

ly to the satisfaction of the gradualists. For the problem was not internal to the Festival organization which, from the Board of Directors through festival director Wayne Clarkson, was, as all the organizers of the retrospective agreed, completely supportive. The problem lay in the nature of doing something unprecedented. For example, in programming the Experiments series, Bruce Elder found that he could have put together 50 programs as easily as the 20 finally agreed upon. What should the proper balance be without draining material from the other programs? Handling mentions "there was a point when we realized that we were holding 13 separate screenings per day in the Canadian retrospective as compared to only five in the Contemporary World Cinema program. Were we stretching the audience too much?"

What was involved. Handling explains, was nothing less than "the whole process of defining Canadian cinema" - of being representative and programming good films at the same time, and this within the limitations of faithfully attempting to reflect the range of Canada's 1100 feature-film history from an available sample of about 10%.

"Looking back from 1984," says Handling, "it seems clear that the years 1963-1975 were a period of extraordinary growth in the modern Canadian cinema. I wanted to give a sense of that, to celebrate what we've done best. The films themselves need no apology. In fact they constitute one of the most stimulating national cinemas in the world."

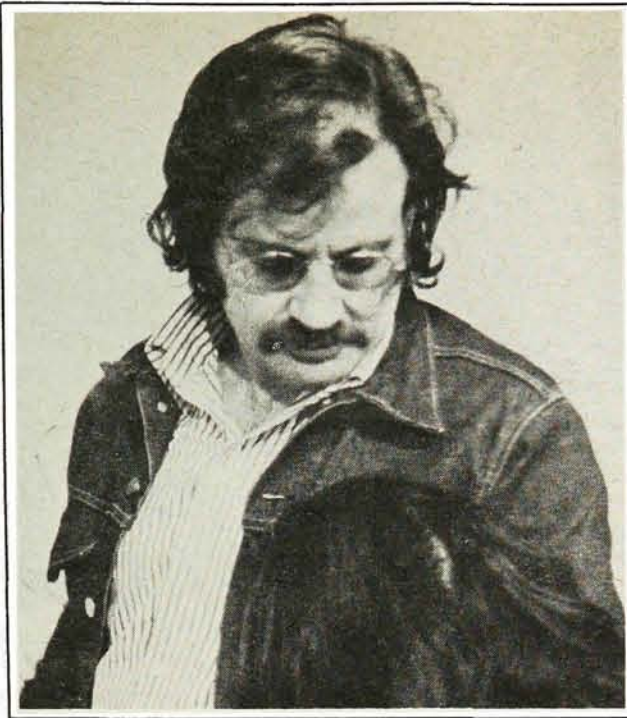
But knowing that as a critic or teacher would be one thing and knowing that as programmer of the largest Canadian film retrospective ever would be another - as Handling admits, describing how he felt as the Festival got underway.

"I was petrified, totally numb; I couldn't sit through a film. It took me three days to screw up the courage to go see what was happening. By Monday, I knew. The cinemas were packed and the people were applauding the films. I couldn't believe it. It was noon and the cinemas were packed. That Monday, three days after the Festival opened, was the biggest high of my life."

The difference, of course, was that the films were at last reaching a public, and an enthusiastic one. As Handling put it: "Seeing the films in a screening room, usually alone, is one kind of experience. Seeing the films with 500 people is totally different."

Perhaps it was this difference that would prompt Festival board of directors' member Bill McMurtry to respond to journalistic criticism of the retrospective with these words: "People who complain about it don't know squat about cinema."

It's not that the films change so much (though each viewing of a film always reveals a different film), it's that you are changed: the films become your eyes as eye and I meet and suddenly you can see. In such a context the films escape from the ghettoization of being part of a minority culture and, thus freed, begin to refer to each other: at times they seem to echo one another quite deliberately. For instance, a shot of a park in Lea Pool's *La Femme de l'hôtel* (1984) will refer to the same park in Michael Snow's *One Second In Montreal* (1969). Not only do the films begin to converse among themselves, they also speak



by Dot Tuer

It was a young and frustrated Larry Kent, prompted by the banning of his film *High* in 1968 by the Ontario Censor Board, who was quoted by the *Toronto Star* as shouting "I'm 30, and I'm not waiting around until I'm 45 when I'll be making films as bad as they are now. I have my talent now. I want to be seen now!"

Sixteen years later, these words have an ironic overtone for those of us who 're-discovered' his now obscure films during the retrospective of Canadian cinema at this year's Festival of Festivals. For despite the notoriety and acclaim Kent enjoyed in the '60s; writing, directing, and producing *The Bitter Ash*, 1963; *Sweet Substitute*, 1964; *When Tomorrow Dies*, 1965; and *High*, 1967; the only surviving prints of these films in the '80s are to be found in historical safe-keeping at the National Film Archives in Ottawa.

Badgered by censors, and beleaguered by inadequate distribution facilities and lack of support in Canada for independent features, Kent turned in the '70s to the National Film Board and outside producers. His subsequent films lost the stamp of Larry Kent's original sensibility, and his name and work dropped literally from sight. And while the Festival's dedication to resurrecting the 'buried treasures' of our cinematic past has given these four independent features by Kent momentary recognition and public viewing, it seems a bitter-sweet requiem for what should be widely distributed films by one of the major and currently eclipsed talents of Canadian cinema.

From the vantage point of the '80s, the sensibility which characterized these first features is in every way as relevant today as it was to Kent's contemporaries of the '60s. The intervening years, however, have altered the way in which his once scandalous subject-matter is received and perceived by an audience and critics. For Larry Kent's troubles with the

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The resurrection of Larry Kent

ensor boards and his hostile encounters with the mainstream press were a result of his proclivity to portray individuals who were lured by the promises of a counter-culture and trapped by the social and economic realities of a larger society.

His characters were one way or another outsiders; whether it be the listless rebellion of a bored housewife in *When Tomorrow Dies*, or the desperation of a woman married to a selfish Beat in *The Bitter Ash*, or the abhorrent lifestyle of two hippies in *High*. This led to his reputation as an 'anti-establishment' filmmaker who was disseminating an insidious immorality through his work. Yet, in retrospect, it is clear that Kent was using the context of a counter-culture as a vehicle to examine the crises and degeneration of individuals in any society who struggle with the recognition of oppression and the choices this recognition offers. Far from immoral, his films are in many ways harsh indictments of the lives of his characters who seek an alternative existence to the status-quo by adopting the ideas of a counter-culture. But his films are an equally harsh indictment of the hypocrisy and oppression engendered by the establishment's values.

Kent's originality - he is a South African expatriate - lies in his acute perception of our society as an economic and social structure that is patriarchal and limiting, so pervasive in its materialistic ideology that even the ideas of the counter-culture turn sour and oppressive. It is this sense of complex and sophisticated dialectic between idealism and its practical realization that perhaps horrified the censors unknowingly in the '60s, and it is certainly this sensibility which has created works which still have the power to shock, and to question, our choices and dilemmas as individuals today.

Of the four films screened at the Festival of Festivals, *The Bitter Ash* is the most raw and biting realization of this morally ambivalent dialectic, and perhaps the most remarkable of his cinematic achievements. His first film, and the first feature to be produced on the West Coast in 33 years, is an inspirational example for any

filmmaker struggling to make independent films in Canada. Filmed while he was a student of theatre and psychology at U.B.C., Kent used student actors, an amateur crew and a wind-up Bolex camera to create a fictional document of the Beat era which rivals Robert Frank's *Pull My Daisy*.

Influenced by Cassavetes' *Shadows* and Fellini's *La Strada*, this film reveals a gritty realism and original editing style that distinguishes Kent as a unique talent in Canadian cinematic history. Utilizing a complex cutting and flashback structure, Kent traces the concerns of two couples living in Vancouver's lower economic fringe. The themes of their existences revolve around the boredom and monotony of office and assembly-line work, and the inevitability of pregnancy which forces them to marry. But while one of the male characters sees his only escape from the system in the acquisition of money and material goods, the other has rejected these values for the 'freedom' of a bohemian lifestyle. What becomes evident during the evolution of their characters, is that either choice by a male doubly traps the females, who are oppressed by a society which offers them no option except marriage, and in turn are oppressed by the demands of their egotistic spouses to morally and economically support their 'freedom.' As the events of the film lead to a beat party where all of the characters' lives intertwine, the powerful ironies and frustrations of their worlds unfold during one of the most originally filmed parties in cinematic history. And it is indicative, not of the film, but of the state of Canadian cinematic institutions, that a subdued and modestly surprised Larry Kent seemed almost bewildered by the excitement of the audience who gathered around him to praise this film during its screening at the Festival.

Encouraged by the enthusiasm of the crowd, Larry Kent, at 45, is thinking of striking a print of the film for distribution. Sixteen years later, Kent's plea that he "wants to be seen now" may finally come to pass.