their lines with conviction. I do not know whether this phenomenon is caused by the use of non-actors or actors with only stage experience or whether it is caused by limitations of the director's talent, but it occurs with alarming regularity. **Outrageous** is an exception to this generalisation, and it is un-Canadian in this specific sense: all the performers say their lines in a believable fashion. It does not have those moments when a poorly said line breaks the flow of the narrative by forcing you to think about the awkward way in which the line was said.

Hollis McLaren must be given credit for the film's best acting. She conveys Liza's craziness subtly with details rather than with shouts, and this works very well in the context of such a raucous film. For example, when Liza must appear sufficiently sane to a visiting social worker to avoid being sent back to the mental hospital, McLaren plays Liza with extreme tension. We clearly see how the performance of the simplest task, such as making a cup of coffee, is excruciatingly difficult for this schizophrenic child, and we sense the relief expressed by Liza's sigh when she has managed the task successfully. Hollis McLaren is tremendously successful at conveying Liza's difficulty just being in the quotidian world. She is so good that I think she will very quickly become Canada's next international film actress.

A further indication of the level of acting is that many of the film's crucial lines are extremely difficult to say. Points are made with lines which cannot quite be said with a straight face, but which somehow have to be said seriously enough so that they do not simply sound corny: when

Liza's psychiatrist asks if she sleeps with Robin, she replies, "Robin and I sleep in different worlds." Later Robin says, "There are three important things in the world: sex, movies and my career." And when Liza says she is dead inside because she lost her baby, Robin says, "You're not dead. You are alive and sick and living in New York like 8 million others," and "You just have a healthy case of craziness." These and other difficult lines are delivered with a style which makes you laugh, but which also makes the lines stick in your memory. It is quite an accomplishment.

Canadian films often seem to disguise their nationality. Actors and actresses never say "aye". Canadian artifacts like money and license plates never appear. The landscape looks like homogenized America. Their goal seems to be to look like they were shot in Kansas. **Outrageous** breaks these conventions usually followed by Canadian films looking for U.S. distribution, and it makes the broken conventions work in its favor. We see Canadian money and the Toronto landscape with landmarks like Starvin Marvin's burlesque theatre. We hear a crack about Air Canada flight bags lacking class, and snow seem to be everywhere. There is even a joke about Canada Council grants which of course will only be appreciated by Canadians. The best Canadian reference is a comment by one of Robin's friends who is trying to convince him to go to New York to make the big time. The friend says, "No Canadian act makes it here without the U.S. seal of approval." Robin is convinced and goes to New York to become a success. This comment and sequence of events is particularly interesting because it mirrors the path followed by the film itself: **Outrageous** first opened in New York, received some very favorable reviews and now we are waiting for it to return to Canada.

**Outrageous** is a very funny film, and it is a film which vibrates with energy during many of the stage scenes. It is

also a film which will move the audience to tears when Robin leaves New York for Toronto, in a taxi no less, after Liza has lost her baby. It is a tremendously enjoyable and moving film. Thank you, Richard Benner, whoever you are. I have been waiting for years to see a really good Canadian narrative film.

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A note on the Canadian feature film business: on a Saturday afternoon several weeks after it opened in New York City, **Outrageous** was completely sold out. That is very unusual for a summer weekend afternoon when many people have left the city. Also, **Outrageous** was playing at Cinema II, one of a strip of fashionable theatres in the East Side's Bloomingdale Belt. For the record, the other Canadian film to open in New York during the last year played in a sleazy Times Square dump. T-shirts advertising **Outrageous** were selling briskly outside the theatre as people lined up to wait for the next screening. And, on August 17, the film made *Variety's* list of "50 Top-Grossing Films", taking in over \$18,000 during the previous week at the relatively small Cinema II.

This success suggests to me that the problem with Canadian feature films is not primarily the lack of money. In

this era when film budgets are approaching \$30 million, there is little possibility that Canadian producers can, or should, compete with big budget productions. **Outrageous** is a low budget feature shot in 16mm which succeeds because of the quality of its conception and execution, not because of international stars and big bucks. This film and the enormously financially successful **Cousin, cousine** show that 16mm is not a barrier to commercial success. Filmmakers cannot seem to understand that an audience of non-filmmakers just does not notice the grain or the background noise of camera. I think that it is essential for Canadian filmmakers to begin to understand that technical perfection is not nearly as crucial as the quality of their ideas. I also think that the Canadian Film Development Corporation should use the international commercial success of features originally shot in 16mm as a justification for a renewed effort to encourage low budget 16mm feature film production.

If Canadian feature films are to achieve a place of importance in world cinema, I predict that it will be through low budget films made by young, unknown directors. It is important that these directors be given a chance. Richard Benner had the chance and look at what he has achieved. □

## **Richard Benner's Outrageous**

**d:** Richard Benner, **sc:** Richard Benner, based on "Butterfly Ward" by Margaret Gibson, **ph:** Jim Kelly, **ed:** George Appleby, **sd:** Doug Ganton, **a.d:** Karen Bromley, **m:** Paul Hoffert, **l.p:** Craig Russell, Hollis McLaren, Allan Moyle, Richert Easley, David McIlwraith, Helen Shaver, Andrée Pelletière, Jerry Salzbert, Helen Hughes, Martha Gibson, John Saxton, Rusty Ryan, **p:** Bill Marshall, Henk Van der Kolk, **assoc. p:** Peter O'Brian, **p.c:** Film Consortium of Canada Inc., 1977, **col:** 35 mm, **running time:** 100 minutes.

There are many entertaining and genuinely touching moments in **Outrageous**, but the overall effect is unsatisfying.

Robin Turner is a homosexual hairdresser who is bored with his profession of boosting women's egos. Liza Connors is a high school friend who has been a voluntary patient in a mental institution for eight years. On her 26th birthday she leaves to seek shelter with Robin. He helps her to ward off the bone crusher demon of her madness and to cope with well-meaning mother, doctor and friends. She encourages him in his bid to release the female personages residing within him. Complications arise when, after a promiscuous fling, she becomes pregnant.

Craig Russell's life bears similarity to the Robin character he portrays with such warm conviction. Russell worked as a hairdresser in Toronto and broke into show biz in 1970 by playing Mae West in a gay bar. "Save your hands, boys", Robin/Mae says in his debut at the Jack Rabbit Club. "I might need them."

Hollis McLaren conveys the defenseless sensitivity of madness in a supposedly normal and straight world.

Though secondary characters are delineated with less sureness, the actors manage well. Allen Moyle is Marvin, obsessed with the desire to place all Russians and Chinese in concentration camps. Richard Easley is Perry, who realizes that he hasn't Robin's talent, yet valiantly tries to mimic Karen Black in **Airport** or a nun singing Ave Maria on roller skates. Martha Gibson's nurse is straight out of the cuckoo's nest, a Nurse Ratched type so dedicated to her job she even ferrets through Liza's garbage.

With such talent involved, there is potential here for a really gripping film. Director Richard Benner puts the stress, however, on Craig Russell, female impersonator, rather than on Robin Turner, hairdresser. Robin becomes another personality conjured up by Russell's talent.

The viewer is further distanced from the characters by choppy editing, uneven color photography, variable sound, and a general aimlessness in direction.

Some of the dialogue is funny and pointed. A New Yorker remarks that when he was in Toronto the only female impersonators he saw were women. Robin queries whether he should apply for a Canada Council grant in his bid for show biz razzle dazzle.

To use Margaret Gibson's beautiful short story, "Making It", from her collection, *The Butterfly Ward* as a springboard for easy laughs is lamentable. Several strong scenes between Robin and Liza give a glimmer into the film that might have been - a compassionately moving drama on the healing power of friendship.

Instead, one leaves the cinema with body pulsating to the dance music of Paul Hoffert, and mind swirling with visions of Bette Davis, Mae West and Judy Garland.

As a result, the viewer is left with a documented look at one man's magical chameleon ability to change from male to female before our awed eyes, and to capture the breathing essence of each star that he idolizes.

*Ted Fox is a free-lance film critic from Toronto.*

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