

of cannes, canada, robin spry and roberto rossellini

Marc Gervais, a Cannes habitué, looks at the Canadian participation and singles out Robin Spry's *One Man*. He also pays tribute to Roberto Rossellini, the man and the filmmaker.

by Marc Gervais



The idea of Craig Russell as Mae West or Judy Garland was *Outrageous*, even at Cannes!

Cannes '77 was a Canadian success story by now well recorded. Many of the elements of that story deserve careful analysis, not the least of which, of course, were our best international sales on record.

Marc Gervais, Montreal film critic, is an associate professor in the department of communication arts at Concordia University. He is the author of *Pier Paolo Pasolini* edited by Seghers in Paris.

There were some films one would like to be able to write about, but cannot, since it is simply impossible to see everything on display during a two-week period that has become charged almost beyond the breaking point. And so I missed *Outrageous*, a spoofy film that elicited a lot of good popular and critical response. But see it or not, one heard about it, thanks to a publicity and marketing pizzazz seldom seen surrounding anything from Canada. At last count, *Outrageous* was being courted by seven other international film festivals, ranging from Berlin to the Virgin Islands.

Peter Carter's **Rituals** presents a striking example of a strong film marred by overwriting and too much giving in to market values. Carter almost achieves the Canadian dream of reconciling what are often contradictory demands: the small film, basic audience impact as determined by well proven Hollywood practice, and personal in-felt experience. Almost, but not quite. But, flawed or not, **Rituals** proves that Carter's marvelous earlier feature, **The Rowdyman**, was no fluke, and that Carter himself is one of our best feature directors.

Another story: the flawed **Olympics** film, a movie that could not miss, but did; but which still will do well, inevitably, in international sales.



Riding the rapids in **Rituals**

One could equally linger on Sylvio Narizzano's **Why Shoot the Teacher** a delightful rural prairies' Depression story, starring Bud Cort, and a Canadian film that should do well all over North America.

Above all, Canada scored with its two official entries in the Big Festival competition. Both are Québécois films, and both are charming, personal works. Jean Beaudin's **J.A. Martin photographe**, which deservedly won the best actress award for Monique Mercure, may well usher a blessedly new spirit, a psychologically freer and maturer one, into Québécois cinema. And Pierre Mignot's camera brings us a Quebec never before seen on the screen. Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, with **Le vieux pays où Rimbaud est mort**, gives us his most accessible, serene, and well-rounded film to date. The brilliant but uneven enfant terrible of Quebec cinema seems to be shedding his worst ideosyncratic traits, while retaining his freshness and unique creative independence.

All of this is well and good, and worthy of far more complete treatment. However, for reasons which may emerge below – and at the risk of sounding both pretentious and pedantic – this article has opted for focussing on one film, Robin Spry's **One Man**, and through that one film, to touch upon certain larger issues involving Canadian cinema, some aspects of Cannes '77, and, indeed, of the film world at large.

For this writer, anyway, **One Man** proved one of the most intriguing films of the whole lot.

For one thing, the film seems assured of a wide international market, above all on the television networks of the Western world. But more important, surely, is the quality of a film which won such enthusiastic response from the over worked, not to say jaded, Cannes audiences.



Rose-Aimée (Monique Mercure) and J.A. (Marcel Sabourin)

For out of the 500-odd films shown in the various Cannes manifestations, **One Man** was surely one of the most exciting, most dynamic. Paradoxically enough, the film is outstanding precisely in those areas which the National Film Board, its producer, and Robin Spry himself are not primarily noted for: gut-level popular appeal. No doubt about it, the viewer is riveted, captured by the pace, involved with the various characters *moved* by what is going on.

For some years now, Spry has been commuting back and forth between fiction and documentary. His television dramas have given him the groundwork in fiction and in the use of professional actors. The highly successful **Prologue**, a feature already a decade old, was a sort of mix, leaning heavily towards documentary. And the more recent **Action/Reaction**, of course, was out-and-out documentary in its study of the October crisis.

With **One Man**, Spry moves all the way into fiction feature cinema, showing a mastery and control hitherto lacking in his work. The acting has *size*, popular appeal. Len Cariou,

Sabourin again, this time as Abel in **Le vieux pays...**





Cariou and Eastwood make **One Man** live

in his first film, already has the aura of film stardom. And Jayne Eastwood and Carol Lazar, in a well-rounded cast, are excellent. Jean Lapointe, as always, is superb.

And, as already stated, the film moves in the best tradition of the well-made thriller. As a matter of fact, this quality may well be **One Man's** major limitation. Or at least it raises a very keen esthetic, not to say moral, problem. For in **One Man**, we are in territory grown too familiar: the film has the feel of those slick, incessantly repeated crime detection dramas that inundate American television. In its structure and texture, in its film rhetoric, and in its characters and situations, it risks being too easy, too familiar for an audience glutted on consumer TV objects, one that cannot be reached at any level except that of unthinking, unchallenging consumption.

In other words, does the film language employed doom **One Man** to a sad diminution in precisely those dimensions that have informed Spry's previous work, and, indeed, that have been one of the hallmarks of the NFB's finest products over the years?

One refers here to such things as social responsibility, film as social research, film as consciousness-raiser and conscience-rouser.

The most fascinating aspect, it seems to me, of **One Man** is that it attempts to communicate this spirit of true social concern through a popular film language. And in this it was, at Cannes, only one of a number of works attempting the same risky tour de force.

Sweden, in very oblique fashion, presented two such films. Bo Wideberg's **The Man on the Roof**, already a hit in New York, is an excellent police thriller that achieves special interest through its playing with the conventions and situations with a certain ruthless awareness. Implicitly at least, some pretty powerful social comments are coming across.

Mats Ahren's **The Assignment**, using popular film rhetoric, explores with undeniable power the dilemma facing Western nations in their dealings with Latin American dictatorships. It stars Canada's most accomplished actor, Christopher Plummer, who goes on receiving full marks for his stage work, but very little consideration for his consistently interesting performances in films good, bad, or indifferent.

Denmark as well had its entry in this popular genre. Anders Refn's excellent **Copper** studies the social structures underlying social injustice through the trauma of a more or less psychopathic policeman.

It is Robin Spry's film, however, that is the most intense, convincing, and penetrating of all these studies. The story of a TV reporter/star performer, his discovery of the com-

plex socio-economic forces responsible for polluting a Montreal slum area, and his answering moral dilemma, might well serve as a model on how to reduce complex issues into a meaningful communication not beyond the reach of the general public.

High marks, therefore, go to the scripting – usually the weakest area in Canadian filmmaking – and hence to Spry, Peter Pearson, Peter Madden, and probably a lot of others involved in the great number of rewrites. But it is Spry the director who ultimately is responsible for the success of the film. The danger, previously outlined, in courting film language that has become banal, anodine, made-to-order for consumer products – and that, far from eliciting an audience's creative response, simply helps that audience to plunge deeper into its own alienation from anything humanly positive – is more than overcome by Spry's intelligence and deeply felt social commitment. In other words, the film is eminently *aware*, in the finest social sense. And it takes a stand.

But more. Informing this dimension are an intensity, an insight into human relationships, a sensitivity to basic human needs and responses, that make the film soar beyond the dangers inherent in banal, formula-dominated film recipes.

So **One Man** works, the best Canadian film of this type yet made. In one sense, it marks the culmination point of the journalistic, reportorial films I wrote about a few months ago in **Cinema Canada**.



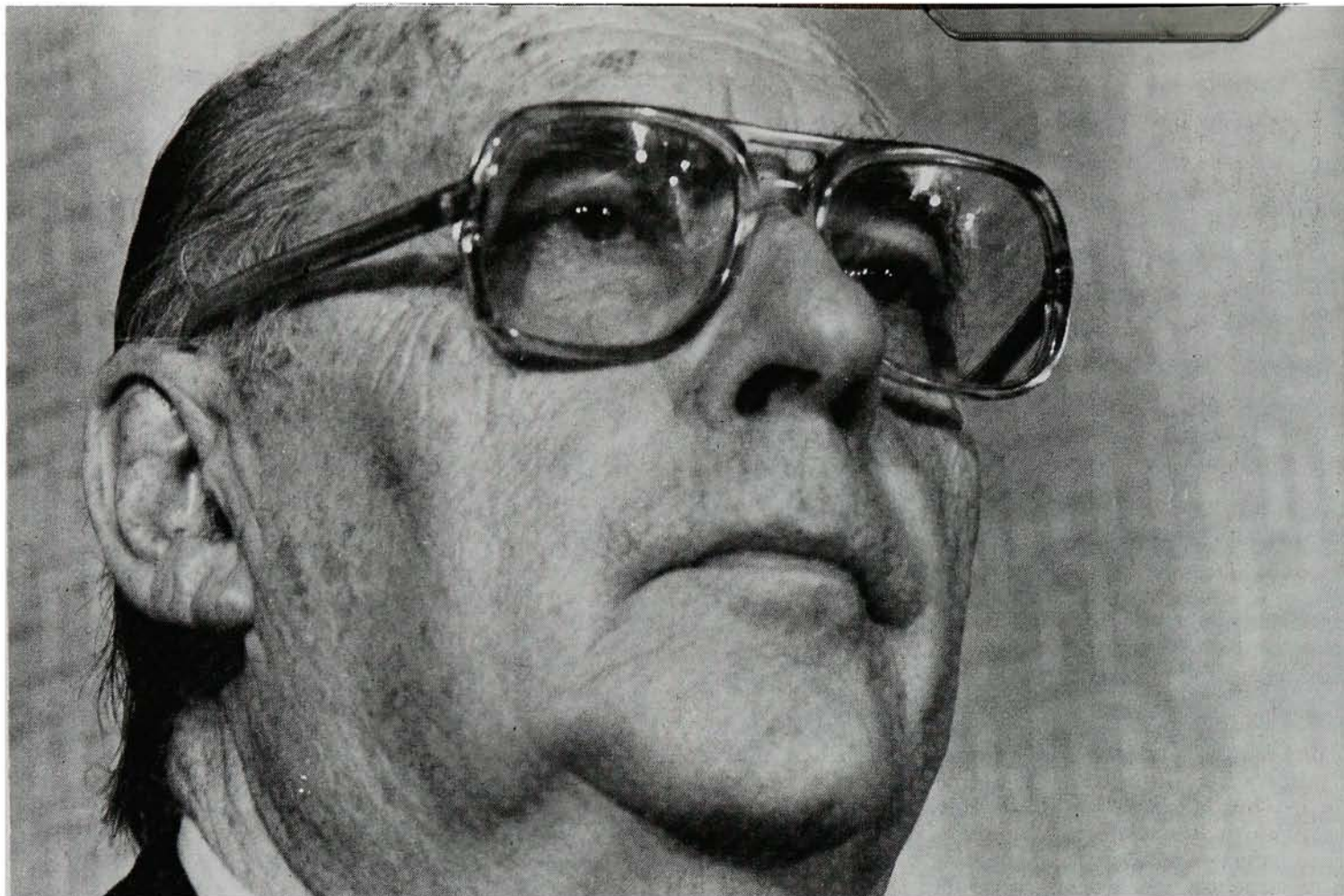
Getting after the news in **One Man**

In a completely different vein, the film raises other, pleasant questions. Where does Robin Spry go from here, as a film maker? He has shown now that he can play the popular game with skill, without sacrificing his personal convictions. Will his next film adventure out onto more ambitious esthetic ground, *i.e.*, in those regions where the whole film, its texture, structure, ideas, etc., becomes a personal, in some ways unique, organic object, both art and communication; or does he consolidate his gains at the present level? Both possibilities, obviously enough, have their share of challenges, risks, pitfalls.

And what about the NFB, its determination to stay away from fiction features demanding too heavy a cut of the over all budget as it presently stands? Will financial success (possibly for all three features: **One Man**, **J.A. Martin**, **photographe**, and the **Olympic** film) alter policy? And so on...

Would that Canadian feature film making were plagued by more problems of this kind!

One Man and a number of other sincere, though by no means so successful, feature films shown at Cannes bring to mind the sad news of Roberto Rossellini's death.



Rossellini as he was during the symposium he organized at Cannes

photo by Federico

For Roberto Rossellini was very much in evidence at Cannes this past May. Indeed, his was far and away the outstanding *personal* presence.

While thousands were scurrying about buying and selling mostly junk movies; while, say, the multimillion-dollar ad campaign for the forthcoming supercolossal **Superman** epic was already in full swing, dwarfing, by sheer size, almost everything else – in other words, while the dominant activity, willynilly, was the huckstering of alienation – Rossellini was gathering film directors and anyone else interested in a daily symposium on film responsibility. In essence, he was asking the question: what can we do to make the media socially responsible – the same media which overwhelmingly shirk that responsibility.

The silly newspaper obits following his death seemed only interested in his Ingrid Bergman *scandale* of years ago, passing over, in most instances, the essential thrust of his life, a magnificent one. For Rossellini's entire activity became an incarnation of the quest for truth through the media. The "father of Neo-Realism", he made, over the years, some of the masterpieces of film history, as well as some much less distinguished work. But it was the man himself, with his astounding enthusiasm and openness and generosity, and above all his ability to spur others on to creative action, who played a role far beyond that of his films.

He was always ahead of his time. For example, he helped Truffaut and Godard, and many others of France's Nouvelle Vague (by whom he was revered) to get their start. And many of the young independent national cinemas of different countries turned to him over the ensuing years.

A voracious student, a scientist, inventor, researcher, a lover of and creator in the world of art, he was forever on the go, with his headquarters in Rome and in Paris, but going his peripatetic way through India, Spain, America. Working in universities, with special groups, making films, planning new projects, new explorations in the area of human con-

sciousness and a new understanding – such was the man.

Advanced film research is taking a serious, second look at what he was trying to achieve in his less popular later work. Films on Louis XIV, the Acts of the Apostles, De Gasperi, Pascal, Christ, the History of Science, the History of the Industrial Revolution – on and on the list goes, with his next film slated to be on Karl Marx. It is now clear. From the very start, and right to the end, Rossellini's thrust was constant: to know, to help contemporary man understand his roots. It made for an exemplary quest of the human spirit.

Rossellini died one week after the Cannes Film Festival, of whose official jury he was chairman. Endless film viewings, interviews and discussions, the symposium he was presiding over – the strain was too much.

I chatted with the man briefly in his hotel suite. It was somewhat shocking to see how tired he was, and how the weight of his 71 years had caught up with this apparently indefatigable, energetic man. He was in pyjamas and dressing gown, trying to catch 40 winks. We made a date to meet later in Paris, to plan a seminar in Montreal for later on in the year. And that, of course, was typical of him. Even when the energy was low, the enthusiasm and openness remained, with a desire to do more, help more.

With his death, the cinema loses one of its greatest names, and more – one of its richest human beings.

But in true Rossellini fashion, defeat or frustration are hardly the final word. For hope and creativity go on. Rossellini's legacy, precisely, is carried on by committed film directors like Robin Spry and in their finest moments, by institutions, such as the National Film Board. As long as film people of talent and social responsibility continue to use the media as the area of their activity, so long will the spirit of Roberto Rossellini continue to exercise its influence on a world that sorely needs him. □



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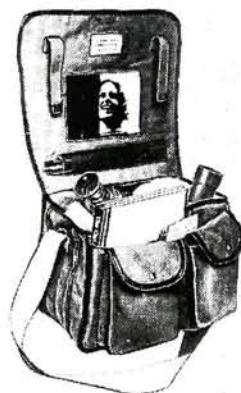
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L.A. Times CALENDAR
November 28, 1976

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The Hollywood Reporter
November 5, 1976

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