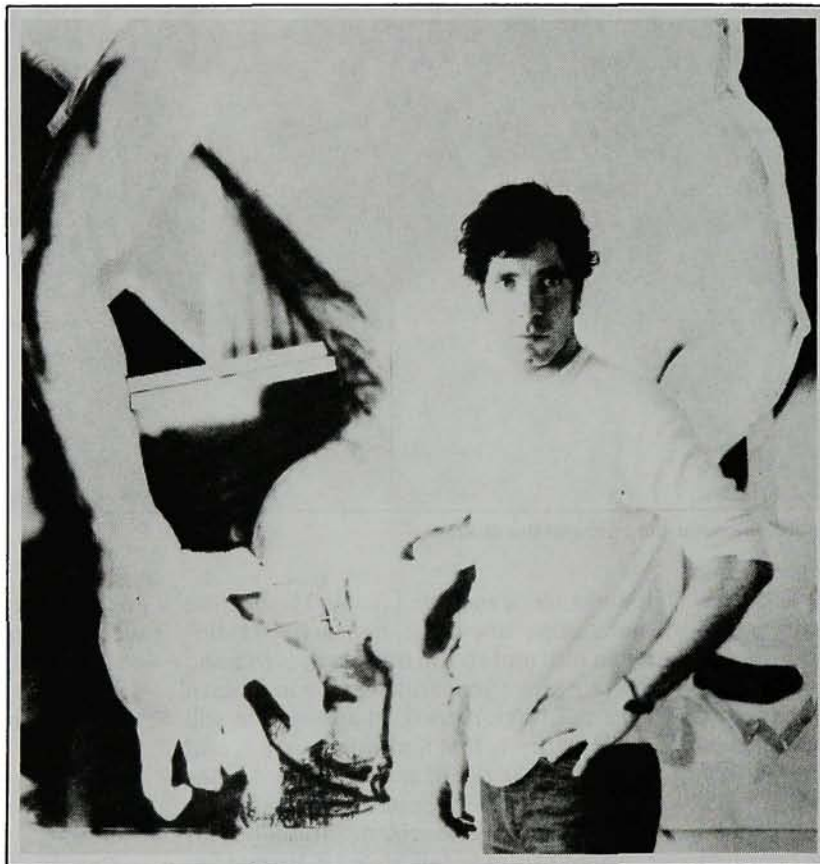

Lack à la Mode

by Lois Siegel

To the surprise of many, actor Stephen Lack has shaken the 'underground' image of his **Montreal Main** and **Rubber Gun** days, to play the lead in **Head On** and **Scanners**. Still, as Lois Siegel discovers, beneath the surface of his recent success the old Stephen Lack is still at home.



Stephen Lack — in a flashback to earlier days and **The Rubber Gun**

Stephen Lack is becoming a legend. Whether he is playing the penny arcade street talker in **Montreal Main**, or the sarcastic, but artistic, social drop-out in **The Rubber Gun** — who enjoys drugs, boys and a little action — he is still Stephen. His rambling monologues brought him immediate audience attention, and led him to "straighter" roles in **Head On** and **Scanners**. Who is this Montreal phenomenon who seems to be telling us about the younger generation just by being himself?

When Stephen Lack was a small child, movies made him cry. Once, he cried so much that he was no longer allowed to attend his neighborhood theatre. **The Wizard of Oz**

*Lois Siegel teaches film production at Concordia University and John Abbott College in Montreal. She has just completed **Extreme Close-up** — a documentary about multi-handicapped blind people, which was screened at this year's Grierson Seminar — and is presently finishing her first feature film, **A 20th-Century Chocolate Cake**.*

freaked him out. So did **Cinderella**. "This wouldn't happen with today's kids," he explains. "By the age of a year-and-a-half they've already seen a computerized vacuum cleaner."

Lack spent his childhood summers in the States at summer camp. "The Canadian kids at camp knew more about the Americans than they knew about us," he comments. "I used to have a great time inventing stories about how poor we were. I'd say that there was only one television set in Montreal, and me and a couple of my friends would go down to the RCA store and look at the TV through the window; that is, if we could get past all the Indians who were looking at it. And then, every now and then our parents would send us a picture of an Indian on a postcard, and we'd say it was the mayor or something like that."

Lack also learned that if you do what you want to do you won't learn a thing. At camp he was forced to do things, and as a result he became good at different activities, and his tastes changed. His interests included studying animals. "I had a collection of the lower phyla: slugs, worms and beetles. My older brother was into insects — high creatures like grasshoppers, but they moved too quickly for me to stare at."

Then, in his usual logical fashion, Lack went from worms to Edgar Allan Poe. "Worms are good for the garden, but people don't like them. I had a fascination for them. I admired their ability to easily frighten — like a Cronenberg. Worms were tools of deterioration," he explains, "as was Poe, who was into the deterioration and recycling of his heroes. Gothic horror, guilt and vengeance. These were my early childhood emotions," he smiles. "I haven't got a clue what the other kids were thinking. I just hung out with kids who felt the same way as I did — and they all went mad!..."

Lack developed his monologue style in grade four. "When the kids in my class wanted to take over a baseball field, they used to use me," he admits. "They would send me over to the sixth-graders, and I'd raze them with non-stop verbage, and while I was busy with the sixth-graders, the fourth-graders would take over the bases — a method similar to that used in politics today."

Early traces of the artist appeared in his drawings: "I went on strike from drawing at the age of six-and-a-half. I got mad at my parents, and since they liked my drawings the best, I thought I would hurt them that way. And I watched my first, official, self-destructive gesture. They were horrible pictures because of the sentiment in them — the obvious niceness. But later, in high school, when my work had developed in a more positive direction, I was thrown out of Latin class because I had drawn people twisting in graveyards on my school notebook."

Comic books were a priority during Lack's childhood. General reading — seditious material. He read Carl Barks's *Donald Duck*. "Rumor had it that Uncle Scrooge was modeled after Disney himself," he informs. "And that Disney kept fan mail from Barks — like 20,000 fan letters a year — so that he could keep him at his original salary."

"When I was young I always wanted to grow up to be a real boy — just like my idol Pinnochio, who I think did the best acting job in all of Hollywood. I still don't think I'm a

real human being — I'm still on the periphery — adopting certain human poses. Those who know me know I'm not real, but I had nothing to do with that scene in **The Man Who Fell to Earth**."

Then came his days at McGill University, and, believe it or not, he joined a fraternity — Zeta Beta Tau. "They started noticing I was a little different when I kept playing Ray Charles on the jukebox," he admits. At McGill, Lack met Bozo Moyle and Frank Vitale during their pre-**Montreal Main** days. "They both looked like the face my mother drew for me one day and said, 'Don't go near that person,'" he laughs.

Then, at twenty-one, he met Salvador Dali at his Spanish villa. There was a woman there with a fingernail glued to her tooth. Then Dali came strolling in with a silver laurel wreath in his hair. (Hardly abnormal for a man who once gave an entire lecture at an art school with a lambchop on his head.) Perhaps Dali was a moving picture becoming real. From then on, Lack led a very normal life — normal, that is, for Stephen Lack.

It's a summer morning in June, 1980. Lack, in his loft on the St. Lawrence Street Main, is surrounded by his friends — a long-tongued lizard mask wrapped in a leather jacket, with a doll's hand emerging from the pocket; a new set of colored xeroxed works — 'people pictures' — for his next exhibition; a collection of rubber spiders; Peter Brawley, famed actor of **The Rubber Gun**; and a female stripper, who he invited in by saying, "Would you like to come upstairs and get handcuffed in front of my video machine?" As Lack and Brawley talk about movies, Brawley



KEY TO QUALITY

KEY TO CANADA'S
FINEST OPTICALS

FILM OPTICALS OF CANADA LTD.

410 ADELAIDE STREET WEST
TORONTO (416) 363-4987

MONTREAL (514) 937-2336
VANCOUVER (604) 687-4491

quips, in his usual fashion, "The weather got mixed reviews."

Lack then relates the story of his recent and successful move into film — finding his agent, Bill Boyle; or rather, how his agent found him.

"I was in Cannes in '77 pushing **The Rubber Gun**. Bill was in a bar at the Carleton, which is a huge hotel: it was a lot calmer then, but now it's like the Forum after a hockey game. Anyway, I was walking past a table occupied by some big producer and his lady friend. As I passed them, I took the olive out of the martini one of them was drinking and said, 'Oh, a pregnant olive' and then put it back. Bill overheard the joke and remembered me because of it. I met him soon after. Now he wants me to go to Toronto — but Montreal is where it happens for me. I suppose I could go to the market place and hover, but that might kill the demon. People have been quoting that I'm the highest paid actor in Canada — perhaps the highest paid who's still *living* in Canada. There's no team spirit here. Once producers are established one wonders if they will just crawl into the States."

"We're Hollywood's 'B' lot," Brawley inserts.

"American movies," Lack continues, "well, the States are a leading power, so their films reflect this. They know where they're going, so the films have a beginning, a middle and an end, whereas everyone else is busy experiencing. Right now it's movies with a comparative motivation which are getting attention," he explains. "You go home to your old lady, and you don't really want to stare at each other all night so you say, 'Let's stare at the lives of five other people — but not too close — we'll make them really big.' So you go to a movie, like **Kramer vs Kramer**, which is a scientific study. We study the traumas in a relationship within a given situation. Today, we don't have the same family unit. The food's not the same. So we change an element — a divorced husband with a kid — and we watch what happens. We don't have the family structure that we had before, and we don't have an articulated goal. We do have the joys of life, and we are adaptable to change. But people will soon long for the old ideals and, as a result, we will have films glorifying the old standard," he projects. "The '60s reflected self-righteousness — they were films about the lonely hero. Father will again know best in the future."

Lack prefers the Germans — especially Fassbinder. "In American films, rarely does the camera linger on anyone: they are much less excessive than the Germans. Fassbinder's films are filled with close-ups and poses."

Films also reflect what is lacking in our society. "You go to watch a slick commercial film with lavish locations and flamboyantly dressed people. What is royalty anyway? — we can only aspire to it. If you have to go home to a dirt floor, it's not so bad if you know there's a tiled floor somewhere," he explains.

Mentioning **Star Wars**, he explains, "It's an heroic battle between good and evil. Whether you vote for Carter or Reagan, it makes no difference, there's hardly a struggle, and evil is already in — so it doesn't really matter. In school the same person was always elected for class president — someone who campaigned when no one else cared. We voted for him, but we didn't really like the guy. For



A sculpture catches Lack's attention during an extraordinary art show



Every second counts for Lack and O'Neill as they make a run for it in **Scanners**.

photo: Lois Siegel

example, we don't *choose* the cars we buy anymore, because three companies make them all; whereas there used to be 40 different manufacturers. Evil is definitely the progression. We know that what's going to happen next in the world is going to hurt.

"War is needed to advance the economy. Death, cancer, heart attacks...so much of what we do is on the assembly line. It makes no difference whether we eat the hamburger or the cheeseburger — which one is really less carcinogenic? Films give to people what bullfights do — life and death. One of my favorite films is **Rollerball**, where the people are so bored that they go out and shoot trees with ray guns. Basically, we'd rather see people shoot other people with ray guns with a story attached to it. Film is easy to watch. People would like to be active, but they are reduced to a passive role. We have to decide what we want."

But despite the evil, he thinks there still might be hope. "There will always be formula films — scripts which follow a certain pattern — until someone teaches us a better song, or until the audience becomes more sophisticated. Consider television: it's so involving because there's so much action. Television is a tiny radioactive dot which scans across a line. It's moving so quickly that the eye doesn't have to move. If TV had too much content it would be overwhelming, therefore, TV naturally goes for the middle of the road. If the viewer is exhausted, he will turn the machine off and think about it. The producers of TV don't want you to turn the TV off — so they are very subtle on manipulations: Coke commercials sell to young kids — they display young bodies, perfect arms. One commercial is all arms bending — total fetishism — which is the goal of TV — fetishism, rather than heavy emotional experiences. God forbid if a viewer became too emotional and turned the TV off! So you get a few yuks on the Situation Comedies, then a dramatic murder, then the news gives you a story about real murder in another part of the world. Everything is pre-planned. The network shows block off your evenings six months in advance. Then there are programs like *Bonanza* that were really slow, and they were stretched from one half-hour to 90 minutes. We've been taken over by technological products. People have been reduced to eating sugar-covered strawberries in front of the TV. Everyday we create more illusions to tranquilize

Stephen Lack — Filmography

- 1974 **Montreal Main**
principal lead / co-writer
- 1977 **L'ange et la femme**
principal lead / co-writer
- 1978 **The Rubber Gun**
principal lead / co-writer
- 1979 **Head-On**
principal lead
- 1980 **Scanners**
principal lead

people." His solution? "Well, it's like **Taxi Driver** — pick an enemy, stalk it, kill it."

Lack, who is always looking ahead, also sees Westerns coming back into vogue. "People can't travel anymore to see the frontier landscape of the West — it's too costly and their horizons have disappeared; and anyway, all you see out West these days are a bunch of Winnebago farms. Westerns are like going back to being 19 while retaining what you know now."

In the future, Lack hopes to continue working with his friends — a group of young filmmakers who got together a small amount of money to make films on their own. Of the old **Rubber Gun** and **Montreal Main** gang, Frank Vitale is living in New York. He's married, has a baby and is shooting very successful documentaries for The March of Dimes. He also teaches film at The School for Visual Arts. Pam Holmes is in Sutton raising little Rainbow, Pierre Robert is selling stereo equipment, Peter Brawley has just acted in a half-hour fiction piece called **Amateurs**, Norma Bailey just won a Palme D'Or at Cannes for an NFB vignette she directed, and Bozo Moyle has finished directing **Times Square** for Robert (**Saturday Night Fever**) Stigwood.

"Now, we're waiting to see if Stigwood finished Bozo," Lack smiles. □

Stephen Lack is having a colour photography (xerography) show at the Idée Gallery on Queen St. in Toronto in mid-March.

York University Faculty of Fine Arts Summer Studies in Film June 29 to August 7, 1981

Intensive studio courses include:

Introductory TV Production
Film Editing
Introductory Screenwriting

Courses also offered in *Dance, Music, Theatre and Visual Arts.*

JOIN US AS A SUMMER FINE ARTS STUDENT!

For further information, brochure and application form, contact: Summer Studies, Faculty of Fine Arts, York University, Downsview (Toronto), Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3
Telephone (416) 667-3615