



*Harvey Hart*

and the success of *The Pyx* at the box-office should mean he's here to stay.



*Karen Black as Elizabeth Lucy in "The Pyx"*

# Harvey Hart's Back in Town

*interviewed by Kiss/Koller*

*edited by A. Ibrányi-Kiss*

Directed by Harvey Hart, screenplay by Robert Schlitt (adapted from John Buell's novel), director of photography: René Verzier. Editor: Ron Wisman, music: Harry Freedman. Songs composed and sung by Karen Black. Starring Karen Black, Christopher Plummer, Donald Pilon, Jean-Louis Roux, Yvette Brind'Amour, Jacques Godin, Lee Broker, Terry Haig, Robin Gammell and Louise Rinfret. Produced by Maxine Samuels, Host Productions. Executive producer: Julian Roffman. 35mm, colour, Running time: 111 minutes. Distributed in Canada by Cinepix, in the U.S. by Cinerama. Produced with CFDC assistance.

**After seeing *The Pyx* several of us wound up having a long discussion about two particular scenes – especially the last scene. Some people said it just didn't work for them, while others were explaining the reasons why it did work. . . .**

That's interesting. It's good. Actually, I thought of the ending as the reason for the whole picture. The ending became supra-real. It was a calculated gamble on my part to step out of the reality that I had established. I consciously wanted to suck the audience into the immediacy of it so they couldn't cop out and say, "This couldn't happen to me." I wanted to get down to the issue which became cut away from the established reality – good against evil. But who's good and who's evil? That's what it comes down to in the arena for most of us at one time or another. We try to avoid it. We're faced with a multiplicity of choices so that we're able to cop out. But when it comes down to, "Are you making an evil choice or a good choice?" – we know it. Everything becomes stripped away. That was the intent. I say it was a calculated gamble – I didn't know whether it would work emotionally with what had been driven before it.

**Do you know now?**

I can't tell until I've finally seen it with an audience. I've seen it so many times just in a screening room, that it's strictly up here for me. A film doesn't work until you finally sit in an audience and feel whether it's there.

**Have you had any screenings with audiences?**

We did about four, just at invited screenings, and it's definitely worked.

**With the printed questionnaires and all?**

(Laughter) That whole Hollywood thing is finished. I'll never forget the first picture I made in Hollywood, *Bus Riley's Back in Town*, and I had never gone through that in my life! We had a sneak preview in a big theatre and they handed people cards . . . and the idiotic things they were saying on the cards! And then the picture was butchered. Absolutely butchered because of those cards. Actually, the heads of the company were like children. It's like doing a controversial show on TV and one letter comes in and says, "Tatata! Why did you do this?" And they listen to that letter which is negative! They're so afraid of having an opinion for themselves. So I'd never. . . . Never. I don't know. I can see if you're out of the film – if you're not into it all the way. . . . But it depends on whether you're involved with it or whether you're criticizing it.

I was involved with it all the way, but somehow the ending wasn't evil enough for me . . .

I see. . . . My thing there was to say – evil is cloaked in many different disguises. It's a bit like Pirandello. For instance, to go back, I interviewed cops from the Montreal police force and I had a terrific guy with me every day who was a homicide detective and is now head of their investigation bureau. I really questioned him at length before we started shooting. What came out was that cops are now put into a position where they have to play God. They're used politically, to make moral judgements. The church has copped out, the people have copped out. So they get the feeling of being God.

I talked to a captain who just came back from court – a man was on trial for killing his wife. And he said, "You know something? I would have killed her! She was a bitch! She drove him crazy!" It made me think – here's a man who we say should not have these thoughts. He's there to carry out the letter of the law. But it's like in the States – when you allow Nixon to assume too much power, he starts to believe he should have that power. That's exactly what's happening to the police. We put them there. We're the ones who have allowed them to take this power. They don't want it, but they've been put in a whole different position today.

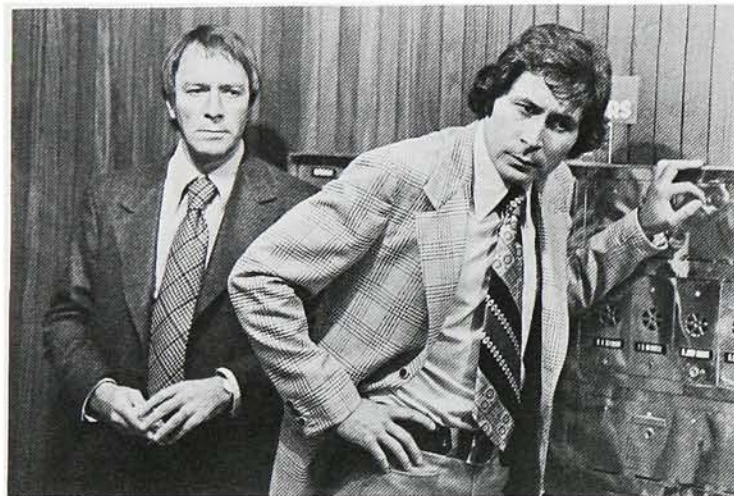
So, to get to the last scene – we have someone who has been making decisions as to what's good and what's evil – except for his own life. Now, when he's involved – who is good? Is he good? What I wanted to do was to make each person in the audience face the goodness or evil in himself. I did consider having Keerson fall off the balcony being pursued by the detective. What appealed to me momentarily was the symmetry of the idea coming back to the beginning – not knowing whether it was suicide or murder. But I threw it out because it was symmetrical. My feeling was, "Now don't you cop out – as a filmmaker! It's a dialectic you're involved in here. Present it as simply and as powerfully as possible." That was to see it on their faces. I don't even show the gun firing. When I saw Chris (Plummer) do it, I said, "That's the moment. That's what my picture is all about." It's that horrendous moment when people kill, either symbolically or literally – which brings them to the fact that they're capable of it.

**But there had already been so much horror in *The Pyx* – it didn't seem horrendous enough. . . . By then you're ready for a bloodbath. . . .**

My feeling was to pull away from that. To me, the documentary aspect of it was the horror of our everyday lives. This is what we're living with. To try and outdo that would have been an attempt to top myself with horror – and there are lots of people who are much, much better at that than I. I was more interested in the argument. The attempt was to shock them philosophically. That was definitely a gamble. An actor or a director has a multiplicity of choices and its only the point of view he's got that selects what for him is the right choice.

**There was also new information revealed in the last scene. . . .**

That was purposeful again. I don't believe in a well-made play anymore in terms of the Chekhovian idea of planting everything so that the audience has a chance to be with you and say, "Ah! He said this back in Reel 1. I remember now!" The audience, if you're honest with them, most of the time they're three steps ahead of you. Some of the time, they're there – waiting for you. That's where I'd like to have them. There have been so many pictures which have experimented, for instance, with sound coming from all different directions like you would have at a party. You have to zero in and find out what the director wants you to hear. The same thing is – I would like it to be so they don't know exactly what's happening the first time around. What's to prevent them from going to a picture the second time? Third time? Maybe you'll come out seeing it the same way. But I think that's the



Christopher Plummer and Donald Pilon – Montreal detectives in "The Pyx"



excitement of pictures. That's not to say that you can't do films for pure entertainment. But that's why I didn't want to tie it up too neatly.

**You seem to have hit on a very good combination of the two.**

I hope so. It's very important that the film gets out to audiences because a filmmaker has nothing except feedback. What you say to me now – maybe on the next project, it will feed itself in. The most important part of the film is to know the story you're telling. You should have a firm grip on what you're talking about. This is what forms every image – point of view. What helps you select.

The other scene I had problems with was between the two young women. When Elizabeth visits her friend Sandra in the hospital while Sandra's kicking heroin. I was embarrassed by the scene because I felt that women relate differently when they're alone. Eye contact becomes of the utmost importance . . .

You said an interesting word there – that you were embarrassed. I wanted you to be embarrassed, but maybe not in the way you're saying. I wanted you to be very uncomfortable. Remember, there's a big important factor here that is, this girl Sandra has been dried out for about two days and she's desperate for a fix. In the beginning, she looks right at her. She's trying to get through to her, and what Sandra does is she shames Elizabeth. She says, "You still shoot up, don't you?"

**That's exactly my point. Sandra shames Elizabeth. If anyone were to turn away it would be Elizabeth.**

But Elizabeth slaps her. Sandra's a child – she's only sixteen or seventeen. And she slaps her! It's really not out of not wanting to make a connection – it's out of desperation. Because Elizabeth does something she wouldn't want to do in the whole world – which is to slap this child who means the most to her except for Jimmy.

**But that's why I didn't understand why Sandra looked away. She had the trump over Elizabeth – not the other way around.**

The problem is, that in Elizabeth's purse is the stuff Sandra could use right now. It's the frustration, the desperation, the anguish at being left alone. What you said is exactly true – Elizabeth is using her to solve something in herself. It's a physical thing, it's not emotional anymore. Out of the slap it becomes the feeling of wanting to be mothered, more than anything else. She's not an adult, and how many times do we want someone to just say, "Take me around, just take me around. Stop talking so much. Rock me and let me feel good." It's that. So again, it's a choice.

**I brought it up because the scenes between Elizabeth and the Madam are so excellent, and this one scene stuck out. In the other scenes, the communication of feelings and the subtleties of affection going down between the two women were so beautifully done.**

It's more than affection. I think you get the feeling, and this is definitely true, that the 'high princess' in a high class bordello has been the Madam's girl.

**Yvette Brind'Amour was excellent in her role as the Madam. Just excellent. Has she been in any other films recently?**

You know where you've seen her? On the stage. Never has she appeared in a film before. It brings up another point, and it's interesting – Quebecois filmmakers do not want people from the theatre. They want people off the streets, and that's their style. So you have in Quebec a body of performers and actors who have been in Theatre du Nouveau Monde and Yvette's theatre – she's had a theatre for 15 years – never being offered a role in a movie! That's why you'll see on the credits "Introducing Yvette Brind'Amour". She was just a natural. . . .

**The editing on The Pyx was so precise and brilliantly done. I really wasn't sure at first whether you could pull it off – intercutting the past and the present but it worked very well.**

That was a conscious decision, too, to make it so that you would not be conscious of time. I wanted it to feel as if there could be a love affair between this detective and this woman who was dead. That's why there were no dissolves. It was all meant to progress – the stories became dependent on one another. You're right. It had to work, because otherwise it could have been just a philosophical approach, and no meaning

emotionally.

### **Was this timing in the screenplay?**

Oh, yes. It was in the whole structure. It was also in the original book. Not to the same extent, but the concept. You started in Chapter I, with today, the present; and the next chapter would be the past. I just tightened it up a little and made the past yesterday. To show you how I was trying to make this work – if we're shooting here at 11 o' clock, at the end of this scene it would be 11:10. I would cut to yesterday at 11:11 to play with time a little bit like Resnais would play with time. Not quite that sophistication – but with his use of time in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* and *Last Year at Marienbad* – he opened up a whole other thing!

### **Then the novel by Buell must have been cinematic as well.**

Absolutely. That's what's happening more and more. When you get the products of a movie generation writing novels, they're writing images and in filmic construction. I think Buell is definitely a product of that generation. . . . McLuhanesque. . . .

### **The camerawork in your films has always been excellent. In "Fortune and Men's Eyes" you worked with Georges Dufaux and for "The Pyx" with René Verzier. Do you have any preference?**

No. No, I don't. They're both beautiful people, completely different styles. Dufaux is a very talented man and a very philosophical person. The currents run very, very deep. But I think it's important to cast a cameraman as you cast a performer – depending on what you're looking for. On *The Pyx* I wanted the feeling of immediacy, excitement, and Now! I needed someone who had that and who lit in a completely different way. Who was willing to go with available light most of the time. I saw what René had done with *La Mort d'un Bûcheron* – I saw some rushes, and he didn't use any lighting whatsoever. I didn't want *that* – but I saw what he could do with just the film alone. Which was incredible. This is what people have been afraid to do. In Canada, you've got two groups – people who are trying to be like Hollywood, so they bring in fifty electricians and fourteen lights and so forth – and it's an intimate scene! Then there's the other side which says, "Let's experiment! Let's not be afraid. We know what we're doing. Let's try." And the best cameramen in the States are doing the same thing. They're experimenting with the film. We've got faster film now, and you can push it way beyond what you could push the other films before. You get an extraordinary quality. . . . The thing that disturbs me in color is when you get very full color which looks like home movies. When you desaturate that color, you get something approaching reality. That's what I did on *The Pyx*.

### **That's why you didn't use any gels for the windows?**

Absolutely. That was a conscious decision made in the beginning of the picture. I'm convinced that if there's a consistent style, people will understand that this is what you want. Even if it takes them a while to get used to it – but if there's a style, a point of view, they have to come along.

### **Verzier has an enviable reputation of being both very quick and very good. It must have been a pleasure working with him.**

The scene in the morgue? I came in and showed René the set-up and asked him to let me know when he's ready. And I started to walk away. He said, "Harvey. I'm ready." I looked around and saw all those fluorescent lights. . . . and I said, "O.K. Let's go!" You saw the results. . . . All he did for the close-ups was that he used a bit of cardboard underneath the person to bounce the light back into their faces. That was it! And that's a very important distinction. . . . because a director needs all the time he can get with the actors. The more time a director of photography can give him, the better

it is for the picture. It's for that immediacy, that moment. If you have a rehearsal and you show it to your director of photography, there's that moment when he has to do the lighting. If it takes him an hour, an hour and a half – you've lost the concentration you had in rehearsal. You've got to come around and start it all over again. If he takes 15 minutes – then you keep it going.

### **Did you do a lot of hand-held?**

We used hand-held sometimes – in the cars . . . some of the walking sequences. . . . Verzier is like a dolly. He's an extraordinary operator! This new camera that Panavision is making is built for Verzier. It's just glued to his shoulder, it's light. . . . he'll be able to be like a dolly! (Laughter) I'm convinced about that!

### **Are you making any plans for another feature?**

I've been involved in other things for the last month or so. I just did a pilot for CTV on the *Starlost* series with Keir Dullea. The use of tape, using models and Chroma-key – I've never done that before in my life! It's like instant animation – just blew my mind! With a very exciting guy, Doug Trumbell, who did a lot of the effects on *Space Odyssey* and invented a process called Magi-cam – which is a way of slaving two cameras together and shooting against blue, which is the Chroma-key color. Let's say I have a model of this room. You're sitting against blue on a blue box. I could key you in with this camera. The novelty of this, the ingeniousness of this is that if you get up and move around and my main camera follows you – the slave camera follows you in the model! It's tied together by computers. It's just incredible. That's what this was about.

### **Is the reason for blue the same as in rear projection?**

Same reason. Yeah. It's the matting color. This was my first tape. I was amazed at the progress of technology. I hadn't noticed just how far it had gone. The editing process alone is very interesting – it's quite different than film. Just incredible – you never touch the tape you're working on! You say to the editor – There! – and he's got a time code of when the edit was made, plays it back, punches the computer – and there's the edit! You see the edit immediately and there are millions of combinations possible.

### **Do you still prefer working with film?**

I do. I was looking at the possibility of adapting some of the technology to film. It took the Mitchell people over 25 years to make some kind of adaptation to the camera which made it more flexible for shooting. I don't know if you remember the old Mitchell camera with the viewfinder on the side – and you had to correct for parallax on every shot. The operator didn't know what he had. You'd look at your cameraman at the end of the shot and ask, "Well?" And he'd say, "I think so. . . ." You think so? How are we going to know? And they finally came up with a reflex camera where you can see through the lens and you know exactly what you've got.

Now, they have a system which I've only heard about – I've never used – where they tape all of your rushes and put them into a computer bank. You never touch your film. The computer bank has memorized all of your rushes by a code number and when you edit – say you want to look at Slate 743 – it would be up there and you could screen it! Whereas in film you've got walls filled up with your rushes and you could eliminate all that and then go back to the original film and cut the negative. Talk to the computer and the computer talks back to you!

The film medium is itself so young, advances are so quick! Probably in ten years, there may be surprising advances using electronic cameras instead of film cameras. Everything is happening so quickly! You have to keep your head open! ●