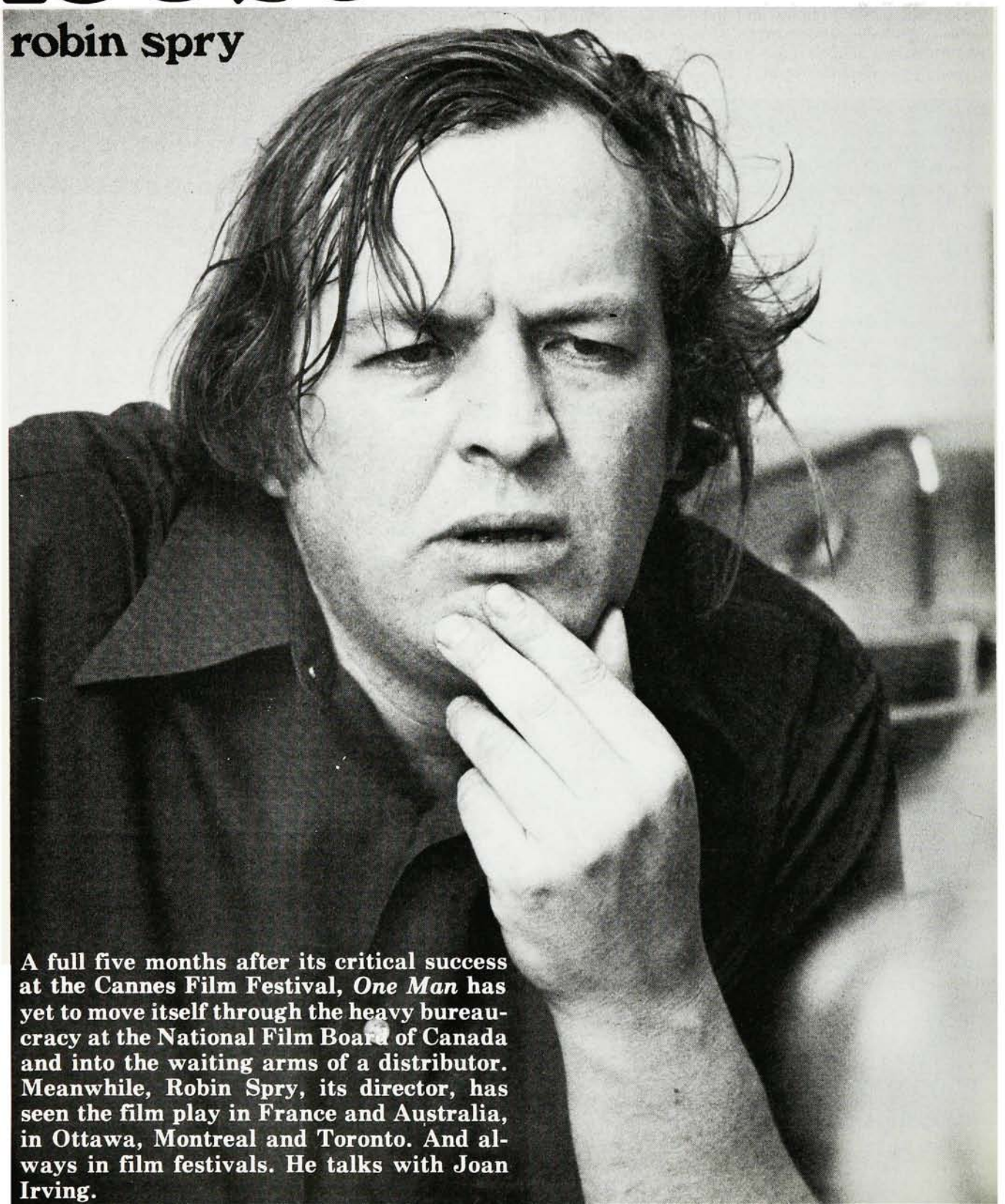
breaking loose

by Joan Irving

robin spry



A full five months after its critical success at the Cannes Film Festival, *One Man* has yet to move itself through the heavy bureaucracy at the National Film Board of Canada and into the waiting arms of a distributor. Meanwhile, Robin Spry, its director, has seen the film play in France and Australia, in Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto. And always in film festivals. He talks with Joan Irving.

I don't imagine I have to introduce Robin Spry or his films to readers of Cinema Canada. *Though it probably is true that his work is more highly critically esteemed outside of the country than in, Spry's early feature films* Prologue *and* Action *reached large Canadian audiences through theatrical and television release. Early indications (to quote Spry, the "embarassingly positive" reviews, largely from foreign critics, including the nod from Variety which called it "a winning tale that could easily make its way on TV and theatrical play-off") augur well for a wider than ever audience for his new feature* One Man.

Spry was 29 when he made Prologue *at the National Film Board of Canada. Eight years have passed. Unlike many filmmakers who direct their debut film at the Film Board and then leave for private industry, Spry stayed on. He is loyal to the NFB which trained him, gave him time to think and read and, above all, to test his ideas. But a certain weary resignation at the timely, cumbersome and finally risky business of seeing a film through the approval process at the Film Board has taken a toll of his energy. (The first script for the project which became* One Man *was written in 1970, and Spry is still running around prodding the Film Board into finalizing distribution deals for the film in Canada and the U.S.A.)*

If it is a trade-off, Spry understands what the stakes are. At the NFB he writes 36 drafts of a script and then travels across the country to find the "right" actors. More importantly, he is able to make films which reflect things he cares about. Power and the politics of power, the major themes of his previous features, appear again in One Man, *this time in a popularized form. The big issue of the early 70's, everybody's bandwagon – pollution – becomes the subject on which the film focuses. Even then Spry is not extending himself into unfamiliar, impersonal subject matter; the death of his brother Richard from "a form of cancer related to industrial pollution" brings urgency and fear in close.* One Man *had its North American premiere at Ottawa 77.*

I met with Spry in Montreal where the film played in Le Festival international du film de la critique québécoise and then, the next week, was screened to enthusiastic houses at the World Film Festival of Canada. Spry's worries these days seem to be limited to the quality of the projection and sound in the various, and seemingly improvised salles, and to what few words he will find to say to the audience when he raises his burly self out of the theatre seat to receive their applause.

Cinema Canada: *What are your immediate concerns now that you have finished* ***One Man?***
Robin Spry: I'm going to write another script and try to make another film. Whether I can raise the money to do another film – whether the Film Board will make another feature, or whether I can find the money outside, I don't know. It's going to depend a bit on how **One Man** does. If it does very well then it will presumably be easier, but not easy.

Is your relationship with the Film Board going to change if you find there is some restriction to your making feature films?
Yes, if I can't make them at the Film Board in some way or another – and it may or may not be possible – I'll make them elsewhere. But I'd like to stay at the Board. My ideal existence would be to stay there and continue to make low budget socially oriented feature films. I don't want to make massive commercial Hollywood glamour movies at all.

There is a lot of activity in Canada now with big budget productions but it seems to be difficult to get low budget features under way. Do you feel the low budget feature is viable?
At a commercial level, nine times out of ten, it may be true that if you have a film that doesn't have main actors it becomes very difficult to sell it in the major market, which is the States. And, if you don't sell a film there, the chances are you lose money. If I make a feature for private industry in Canada, the budget will probably be higher than what I've had and I will have to go with two or three name actors; it will be imposed by the investors.

Was Len Cariou, in your eyes, a "name"?
No. He'd never done a film before. And he's still unknown because neither of his films have come out yet... my film and the film with Elizabeth Taylor, **A Little Night Music.** Maybe in the theatrical world, in a Canadian context, he is sort of a name, or will be I'm sure, but that's not why I chose him.

What was the attraction?
He's a very good actor, that was the primary thing.

Did you know that he would be able to make the transition from stage to screen?
I didn't think he would have trouble with it. Len is an actor who has worked on himself very consciously. He's not blindly intuitive, he knows how he gets somewhere and adjusted quickly to film. We spent time on it, talking and rehearsing with video, but he'd obviously thought about it before. The other thing that I really like about him – it's down the scale but there are always arguments about Canadian identity and Canadians being the same as Americans — I think there is a difference that I personally like a lot. For me, Len is a very genuine, or as they constantly say in these festivals, quintessentially Canadian person. Len has that perfect Canadian feel.

How do you define that quality?
Cariou, though he now lives in New York, hasn't in any way become Americanized in his character. This is a terrible generality, but I find that people who are infected with the American way of life spend a lot of their energy imposing their existence on the world around them. Len is confident about his qualities but he's happy to keep it to himself. It's somewhere in that area... there's a quiet strength. It was one of the reasons why I chose him. It was there in him and it's there in the film.

Could you tell us something of your experience with actors. How did your work at the Film Board prepare you for this film?
Well, I made **Prologue** and other dramatic films at the Film Board. Those films made it very clear I didn't know how to work with actors. Then the Board supported Mort Ransen's idea of having a directors' and actors' workshop, which I worked in and ran for awhile.

That was the first such workshop?
For actors, I think so.

Until that point there hadn't been much concern over developing that kind of expertise?

Spry talks with Jean Lapointe who plays the hood, Ben Legault

Not much. I think it was assumed that if you directed dramatic films you had learned somewhere how to do it... in theatre or at drama school or whatever. And I suppose for most people that was true.

I had worked in theatre a little in England and had made a number of short dramatic films in England. That was my training, working with actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company, in England. I lived in a world of actors, although I wasn't all that involved with theatre. At the time I was attending the London School of Economics which was right next to the Aldwych Theatre. Quite a few of the actors there had been at Oxford when I worked in the theatre as a still photographer. I had all those connections which enabled me to work with professional actors on a cooperative basis.

What brought you back from England to the Film Board?

I had applied for a job as a summer student in 1963, which was then I started making films and was contemplating filmmaking as a way of surviving. They refused me that summer but took me on the following summer. After that I returned to LSE (London School of Economics) to finish my degree and then the NFB offered me a job.

Did you find the Film Board dry after being close to the theatre world?

I was very busy learning how to make films. For many years the Film Board as a milieu was very exciting. I had access to many facilities and was surrounded by enormous expertise. Also, the excitement of actually making films kept me going. Now I find it dry, in the sense that after years in one place you begin to feel that you're repeating yourself, saying the same things to the same people. I'm very much in that position now, which is why I'm taking a year off, to try to subject myself to other ways of making films, getting to know new people, seeing how other people do it.

Do you have a specific project in mind?

Yes, but I'm reluctant to talk about it. Essentially, I'll be talking to Canadian filmmakers and people in the business world about making feature films. What it will amount to is an informal investigation of what's happening with features here and how they're made.

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Are you consciously developing a style?

I don't think, really, that I've made enough films to say that I am developing or have developed a style. There are certain areas I keep finding myself in, essentially contemporary situations where there is an immediacy that I try to reflect in the way I handle the film, the use of sound and more in the way we shoot things. Some of that is dictated by money, that I don't have the money to put 3,000 people in a crowd; therefore, I put my actors in a crowd that is already there. Automatically that imposes a TV journalistic feel on the coverage. In **One Man** and **Prologue,** and inevitably in

Action because it was a documentary, I have tried to be consistent with that style so that I can move back and forth between the different sources of circumstance. I suspect that as things go along that will be less present in my work, although, I may be stuck with it for life.

What were the factors influencing style that you had to consider in ***One Man?***

Because it's about a TV journalist we (Douglas Kiefer, director of photography, Roman Kroiter, executive producer and Spry) wanted to try and give it the feel of a TV news item or documentary, and therefore we decided to shoot almost the whole film handheld. Although we choreographed things – it was a controlled, not an improvised film – even the complicated focus pulls were done, for the most part, handheld. The film has a slightly different feel. Douglas Kiefer, who was on camera, is very good at that. I think it works in the sense that very few people are aware it's not shot in a normal way. For me that's the tip of a new iceberg... beginning to play more with that controlled choreography.

Do you find the experience we've had in the last two weeks at the film festivals valuable? Are you seeing something new in Cinema? Is there anything new in Cinema?

I think there is always something new. I haven't always liked the new things but I think it's terrific to overwhelm yourself with all types of films, from all over the world.

The end result for me is that I find myself much more interested in making films than in seeing them. The film has to be extraordinary to really do much for me; otherwise, I'm thinking about how it has been made. A week after the festival, that will go away and I'll get back to just enjoying films, but in a weird way this gives me a lot of confidence. I see people making mistakes as gross as the ones I make, then I think maybe I can keep going.

I feel part of the world output of cinema now. But you have to subject yourself to that kind of thing and it's amazing how few people do. I went to a conference on the Canadian feature film Sunday and I was the only local filmmaker in the audience. I found that astounding.

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We've talked before about the Canadian film industry and its problems. What are your current thoughts on the situation?

I spend a lot of my time, as all Canadian filmmakers do, complaining about this and that; I've heard so many complaints over the last few years. Maybe because I've seen so many films over the last few days I have been thinking that maybe our problems are also our advantages; that because there are so many difficulties, those difficulties almost define a certain type of cinema. And if you succeed, in spite of all those difficulties, in making a Canadian film, the chances are you'll come up with something strong. All the counts against you culturally (at least in film, and it's probably true in the other arts) may add up to an enormous advantage because they forced you to think about what you're doing, why you're doing it and who you are, in ways that, if the perspective weren't there, you might not be forced to do.

It's also true that many people are not doing that; they're doing quite the opposite... saying we won't try to find out who we are and be ourselves; we'll in fact try to be somebody else. There's almost the possibility of a lifelong battle of massive proportions there which may be finally quite exciting. It's also very discouraging. I guess I'm feeling up because I have a film coming out. In a year from now, when I've completely failed to do anything else, I'll feel quite the opposite.

A lot of people in the arts here just can't be bothered with that "lifelong battle" so they leave...

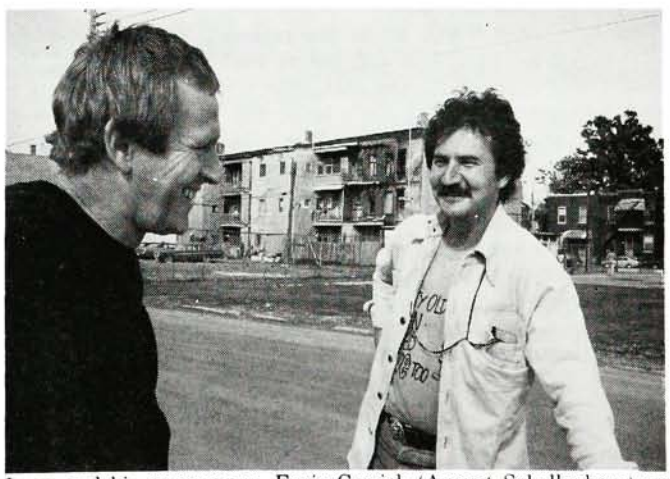
There are two ways of looking at it. It can be looked on as a total defeat for those individuals and a total loss to our culture, and often that is the case; or it can be looked on as an absolutely essential period of expending one's expertise with the hope that that expertise will eventually be fed back into Canada, in the way that Ted Kotcheff has come back and made one film and is trying to make another.

You're more generous than most about this.

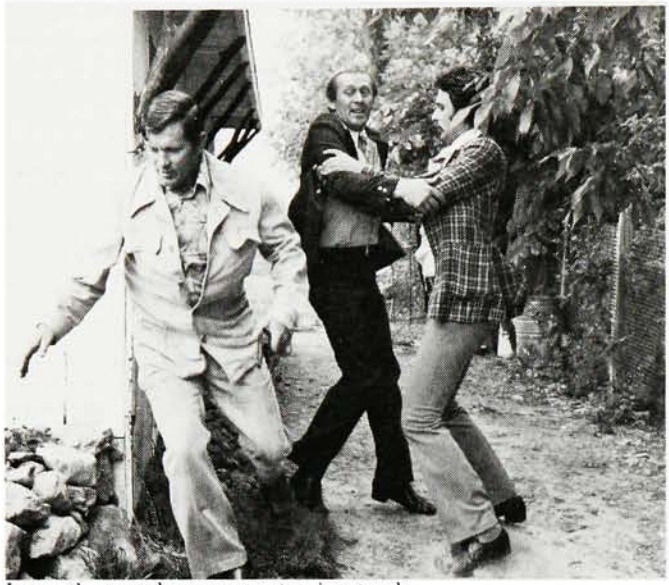
Again, it's subjective. Kotcheff, whom I talked to in the past two days, is, I feel, very honest, and genuinely wants to make films here... films that have something to do with being from here. He and Richler are genuine cultural products of Montreal. I'm not so generous with those who left Canada for the land of opportunity and, now that opportunity is here, are whipping back essentially to exploit it here.

But who am I to say which is which; all I can do is have my own feelings about it. It probably depends on how you're feeling about your own situation: It's very easy to feel resentful when you've been out of work for five years and the money you almost got for a feature is suddenly given to a Sophia Loren film because some Canadian investor was interested in meeting her at a cocktail party.

Jaworski (Jacques Godin) and Jason (Len Cariou) just after the shoot-out in **One Man**



Jason and his cameraman, Ernie Carrick (August Schellenberg) on the news trail



Jason, the news-hungry reporter, in a tussle

You were in Australia recently with ***One Man.*** *Do you have any comments on how Australians see the Canadian film industry, and if there is anything to be learned from their experience?*

They seem to think quite highly of it. Obviously, above all in the documentary area because of the Film Board, but also I think in the feature area. The Australian festivals have always taken an interest in Canadian films. We have a higher visibility in Australia than we do here.

Australia, because it is a physical entity with an ocean around it and cut off from its cultural roots by millions of Asians, is in many ways very self-contained. When you put Australians in Australian films, Australians go and see them. Right now, it's rather like Quebec was in the 60's; Australian films are full of energy and life. Even when they consciously make international exploitation movies, in spite of themselves, the films feel like Australian movies. There's a much healthier climate right now there than in English Canada. They're selling their films because they have an authenticity and a life. It's great; there's a very exciting atmosphere down there.

What draws Australians into the cinemas?

The fact that they see Australians on the screen.

The same doesn't appear to be a drawing factor for Canadian films...

No it doesn't... you know the reasons. We're completely inundated by American culture so that the distinction becomes confused. Also, the fact that Canada is made up of five different regions doesn't help; the Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairies and the West Coast are culturally all quite separate. This makes it hard for a Maritimes film to do big business in the prairies; whereas in Australia, though there are differences, there is a greater common denominator that allows a person from Perth to respond to a film from Sydney.

...Northrop Frye's thing about unity doesn't have to mean homogenization. The exciting thing about Canada is that it is not homogenized and yet it is a country. If you have to homogenize in order to stay together, you might as well pick up the whole shooting match and join the States.

Do you find Montreal a particularly creative place to work?

I like Montreal a lot because you have the clash between two cultures, because all the problems are being expressed at two levels all the time – French versus English, and Canadian versus American. The confusion and contradictions that come out of that, and also the energy, is lovely.

It doesn't appear as a major factor in ***One Man.***

It can't appear in every film. Still, it's there in **One Man** in the sense that the film is about the distortion of society by big business, which is, to a certain extent, what all these battles are about anyway. So, yes it is there, but not in an explicit way.

Okay, let's end on a question about ***One Man.*** *Do you feel that the choice offered in the film – Brady's decision as to whether he should act on his knowledge, or revert back to security, which would solve the problem of his wife and kids – is something everyone faces?*

We all have the choice to a certain extent. It's pushed to the limit in **One Man** and becomes a life or death question, but we all balance what we are prepared to do in order to have money, how dishonest we are going to be, how destructive of our own sense of ourselves we are prepared to be. Almost everybody works for money; therefore, there is someone who can take that money away. That is a position of power we all have to cope with in one way or another, sometimes as employers, sometimes as an employee. In that relationship is the question that is posed in **One Man.** It's there for practically everyone in the world.

In the film, the crunch seems to come when Brady questions whether he has the courage to go through with his revelations.

Courage – a holding on to the importance of ourselves as individuals – becomes the key to it all. If we all give in to the financial blackmail that we're subjected to, then those that have the power and the money automatically have all the power and dictate what happens in the world. If the world is to have any freedom at all, there has to be a limit to that in everyone's life. If the situation becomes bad enough and people respond enough, you get a situation where you have revolution.

That's what revolutions are... people eventually saying "we've had enough". Because we live in a stable country, in a rich country, most of us can spend most of our lives avoiding the question.

I think it's very important that the question be faced by people; that our society doesn't slip further into being in the hands of money. One of the reasons for that film is that we have to somehow take those stands now. As things concentrate, as power falls into fewer and fewer hands, as technology advances into mind control areas, there may come a time where it's not possible to take that stand. It's already pretty hard to identify those things in your life.

Is making ***One Man*** *your stand?*

I don't think I take that stand personally. There was a lot of struggle in making the film but it wasn't particularly dissimilar to some of the things in the film, obviously, on a very mundane level, as opposed to a life and death situation. It was a message to my own conscience, but not much more. I'm a filmmaker and I try to make films about my concerns, but I in no way feel that making the film was a monstrous act of...

Well, then we can presume you've got energy left to do something else, another film.

Touch and go on that...

We both chuckle. It is approaching noon. The rattle of cups in the tea room we've been sitting in begins to drown our conversation, so we pack it up, Robin to attend another screening at the festival. □