

hoping deadly is sweeter

by Natalie Edwards



A street scene
from *Lions for Breakfast*

Jet lag is nothing compared to the time lapse some Canadian producers experience between the moment they shoot a film and the date of its release. *A Sweeter Song*, produced by Tony Kramreither, was screened at Cannes in 1976 and has been

waiting for its Canadian release ever since. Meanwhile, both the director, Alan Eastman, and the star, Susan Petrie, have moved on to Hollywood, and Kramreither himself has another feature under his belt and several more on the drawing table.

Typically, producer Tony Kramreither (*Lions for Breakfast*, *A Sweeter Song*) had to begin his career all over again when he emigrated to Canada at 30 in 1956. Despite a background in theatre, film and TV (directing and producing over 50 TV dramas and documentaries, acting on stage) the Vienna-born Kramreither took a variety of jobs here before he began to work as a performer in TV series like *RCMP*,

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Scarlett Hill, *Wojek*, *Quentin Durgens, M.P.* and *Adventures in Rainbow Country*.

After gaining experience, if not acclaim, with two quickly forgotten films, *Change of Mind* and *The Reincarnate*, he became a producer with a Canadian-Rumanian co-production (the first) of *Silent Friends*, shot in Rumania.

"It's very strange, working in Rumania," he says. "The crew was excellent. The cameraman did wonderful things with a hand-held camera. But the difficulties were with paperwork. Half an hour to get a hammer, signing things. One day I had to use a gun (called a pushka), for which many

papers had to be filled out. And during the river scene the boat went over and I went into the beautiful blue-dirty-filthy Danube, and swam as quickly as I could to get out. They were all yelling 'Pushka, pushka!' because you get into terrific trouble if you should keep a gun. They dove for about two hours trying to retrieve it.

"But what an industry there! They are the same as us, about 20 million people. And they make 20 to 30 features a year. French is their second language, German their third. Many people study English rather than Russian in school for their free language. I spoke to them in German and it worked well."

Kramreither is a big energetic man, enthusiastic to a fault, willing, co-operative, and as opinionated as a Dutchman. He has an old-fashioned excitable disposition – the kind that plans great ventures, survives big disappointments, and doesn't acknowledge defeat. Who else would tackle an all-Canadian film with all-Canadian jokes and an all-Canadian cast? On \$400,000?

Jim Henshaw, one of the stars of **Lions for Breakfast**, wrote the script for **A Sweeter Song** and reworked it with director Allan Eastman. It's Eastman's first, and there are ways that is obvious, and Henshaw, as the male lead, has not quite mastered comic timing. Yet the film has a lot of attractive features, not the least of which is a bright performance by Susan Petrie. Kramreither agrees that sharper cutting might tighten up the film, which lags a little self-indulgently at the moment.

But **A Sweeter Song** is not his first all-Canadian venture. In 1974 he produced **Lions for Breakfast**, for which he claims the original distribution was a dismal failure, almost ruining the film's chances. He bought back control and is now releasing the film through EPOH (Bob Hope's company) in the U.S., and Ambassador in Canada. EPOH has made 45 prints and set 400 playing dates in the U.S. for **Lions** already.

Kramreither is convinced financing and sales, promotion and distribution, are the keys to Canadian success. Co-productions may be one answer. A TV series he produced on the lives and works of four Nobel Prize winners involved co-producing with Radio Sweden, Office de Radio-diffusion Television Française, Bavaria-West Germany and EVS Australia. Shown on the CBC in 1975, the program not only introduced Kramreither to "four of the most wonderful human beings I know" but strengthened his resolve to always work with material he could control – after a confrontation over leaving in anti-U.S. remarks by Linus Pauling, as well as a controversial statement about deaths caused by aspirin.

How does a man with six children and a big house manage? "Well, I don't cry about the Canadian film industry," exclaims Kramreither. "And I do other things to make a living. I can act, direct; I have a big advantage. And a producer does give himself a salary – not large so far but when I get into big-budget films, I'll do all right."

Bob Brooks, csc, and the small crew he always uses give him their very best, he feels, and when he is really big-time, they'll be glad they worked for him, he says, "because I won't forget them." He has three speeches for cast and crew when he begins a picture: "First, I tell them that working together will be like being on a holiday. In the middle of the film I encourage them and ask them to give me their best. And at the end I thank them. That's all."

As a producer, he says, his three main jobs are raising the money, making various post-production decisions concerning the film, and attending to sales.

He has finished shooting **Deadly Harvest** (also with Ambassador). Written by Martin Lager (who wrote **Lions**), the principal photography was finished in December. "Consider



Tony Kramreither, during the production of **A Sweeter Song**

weather conditions..." Kramreither begins, and proceeds to relate what sounds like a disaster plot based on food shortages so bad they affect even Canada. He tones down the catastrophic aspect, however, and insists the story is kept on "a human scale; little people, a small community...". But a big budget. And good distribution. The film at least is not intended as a disaster.

Other irons in the fire include a personal work on **Alexander Solzhenitsyn – The Conscience of Russia in Exile**, a one-hour documentary special which is a labor of love. "I was offered \$100,000 backing to make this an anti-communist film," he says, "but I refused it. It is my intention to simply show the man and his achievement."

From John Craig's novel **In Council Rooms Apart** he is fashioning a film about "the biggest conspiracy ever," concerning the power of the 10 families or so that control our world through armaments and secret agreements."

"How is it, do you suppose," he says, "that both the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth sailed through the Second World War without getting bombed or sunk, though they travelled alone? I have even met the U-boat commander who was ordered at the last minute, while waiting for one of them, to go 100 miles away to sink some small ship. Think of that." Shooting is planned for February/March 1977 with a \$1.2 million budget.

And he's planning more co-productions with the Americans following the success of **Giant Spider Invasion**, recently released here. Asked about a rumored move south, he replies vehemently, "I'll be their Canadian producer, but I'll never move there. I like to visit though. If I moved anywhere, I'd like to live in Munich..."

Other future plans?

"I'd like to make a film about the greatest Canadian – Dr. Banting. The story of his life is fascinating. He had to share the Nobel Prize with McLeod, but he knew Best deserved recognition, and worked hard to see he got it. Have you seen the mock-up lab he worked in at the Ontario Science Centre? Horrible circumstances, to make such an important contribution. But because he is a Canadian you cannot get the money. But I'll make that film. I guarantee." □

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