

Cowboys Don't Cry

A French-Canadian actress was recently quoted as saying that "films shot in Toronto and Vancouver and Alberta have an identity crisis. People are worried about how they are different from the Americans."

Obviously, the actress has not spent much time in western Canada. If she had, she would realize that true westerners are not concerned with being different from Americans. True westerners are paranoid enough, or maybe just stupid enough, to believe that they are different from everyone. And true western films do not have an identity crisis.

Cowboys Don't Cry, the \$2.9 million feature Anne Wheeler directed for Atlantis last August/September should prove the point. The whole production is about as purebred-western as you could find. (As purebred, in fact, as the palomino colt that was raffled to attract extras for a rodeo scene.)

Anne Wheeler is a western director by geography (she was born and has lived in Edmonton all her life), and by attitude. Her films do not discuss the problems of Americanization, they discuss her world: **Loyalties** followed the relationship of two women in a small Alberta town, **A War Story** described her father's World War II experiences, and her next project, **Bye Bye Blues** is based on her mother's wartime existence. **Cowboys Don't Cry** deals with the relationship between a down-and-out bull rider and his 15-year-old son, and, although Wheeler's rodeo experience is limited (she admits to barrel racing), she says the focus of the story is the relationship, not the occupation. "These people could be anybody."

Wheeler agreed to direct **Cowboys** for two reasons: first, because it gave her a chance to work with Atlantis films. Second, and more importantly, because she was allowed to write the script. The story is an adaptation of a novel by Alberta writer Marilyn Hoverson. A popular children's story, it effectively captures the Southern Alberta landscape and the lifestyle of its ranchers and cowboys.

The cast has a strong contingent of westerners. Of the lead players, Janet Laine-Greene is a University of Alberta grad, Zachary Ansley is a Vancouverite, Ron White was born in Dawson City. The proportion of western Canadians was "more than a coincidence," Wheeler said. "Those people play those parts more truthfully...My role is the watcher - to have a relationship with my actors that is very open, hopefully, and devoid of ego."

On set in Fort Saskatchewan there was a remarkably open atmosphere. Between takes Ron White, **Cowboys'** star, chatted about livestock with a wizened local extra; Janet Laine-Greene cavorted with the sound recordist. Part of that

open atmosphere is due to the fact that Wheeler has the trust of her crew.

"On the last project (**Loyalties**) I felt a lot of people were watching, judging but there's really no time to think about that," Wheeler admitted. Despite rumours that **Cowboys** was behind schedule, the difficulties of working with kids, animals, and inclement weather, it was a remarkably happy set. The crew, which spent several weekends "slogging around in mud and shit" in rain-soaked rodeo grounds, liked working with Wheeler. One crew member who worked with her on **Loyalties** said simply, "She's good. She learns more every time out."

Wheeler, according to Alan Stein, has got an egalitarian spirit and technical sense common to western filmmakers. It comes from working up from the bottom. "With the exception of Wendy Wacko, almost every producer in the province has come up through the crafts...Anne Wheeler was an editor and then a cinematographer."

According to Wheeler, the shoot was a labour of love for a lot of the crew. "A lot of these guys turned down projects in Vancouver that paid a lot more to work on this. It's given them the chance to come home and do something they feel part of."

The subject, and not just the location, comes close to home. "All of the guys who drive for movies in this province are rodeo guys," said Wheeler. "I knew a lot of them without knowing (it)." John Dodds, head wrangler on **Cowboys** and a film veteran, was a four-time Canadian bull-riding champ.

While **Cowboys'** pedigree can certainly compare to that of western films like **Loyalties** and **My American Cousin**, it will have to prove its quality. The script competently outlined the struggle between father and son but tended to lack bite: some journalists were warned not to mention 'Disney' on set.

Nevertheless, it managed to offend Marilyn Halvorson, who was apparently unhappy with Wheeler's emphasis on the adult relationships.

Regardless of opinions about the script, the final judgment of **Cowboys** will come when it airs on CBC next March. (Producers are hoping to distribute it as a feature internationally.) The point, however, is proved. **Cowboys** is a western film; whether it is a good western film remains to be seen.

Stacey Bertles •

Pin

A house is perched along the banks of the Richelieu River in Iberville, a small town southeast of Montreal. It's an old stone mansion, grandiose and imposing, colored by local legends about mysterious escape tunnels that no one has ever been able to find. The cold look of the stone is eerie even in the sunlight. The house's grey facade lies in stark contrast to the autumn colors in the trees that surround it. On the inside, made to look like the residence of a doctor and his over-meticulous wife, the rooms appear to be museum displays. The furniture looks unused, monuments to the obsession with perfection they are obviously meant to reflect.

It is here that **Pin**, a psychological thriller, written and directed by Sandor Stern, is shooting. Two-thirds of the film take place inside the house, making the set almost one of the characters.

The title character Pin isn't human. It is an anatomical dummy used by the doctor to amuse his two children. But the doctor and his wife are failures as parents. Driven by an unreasonable sense of order and propriety, they have tended to neglect their children's emotional upbringing. Pin then becomes a surrogate for the affection lacking in their lives.

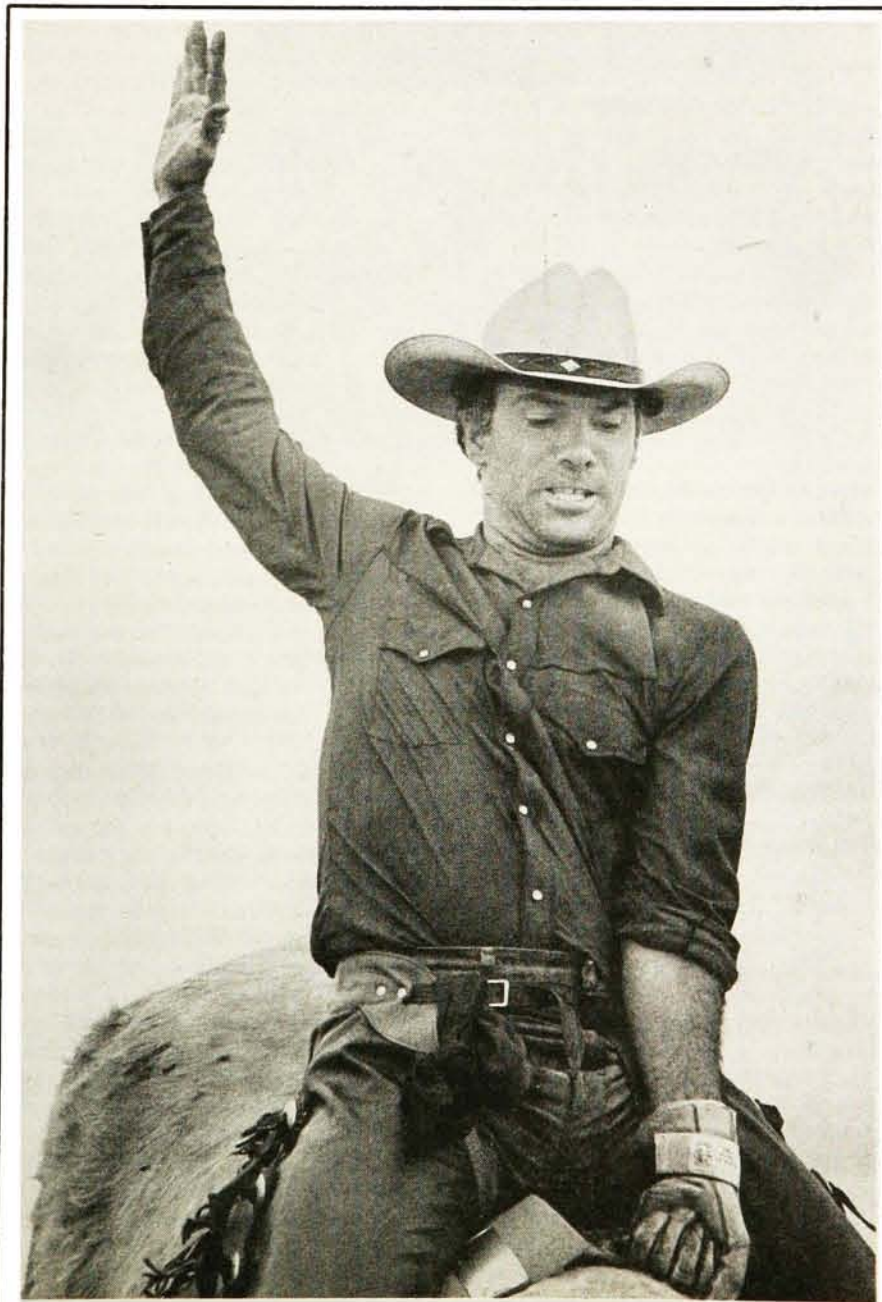
When the two children, Leon and Ursula (David Hewlett and Cyndy Preston), become young adults, their parents are killed in an accident. It is then that Pin alarmingly becomes more than a mannequin. Leon then withdraws into a world where all of his psychological problems deepen, finding focus in his increasingly disturbing relationship with Pin.

Pin's writer/director Sandor Stern was born in Ontario, but now lives in Los Angeles. Stern was a medical doctor who gave up his profession to become a scriptwriter. He eventually graduated to directing, and is responsible for the TV programs **Easy Prey**, **Assassin**, and **John and Yoko: A Love Story**. He also wrote the screenplay for **The Amityville Horror**, so he is no stranger to subjects designed to unnerve the viewer.

He is making the film for the perennially busy René Malo, who this year has no less than five films in different stages of production.

A key ingredient in **Pin's** hopes for success is director of photography Guy Dufaux. As director of photography on two of the most successful films ever produced in Quebec, **Le Déclin de l'empire américain** and **Un Zoo la nuit**, Dufaux now has a reputation that makes his presence on this project prestigious.

Dufaux was born in France, and moved to Quebec in the '60s with no ambition to get into movies. But the Quebec film industry was less hierarchi-



• Ron White is ridin high in **Cowboys Don't Cry**

Photo: Douglas Curran



• Sandor Stern and Guy Dufaux on Pin

cally structured then, and he was able to get various jobs on low-budget films. He worked his way through the ranks and became a d.o.p. in the early '70s. His brother, Georges (now head of French programming at the NFB) was already a respected cameraman when Guy became one of the three founding partners of Les Productions Prisma.

Chatting over the dinner break on the set of *Pin*, Dufaux is amiable and open, touching on a wide variety of subjects in our half-hour together. His recent work has put him in the enviable position of being able to pick and choose his own projects. It's this luxury that Dufaux believes keeps his work interesting in its diversity. He continually looks for challenges in order to maintain his creative spark and to accomplish what he feels he is capable of.

In the case of *Pin*, René Malo showed him the script and he was immediately attracted by the chance to do a psychological thriller, a change of pace from the more realistic tone of his last few films.

Dufaux is happy working with Stern, and feels the shoot is going well. He speaks with justifiable pride about the "look" he is able to lend the project, but is quick to downplay his or anyone else's role as pivotal. "You can't say a film was successful because of the d.o.p., or the direction any one person gave it; a film's success is due to the way a good crew, director and producer work together," he says, adding that that is the only way to capture and imbue the work with the elusive, intangible quality known as magic.

The critical accolades garnered by *Le Déclin* and *Un Zoo* have bolstered Quebec cinema's international reputation, giving people like Dufaux some

overdue recognition. He feels the industry still isn't as big as it should be, but that the talent is here, and can be nurtured under the right circumstances. "American filmmakers can afford to do only one film a year when they are paid millions for a movie," he says by way of explaining how the American system can provide the necessary economic support to allow more time to be devoted to a given project. Given similar circumstances in Canada, he feels we can eventually produce international cinema in both quantity and quality.

But for the moment there is *Pin*, and Dufaux's energies are focused on it. The future looks bright, but he is well aware of the old adage that you're only as good as your last film. And Dufaux seems intent on making his work on each film ensure that that future is reasonably certain.

Stanley White •

Formula 1

It is a blisteringly hot July morning here at the Gilles Villeneuve Circuit on Montreal's man-made Notre-Dame Island, and the bordering trees shimmer distantly as cyclists roll over the hot, black pavement. Soon, they arrive near the massive Race Tower, where many Saturday-morning cyclists are already stopped, fascinated by the activity: sleek Formula 1 racers throb in anticipation, a 'pit-crew' seems to be racing with time while working on another racer, 'press photographers' in a tight circle are el-

bowing each other for a better view of the action while in the foreground a sizeable crescent-shaped group sit as if waiting for something to happen.

The gallery of cyclists, now grown larger than before, scan the faces of the 35 or so who sit on a concrete wall, as if in search of someone they will recognize. They see one of them stand, dressed smartly in a pilot's jumpsuit and jaunty sports cap, stretching his legs and looking around him. From his pocket he takes out a ping-pong ball and starts to bounce it on the pavement, absently, like a smoker trying to cut down or quit by keeping his hands busy. "Regarde," says one of the cyclists, elbowing her neighbour and pointing, her eyes shining from recognition, "c'est Guillaume Plouffe!"

No, it is not Guillaume Plouffe, but the young Québécois actor who played him: Serge Dupire (*Le Matou, Les Plouffe, La Femme de l'hotel*) who here plays Daniel Hardy, a character loosely based on the namesake of the racetrack where he now stands, the Gilles Villeneuve Circuit. He holds the leading role in *Formule I*, the latest television mega-series to come out of producer Claude Heroux's (*He shoots, He Scores I, II* and soon *III*) guiding hand.

A 13-episode, \$13-million budget series on the glamorized, high-energy life of the Formula 1 racing world, it is actually a co-production between Canada's Communications Claude Heroux and France's Vamp Productions. Already it is pre-sold to Quebec's Réseau Télé-Metropole and France's TFL network.

It is the story of the fictional Sainclair Racing Team, headed by the patriarchal Joseph Sainclair (played by French actor Daniel Gelin, perhaps best known to North American audiences for his role in Alfred Hitchcock's classic *The Man Who Knew Too Much*), his drivers Luc Sainclair (played by real-life son Manuel Gelin, of *Les Uns et les autres* by Claude Lelouch), Alan Sturgess (played by Steve Banner, of *Les Fous de Bassan* and Hardy (Dupire).

Their 13-hour story, co-written by two Québécois and two French screenwriters, co-directed by at least three different directors of various nationalities (on a per-episode, per-country basis), has them circling the world to the exotic settings of international races. These include actual Formula 1 racing footage shot in Monaco and Budapest, as well as filming in various regions of France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Mexico and Canada.

With its formulaic predecessor being *He Shoots, He Scores*, it is presumed that the story will carry just enough sexual innuendo to sizzle up the ratings. Indeed, when looking at the group of actors/actresses/extras, one is struck by just how young and handsome a group they are. For example, in real-life, racing mechanics tend to be balding, beer-gutted, cigar-chomping middle-aged men. Here, however, they are young model-types with smart haircuts and tight-fitting mechanic's jumpsuits. The women extras are uniformly svelt and pretty, though generally short: shorter, that is, than their male counterparts who for the most part are European and therefore smaller than the typical North American.

Now Dupire is called and he takes his place atop the winner's podium flanked by two other 'drivers'. He wears the win-

ner's crown around his neck, and in his hand is a champagne bottle (actually a cheap imitation) which he holds in readiness to spray the 'crowd' of 'enthusiastic' extras.

One man steps to the fore, directing the cameraman. He is Nardo Castillo (*Claire... cette nuit et demain*) who, with French director Paul Planchon, is responsible for directing the lion's share of episodes for this series. He has two cameras shooting this scene, the main one on a tripod taking the medium shot, another hand-held for 'atmosphere'. He stands on the concrete abutment, towering over the extras, as he instructs Dupire on what he wants for this scene. He then turns to the extras and explains what general movements he wants from them. Returning to the camera, he peers quickly into the viewfinder, then takes another quick look at where the microphone is positioned. Satisfied, he calls for a run-through.

The scene lasts barely 15-or-so seconds, full of cross-movements by extras, specific acts by the 'drivers', and the general hubbub of a 'crowd' in a white-hot state of excitement. Even though several things happen in so short a time, Castillo manages to pick out several little details that need correcting before he is ready to shoot the scene.

"I have great confidence in my actors," says Castillo, a self-taught director of prizewinning commercials (he founded Les Films 24 Inc., today one of Montreal's largest commercial production houses) before moving into features. "It's a pleasure to work with 'experienced people. They have a kind of actor's gyroscope that keeps the reality of their character throughout the 13 episodes. And that's not easy with two different main directors."

Castillo has developed a reputation as a demanding but fair director. When a member of his cast or crew needs to be talked to in specific terms, it is typical that he will take him or her aside, in privacy. Only the sin of incompetence is not tolerated. "You see, more the machine is complex, more it is necessary to work with precision. Like in watch-making: if one of the little wheels isn't turning right, all the other wheels will be off. So you have to prepare your choices carefully."

(Later, one of the listeners to our conversation asked Castillo how he goes about directing his group, using the French word 'gerer' which translates as 'direct' but in its wider sense of 'organize' or 'control'. Castillo frowned.

"Oh, I hate that word", he answered.

"Why?", she asked.

"Let me give you an example. Do you, um... 'direct' a baby?"

"Of course not. It directs you."

"Precisely.")

Now the scene is ready. At Castillo's signal, the 'crowd' bursts into cheers and excited applause, hailing the 'champion' Dupire, as he shakes the bottle and happily sprays them with a fine mist of sweet-smelling champagne. The extras cry out even more lustily as the champagne glistens on their upturned faces. Dupire waves to the crowd, standing on the very spot where Gilles Villeneuve stood not so long ago to the cheers of an adoring local crowd. Like him, Dupire finally walks away and into the sun.

André Guy Arseneault •