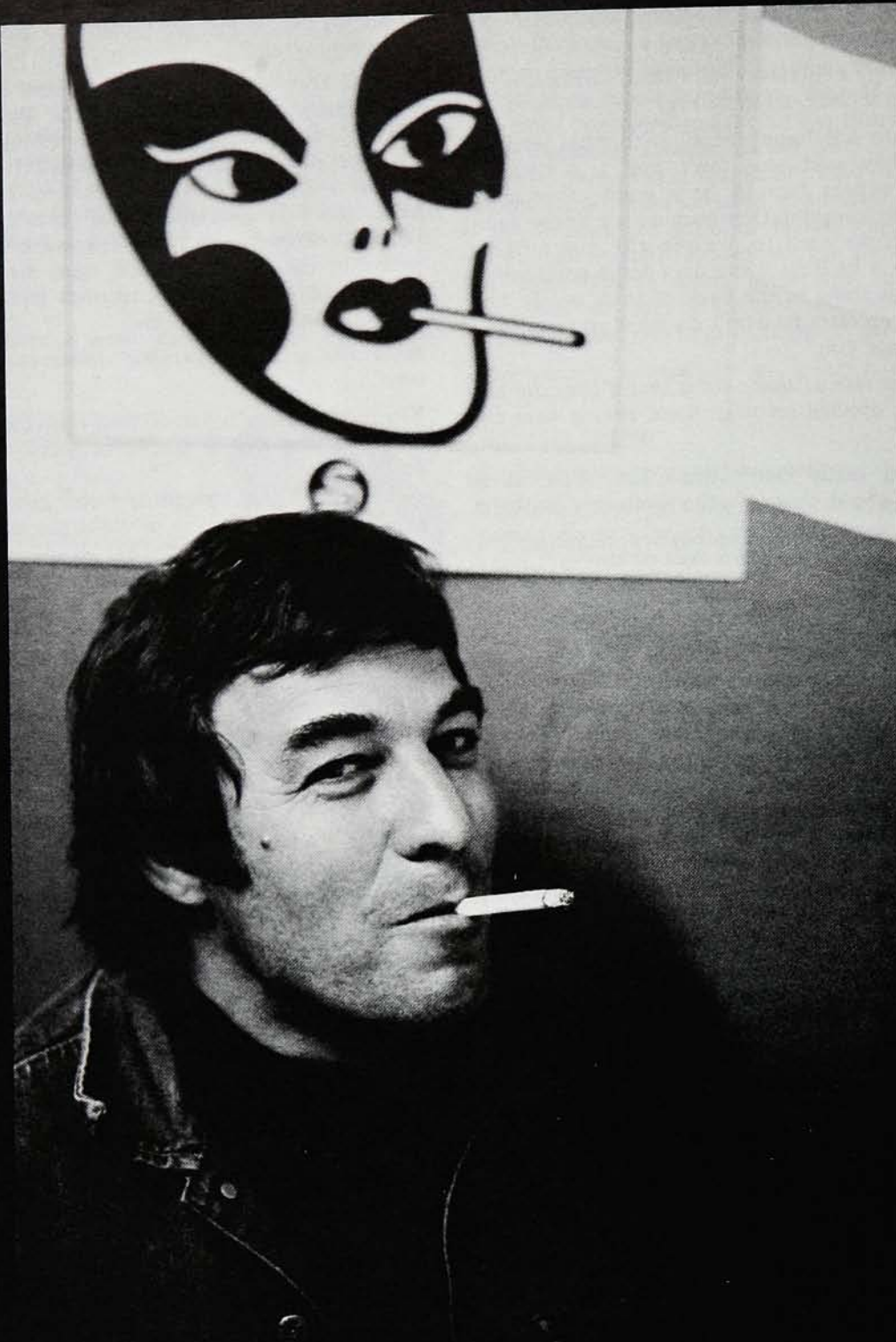


Photo: Baltazar



independent Julius Kohanyi prefers to play them by his own rules

short games

George Csaba Koller

If one had to choose a single adjective to describe Julius Kohanyi, it would be *friendly*. Having met the 37-year-old Toronto filmmaker repeatedly over the past three years, the most lasting impression one gets about him is that of a hell of a nice guy pedalling his foldable mini-bike, dodging the cars on Bloor Street with a smile in all kinds of weather. Getting to know him better, one finds a quiet but strongly independent filmmaker with a growing list of personal, professional and it seems even slightly profitable short films to his credit. Furthermore, after years of making it on his own not by anybody else's, but his rules, Julius Kohanyi has just been appointed by John Hirsch, head of CBC Drama, to the position of producer (succeeding Beverley Roberts) of the new, prime time Canadian Filmmakers Series.

He has represented the Directors Guild for a number of years on the official Canadian pre-selection Committee, which is in charge of selecting the best of our films for all the major international festivals, including Cannes. As a result, Julius has seen most of Canada's recent output and has invaluable experience in judging films technically and artistically. Hirsch is to be commended for choosing this man to deal with independent filmmakers, even though there is a strong argument to be made against any single individual having the final say as to which independent films are to be shown on the CBC in general. But Kohanyi is approaching this very delicate task with the right kind of healthy, open attitude. "We will try to give exposure to those Canadian films either forgotten or never before exposed to a mass audience," Kohanyi is quoted as saying in a CBC press release. "The series will feature the work of filmmakers who are innovative, emphasizing the experimental and the abstract." Filmmakers coast to coast are urged to get in touch. The program is to be aired 26 consecutive Friday nights at 10:30 pm on the English network, starting in September.

Born in British Columbia and having spent part of his boyhood in Hungary, Julius Kohanyi got involved with filmmaking through his interest in art, which is still very strongly reflected in the content of his films. *Requiem for a City Block* and *The Softness of Concrete* from 1960 and '61 have self-explanatory titles. *The Herring Belt* is a short made in 1963 about the Kensington Market area of Toronto. *The Artists' Workshop* (1964) is first in a series of films dealing with other art forms; *Little Monday* ('65) is an impressionistic look at a Mexican village, through Kohanyi's animation of artist John Gould's sketches. *Teddy* is a study of the alienation of a young immigrant boy, dealing with his fantasies of revenge, suicide and idealized family love. That was directed by Julius in 1967, and the following year he organised a film crew over a weekend, flew to London and visited Henry Moore's country home and studio by Monday, all as a result of a wild idea that came to him in a bar on Friday night. The outcome was the widely acclaimed half-hour *Henry Moore*, which was shown on both the U.S. and Canadian TV networks as well as garnering a long list of prizes at international competitions. Kohanyi is still collecting royalties from worldwide sales of this and his other films, and is proud of his "balance sheet" being in the black. Several of his recent shorts were just sold to Australia and Sweden.

Teve, made in 1969, uses artist Saul Field's unique etchings of Jewish ghetto life with a soul stirring accompaniment of ancient Hebrew music. *Images* (1970) is an abstract succession of swirling images and geometric patterns, not unlike the 2001 space warp sequence, utilising some of the same techniques. He did *Eight Short Films on Art* in 1971 and *Rodin* the following year, on the sculptures of the master now housed in Philadelphia, New York and Toronto. (For a comprehensive review of *Rodin*, see Cinema Canada No.4.) *Gates of Hell* is a shorter look at one of the most famous Rodin creations, and three short films were shot by Julius on a trip to Brazil last year. He just completed *Games* (Canada's official entry in the San Sebastian festival) and has another short coming out soon, plus he's planning a feature film called

Phenorite for later this year. And now he's working for the CBC full time, as well as helping Gerald Pratley and Clive Denton on more Canadian participation in the 1974 Stratford Film Festival, to be held September 13-22.

On a recent visit to Cinema Canada's Jarvis Street offices, Julius Kohanyi summarized the economics of his type of filmmaking: "Games doesn't have an ounce of dialogue, which is good for international distribution. The film cost about \$10,000 to make, I'll recoup \$3,500 of that from the CBC sale. There's another \$6,500 to go, but I can get that on foreign sales in no time. A thousand here, two thousand there, that's all you get from tv sales, but then there's the educational market and the educational value of the film is far superior to the commercial value of it. We'll have it up at the Science Centre with the new Godard film (*Tout Va Bien*) the first week of June."

Games is a simple story very visually told, with an excellent soundtrack prepared by Julius and Chris Stone. Pasquale Bonniere (the young son of director René and art director Claude Bonniere) plays the boy who gets locked into the Royal Ontario Museum and then trips out on all the marvelous art treasures stored there only to be overcome by fear. It all winds up well, however. Pasquale is a good actor, the camerawork by Lance Carlson and Bronco Perak is professional throughout and Julius is a very sensitive director with a good eye for art and how it should be photographed as well as a strong sensibility for a child's world of joys and fears. *Games* is a great way to introduce kids to the wonders of the R.O.M. (short of a personal visit) and it's also a pleasant and exciting cinematic respite for adults of all ages who still know what it means to see through a child's eyes.

"I called it *Games*," explained the director, "because he just plays games in the museum by sneaking in, but then the thing reverses itself and the museum starts playing games on him. And at the end we realize that it was all games, nothing else but games, because when the kid looks back and sees that there's nothing there at all, everything is very peaceful, he just breaks out into a smile. It was all in his head and the museum guard smiles with him, as if to say, look there's nothing to worry about. You know as a kid I was always safe and secure as long as somebody was around me. But the minute I realised there was nobody else around and I could hear my own footsteps, I felt that it could really be dangerous if I was left there by myself."

We had just finished screening the film in the basement with the entire staff of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (which handles some of Julius' titles) and Kohanyi was very pleased with the response of these "connoisseurs of film" as he called the gang at 406 Jarvis. Phones were kept ringing while we sat and watched at times enraptured, at times exhilarated by the fast moving camera, at times mellowed by the experience of wandering through the art of the ages with Pasquale. "I'm really flattered," continued Julius as we sat down with the cassette recorder, "because you guys see films every day, and to have all the people stand up down there and say that it was a good film really gives me a good feeling. And filmmakers are so desperate, when they finish a film, they don't know how good it is any more. They think that they have put their best work into it, but they're still looking for some kind of reassurance. And when what just happened downstairs happens, then you know you're home free."

We hope that Julius' attitude will not be changed by six months at the CBC. He'll have a lot of fragile egos to deal with, to be sure, both from without and within the Corporation. But he's faced challenging problems before and has coped with them admirably. "The biggest problem shooting *Games* was the lighting," he went on. "I wanted slash lighting, dramatic lighting for all the running shots, and we couldn't have lightstands in the picture, so the lights had to be hoisted and concealed. We had to pay the chief electrician from the University of Toronto who knew where all the plugs were we could plug into. The guard cost \$100 a day, since we shot

always at night for five days in a row, from 5 pm to 2 am. The museum cost \$2,400 all told, but it was worth it, because it was just like Cleopatra's sets, except these were original. If you go into a private studio it will cost you \$500 a day and you can still smell the paint and all you've got is two walls."

Some additional lighting problems involved recreating for colour film the kind of eerie illumination a museum has at night, with only the glass cages being lit low-key. Some available light was utilised, along with a wheel chair for the fast travel shots, meant to be the point of view of the running boy. "The running shots weren't undercranked as most people might think," Kohanyi explained. "It wasn't a speeded up camera process, that would have been too jerky. I strapped Lance Carlson into our brand new wheelchair which we had to pay for and I still have, and I told him only one thing: 'No matter what happens, just keep your finger on the button.' I wanted him to aim to the left or right as I told him, but that's all. I insisted on pushing him myself. I knew exactly what tempo I wanted and I knew exactly what I was going to do, without telling him. Then I wheeled the chair very close to the bloody glass cages (some of them housing a most beautiful Oriental exhibit with all the exquisite miniature statues of warriors and priests sculpted thousands of years ago) so I would get the effect of almost running into them. At the last minute I would swerve away, but I told the cameraman not to let go of the button so I would get that frightening effect. He was frightened himself. I was going around wearing Adidas sneakers all year pedalling my bike around. Well this time it was Adidas all the way, I couldn't even put the brakes on had I wanted, it was a really fast chase scene, and I became the victim of my own plan. I was running down all these rooms and I finally thought about stopping but didn't know where or how. So I rounded some more corners and ran out of breath eventually, but it was just one big push and we used most of the footage in the film. When we stopped the chair Lance just let out a sigh of relief and he said to his assistant "take the camera!" (laughter).

Kohanyi is a good friend of the Bonniere s and when the idea of the film was discussed, René suggested using Pasquale as the lead. The handsome twelve-year-old has been in a film


Director Julius Kohanyi with the poster he helped design for the Stratford Film Festival. Artist was Sam Mvratá of Sunrise.

Photo: Baltazar



before and had turned down a role in the **Collaborators**, the popular CBC crime show produced by his father, since he would have had to cut his hair. Julius liked his attitude, watched him play hockey, admired his pugnacity and chose him for the role. He's pleased with the boy's performance: "He's got a warm, receptive face, his dramatic abilities are good and he gave me exactly what I wanted — reactions, not actions. He's also a good filmmaker — I saw an animated film of his in super 8 which was out of this world!"

Kohanyi has worked with children before and he recognizes the difficulties of having to handle them more delicately than seasoned troupers. "I remember one night when Pasquale was extremely tired," he recounted warmly, "because he was playing hockey. We picked him up at five o'clock and by ten he was washed out. We were shooting in the Chinese section where I wanted dramatic reactions and I couldn't get very much out of him. So I got one of the crew members to pack him into a car and drive him home. And I found out later that his dad asked him how come he came home so early. Pasquale told him that he thought I wasn't very happy with his performance that evening. His dad asked him what he was supposed to do, and he said act frightened. René showed him how to look scared, and you know that night he was up in front of a mirror in his room practising, and the next night he was great!"

Julius Kohanyi gets great pleasure from directing short films and believes that a number of our movie makers suffer from a "feature film mania" even at the expense of the content matter. Many films are needlessly stretched out by leaving in long shots just to eat up more time, he explains. "It doesn't matter about length. You can have a ninety minute piece of shit or a ten minute very powerful piece of cinema." His newest is a seven minute tour de force entitled  a film by Julius Kohanyi et al. If that visual title has you puzzled, it is the symbol for the most abundant material that makes up the universe — the hydrogen atom. "This is the time clock idea," he goes on "and the film deals with the creation and destruction of the universe seen through the point of view of an artist, a painter. It's all done through the pointillism technique. It's really a beautiful film, shot in 35mm, and soon I'll have a 16mm reduction print of it and I'll bring it to screen down in the basement."

In spite of his infatuation with shorts, he does not rule out directing features, even movies for television if need be, and has his first one **Phenorite** ready to go in the Fall. He plans to shoot it without CFDC assistance, since the Corporation has already turned the script down some time back and he prefers to steer clear of that path. "I've made my films without them in the past. All the hassles aren't worth the effort. I have a backer who believes in me, my work, and all I had to do was to show him my balance sheet for the shorts. Think of what one could make with a good feature. And look at the CFDC's balance sheet. The only thing I go by is results."

He turns inward for a moment, and after some reflection the man who's unique in having made enough money to live on with independent shorts candidly admits: "The fact is, short films are the bastards of this industry. In commercial theatrical distribution there's zilch in them in terms of money. A filmmaker might be able to go ahead and scrape up enough money to do one short, but that's about it. The labs and everybody else charge the same whether you're processing shorts or features, the CFDC has stopped grants to short films, the Canada Council has just started recently to give more money, but in the last few years shorts have dried up in this country. There was a great shortage of shorts submitted to the pre-selection committee this year, and this country has always been internationally known for its shorts. I think that short films are just as crucial as long films. It's just as hard to write a short novel as a long novel, because the ingredients are the same, but short films are ignored, they never get any publicity except in your magazine, and that's why I came to show you **Games**." Thanks, Julius, hurry up and show us your next one.

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