



Scaling the Heights

by Bruce McDonald

Mack the Finger is polishing the new sign on his office door, right across from the elevator and there's no way to avoid him. Mack produces low-budget slasher films for Korean television, dresses in straight black polyester, sports a pencil-thin moustache above a smarmy grin and collects my rent. Nice guy. Talks loud. Smokes proud. He strikes up a conversation in order to tell me of his latest hustle and as we bounce

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outrageous lies back and forth Mack is seized by a fit of nostalgia and asks me, "What ever happened to VOS Productions? They were shooting a film last fall and had the office beside yours."

I remind him of the faces behind VOS; Patricia Rozema and Alexandra Raffe, and tell him that they just finished mixing their film. "Sure" Mack says, rubbing his neck, "Alex and Patricia, real nice kids, but no sense of what an audience really wants to see. It was some crazy film, wasn't it, about a girl who flies and walks on water." With no time for me to clarify, he continues, "You know they told me point-blank that they didn't expect to make much money off the film. I mean, Jesus H. Christ, what kind of attitude is that?"

"What they meant," I began, "was that as producers they weren't going to get rich. Just to get the film shot, they had to defer a lot of their salaries and make some big personal sacrifices." I explained to Mack that they received their initial production funds from the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council based on the merits of Patricia's script. They approached the CFDC and were one of the first low-budget features to be supported by the newly formed organization. Alex and Patricia managed to crack Telefilm and were offered post-production assistance through the PATFFS program at the National Film Board. They had a lot of support from people who liked them, liked their attitude and liked their script but

it would be a while before they saw a personal return on their investment. "It's like a labour of love" I said, taking a drag on my Players. "A personal expression, rather than a film tailored to a specific market."

"If you want to make a personal expression, join the choir!" says Mack the Finger. "Come here, I want to show you something." He drags me into his office for some fatherly advice and points to a framed poster on the wall. "This film here made more money than **Anne of Green Gables** and was made at a fraction of the cost." "**The Corpse Grinders** huh? Never heard of it." Mack is a little deflated but continues. "This is what sells. You give the market what it wants." I look around at the other post-



She knows there's no success like failure and that failure's no success at all

Bob Dylan

Love minus Zero/No Limit (1965)



photo: Ron Levine

ers on the wall and see that the market also wants **Slayfest**, **Uncle Meat** and **Hammer of Blood**. I know Mack is a sensitive guy but he just won't admit it. "It's great that Alex and Patricia got their film done, but come on, who's gonna want to watch someone's private confessions?" He stops me and asks in a whisper, "Just how hard is it to get a grant, anyway?" "Show them **Slayfest** and you're a shoo-in." Mack the Finger laughs this demented laugh and reminds me of the rent I owe him. "Cheque's in my mouth," I shout from the elevator, "It'll come in the mail."

The Rivoli is buzzing with the regular crowd of savage clowns, roving gamblers, six-time losers and a hundred inevitables. Ramona's held onto a seat for me and we catch up on each other's last 48 hours and order the special. I'm trying to get down Highway 61 on this new film I'm writing and Ramona, 'cause it's her turn, listens to the latest route I've found. Out of the corner of my eye I see Patricia across the room, walking in half-circles by the dim light of the pastry counter. The look on her face isn't exactly dazed and confused but it's not the usual face she wears on her night off. She sees me looking and spins over to say hello with a kiss. Surprise!

Before I can even ask how she is, she tumbles out with the news that her film, **I've heard the Mermaids Singing** has been selected to premiere at the prestigious Directors Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival. It is one of the two official Canadian entries in this special showcase that features the hottest new films in contemporary world cinema. Patricia is ecstatic. As I congratulate her she just sort of bobs up and down, still trying to get used to the news.

Ramona pulls over a chair and guides Patricia into a shaky landing while I introduce them. I'm so excited I buy the next round of suds. Patricia rewinds and tells the story with a few new details. Ramona, who is just beginning her first film — something about the history of outer space, a train ride to Memphis and the ghost of electricity that howls through the bones of her face — is on Patricia like a hawk, demanding to know all about the film.

She lights up Camels for them both, leaving me to my Players and Patricia starts up with a practiced ease. "It's the story of an unsuccessful career woman, named Polly, who understands the world she lives in by the photographs she takes. She's a bit of a dreamer, a sort of urban innocent not unlike Walter



Mitty, who is given to wild flights of fantasy. She gets a job as a curator's assistant in an art gallery and becomes quite entranced by her boss, who is all the things she longs to be; sophisticated, witty, urbane..."

I begin to phase out of the conversation, having read the script last fall, and flinch quietly as the nasty green beast of envy comes creeping up my throat and becomes stuck there like some condemned house. I'm thinking... Rozema, Patricia, and trying to add up the history that has brought her to the point where she is packing for Cannes.

Born in the fifties as a baby woman and brought up by parents who tried to keep television addiction to a minimum by removing all the knobs from the set, keeping **The Beverly Hillbillies**, Maxwell Smart and Mr. Haaney at bay, she speaks Dutch as her second language, plays classical guitar and avoids Zeppelin. She topped off high school as student body president and directed and acted in a number of college theatre productions. Graduating with honors from Calvin College — a private religious school known for its high academic standards — with a degree in English and Philosophy, she supported herself as a journalist, leaving Grand Rapids Michigan to work in Sarnia, Chicago, and for NBC in New York City. Coming to Toronto, she worked as a news writer for Global Television and soon got a job with the CBC as an associate producer on short news stories for **The Journal**.

Patricia was Don Owen's assistant during the shooting of **Unfinished Business** and continued working in film as an assistant director for **Owl Television**, **Sharon, Lois and Bram's Elephant Show**, moving into the role as a third assistant director on **The Campbells**, and features such as **Head Office** and David Cronenberg's **The Fly**.

Her first film was a half-hour drama called **Passion: A Letter in 16mm** starring Linda Griffiths. **Passion** won the Silver Plaque at the Chicago Film Festival and played at the Toronto Festival of Festivals to very positive reviews. Her credentials are impressive and do nothing to tame what's caught in my throat.

Returning to the present, I find that Ramona has gotten Patricia into a very easy reflective mood: "The purpose for the telling of the story in **Passion**, was to communicate to a loved one — in the form of a love letter, or the cinematic equivalent of one — an expression of regret as to what happened in this relationship. The purpose for the telling of the story in **I Heard the Mermaids Singing** was to confess a, quote, "crime." Patricia continues at a nice cruising speed. "By making the whole film, in essence, a confession, its a veiled comment about art being a forum for confession and that people are often exorcising their own devils and exploring the things that frighten them and amuse them. But all that confession stuff, the setting up of the context of the story, that's kind of secondary in **Mermaids**. I just wanted to create this little person, who ordinarily, we wouldn't pay any attention to and to take a look into her vast internal landscapes. With Polly, I loved writing for her because she is so earnest and I could say everything the wrong way. I loved Polly when I wrote her and I love her even more now that Sheila McCarthy has become her."

This creeping jealousy is like a white biting dog, embarrassing me, by turning my face into little silent snarls. Hitting her isn't going to do much good, it would just cause a scene and spoil the dinner. Now I'm beginning to growl with self-doubt, feeling smothered by Patricia's success. My mind races for something to hang on to. She peaked early! That's it, her career has peaked early, and it's all downward plunge from here on in. I can feel myself getting worse.

Patricia stubs out her cigarette. "The character of the curator is a sort of morose character whose biggest grief is that she is not able to convince herself that she has the skills to make something beautiful. She collects art, she writes about art, she does everything around art, but is consumed by the haunting dread in the middle of the night, that she wants to make something that lasts forever, but just can't." Ramona nods in sympathy and Patricia

knows she has found an audience, and continues, glancing over at my white face. "I guess the state that Polly is striving for, and that I am striving for, is the point where you just don't judge yourself. You take it easy on yourself. Trust your own visions. Trust your own perceptions. Not to say that you don't listen to the input of friends and of those people whom you respect, but you basically say..." she sighs, "It's been said a million times and it will be said a million times... I am who I am! And that's where I was starting — Polly at the beginning of the story, believing that she is who she is, and that's an okay thing to be. She loses faith in that. She regains it. The story. The hope is to get to the point where you don't have these internalized gods that damn you."

My white biting dog tells me to strike out and nip this talent in the bud before it's too late: "It's okay," he tells me, "it's the Canadian way. Don't be afraid. Squash her like an ant. You hate her. Save yourself. Soon, Patricia Rozema will be off to Cannes basking in the glory of the international press and who knows what can happen after that. Studio deals, Bloody Marys with Jean-Luc Godard by the poolside, distribution in Japan, there's no end in sight!"

Ramona is grinning and trying to confuse me by doing Elvis impersonations across the table.

Patricia asks, "Are you OK?"

"I don't know what you mean..."

"Your cigarette has gone out." She carefully relights it for me and continues where she left off with Ramona, who is more attentive than ever.

"How does one deal with believing that the thing you most want to do, you're not capable of doing? How do you deal with that haunting dread? How does one deal with, for instance, in **Passion**, wanting more than anything else to connect with another human being, to have a really strong and intimate and genuine bond where you are almost fused emotionally and physically? Wanting that on the one hand and wanting, equally as hard, to refine your craft to a really respectable level, and given your concept of perfection, you know you can't have both. You just don't have enough time, emotionally or in the actual number of hours in the day. You just don't have enough time."

There is a small silence in our little dinner trio.

Forks move.

Far off in the back room, I can hear the **Rome Boys** doing a sound check.

Ramona tosses back her black hair

and says softly, "The quote (from T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*) is, 'I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each, I do not think that they will sing to me.' That's one of the saddest things I can imagine."

That Ramona. She's OK.

Patricia picks up again, sensing that we want her to go on. "Yes," she smiles, gaining confidence again. "The primary relationship in *Mermaids* is between Polly and herself and her learning to come to the point where she can trust herself. Now, if she had to learn that by learning that the curator, someone she idolized, was just that — an idol that came crashing down in the end — then that's OK. It was primarily an internal struggle. I guess what I am pleased with is that I could portray this internal struggle visually, whereas in *Passion* I tried to do it in words and that wasn't really effective."

"Don't you feel that the art world can get a little pretentious at times?" Ramona ventures. "Sure. The fact that I've dealt with the art world in both *Passion* and *Mermaids* is just one of my own limitations. I feel that in order to do something urgent and vital, I have

to deal with my own experience and this has been my own experience. I'm sure I'll get outside the idea of art and its creation but at the moment I have to deal with what's vital to me. I do think it's a challenge to try to deal with the business of art and not make the audience gag. It's dangerous territory. It's sooooo self-reflexive, you know. I think that *Amadeus* was successful by having Salieri as the patron saint of mediocrity. That's a very powerful portrayal of the kind of self-doubt that I was trying to get at with *Mermaids*, in a much sillier way."

Now she's comparing herself to Mozart. I can't believe it.

"Bruce?" queries Patricia, leaning over the table. "Why are you being so quiet?"

"He's jealous of you," says Ramona.

"Am not!" I reply in a stunning rebuttal.

Ramona laughs and pours me more beer.

"Come on, say something," coaxes Patricia.

"OK. What part of filmmaking do you enjoy the most?" I figured I would trip her up.

Patricia pauses for a moment, probably for dramatic effect. I lean forward, just.

"I see film as a little trip. You know you have the really private, self-analysing, quite gruelling part of writing, which is just you and you, and then you go out to quite a public situation where you try to communicate what you saw there. For me, it's a process of trying to hang on to what you dared to tell yourself, what you dared to write in the middle of the night, because it's embarrassing in front of all those people. But I do enjoy getting people excited about something that I'm excited about. Then you go into the relatively private realm of editing, where you sort of kick yourself over and over again, saying 'What was I thinking about? Why didn't I get that shot?' and so on. And when it's finished, there is the public to deal with again. And this time it's more public than I ever dared to imagine — showing it to the world! And then I'll go back into seclusion again. I'd like to go on a number of trips in my life."

"Now that wasn't so hard, was it?, Mr. Filmmaker with Ego the size of the Southern Hemisphere and all its boats."

Ramona gets pretty clever after two years. Still, things relax a bit and I see that the White Biting Dog has moved across the room to a more accommodating host, whispering tales of envy and fear into the ear of some musician. Patricia is still really wound up from her news, but by now we're just kinda egging her on, curious about the shape of things to come.

"I like the idea of creating three completely different female characters. I've said this before, but there's a saying that goes, 'When a man does something foolish they say, what a foolish man. And when a woman does something foolish, they say, aren't women foolish.' This tendency to lump all women into one category is in a small way undermined by having radically different female characters in one film. So far, I've liked drawing female characters because so often they are not drawn very respectfully or intricately and there's so much that's yet to be done. They're seen as adjuncts to the action rather than as the movers and shakers, so I suppose I'm responding a little bit to the history of women in the cinema as just being the Love interest to the essen-

• Patricia Rozema, Sheila McCarthy, Paule Baillargeon and the cast and crew of *I've Heard the Mermaid Singing*





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tially male action. I feel a little bad that I have two male characters in **Mermaids** and neither one of them is particularly sympathetic. It just sort of came out that way. None of the action revolves around them. They're adjuncts." Hardy har har. We're laughing now. The three of us. Patricia, Ramona and me. I hope I'm laughing with them.

Alexandra arrives with a couple of friends to celebrate the good news with Patricia. She asks why we all look so silly, and Ramona tells her that we've been rehearsing Patricia for her interview in *Cabiers de Cinema*.

"How'd she do?" asks Alex.

"Full marks," I say. "but she's got to play down the Mozart angle, pepper the next with a few more names, and learn how to stumble a bit on the really big words."

Alex cocks her head and puzzles her eyebrows, "You mean words like, 'it's a fucking incredible thing that's happened to our little film?'" That's what I like about Alex; she's so humble in her wry English manner.

The Neon Rome boys have started cranking out their new heroin music in the back space, so after toasting to the Jesters of Destiny, Polly, Doug Koch, Van Ann Ridgeway, Michael Werth, Steve Munro, Edgidio Coccimiglio and the rest of the crew, the folks at LIFT, the NFB, OFDC, Telefilm, and both the arts councils, Ramona and I stumble into the dark smoky noise of the back space. The Rome boys claim that they never found civilization, and Ramona tells me that's just where Highway 61 begins. I believe her, I guess 'cause I've been inspired. Congratulations Patricia! Way to go, Alex. It's great to hear you singing.

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