

# JACKIE BURROUGHS

## A Career of Deep Shame



photo: Anita Alanick

• A Winter Tan



• The Housekeeper



• John and the Missus



• The Grey Fox

photo: Gail Harvey

### by John Harkness

Jackie Burroughs made her first films over 20 years ago. She was in Don Owen's *Notes for a Film about Donna and Gail* and made a brief appearance in *The Ernie Game*. When an actor has been around for two decades, one generally starts getting reverent, especially when that actor has won awards for her various appearances on stage, television and screen.

Despite her stellar work under Robin Phillips at Stratford in the mid-'70s, Burroughs did little film work during the tax shelter production boom, emerging only in the early '80s in Phillip Borso's *The Grey Fox* (for which she won a Genie to go with her early '70s *Etrogs*), and a second Genie-winning performance in Robin Phillips' *The Wars*. She was most recently seen in Gordon Pinsent's *John and the Missus* (as ...and the Missus), for which she was again nominated for a Genie, losing to her Stratford colleague Martha Henry.

However imposing her recent credits, Burroughs doesn't allow a reverential response. Self-consciously outrageous, wilfully profane, and a respected performer who has very few qualms about doing bit parts in sleazy pictures like *The Surrogate* (in which she is the only memorable element), Jackie does not inspire incense-burning at the altar of her art.

John Harkness is a Toronto-based film critic, writing for *Now*.

What Jackie really is is one of the half-dozen neatest people on the planet. She is more fun to interview than anyone I know, because she honestly does not seem to care what people think about her and will say anything. And there is no one I would rather be with at a dull industry function.

**Cinema Canada:** *You've been making movies for 20 years now...*

**Jackie Burroughs:** No, I haven't. Really. It's actually only nine years of making movies, so I actually belong to the new promising generation.

After I made *Note for a Film About Donna and Gail* I immediately sank into obscurity. There's those two, then I disappeared, so those years in between don't count.

Then I made *Conflict Comedy*, in 1972, which you may never have heard of. It cost the NFB a great deal of money. I played an 88-year-old woman who had an affair with a young boy. I can't remember who made that — it wasn't Morley Markson but it sounds like him. Mort Ransen. That came out, but no one saw it.

Then there were the movies I got *Etrogs* for, CBC productions on film. *12½ Cents*, and *Vicky*, which was the sequel. I was a childbeater, a really good childbeater. Beat the shit out of those kids.

Then *125 Rooms of Comfort*, which I really love, apart from the fact that it has a heterosexual transvestite. Then Morley Markson's *Monkeys in the Attic*.

Somewhere in there I went to Strat-

ford. It's been very dull — I didn't do anything until *The Grey Fox*.

It's actually a career of deep shame.

**Cinema Canada:** *Are there, right now, better roles and opportunities for women of a certain age in Canadian films?*

**Jackie Burroughs:** I think that's a suck ass question. I don't know, I have no idea what opportunities there are. I don't read the paper. I don't like being a part of the "aging actresses." It's like 'How many foodstuffs have raisins in them?' I don't think about my career. If I did, I'd probably be doing something else. I've never sat back and thought if there were roles for people my age. I don't know. Fuck, there've never been roles.

I've been playing fucking 80-year-olds for the last 20 years. It's so bizarre to me, 'cause I don't see any kind of rhyme or reason. Mostly, I've been always doing the same thing. Right now it's getting your own project together.

**Cinema Canada:** *Who do you admire?*

**Jackie Burroughs:** I dream of being asked this question because there are lots of people I admire. Maggie Smith. Gena Rowlands to me is a great, great actress. I think she's fantastic. I like her husband, Cassavettes. I have a crush on Susan Sontag. A lot of ancient people, like Isadora Duncan, and writers, mostly — Jill Johnson: not too much on movie stars. Mickey Rourke, I like his acting. Christopher Walken. That disappearing thing of his is very attractive. Gene Hackman.

Then I have crushes on major movies, like *Last Tango*. I would love to work with Cassavettes. Peter Brook, at one point, but I got over it.

**Cinema Canada:** *Let's talk about some of the people you've worked with. Martha Henry.*

**Jackie Burroughs:** I adore Martha Henry. It's so funny that she's from Pittsburgh. Robin used to say to me, "She comes on like such a lady, and she's from Pittsburgh!" Martha and I can pass for Rosedale types.

**Cinema Canada:** *Don Owen.*

**Jackie Burroughs:** I like Don Owen, because he's a nice, bumbling guy. I want him to come up with something excellent for himself, because I've had fun working for him. He was sort of an easy guy, but opinionated.

**Cinema Canada:** *Robin Phillips.*

**Jackie Burroughs:** I have an endless crush on Robin Phillips, because he's entirely naughty. Those are the people I love. Chris Walken has that. The fun of being outrageous is part of the major fun of my life. Robin is just like that. If he just met you, he would want to impress you, so he'd say something profound. That doesn't mean he is profound, but he wants you to think he's profound, so he just came up with a profound thing. I love that kind of energy, and I think my major friends are like that.

**Cinema Canada:** *David Cronenberg.*  
**Jackie Burroughs:** Well he's very hand-

some, and he's very kind, and he's very good to work for, but I wouldn't have acting spasms over him. Of course, I don't know that I want to have acting spasms, so I liked being with him. He's a very controlled man, and he sails a very smooth ship. I don't feel intimate with him.

I liked being in his movies, and I liked **Videodrome** as a spectacular, but it's not stuff that's second nature to me. We're involved in OFAVAS (Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society — Ed.) together, so I see him quite often.

**Cinema Canada:** *Gordon Pinsent.*

**Jackie Burroughs:** I worked with him a long time ago in theatre. We were both terrible, and I hadn't worked with him, then this thing comes along. I have to say that I thought he was a slighter being than I think now. Mostly because he's charming and he's got that kind of crinkly Hollywood look. So I always thought there wasn't that much to him. I was vastly surprised. I truly like his writing. He does all kind of things, with a lot of deep stuff doing on. I was shocked. Whatever we think of **John and the Missus**, he came out stalwartly.

**Cinema Canada:** *John Hunter.*

**Jackie Burroughs:** I adore John Hunter. He's very naughty. But he doesn't like me anymore. We had a kind of falling out during **John and the Missus**. He worked incredibly hard on **John and the Missus** — to me, he did lot of the directing and producing on that film.

John has written a script for himself that he wants to produce, so maybe — I hope he does, because he has a lot of bite to him.

**Cinema Canada:** *Nion (Toronto performer Ian Wallace, with whom Burroughs has appeared in alternative theatre production).*

**Jackie Burroughs:** Nion's naughty. He's very naughty, and very bizarre, and also saintlike. He's also an extremely controlled man — I've had more fights while working with him than with anyone. I think he's quite brainy, but quite out in left field. He's like Cronenberg that way, he's in a world of his own, and that's the way he wants to keep it. Robin's made too much of his own world.

**Cinema Canada:** *You said the other night that you're a little down on acting right now. Would you care to elaborate?*

**Jackie Burroughs:** I'm terrified of acting. I hate acting, I always have. Stage is the true terror, because you come face to face with the actual enemy.

**Cinema Canada:** *The audience, or your own incompetence?*

**Jackie Burroughs:** Witnesses to my own incompetence. There's also quite a thrilling moment in facing your enemy at that moment. Some actors feel like they're really giving something to the audience. I wish I could feel that, but I

don't. Sometimes they reject you, and you feel really full of self-worth.

Movies are terrifying, but not really. I can get terrified of the cameraman or the grips, but I can never think of the camera as 'many people.'

**Cinema Canada:** *It's a strange job, pretending to be other people. It's a form of socially sanctioned lying, really.*

**Jackie Burroughs:** A lot of actors think they find the truth of a character, and I think that would be a really lovely way to work, because then I wouldn't feel all those egocentric things I feel.

You feel defensive — "like, what do you think, I'm lying?" and of course you are, and spend your life lying in front of other people and trying to make them think you're telling the truth.

I do like a really good fascist director, but that's something you never run into in this country. I could work with someone who knew to within an inch what he wanted. Robin Phillips was like that. I've never met a film director like that. Then I can enjoy that. Either that, or as little direction as possible. I'd rather have total responsibility than having some numbskull coming in halfway through and saying, "That was exactly what I meant."

I've never run into a director with whom you could risk just reading your own lines. You can either fill your head with so much information that you don't have a line on it — I fill up so much information that I can no longer direct myself — or you have a lobotomy.

I learn my lines backward. You take a long passage, and you learn the last phrase, and the second last phrase, then the third phrase, and eventually it begins to make some kind of sense, and by then you have it by rote. It stops yourself from knowing what the writer is thinking, so you come at it through the writer rather than through your brain. You can actually do shit very easily that way.

It's because I've just done this film, and it's all I've been thinking about for four years. So I'm sort of at a loss and I'm thinking maybe I'd like to be a nurse. I'm not down on actors, but I haven't got much energy for that now. I'm just not keen on acting.

**Cinema Canada:** *Let's talk about that. This is the film you made in Mexico?*

**Jackie Burroughs:** There were five of us — Louise Clarke, producer, John Walker who's the cinematographer, Aeryn Weisman, who's the sound person, John Frizzell, the director, and myself, the actor. But we all did everything. We got our money together over about three years, from Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council and the fabulous Ontario Film Development Corporation, who really gave us most of the money.

It's a \$200,000 budget and we shot it on time, on budget and in Mexico. It's a feature. I adapted it from this book of letters, *Give Sorrow Words*, by Maryse Holder. It's roughly about this feminist who goes from New York to Mexico,

and writes these endless letters to her friend that are quite funny, and subsequently was actually murdered in Mexico, though that's not in the story. Now we're assembling it.

We put it together and the OFDC said fine, and we adapted it. I'm so nervous about it right now.

This is a very little movie. A long petite movie. An extremely long very small movie. Certainly not less than two hours, if you're going to get your six bucks worth.

We don't know how long it is. Our entire crew was the five of us and three Mexicans. And we had a censor with us, a Mexican censor. We had to hire him. If you're going to develop your film in Mexico, they're going to look at your rushes, so you have to hire a Mexican censor, feed him and put him up. He was okay, he was fun. He wasn't really worried about sex. I could do anything, but the Mexicans couldn't. He didn't care what the fuck I did.

**Cinema Canada:** *How did the project begin?*

**Jackie Burroughs:** Chappelle Jaffe had the rights. John Hunter gave me a copy and Chappelle got the stage rights to the book, unbeknownst to me, and I was doing it in theatre without any rights at all. She did immense amounts of research on this subject, and then she dropped the whole thing, and wasn't doing anything with it.

I was working on these letters in theatre and stupid Frizzell was living upstairs and we said...

**Cinema Canada:** *Why did you decide to basically go outside the industry to make it?*

**Jackie Burroughs:** It's such an interesting idea to have eight people and make your own film. It breaks down that basic industry question. We can't make a big flash movie that'll make everyone feel good. But it's a lot simpler — or it makes my life simpler. I can't feel this huge industry taking off. Maybe I'm sour or something, but I feel perfectly optimistic. I can't see it could be any other way. What industry is there? There's Peter O'Brian. There's the government.

We produced it, and that's an interesting little world. There is that pressure of being responsible for every fuck-up. I'd like to make lots of little movies, because I can't see what's going on. I don't know who anyone up there is playing with — wonderful Ron McCluskey (Creative Exposure) is our distributor.

**Cinema Canada:** *Did you try to go a more conventional route with it?*

**Jackie Burroughs:** We got our script back from Telefilm with "unsympathetic" written all over it. What is sympathetic? It's pathetic, so I can feel superior to this character and thus they're sympathetic.

When we had our first meeting, they asked us why do we want to do this thing, how are you going to make this character sympathetic? Actually, you'll

have to sit and watch her for an hour and a half. If you watch someone, you come to find them sympathetic.

I'm not sure. That whole softening thing is particularly Canadian — where we present ourselves as sweet. It's a Canadian image. One looks at Yuk Yuks and one thinks please send some satirists and have them infiltrate the film industry. We have to shit on ourselves a little. Nobody ever attacks the niceness and the sweetness of the way we stand back and let other people make our mistakes.

Maryse Holder hated Canadians, which is partly why I like her. It's so good to hear someone hate Canadians 'cause nobody does. Actually, people are beginning to hate Canadians. In Mexico, people are beginning to hate Canadians. One of her lines is "fucking Canadians, always on the run for fear someone will exploit a cigarette off them." She's got a real pet peeve about Canadians. They think they're so sweet and nice and they're really deeply and solidly vulgar. Frizzell's writing has some bite to it. He's not about hating Canadians, but he's finding something funny in all that niceness and distance — nothing being said and no one being hurt.

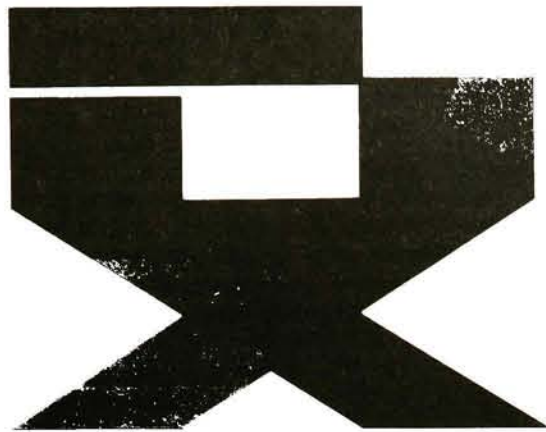
**Cinema Canada:** *But you still don't see any actual industry happening?*

**Jackie Burroughs:** I don't know what people talk about when they talk about the industry. I know people are having lunch. But when I'm in New York agents make sense to me, and all that thing is included in a larger industry that makes some sort of sense. I truly don't understand it here. I'd like to. I'll go to lunch with anyone, but I don't know what it would do. I'm glad I have an agent, because he gives me reports to give to my chartered accountant. I'm not being down on Canada, because I'm happy just the way it is. But I can never get a hold of those big questions.

I like that in Canada you can make something on your own. The part I don't like is having questions like "how's your career going?" or "where's it all leading?" or being treated like a star when I've lived exactly the same way and been doing exactly the same thing for 20 years. I'm very grateful for things people like, but it's like the bank. If you stick in there long enough, you'll probably get to be head teller.

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you have anything else to say to Cinema Canada's readers?*

**Jackie Burroughs:** Uh, hi. I thought this morning — I wasn't depressed, but you go through these periods when you have no opinions. I so treasure these moments, because I'm usually such an opinionated cunt, I've been feeling for the last three weeks quite empty. This is fine, I can't go out with anyone, no one wants to see me, so I'm thinking to myself I don't want to have opinions, I don't want to have any of the same fucking attitudes I had before, and how dare John Harkness come over and make me have opinions.



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