

Shooting a Coke Czar

Vans full of people pull up at executive producer Bernard Zuckerman's house (creator of CBC's *The Journal*) in Toronto for a party. The rugs are pulled back for an interior shoot of *And Then You Die*, a two-hour CBC drama to be telecast this month. It's a birthday party for Eddie Griffin, cocaine czar of Montreal's West End.

"This is our last day of shooting, we're in our last hours of this film and we're exhilarated by what we're seeing on the screen," says producer Brian McKenna, documentarian for *The Fifth Estate*.

The television drama was "shot like a movie" by director of photography Richard Leiterman, whose credits range from *Goin' Down The Road to My American Cousin*. While the exteriors are set in Montreal, the interiors are in Toronto, "for financial reasons."

"It's a big movie that we've made," says director Francis Mankiewicz, whose 1978 feature film *Les Bons Débarras* won eight Genie awards. "It was 26 days for a film that has an enormous number of locations, night shooting and day shooting, a lot of complex scenes, stunts and special effects."

Actor Kenneth Welsh, who won an ACTRA award for his performance in CBC television's *Empire, Inc.*, leans against the wall chanting with his eyes closed. He plays Eddie Griffin, a character based on the first Irish-Canadian gangster to make millions in illegal soft drugs.

R.H. Thompson, who played the title role in the award-winning CBC television film *Charlie Grant's War*, co-stars

with Welsh, but the two men never meet in the film. By this time, Thompson has put detective sergeant James McGrath behind him, to get on with live theatre in Toronto. McGrath, one of the few English Canadians on the Montreal Police Force, is obsessed by Griffin and tirelessly pursues the gangster.

And Then You Die isn't meant to be a police story as we know them. "In a sense it's a piece of reporting as well as, we hope, drama that's going to grab people by the throat and hold them to the end," says McKenna. Zuckerman and McKenna set out to produce something more realistic than *The Godfather*. For six months, a researcher recorded his observations while immersed in Montreal's criminal sub-culture.

McKenna explains. "We've researched every scene in detail. As you might not have seen on the CBC before, this is the way someone dies when they're shot. There's a certain kind of bloodspill, and they fall in a certain way, and we've got that right."

The story is told from the criminal's point of view. "It's based on a real guy, but I can't emphasize enough that it's fiction." The script was written by journalist Wayne Grigsby and playwright Alun Hibbert.

"I think if we get the story right and capture the way these guys operate, then when the gangsters see it they're going to say we got it right. In the same way, Mario Puzo, author of *The Godfather* was celebrated by the mafia themselves because they enjoyed the way he got it right," McKenna finishes.

Francis Mankiewicz is a director whose reputation is built on "his ability to capture the way people relate and express themselves." He "insists every detail be right." Mankiewicz says, "What we've tried to do is not so much develop a character in Eddie Griffin that would seduce the audience by his appealing qualities, but a character

faithful enough to what he is fundamentally, and interesting enough for an audience to want to watch him."

Kenneth Welsh describes Griffin as a child and his job as partly play-acting. "Griffin is still a boy at heart and he behaves like one. I remember doing this as a kid. As an actor playing it, it was very much cops and robbers. Like the scene where I get shot myself. 'Bang' and you have to fall. These little charges with the blood in them explode on your chest, you fall back against the wall, then you fall on the floor holding your breath. It's action-filled cops and robbers and everybody likes to watch it."

If Welsh sees it as a game, that's exactly what Zuckerman and McKenna had in mind. "My sense of guys who operate in this kind of world is that it's an incredible game, they really get a charge from living on the edge. When they talk to one another and you listen to the wire taps and you hear them talk in the bars, it's a banter, but below there's this lethal subtext always running. And so, in our movie, you have a sense of these characters playing this game with one another," says McKenna, who has "kept his ear to the ground" for years, hoping to tell the story one day.

McKenna takes time to thank everyone individually before leaving for his home in Montreal. When all the cables are moved and the carpets back in place, Bernie Zuckerman hosts a party for an exhausted but exhilarated crew. "People have a stereotyped idea of what the CBC should be doing," says Zuckerman. "It's the image that it's a movie about prairies and a spinster."

"After 12 years, hundreds of different stories, different parts of the world, you get a fix on reality, you don't just hang around with other show business people, caught in a circle, feeding off each other's stories. You're in real situations with real people," Zuckerman concludes.

Stephanie Gould •

Prostitutes Pimps and Others

The last shoot of Motion Canada Media Productions' first feature-length film, *Platinum*, takes place at the Raceway Tavern, Ottawa's oldest established hooker bar. The bar is home to scores of prostitutes, pimps, and other assorted unsavories. The air is dense with smoke and smells of stale beer. A few new Christmas decorations have just been added to pep up the leftovers from last year. The camera crew and sound man are trying to clear an area for the evening's shoot.

The regular clientele are somewhat disturbed by all the activity but as the evening wears on, take after take, they begin to accept the crew. Peter Evanchuck, co-producer and director of *Platinum*, is trying to capture Paul Henry - King of the Ottawa City Cow-boys and resident entertainer in the Raceway - singing his title song, *America Bleeds*, on his last few feet of film. Well into the second take, some of the local patrons, pimps, and prostitutes want a part in the action.

"Why not?" Evanchuck says. "One of the premises of the film is that I use people on location who I have known for a short or long time, including my mother." This night Evanchuck has managed to find parts for a pimp, several prostitutes, and myself.

"I see the movie, in some ways, as a moving, extended family album," Evanchuck explains during a short pause in the action. He goes on to say that the film is, in his mind, "... about two notches above a home movie. It's a mixture of John Waters' movies and *Liquid Sky*."

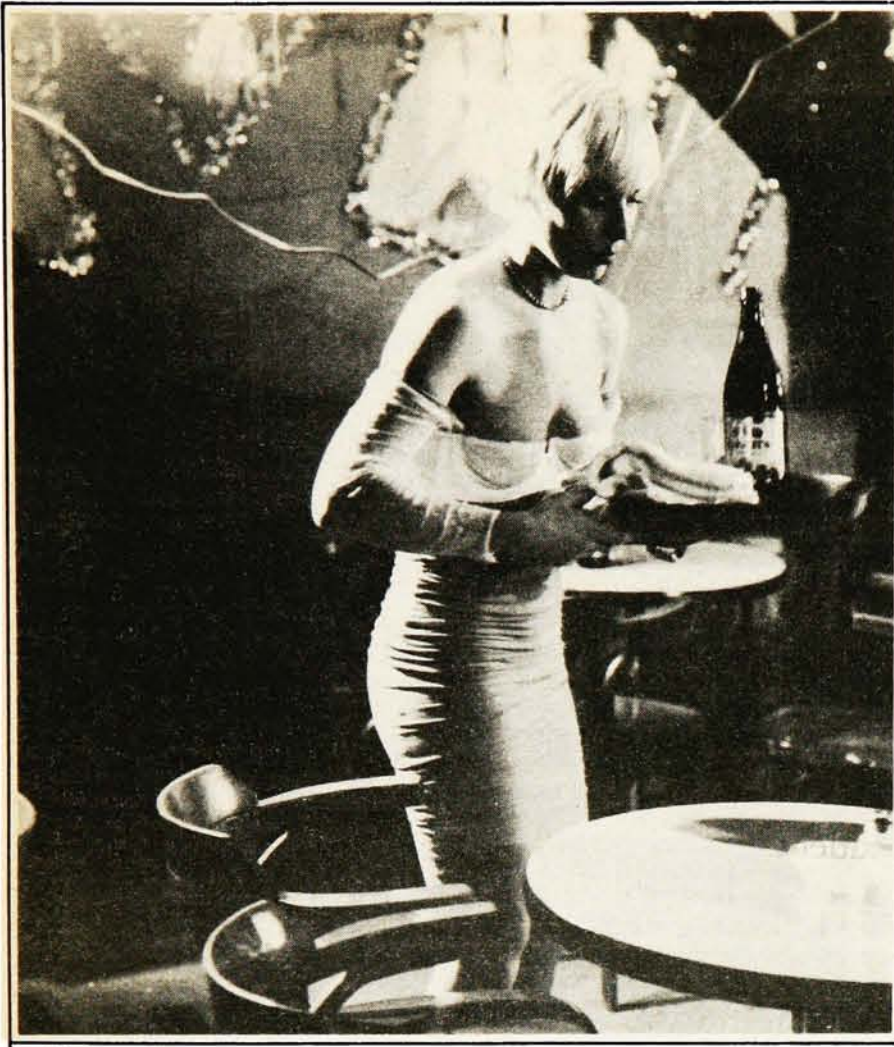
The film has been shot in locations from Niagara Falls to St. John's, and from New York to Key West. The producers have used bars, hotels, busy southern streets, and people's homes for on-scene locations.

"We tried to use locations that both Kiki (co-producer Kiki Sarda) and I were familiar with, and which the movie-goer might easily identify with. We may have shot a scene where a lot of viewers live, or have caught some viewers on camera walking down the street. We wanted to use all natural or living locations as opposed to studio space."

Kiki Sarda, co-producer and editor, agrees with Evanchuck but adds, "In our film, there were also budget constraints. With the exception of a \$10,000 grant from the Canada Council, Peter and I have put up all the money ourselves. It's very difficult when you are trying to produce a major feature film on a limited budget." Recently, however, Motion Canada Media and Los Angeles-based Transcontinental Pictures Industries signed a completion funding-distribution deal, through the film's busi-

• Richard Leiterman and Francis Mankiewicz shooting *And Then You Die*





• Platinum Blonde

ness consultant, Philip Jackson, producer of **Music of the Spheres**.

The film has gone through a number of title changes, and has also kept Kiki busy in the cutting room with major revisions. The music, apart from the title song, is being produced in Toronto by John Doerr and Marcelle Amar, original members of the rock group, **Cano**. They are writing the principal and electronic sound tracks.

The principal actors are all non-actors. Few of the people involved with the film are in the business full-time, except for Sarda, Jackson and Frank Cole.

"The original idea of the film was to form a group of people, that is, technicians and performers who could work on a low-budget road picture where many locations are covered as part of the development of the film story," Evanchuck says. Everyone in the film has other work. "This is an experiment to see if people could make feature films and continue their regular lifestyle." Testimony to success is the fact that the film is now in post-production and all participants are still working and living their regular lives.

Platinum opens with the haunting sound of Hank Rivers yodelling from atop an old steam train. Hank, of course, is Canada's "Singing Soldier", Gene Autry. He plays Johnnie Doe's missing father. Johnnie is played by independent filmmaker Frank Cole, currently completing his own feature, **A Life**. Helene Lacelle plays the principal female character, Libbie Dough, who has numerous relationships throughout the film, always looking for Johnnie, or at least a reasonable substitute. In the substitute's role is Jacques Couillard, whose portrayal of John Smith, a lawyer, is convincing. Numerous other bit parts are taken by whoever Evanchuck could dig up to fill in at the time of the shoot.

Israel Shaked, of Transcontinental Pictures Industries, sees the film as a series of vignettes made into a feature, which he predicts will be popular with youthful viewers because of a similarity to rock videos.

Helene Lacelle and Jacques Couillard found the experience of working on the film both rewarding and enlightening. Says Couillard, "There are always problems when you work with the same people all the time. You know, sometimes you get fed up and think what's the point, but in the end you always know that you have been part of something new and unique in the film industry."

Paul Henry found it difficult to play himself. "When the camera goes on, you feel you have to play yourself, but at the same time, it's difficult to do because you always see yourself as being someone else." Indeed, at the shoot I attended, Paul's voice dropped two octaves and he sounded more like Johnny Cash than Paul Henry. As Evanchuck summed up, "There is a problem in working with non-professionals. They can't seem to be themselves. They all want to act and I don't want them to. I want real people, not actors."

Platinum has been in production for the past two-and-a-half years. It is the first film in the **War Trilogy** ("The war between men and women", one of the character's explains), which will also include **Mothers** and **Nervous Disorders**.

Evanchuck hopes that now the team is together, the rest of the trilogy will be completed within three years. Other Canadian actors in the cast are too numerous to mention, but all play crucial roles in this parody of middle-class relationships.

Doug Allan •

Outrageous Comeback

Turning the depressing, snowy streets of Toronto into the back drop for real life narrative mixed with the lure of legend and myth, Richard Benner's classic **Outrageous** (1977), showed us at our most Canadian: dreaming of success, a success most often defined as more valuable for occurring south of the 49th parallel. Robin Turner (Craig Russell) wanted to "make it big" in New York doing his impressions of the silver screen's most remembered ladies, and Liza (Hollis McLaren) wanted to be "as famous" as Robin by creating fantastic stories out of her experiences in the mental health ward, where she was often a resident. Not really an unusual pair if you hang around Yonge Street long enough.

Like many stories that bring you memorable characters, **Outrageous** was due for a sequel. **Too Outrageous**, which recently finished shooting in Toronto and New York, catches up with Robin and Liza and their friends ten years later. They haven't quite 'made it' yet but they are still trying.

On the final day of shooting in Toronto the atmosphere on the set was an expected mixture of exhaustion and excitement. The scene is set in a diner on New York's Christopher Street on Halloween. Robin has just finished an anniversary show at the Jack Rabbit club, that quintessential gay bar whose clientele wear both leather and lace. Our Mr. Turner and his 'entourage' have come in from the street's madness for a bite to eat.

Director Richard Benner jokes with his cast. Like a leader on the final day of summer camp, he attempts to rally some energy from his group of eager but tired campers. One's eyes fall immediately on Craig Russell. Ten years ago he flirted with the fame Robin Turner hungers for. But after much celebrated 'bad boy' behaviour, and the tirage of bad press that followed, he ran from the brass ring to the safety of Germany's cabaret scene. The lights were a bit dimmer there and the fame, presumably, less costly.

He now sits demurely in the booth waiting for the cameras to roll. "Darling", he says, "this is why I never wear a fur coat in a scene unless I have to." I catch myself staring at his face, searching for signs of that famous fire and mischief, but all is in tow for the moment. "Too hot darling, glamorous, but not worth the torture in this heat." In an instant his eyes roll, and his mouth cuts a private grin. There is no mistake - this is for the benefit of my smuggled camera.

In addition to Hollis McLaren and Russell the cast is a pleasant reunion of many of the **Outrageous** originals, including David McIlwraith as Bob, Robin's leather-clad agent. This time around the picture's focus is no longer predominately on Robin. The Liza

character has been developed and her individual struggle to lead a fully integrated life, in spite of that bag full of prescription drugs, brings a fuller sense of drama to the sequel. We know these characters. We can almost imagine how their lives have continued in that Manhattan loft.

In spite of all the sequel's new twists and turns, the film's success will be due to the metamorphic Craig Russell's ability to erase some of those bad memories of the post-**Outrageous** performance fiascos which are not always easy to forget. As an ardent fan, I remember sitting in the audience at the Royal York's Imperial Room in 1978, disappointedly watching as Russell tumbled off the stage. Any discussion of Russell becomes impossible without intersecting these unfortunate incidents. The ways in which the persona of 'Robin Turner' interweaves with the myths and stories that surround the 'real' Craig Russell approaches the uncanny in the new film.

In one scene, when Robin is about to sabotage a backer's audition for a Broadway show, his long-time friend and agent Bob (McIlwraith) tells him to "grow up". In the tradition of the 'comeback' - for which many of the Russell ladies were themselves famous - **Too Outrageous** could well prove to be the phoenix Craig Russell has the talent to navigate into effortless flight.

David MacLean •



photo: David MacLean

• Craig Russell - Too Outrageous!