

The scene of one of the most controversial crimes in Toronto's history, seen in its fictionalized version

hugs and kisses ?

by Piers Handling

Murray Markowitz is one of the few Canadian filmmakers who finds the material for his feature films in the drama which confronts us daily in the newspapers. His fictionalized account of the Demeter murder is probably one of the most violent films made in Canada, and has created considerable controversy even before its release. Piers Handling spoke with him about the film.

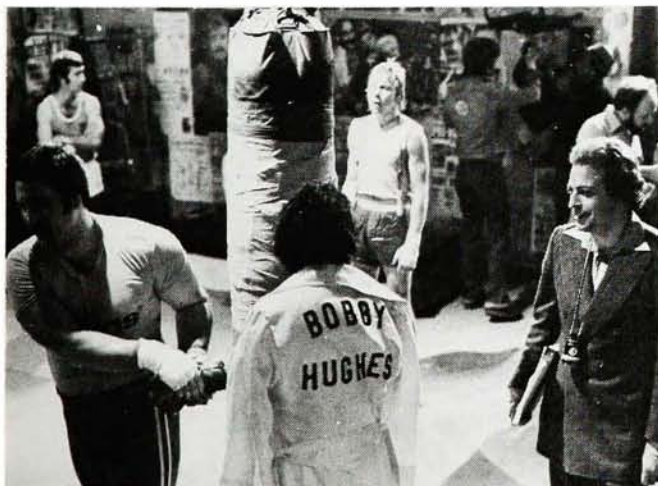
Can we sense a trend of some sort? After the gratifying success of his third film, **Recommendation for Mercy**, based on the Stephen Truscott case, Murray Markowitz has turned to the more recent, but no less controversial, Demeter affair for his latest work. Aiming **I Miss You Hugs and Kisses** at the international market on which his previous film made little impact, he is striving for recognition in the United States and Europe.

His career has been a series of gradually more ambitious steps which he has approached in a highly pragmatic way. His first two features, **More Than One** (1970) and **August and July** (1972), were low-budget but highly sensitive portraits of people on the fringes of society. Documentary in form, they left the impression that Markowitz was struggling against his material to make it reflect his concerns. More revealingly, though, he was awkwardly groping for some kind of structure that would allow him to articulate his ideas with greater clarity.

The form of **Recommendation For Mercy** marked the beginning of this new step; for with the Truscott case, he began with a constructed framework within which to formulate his own vision. Not surprisingly, this attempt to find a more defined structure for his work closely matched that of another filmmaker who has been accused of moving into the commercial cinema to the detriment of his integrity — David Cronenberg. Although Markowitz rejects any comparisons, what is fascinating about both filmmakers is that, either consciously or unconsciously, they felt the need to work within certain genres that are imitative but which, ironically, allow them a great degree of freedom and an important access to the marketplace. It's not that either of them are saying anything really different from what they said in their earlier, more esoteric work; it's just that they are saying it in other ways.

Markowitz's films have all had common departure points; the human relationships are generally incomplete and frustrating, often marked by feelings of betrayal. And the society within which they exist is hostile and cruel. **I Miss You Hugs and Kisses** appears to reflect this pattern. It is also a step forward for Markowitz. How the film will be received and understood is impossible to tell, but no doubt it will be controversial and will elicit extreme responses. He describes it as being the most violent film to have come from Canada; it deals with a real life situation that was extremely gruesome. Whether he has touched the pulse or not only time — when the lights go down in theatres across the country sometime this spring — will tell.

P.H.



George (George Chuvalo) practising in the gym as director. Markowitz looks on

Cinema Canada: What attracted you to the Demeter case which provides the basis for **I Miss You Hugs and Kisses**?

Murray Markowitz: It's difficult to say what attracted me to the Demeter case. You basically have a kind of instinct about what would make a good story. It reminded me of things that I'd like to get involved with, or that told me a lot about human relationships.

I was going through a very difficult period in my life. I had finished **Recommendation For Mercy** and we had sold it to an American distribution company. My contract with them sent me to at least thirty American cities on a one-day junket with a PR person. It took a lot out of me. When I had finished that, I started a script on the Black Donnellys. We went through various drafts of that and nothing ever came of it. I sold it off to another producer that I was working with because he wanted to go in one direction, and I wanted to go another. So I had nothing. I wanted to get into another film very badly.

Recommendation For Mercy was a lot different from **More Than One** and **August and July** which were more like documentaries, films that didn't have an exacting, dramatic structure to them. **Recommendation** was a successful Canadian film which did tremendous box office in Canada, but lukewarm in the U.S. It played in about sixty American cities, but it didn't have the kind of impact that it did in this country. I wanted to go beyond the Canadian experience. I wanted to make something that would have some kind of impact with the New York audience... something that would hit any major film capital. Some of the criticism that bothered me about **Recommendation For Mercy** was that it was referred to as a "nice little Canadian film." Filmmakers want to expand and go beyond their horizons. I saw that kind of intrigue in **I Miss You Hugs and Kisses**.

It's not as if you look at the Demeter case and say, 'it's going to have this', because a lot of it is very fictional. A lot of it is trying to draw from your own experience as to what actually did happen, while trying to deduce from the facts that were available. But it was a bizarre case, it was intriguing, it had those elements. Here's a situation where your best friend, with whom you once escaped from another country, turns on you. He has been on the police payroll for a whole year, and then comes to your wife's funeral with a transmitter hidden on him and, in front of the open coffin, tries to get a confession out of you. In view of what they had been through just escaping from Hungary, having to fight for their lives, and then, suddenly, one friend turns on the other like that, it's quite bizarre. In the end you can't really trust anyone, in terms of the story.

I began by going through all the court transcripts and through all the newspaper accounts, taking notes. From that, I was able to put together a first draft.

And then, of course, Barbara Amiel's and George Jonas' book, *By Persons Unknown*, came out. Jon Slan picked up the option to the book, which is based on the factual account of the Peter Demeter case. My film is a fictional account of the Demeter case in that we have changed the names. It was quite beguiling and frustrating and worrisome since I had spent over a year working on it already, and here was someone talking about making a \$2 million film based on this case.

Cinema Canada: I understand that Demeter doesn't like the book, but he is prepared to get involved in your film?

Murray Markowitz: He wrote us a letter and the letter was transmitted to us through his lawyer. Now he wants to read the screenplay and give us an interview because he feels the

Piers Handling is head of the Canadian Film Institute's publications division and is the author of Canadian Feature Films 1964-1969.

book betrays him and shows him as guilty. He understands, through the *Globe and Mail* article, that this film is more or less a sympathetic account of the murder and the whole mystery behind it. It is unequivocally very sympathetic and by the end of the film, people will feel that Peter Demeter (since this film was inspired by him), is obviously innocent and shouldn't be in jail.



Magdalene Kruschen (Elke Sommer) being run down in one of the fantasy sequences

Cinema Canada: *Recommendation for Mercy* had a similar premise in that it dealt with a murder case which has never been solved to everybody's complete satisfaction.

Murray Markowitz: There is that similarity, but I think it's just a coincidence. You go as far in a certain direction as you can, and then you go on and do something else. It's somewhat like a painter who has a blank canvas. You don't know what attracts you to a situation, but you start working on it. People in the media, interviewers and critics, make the parallels and say 'your films are in a certain pattern and that's what you're doing', whereas I would dispute that. I would say that this film is very different from the last one.

Cinema Canada: Can you explain those differences?

Murray Markowitz: *I Miss You Hugs and Kisses* is a treatise on violence, and will probably be the most violent film ever done in the country. There is more violence here than in *The Exorcist* or films of that ilk. I don't know what attracted me to that violence. It's like working with the unknown, and it frightens me in a way. I knew I'd filmed these scenes, and I knew the reactions the crew had – people were virtually getting quite sick during the filming and people were rushing out while we were screening dailies. I don't know what kind of impact or effect that's going to have. I'm not doing it just for the sake of sensationalism and just to be explicit – it's quite central to the story. It was one of the most brutal attacks you can visualize. People say 'you don't have to hit us over the head to get the point across'. I'm saying maybe you do have to, and I'm also saying that I don't know why the violence is in there and why I've gone out of my way to graphically show every blow. But it was done, and I feel that I have to try to complete that in as extreme a form as possible. Maybe after this I'll get out of working in that murder or violence situation.

But it's also an intriguing, tender love story as well, so it's not just a grade "B" film. I think it's like trying to put together a symphony and it just happens to be a tragic symphony. I hope the elements of the tragedy will be there.

What kind of reaction do you attempt to elicit from your audience with this mixture of violence and tenderness that is so much a part of this film?

I don't know. You never know how people are going to react. It's part of the whole mystery of making films. Sometimes they think you're a bloody phony or someone who shouldn't be directing films. To me, the Demeter murder was horrific. It's part of the whole tragedy. That's the way I wanted to capture it.

You gravitate toward extremes as opposed to normal situations.

Well, what is normal? We could spend hours talking about what is normal. There is no norm. What's normal for one person is abnormal for another. Some say it's better to have violence in movies than to actually go out and murder people. On the other hand, other people will argue that violence on the screen triggers unconscious responses in people, and makes them go and carry out my fantasies. Now, whether they are my fantasies, unconsciously surfacing... I don't know.

A number of the relationships in your films are very cruel and cold.

I think that the real life relationship between Peter and Christine Demeter was very cruel. In my own life I've gone through a series of tender, passionate relationships that have become very cruel. But, on the other hand, my family background was very tender, religious, middle class and normal. Maybe that's part of it. Having been brought up in a very normal way, I've reached out to the other extreme, and have experienced that in certain love affairs. In one sense, my last two films were almost cases of unrequited love, as if the film ideas, the scripts, the putting together of the projects, became relationships. And that's the way I wanted them to end, very unsatisfying and unredeeming. It's just a universal situation that exists, has existed and always will exist.

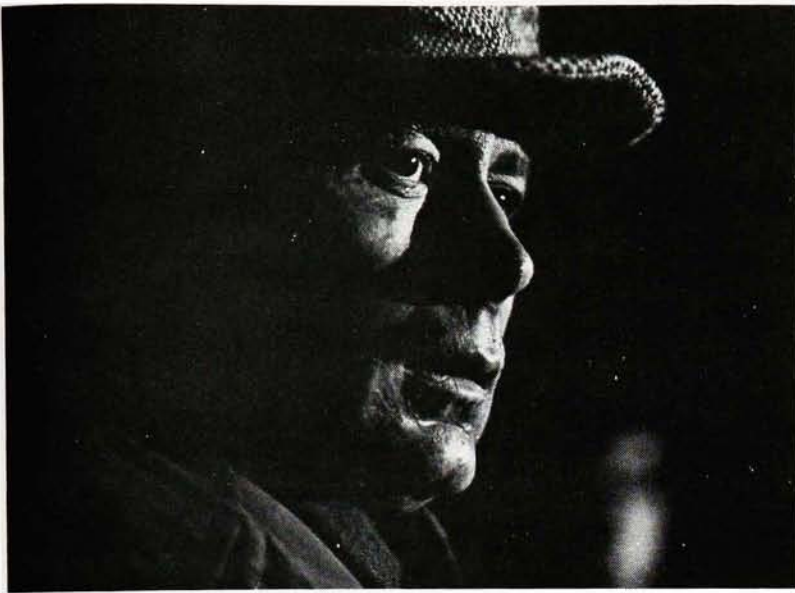


Pauline (Cindy Girling), Kruschen's mistress, fends off the reporters

How difficult was it to adjust to the upper-middle class, bourgeois environment of this film where you're dealing with characters who are much older than the principals in your other films?

I think we were very lucky on *Hugs and Kisses* because it could have gone wrong. You have to depend to a great extent on the location manager and, especially, on the art director, the props person and the director of photography. I can't begin to tell you how important a person like the art director, Carol Spier, was in terms of giving the film that look. You were asking me about the adjustment. This was very different from *Recommendation For Mercy*. Part of the whole socio-economic background that we were dealing with was the fact that the Demeters were millionaires. You try to create a world of the rich. It was difficult at first, but you try to master it like an illusionist.

There are strong elements of betrayal in this film just as there are in Recommendation For Mercy. It's ironic in a way. These characters leave Hungary to find freedom and they



Charles and Tibor (George Touliatos) escape from Hungary, and Charles settles comfortably in Toronto with a lovely wife and a mistress on the side. Years and millions of dollars later, Charles finds his wife murdered in the garage. The funeral gathers together the principal actors, Charles still unaware that he will soon be in prison for the crime.



come to North America. Within the freedom they find, they create something very destructive, as destructive as what they have left behind in Hungary.

That's the big irony of it. Demeter escaped from Hungary, actually cutting his way through barbed wire. He was penniless and he over-compensated. He became a very wealthy individual only to find himself in a much bigger prison or trap, because the parameters were invisible. It was a jail within his mind. All his relationships were fucked up – his friends, his wife, his family. Then he found himself in a situation where he was thinking about murdering his wife and he really didn't know how to deal with that.

It's almost like a jungle. It's not unnatural in a way. It's like a religious parable where the cow comes to drink the water, the lion eats the cow, the elephant eats the lion, man comes and shoots the elephant, the plague comes and kills the man, science comes and kills the plague, and then God intervenes. In nature, it's the survival of the fittest. After all, we are beasts in a jungle and we do whatever we have to do in order to survive.

In your films, though, innocent people are put in prison; it's not just the survival of the fittest. You have been attracted to characters you feel are innocent of murders that they have been condemned for.

It's not only a story of the innocent; who are the guilty? It's not so much that Peter Demeter is in jail – that's not the whole tragedy of it. What about the best friend, what about Christine Demeter? Maybe Peter Demeter is better off than his wife. At least he's alive. I was just trying to show the situation when you're in a jungle. One animal feeds off another, and, sometimes, unless you kill the other animal, it will kill you.

*The relationship between John and Fran in **Recommendation For Mercy** is much warmer than Peter and Christine Demeter's in this film.*

I started doing research on **Recommendation For Mercy** four years ago. At 28 your thinking is much different than when you are 32. In a way I was more of a naive young man then. That film portrayed a first love situation, and this one is like a fourth-time-around love situation.

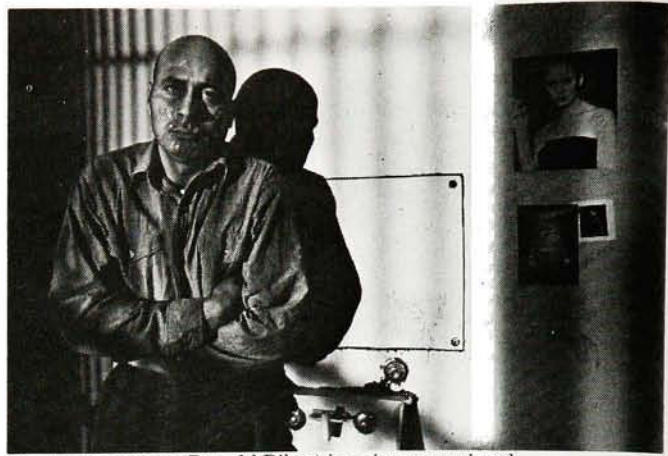
Your last two films have been based on factual cases. Is that a result of the strong documentary tradition in Canada? Or is it something you can exploit in your audience because there's an interest that has been created beforehand?

I think I've been leaning on the factual situation primarily because I was never a great writer. I've been able to lean on history, in a sense, for certain structures. I could create certain situations, and yet have an interesting story to start with – interesting facts to play with. I've taken a situation that exists and turned it around to make it as entertaining and dramatic as possible.

Did you make any major changes in the facts of the case? Were there certain things that you structured dramatically to make the film more effective?

I expanded on the betrayal of the friend. There was no concrete evidence in the actual case but in the film itself the betrayal is much more black and white. In reality, you are not so sure how much he betrayed him. The love story with Marina Hunt, Demeter's mistress in the film, is different. The way they related to one another is more in terms of my experience with women, because I really didn't know how Demeter related to her.

But there is an actual person in jail and a lot of people are going to see the film and say, "this guy is innocent, this



Charles Kruschen (Donald Pilon) in prison, convicted

guy shouldn't be in jail." The film is very sympathetic towards him and, if anybody should be in jail for Christine Demeter's murder, it should not be him. It will have a social impact on people; they are not just going to talk about the film, they are going to talk about the Demeter case, and whether in fact he should be serving a life sentence.

You are very aware of the commercial nature of filmmaking at this point, making your films for an international market. How does that affect what you are doing?

It's a kind of showmanship; you enjoy competing in front of an audience. You enjoy performing and entertaining. The very first film I did was for Ryerson Polytechnical School. It was only a six-minute film, but you want to make the best bloody film in the class – you want to show everybody where it's at. Then you go beyond that. One of my early goals was just to make a film that would play in a theatre. I didn't care if it was for one showing. **More Than One** played at the Poor Alex Theatre in the Canadian Festival and, even though there were only four or five people at each showing, it was like being a superstar. With **August and July** I wanted to get into a regular commercial theatre. Your goals change. You want a film that a lot of people are going to see, that will play not just at one, but thirty theatres. It's like the latent Napoleonic fantasy that you have about conquering certain things. I had set certain goals for myself in terms of where I wanted to go. And, to a certain extent, they have been fulfilled. When I started thinking about **Hugs and Kisses**, the important thing was not so much how it's going to play in Canada, but how it's going to be received in New York, or Los Angeles. This is the producer in me talking... I'd like to have **Hugs and Kisses** gross \$10 million, but you never know. You throw your hat in the ring, get out there with your cape and you hope that somehow you'll break through. And a break-through on an international basis is having a commercially viable property.

I remember some of my investors asking if I'd done marketing research on whether this film would be successful or not, and really, I never looked at it like that. I just assume that it is going to be, rather than doing analytical research on the situation. But I want to protect the investors who put a lot of time and money into this project, and it's quite important to have a kind of continuity in that. We had a number of influential businessmen who invested a bit of money, and I'd like to show that it's like a business even though it isn't Hollywood: that you can make a film that can compete on an international market. That's what I am aiming at, and I'm hopeful that I'll be able to go back to these 41 people and say "this is what we have done and this is what we are doing next, and we'd like you to get involved". □