

FILM REVIEWS

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz

Nerve? Nerve. Who is this kid, Duddy Kravitz? Raised on his father's stories about the Boy Wonder, Dingleman, who began by selling used Montreal Streetcar transfers at three cents apiece and ended up with a fortune, and taught by his grandfather that "a man is nothing without land", Duddy Kravitz knows what he wants. And he gets it, by using the people who love and trust him, by smuggling a little heroin and by indulging in a few, more legit business deals. He gets his piece of land, a lake in the countryside of Quebec. There'll be a summer resort on the far shore soon. The greenest land is to go to his grandfather. For a farm.

Duddy was always a "pushy little Jew-boy" according to his Uncle Benjy, and he's not going to change. This bit of wheeling and dealing, it's only his "apprenticeship". How to succeed in business by really trying. Lesson one: nice guys finish last. Here he is going on twenty, not even old enough to take possession of this prized land of his. So why do they put up with him? No matter, it's too late now. He's a success. There's no stopping him. He knows that he can do it, and he knows too, that he must do it alone. The people sensitive to the good in him, like his French Canadian girlfriend, Yvette, are too sensitive to suffer the bad. Only his father, Max, is behind him now. Max doesn't talk much about the Boy Wonder anymore...

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz is a tribute to one St. Urbain Street Hustler from another sometime St. Urbain Street Hustler, author-screenwriter Mordecai Richler. A Montreal story as only Richler would tell it (although it must also be typical, in its brassy exuberance, of many other success stories; as Duddy puts it, "there were a lot of comers before me") it is as colourful and volatile as Duddy's character can make it. Duddy is the film. All else is quite incidental, with the possible result that the film might well live or die by Duddy Kravitz himself. He's seldom far from the centre of attention and rarely absent from the proceedings. Could it be that there is too much Kravitz? Fortunately, director



Richard Dreyfuss as Duddy with Harry Silver as Farber, the successful businessman

Ted Kotcheff's touch is light. Duddy is well and honestly developed, always fascinating, very occasionally likeable for some of his good intentions, but ultimately a rather unappealing character. Richard Dreyfuss gives an engaging portrayal of this less than engaging young man, creating a reasonable balance between the good and ill will that Duddy's character is sure to spark.

The others in the film serve mainly to deepen the characterization. From Max comes motivation. As Jack Warden so well plays him, he is very much his son's father; the mannerisms, animation and spirit are quite similar. And to be a "somebody", Duddy must prove himself to this man who would scoff at his son's ideas while telling his own tales about the Boy Wonder. It is Yvette, the (slightly) older woman, girlfriend and sometimes mother figure who builds up Duddy's confidence. She is the first person to accept the same ideas that Max finds so laughable. Micheline Lanctôt brings a warmth and grace to the film and her time spent early on together with Duddy is appropriately visualized with a soft, dreamlike aura. That is too soon lost.

The others too, the Old World grandfather, the dying Uncle Benjy, the betrayed epileptic friend Virgil, the scrap metal dealer Farber, each see something in Duddy's character and are responsible for drawing it

out. He has learned well. Now, he can do without them. Now, he can turn his back on them. Such a nervy kid.

— Mark Miller

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz

Duddy Kravitz is a winner. And so is the movie, **The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz**.

Directed by Ted Kotcheff and adapted finally by Mordecai Richler from his own 1959 novel, the movie does the impossible. It takes the pushy, brazen, edgy, aggressive, relentless, self-centered young male Jew of the title and presents him full-face and full force, exposing his ambition, his need to be a somebody, and the future emptiness of his undoubtedly successful strivings, with such clarity and insight that the character is sympathetic and comprehensible, as easily pitied as despised.

Much of the vitality and persuasiveness of the character of Duddy comes from the definitive portrayal given by Richard Dreyfuss. This 25 year old actor, last admired for his work in **American Graffiti**, radiates energy and intelligence. He transmits the lusts of ambition and possession, and the drive of desperation with the fascinating charm of a caged tiger. Captured on the screen and observed like a wild animal behind bars, his

Duddy Kravitz is continually intriguing, whether pathetic, funny or dangerously cruel or insensitive. He is at a safe distance that lets the audience watch and even enjoy his antics, won by his disarming smile and obvious need, even as they pity his mutilated victims.

From the opening as the CYAC contingent marches down Montreal's St. Urbain Street, through the sets in garment factory, summer resort, bakery, apartment, pub and cafe, the late forties atmosphere is remarkably evoked. Horsedrawn carts, period cars, caps and haircuts, guarantee audience pleasure and approval as well as admiration for the detailed effort needed to so honour the recent past with its reconstruction.

Kotcheff has relied on a straightforward story-telling style of filming which suits the material. No fancy work, diffused lens or zooms interfere with the simple procedure of relating the tale. And this is just as well for the events of Duddy's struggle involve a scattering of incidents and adventures ricocheting from his desperate energies that tend already to a certain chaotic construction and frantic pace.

For those who never read the book, there are only a few places hampered by the reduction of plot and explanation which were so abundant in the novel, and are severely reduced to fit the screenplay. The unrelated incidents and unanswered questions do not seriously damage the continuity of the film, but they are noticeable, and if the film didn't rely on such a deliberately frenetic pace, they could prove distracting. As it is a phoniness and melodrama about some of the events and characterizations results primarily just from this superficial treatment which denies depth of character to almost everyone but Duddy.

Micheline Lanctôt's chambermaid Yvette is inexplicably pretty and poised, which confuses the motivation of her character, while Randy Quaid's epileptic Virgil is rather too soft and inoffensively vulnerable. Lack of background explanation makes these two characters slightly unreal, despite the skill with which they are performed.

However, even though briefly sketched as eccentric, colourful, idiosyncratic, piteable or loveable, the Jewish characters always are very human, particularly Joe Silver as the

rich success Farber, and Jack Warden as Duddy's father Max. They seem to be partly the environment of the film while Richard Dreyfuss' intelligent portrayal of Duddy created the spokesman who adds depth to them all.

However the fifties were a time of energy and expansion and Duddy, a man of the times, becomes almost a symbol of the push of the period — a period when cities, factories and businesses grew without forethought or sensitivity to surrounding life, when the single great motivating force was profit, and possession and plunder were the means to the end. The times were Duddy's and it is that period we find epitomized in him, and which makes pardonable the concentration of the film on him to the detriment of the other characters.

The movie finally is neither Richler's writing nor Kotcheff's direction, it is Dreyfuss' living creation of Duddy Kravitz, the vulnerable and desperate boy who, while still recoiling from an insult, can harden his eyes and smile and smile.

— Natalie Edwards

Alien Thunder*

One of the most delightful scenes in any Canadian film this year involves Donald Sutherland as an out-size, out-of-line Mountie in *Alien Thunder* telling his dead pal's little son the tale of the day in Saskatchewan when it was so hot a crow stuck to the bubbled tarpaper on the outhouse roof and of how when the rest of the concerned flock joined it, they eventually flew off with the outhouse, exposing his Dad still seated in the remains.

It's a funny story, well told, though it ends in sentimental tears as Candy, the Sutherland character, weeps over the memory of his murdered friend and hardens his heart for vengeance on the Indian who killed him.

To those who love W.O. Mitchell's writing, the source is clear, even though Mitchell insisted on his credit being removed from the titles for reasons that become obvious on seeing this beautiful but boring film.

Generally the writing is less than commendable. Unfortunately, although there are lengthy takes in the movie of Indians having a last pipe or of

endless treks across the prairies, crucial plot information is too quickly or sparsely relayed, motivations are left unexplained, and too little time is spared to fill in with the necessary words just what a situation really involves.

It seems odd that Claude Fournier, who directed and shot *Alien Thunder*, could make a number of basic filmic errors, since he is a man of considerable experience: an accomplished cameraman and director, he has had his own production company, made many films for the NFB, worked with such underworld greats as D.A. Pennebaker and Richard Leacock, and in 1970, directed the pop-porn money magnet, *Deux Femmes en Or* to significant financial success.

Nevertheless, there are errors. Suspense is lacking, and characters are generally undeveloped, as is the tension between the Mounties and the Indians. More important, the question of order and law in relation to the struggle for life on the prairies is too indistinctly handled to support the plot of relentless personal vengeance.

There is a confusion about seasons and times of day, probably due to shooting schedules and weather problems, that fogs the clarity of the development of the hide-and-seek plot, which actually extended over almost two years. Locations are not well delineated: the crucial trap in a copse which Sutherland sets to snag Almighty Voice and his two companions, is artistically shot but both words and visuals are lacking to explain just where it is and how it should work so that the audience may participate emotionally. The Indians pictured are almost postcard subjects: invariably grouped artistically, and muttering away in their own language, one is tempted to give them the same kind of sympathy a National Geographic picture evokes rather than become deeply involved in the reality of their lives and their implied poverty.

Frequent use of contemporary language diminishes the historical aspect of the film, reducing the effectiveness of the fact that its plot was actually drawn from RCMP files and involves a true incident.

Compensation is in the form of sweeping wide-screen panoramas of the Duck Lake area of Saskatchewan, vibrating after-the-bomb sunsets, spirit-



Donald Sutherland

renewing sunrises, remarkable background detail in native and pioneer homesteads, and fascinating faces photographed in extreme closeups by a loving, if arty, lens.

Though the original intention of this film may have been to reveal the Indians' plight, and it was this that interested activist actor Sutherland, and though the RCMP forces are deliberately lampooned while the natives are characterized by stoic nobility, the result is seriously diluted since Sutherland's character is the only truly involving and deeply drawn portrayal, automatically attracting audience empathy.

—Natalie Edwards

*This review first appeared in *Toronto Citizen*.

Alien Thunder

Whether or not it's true, they say that the Mounties always get their man. An impressive reputation, it must have basis in a wealth of stories; stories presumably more substantial than those figments of the Hollywood imagination like *Rose Marie*. But the men who pressed law and order so early onto the old "North West" have remained relatively anonymous. And brought to life, as they have been in Claude Fournier's film based on one of those stories, *Alien Thunder*, they continue to be a rather characterless collection of redcoats.

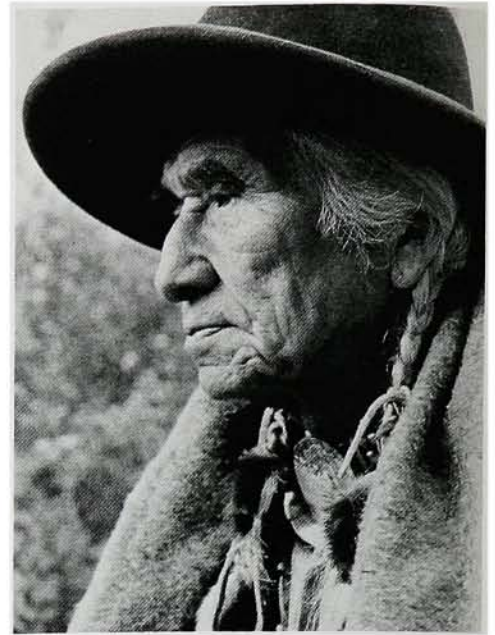
Drawing the film from an official Mountie file on an incident at Duck Lake Saskatchewan, Fournier attempts to develop the conflicts and tensions of the North West in 1895. The site of the first skirmish of the Riel Rebellion ten years earlier, Duck Lake has become a remarkably civil little town. However, it reacts indifferently

to the death of a Mountie Constable, murdered while tracking an escaped Indian cattle rustler, Almighty Voice. Duck Lake watches unconcerned as the Mounties go merely through the usual routine investigation before offering a five hundred dollar reward and throwing the case to bounty hunters.

There is one man, though, who is caught between his conscience as a friend of the dead man and his duty as a member of the Duck Lake Garrison. Having sworn to avenge his friend's death by bringing Almighty Voice to justice, Constable Dan Candy is eventually forced to leave the Mounties when the case is officially set aside. With no contemporary reference intended, the dead man's widow rightly remarks that Candy has become "possessed" with this self-appointed task. In the end, after two years of scenic wandering, he finally gets his man (once a Mountie, always a Mountie), trapped with two companions in a wooded vale. Very convenient for the redcoats who make a timely appearance on the horizon.

Alien Thunder could be a comedy. A black comedy though; the film does not resolve comfortably. The plotline is slight and sketched in over that time-honoured structure, the chase. There are even elements of the Keystone kind of slap dash in Fournier's treatment of the Mounties as they storm onto the final scene, and with the help of some exuberant townspeople, turn frontier justice into a complete farce. But there are few threads running right through the film, aside from the unintentionally funny melodramatic shots of Donald Sutherland as a highly emotional Constable Candy, to suggest that Fournier is trying to present a comedy. And certainly there's nothing to set up that last scene.

On the other hand, if it were not for that absurd last scene and Fournier's tendency to evade rather than develop conflict, *Alien Thunder* might also have been a drama of some substance. Although Almighty Voice has neither the opportunity nor the detailing to be anything more than the unfortunate victim of circumstances, the Constable has the makings of a good tragic hero. He becomes increasingly the outcast as the hunt takes its hold on his senses and separates him from Duck Lake and more importantly, from the widow and young son of his dead friend. When the boy tells him bluntly, "I don't care what you do", the fight for vengeance is Candy's and Candy's alone. And the fight is a formidable one. Unlike Candy, Almighty Voice (nicely underplayed by George Tootoosis) retains



Chief Dan George

the loyalty of his people and is initially sheltered and protected by his wife's family (headed by Chief Dan George) from this white man they've apparently come to call "Alien Thunder". The two men act as foils for one another and Almighty Voice's cool and passive sense of self-preservation makes him a more admirable character than the half-crazed Constable.

On its most basic level, the film deals with the hunter and the hunted. Each man is a threat to the other's existence and as the film progresses, the two take turns as the aggressor. Their conflict becomes one of simple survival. Yet Fournier directly avoids this conflict, shooting their first chance encounter and gunfight on the snowy banks of a nearby river at extremely long range. The personal touch is lacking. Similarly, Fournier dodges the final moment of confrontation by introducing that element of farce. Suddenly, the film's focus is blown all over the North West. Law and order is a joke. The Mounties are clowns. Dan Candy's mission is lost, his place as the film's central character shattered. And when all is done, the concluding montage of accusing Indian faces and accused white faces is an easy and ambiguous way to avoid a pointed resolution.

Dramatically then, *Alien Thunder* is a wayward film, missing most of the original incident's potential impact and losing the rest in confusion. As a portrait of the North West, though, it captures some of that elusive romance in that period, eighty years back, of post *National Dream* pioneer history. As for that romantic image of the North West Mounted Police, well there's always *Rose Marie*.

— Mark Miller

Christina

A perfect crime ruined by a moment of passion, that's **Christina**. Had she not spent her wedding night with her new husband, she would probably have gotten away with her rather brilliant plan. After all, it was only a business arrangement. For twenty-five thousand dollars, he would marry her and as Mrs. Simon Brice, she could get the passport she needed. But in two days and only a matter of hours together, he had fallen in love with her. And the perfect crime, which takes **Christina** so long to reveal, eventually goes up in smoke.

Mr. Simon Brice is an unemployed aerodynamic engineer and a very gullible character. He's taken in at every turn, first and frequently by his bride who quickly disappears and then apparently dies. Then, in rapid succession, he's hit with everything but the truth by a crazy Irish gumshoe hired to trace the elusive Mrs. Brice, a body rub attendant and the habitues of a certain "Queeny's Bar". It's only for the efforts of his unofficial guardian angel, a black police detective named Donnegan who turns up often enough to keep Brice on his feet, that our hero (hero?) finally finds out what's going on. Portrayed as something of a babe in the woods by Peter Haskell, he's much easier to pity for his naivete than to admire for his righteousness.

It is Christina Faith, the bought-and-paid-for Mrs. Brice, who is the real character of interest. Although her place in the film is obscured by the misadventures of her husband, this vaguely enigmatic and coldly beautiful woman (offered with much décolletage by Barbara Parkins) quickly captures the imagination. Such is the fascination of the criminal mind. Revealed in the worst tradition of a poorly written suspense novel, through "And then I..." flashbacks immediately before the climax, the details of her almost perfect crime seem reasonably plausible. Alas, just what that crime happens to be is but a small part of the film. The rest, unfortunately has much less to recommend it.

However, cultural nationalists need not feel badly. This is one of those Made in Canada by Americans efforts, fictitiously located in an unnamed American city which really passes in the light of day as Vancouver. Predictably, there's nothing remotely Canadian about it. In a year or so, **Christina** will make a fine television film. And few people will be any wiser.

-Mark Miller



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