

by José Arroyo

**Cinema Canada:** *Could you tell me a little bit about your background?*

**Atom Egoyan:** I moved with my family to Canada from Egypt. I was three. We settled in Victoria and I stayed there until the age of 18 when I came to study at the University of Toronto. I've been here ever since.

I started making short films at the University. I wasn't studying filmmaking. I was studying International Relations but there was a film club and I became very interested immediately. It just seemed a logical extension of my interest in theatre and I made a number of short films while I was there. My last film at U of T was *Open House*.

By the time I left school I decided I wanted to commit myself to drama. I was still very interested in playwrighting at that point. I was invited to join The Playwright's Union at the Tarragon theatre and I worked on a play there. I also started work on the script of *Next of Kin*, my first feature. It was then that I decided to devote myself to film and it really is an act of devotion. It's been difficult to raise money.

**Cinema Canada:** *Why were you studying International Relations?*

**Atom Egoyan:** I think sometimes it's a bit of a mistake to go right into film school because you tend to limit yourself. I've always been very interested in politics and political structures, political decision-making, and it was something that I was genuinely very interested in. I continue to be very interested in that process. Though it's not necessarily reflected in the type of films I make, it's something which I really wanted to expand my knowledge of. I wanted a firm understanding of the way political events around the world work. I think it's a very important thing. Many people tend to just be satisfied with a very superficial view.

I was really very honest in my reasons for taking that course of study. It's just that, as my time in the university developed, I realized that that wasn't what I wanted to do professionally.

**Cinema Canada:** *How did your family react to your going into film?*

**Atom Egoyan:** My parents were both originally trained as artists, as painters, and at a certain point in their careers they decided to put that aside and to go into business. So they were always very wary of my interest in pursuing an artistic career. They were never particularly encouraging of it. They realized how difficult it is, that it's something that can be very painful. So they were a bit hesitant about giving me encouragement when I was younger.

They were conservative in the sense that they always felt, 'well it's good to continue doing your art but you should also do something else to support yourself.' Which *sounds* very good. But of course, you realize that you have to

# The Alienated Affections of Atom Egoyan

**O**ttawa in June is pretty but dull. No reason to go there then except the trip was free and there was the possibility of dinner with new friends. The official reason, the one that paid the bill, was to attend the Summer Screen Institute's premiere of Atom Egoyan's *Family Viewing*. Dinner was fun. The film was a revelation. Jean Oser, who has worked with Pabst and Renoir (and who should know) thought it brilliant. Nice for a man in his mid-70s and one in his mid-20s to agree. It's that kind of film.

I knew Egoyan had done other films but I wasn't familiar with them. After the pleasure of seeing *Family Viewing*, my first reaction was anger. I was angry because I hadn't made an effort to see *Next of Kin*, Egoyan's first feature, the few times it was shown in Montreal. Angry also at the realization that my viewing choices are too often conveniently self-restricted to what's playing at Cineplex. And pissed off that Cineplex hadn't made my viewing pleasure convenient. I resolved to see the films.

To briefly summarize the plots, *Open House* is a half-hour drama about the roundabout way a son, who can't communicate with his father, tries to make the father feel good — he pretends to sell the house his father built. Prospective buyers come to see it and praise it. The son records the praise and plays it to his father as an expression of love.

*Next of Kin* is about Peter, an alienated young WASP who, along with his family, is undergoing therapy. Their psychiatrist tapes the session so his patients can study themselves later. In the shrink's office, Peter comes across a tape of an ethnic family. The parents can't communicate with their daughter either but have the added attraction of being voluble and having a long-lost son. Peter decides to play shrink and pretend that he's the son.

*Family Viewing* is reviewed on p. 37

After seeing the films I resolved to meet the director. The following was my introduction to Atom Egoyan.

commit yourself to it totally. It's not something you can pursue part-time. I think that there are some individuals that are perhaps endowed with much greater intellectual reserve, which allows them to do two things at the same time. But, really, for me, I find that I have to concentrate on what I'm doing.

**Cinema Canada:** *Did your family immigrate here or were they refugees?*

**Atom Egoyan:** My parents left Egypt at a time when Arab nationalism was getting to a peak with Nasser. They felt that, as Armenians, it wasn't a particularly good time to stay in Egypt. There was a large wave of Armenian immigration out of Egypt at that time — to Canada especially. To say they were political refugees suggests that there was a crisis opposed to a perceived crisis. I think it was definitely a case of the latter and it ended up being quite justified, of course, though to call them political refugees would probably be extreme. In fact, they didn't claim political refugee status when they arrived in the country.

**Cinema Canada:** *How did you start making films? How did you get funding and how did your different films develop?*

**Atom Egoyan:** When I was at U of T there was an institution there called the Hart House Film Board which was instrumental in starting my career. They had 16mm equipment and they also gave out small grants. It was like a dream come true. This was how I made my first film my first year of university. That was a 14-minute short called *However*. I submitted it to the CNE film festival at the time and it won the prize.

I was able to make my second film with the prize money. This is how I built up my body of short films which I made while I was at university. Now I had the advantage in my first year of applying for an Ontario Arts Council grant. Usually film students aren't eligible but I was studying in an unrelated field and I received the grant and made *Open House*. It was my biggest budgeted film until then and it cost \$10,000 to make this half-hour film.

**Cinema Canada:** *Was that broadcast on the CBC?*

**Atom Egoyan:** Yes, in *Canadian Reflections*. Again that was an incredible incentive for me. That sale was very important symbolically. This is the first professional step many members of the independent filmmaking community have made in this country — a sale to Rena Krewagna's *Canadian Reflections*, a program which incidentally is being threatened right now, a very incomprehensible move by the CBC to one of the few sanctions that they make to the independent filmmaking community.

Anyhow that sale was very encouraging for me. For the first time in my life I realized that there was some correlation between doing these films and perhaps having a market for them. I saved the money from that sale and I used that as the core of funding towards *Next of*

*Kin*, which was to be my next film. Now that took a lot longer to get funding for. I tried again to go through the arts council jury system, but of course it's quite unpredictable because you can receive support from one jury and another jury might not like your work at all, which is what basically happened to me for two years. I finally received a small grant from Canada Council.

*Next of Kin* was made for a shooting budget of \$25,000 and then we received a completion grant from the Ontario Arts Council. The film was made for a total budget of about \$37,000. It was something that was much easier to do then than it would be now. It was 1984. The industry was not in the boom that it is right now. People were available and equipment was available for a much more reasonable rate than it might be now. And I was very privileged to be able to work with the calibre of people that I had on that film.

**Cinema Canada:** *You've worked with pretty much the same people in your three films. I keep seeing the same names cropping up on the credits.*

**Atom Egoyan:** Yes. Peter Mettler, Bruce MacDonald, Arsinée Khanjian, Camelia Freiberg...

**Cinema Canada:** *How about Family Viewing? How did that get financed?*

**Atom Egoyan:** *Family Viewing* was an odd film. I had a very clear vision of how I wanted to make it and all my instincts told me that this would not be a particularly commercial approach. The dilemma for me became that here I had a first feature which was quite successful. I had received a lot of encouragement, quite a bit of attention. It had been purchased by the CBC and the next logical step would have been to make a more commercial film. I didn't do that.

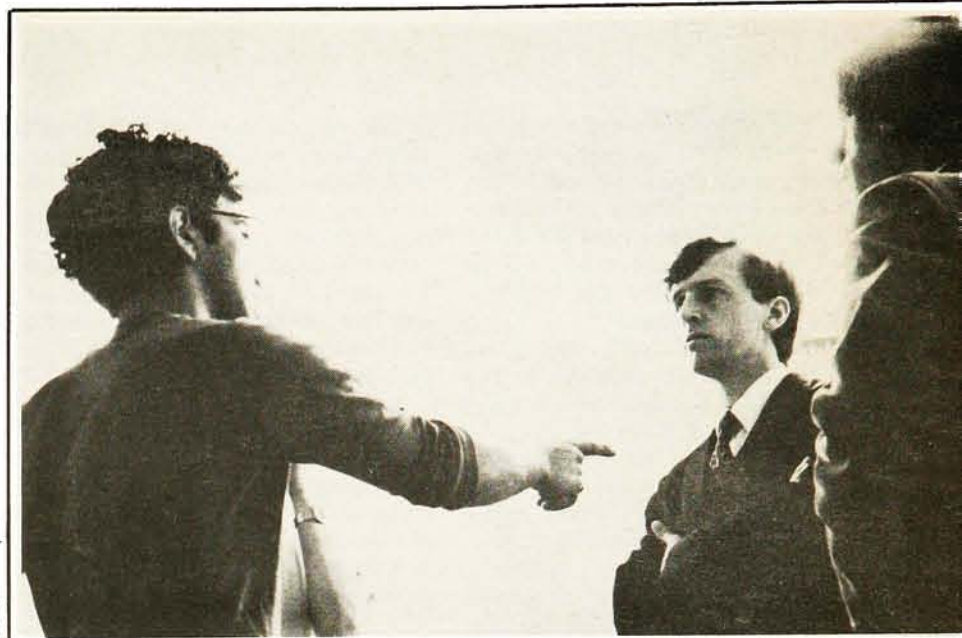
I wrote a script which I think perplexed many people. I wanted to do it in a style which was very different and so the question became how do you fund that. Again I felt it would make more sense to apply to the arts councils because of the nature of the project, because of the way I wanted to do it. And the Arts Council was very encouraging. But that limited me to a very low budget.

**Cinema Canada:** *You didn't apply to Telefilm?*

**Atom Egoyan:** No, I didn't apply to Telefilm very specifically because I knew it wasn't the type of project that would interest them. I didn't want to get involved with the headache of having to tailor the script and the production to what they need.

**Cinema Canada:** *And that's basically what it would have entailed?*

**Atom Egoyan:** Yes. I think so and I don't regret not going to Telefilm. Now what happened was that as I was almost ready to shoot, the Ontario Film Development Corporation came into existence. That was an ideal organization because it seemed to be somewhere in between



• Egoyan directing actors for *Open House*



• Expressive movement for Peter Mettler's camera

the Arts Council and Telefilm and because they had used *Next of Kin* as an example of the type of project that they wanted to get involved with.

I gave them the script for the new film and they were very encouraging right from the very beginning. Especially Bill House, he immediately had a sense of what it was that I wanted to do with the script. They extended a loan and on the basis of that loan I was able to do certain things which I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise: we used professional actors, we were able to go ACTRA, and I was able to pay my crew a decent rate.

Now the way I structure my films in terms of budget, something which I'm now trying to decide whether I'll do for the next film... When you go to OFDC you have to show them a certain amount of private investment. What I did in that case is that I took my fees as a writer/director/producer and editor, put them all together and totally deferred them. Of course you can take the standard scale rates for each of those functions, add them all together, and it ends up being quite a large chunk. So that way, I was able to access the OFDC and still be able

to maintain total control over the film.

For *Family Viewing* it was absolutely paramount that I have total control — even at the rough cut stage, when I showed the film to people, it wasn't really connecting. They didn't know what was going on. The film only came together when the sound was in and it was all completed — even though it was very clear in my mind what I wanted from the very beginning.

It wasn't a film that follows a formula in any way and, for that reason, I was very protective. Also it isn't a film which opens up to an audience. There's no narrator. No one's saying, 'let me lead you through this.' And it demands a lot from an audience. There's no question of that. That's what I'm particularly proud of having done.

**Cinema Canada:** *I think it's very accessible though. The characters draw you along.*

**Atom Egoyan:** Certainly the screening in Ottawa made that clear. That was a very exciting evening for me. This has been a very long film. We finished it in March and all we had were small screen-

ings for one or two, up to five people and it's very difficult to get a sense of how people are really reacting to it until you show it to a large audience. The Ottawa screening was fabulous. I was just so excited. I really felt there was an energy there which was connecting with the film and that's so exciting.

But it came quite a while after having completed the film and I was in real limbo for a long period. I went through a period of hating it, you know, and wondering what I had done. Well, even though you say it's accessible, I still think... For instance for the first 20 minutes you don't know what's going on, you don't know what the relationship between these people are to each other, and if you're not seduced by that very giddy kind of energy that the film has... if you're not seduced by the puzzle it presents to you...

**Cinema Canada:** *But I was and I think audiences will be. In the opening scene when the character switches the audience off. It's like a jolt. It's funny too.*

**Atom Egoyan:** I'm glad you're seeing

be able to give that up. You have to be able to follow your instincts. You have to be able to commit yourself very passionately at a very early age to something that perhaps no one else understands.

You're faced with many obstacles. Whether or not you actually find your way through them and continue making films certainly gives you a sense of your own perseverance.

As to talent, that's another question. There is nothing that is actually able to tell you whether or not you have talent. And I think when we begin to place too much trust in certain individuals or organizations which tell us that we do or that we don't, we are bound to be disappointed or disillusioned at some point.

**Cinema Canada:** *Let's leave that aside a moment because I would just assume that people who devote themselves wholeheartedly to making films will just be sure that they have talent. Could you specify what the obstacles for you have been as an independent filmmaker?*



• Together and apart in *Open House*

the humour in it. When you show films to small groups of people, they usually don't tend to laugh and this was something I thought I had really missed the boat on. The humour in the film is very particular. I mean it's a very odd sensibility. What was great about the large audience is that you get people to lose themselves much more easily to the conceit of the film and the tone of it.

**Cinema Canada:** *You have followed the same route as many independent filmmakers. What problems did you encounter?*

**Atom Egoyan:** The biggest problem, for me, is being able to cope. Or not being able to ask yourself certain questions which are fundamental human questions such as 'Why am I doing this?' And 'Where will I be in a certain number of years?' There is absolutely no answer to these questions. And this is just a sample of the questions that any rational human being would ask themselves. You have to

**Atom Egoyan:** The loneliness. I think it's an extremely lonely career. Lonely in the sense that, though you are surrounded by a community of people, ultimately what makes an independent film exciting is that it's usually going to a terrain which perhaps has been unexplored and you have to defend yourself, or defend to yourself, a number of decisions which may seem indefensible. You have to put yourself through a process in order to make a film which removes you sometimes from people that you care about, that you love. That's one obstacle, the loneliness.

**Cinema Canada:** *That independent decision-making is also what most people would feel is the luxury of independent filmmaking.*

**Atom Egoyan:** Perhaps. But I don't think it's a luxury often. It's a luxury on the other end of it when you finish a film and you say this is my film but I don't

think that during the filmmaking it's particularly attractive. I mean, it is in a romantic sense, certainly, but you know... That is usually not something that filmmakers enjoy when they're working at an editing bench at four o'clock in the morning with a scene that they realize they should have shot another way because it just doesn't seem to work and they don't have the money to go back, and everyone that they've shown the film to hates it.

**Cinema Canada:** *I'm just thinking of lots of stories other filmmakers tell about being at the editing table at four o'clock in the morning and not being able to edit it the way they want to.*

**Atom Egoyan:** Well, listen, I've been on that side of it as well because I don't make my living, yet anyhow, from my independent films. I work as a freelance director and you forfeit control. That is one of the givens of the profession. In that case you take on an entirely different mind-set. You see yourself as a craftsman being hired to perform a particular function.



• Telecommunications angst in *Family Viewing*

Part of your role for the period of time that you're hired to do the film is committing yourself to it. Making it mean something to you. But one of the tricks about that is that once your contract ends, you ought to shed that emotion and all of a sudden remove yourself, because ultimately you don't have control over how it's going to end up looking. So that is the other end of it.

The whole idea of commercial filmmaking is that you delay the process of decision-making until the last possible moment. You provide coverage. You provide different ways of interpreting the scene so that then you can mold it to whatever feels good.

Now with independent filmmaking not only do you never think of relinquishing that but you honestly have to be able to commit yourself to it for years perhaps. The most exciting thing about independent filmmaking is that you are given the opportunity. And, by God, take advantage of it! Don't try to make the

commercial film when you have an independent structure. You are defeating the purpose, right. You're given the advantage of saying 'OK, do exactly as your instinct tells you to do it.'

And that's why these projects are things that live with you, as opposed to things which you've done to put on a resume and show on a reel to someone as a demonstration of technical expertise. I don't know. That doesn't answer any particular question except...

**Cinema Canada:** *Well it kind of does. You do live in a city that can provide a lot of different kinds of work. Which is not the case for most filmmakers across the country. I think most of them are really dependent on the whims of whoever is allocating the money. But I would like just to get a sense of the blockages that you've had.*

**Atom Egoyan:** Well, I would say blockages have been exposure. An independent filmmaker needs exposure. How do you get exposure? I mean it's a very difficult thing to... I'll never forget. This is

an amazing story. A friend of mine — actually it was Bruce Macdonald. Bruce submitted a film called *Let Me See* to the Festival of Festivals and it didn't get in, so we were all kind of wondering, 'well let's see. What should we do about this.' And I just had a film the previous year which didn't get in as well. I knew what he was going through. So we had this idea of 'well, O.K. if they are not going to show it within the festival what we'll do is we'll rent a projector, we'll get a small generator, we'll put on tuxes and we'll go to the university theatre, and project the film on the sidewalk for one of the galas.'

**Cinema Canada:** *I heard of that.*

**Atom Egoyan:** You go through the most ridiculous gestures in order to secure some sort of attention and, you know, all of this has very little to do with why we came to film in the first place. It's quite humiliating at a certain point. No one really likes to be an object for the press's

amusement you know, like so that CITY-TV can come by with a camera and have...

The whole notion of exposure becomes a bit abstract at a certain point. How is a little clip on CITY-TV going to really affect your career as a filmmaker? There is the sense of 'well people will have heard your name' but probably not. People's retention is not all that great. We are obsessed. Our media teaches us that exposure is very important. That becomes very frustrating. That's an obstacle. That's a psychological obstacle. You're talking about concrete obstacles.

**Cinema Canada:** Well no. I can take that as a concrete obstacle. I think we live in a country that, compared to others, devotes very little attention to its films and much less than that to its independent films.

**Atom Egoyan:** Well now, I wouldn't be so sure about that. I don't agree with it necessarily. *Next of Kin* was on a multicultural tour across the country. We went to many different cities and we

that, but all of these things must be seen in relation to the available market at the other end. You know. We can idealize that. We can say 'My God there are so many people who would love to see this film if only they had a chance to see it.'

With *Next of Kin* I certainly felt that frustration. Here's a film that, no matter how many times I show it to an audience, no matter how small the audience was, everyone liked it. It didn't matter if they'd never seen a film. It got on this tour in B.C. which was going to logging towns and the reaction was always quite overwhelming. And I was saying, 'well here's a film that has a popular touch. Why isn't this shown in all the theatres?'

**Cinema Canada:** Right. Why wasn't it?

**Atom Egoyan:** Because someone, somewhere, must be making a conscious evaluation as to what is the market potential. And surely we live in a society, more than any other perhaps, and I'm talking about North American society, as opposed to the particularly Canadian society, where if there is a perceived de-

*Beverly Hills Cop*. But I think that lots of people would like to see it and lots more would like to see *Family Viewing*.

**Atom Egoyan:** This is very interesting for me because it goes to the question of marginalization. Independent filmmakers attempt to marginalize themselves. I don't know exactly why but there seems to be this sense of the avant-garde being something that is on the fringes of society. By its nature, it cannot integrate itself fully into the social fabric of this country because then it defeats its purpose of existence, which is to question values, to challenge values.

This is a very attractive and romantic notion and it's something which everyone who is an independent avant-garde artist feels somewhere in their gut. That it is something in which they somehow have to remove themselves from society and serve this lofty position. So then when we begin to talk about marketing — when you're making a film or when you're writing a novel or when you're writing a play or doing a painting — Usually to be true to ourselves, the market or the public is something that either we don't think about, or we think about with a certain cynicism. We're just so concerned at that point with being true to our feelings.

Then, all of a sudden, we finish the work and we have to apply to that work an entire set of criteria which, had we any sense of self-preservation, we wouldn't even begin to broach. Who's going to want to see this? Who did I make this for? All these probing questions which are evidently painful because they are so removed from why we made the film in the first place. But yet you subject yourself to that. I think in some ways an independent filmmaker is perhaps the last person you should ask about marketing because they're either going to be hopelessly naive and optimistic, or they're going to be like me and question the public merit of their own work.

I think what we need are distributors who will understand the filmmaking process, who love film and fight these wars for us. I'm working with one and I feel very privileged to be working with André Bennet here who is also handling *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*. But we need more people like that and those are the people who should be fighting our cause. I don't feel particularly equipped to fight for why people should see my particular film. I feel it's somewhat presumptuous.

Though I cherish an audience's response and I need an audience's response, it's not why I made it really. I can represent myself. I can represent why I made a film. I can represent the views and issues I was dealing with in the film. I can certainly answer questions to an audience and I can certainly defend myself. But I cannot — and maybe this is a failure on my part because I know there are filmmakers who get very involved with their distribution, Bachar Chbib being the most notable example of that

— but I can't. I'm not capable of doing that. I find it very depressing. Bachar is remarkable because he can throw himself behind it totally. And I have a lot of respect for him being able to do that.

**Cinema Canada:** Let's go back to the films. In your films many of your characters are rootless. They exude a sense of not belonging anywhere. And many of them are ethnic, though I wouldn't have been able to have pinpointed whether they were Armenian or Egyptian.

**Atom Egoyan:** Yeah, well the thing is that I'm very careful not to label them as being Armenian or Egyptian or... You see, one of the advantages of working with the Armenian language or the Armenian culture is that it is, for most people, not something that can be easily identified, and that allows me the luxury of being able to treat it almost on a metaphorical level. I'm not particularly interested in giving details or being precise about a particular state of national alienation. Rather I'm interested in how I can use that as a metaphor for a certain attitude or a certain perception of existence. Anytime that it becomes a specific issue I tend to shy away from it because it's not really what I feel comfortable doing.

**Cinema Canada:** An inability to communicate is characteristic of the characters in both. Can you explain why you have chosen this particular thematic?

**Atom Egoyan:** I'm very interested in how people can take a very simple human emotion and complicate it and find a very long and torturous route to arriving at a simple truth. That happens in all three films. My first film you have this real-estate agent who goes through this incredible charade of pretending he's selling the house that was built by these two people and we find out at the end of the film that in fact it's his parents' house and that this is all a ploy that he has engineered in order to show to his father that this is something that he can be proud of. All my character is saying is 'I love you' to the father. We never see him do that and it's all he has to do. But no, he goes through this entire process.

*Next of Kin*, again this incredibly complicated route the character takes in order to find a sense of self-identity. *Family Viewing* the same thing happens. I'm interested in characters who take that approach to life because it's close to my own personal approach. I am surrounded by people in my own life who are willing to give me very pure simple expressions of love and I find myself constantly analysing that. Trying to understand motivations. Again it's my own character and that certainly reflects in the film.

**Cinema Canada:** It seems to me that the only characters in your films who seem to have a relation to a wider culture or some continuity with history, even though they are depicted as being physically removed from their culture,



• Patrick Tierney and Berge Fazlian passing as *Next of Kin*

never had a problem getting reviewed or getting press attention. At all. I would say making that jump between screenings in the community centres and art galleries to something a bit more viable commercially, that is an obstacle. And it is an obstacle which I am still undergoing, you know.

**Cinema Canada:** It's struck me how the most influential films in the last few years have come from independent people like yourself, Patricia Rozema... People who have been basically making kind of smaller budget, auteur-type cinema recently, have been getting relatively little support. Do you agree with that?

**Atom Egoyan:** But again, it depends on what you mean. It's difficult to answer this question. I really think that *Cinema Canada* especially has a history of seeing the independent film movement in this country as being beleaguered. In many ways it is, and there's no question about

mand, and if there is a perceived way of making money, someone will usually fight to get that right. Fight to do that. Don't you think?

**Cinema Canada:** I think you're simplifying a bit. I think that perhaps in our present context the way that distribution/exhibition is run in this country they wouldn't care if your film made money. I don't think that they would be interested in giving it a major release because it's not something that they produced, it's not something that they have a stake in, it's not something that they contracted for.

**Atom Egoyan:** Who's "they" to you?

**Cinema Canada:** I'm talking about the major distributors who are tied to the American majors. I think they would rather show a turkey like *Ishar* than *Next of Kin* which would probably have made a nice amount of money without becoming a bit on the scale of

are the ethnic characters.

**Atom Egoyan:** When I'm writing these things I work very intuitively. I'm very concerned with the structural logic of the piece and I'm very concerned with the stylistic concerns and the formal concerns of the piece and more than anything else I'm concerned with the emotional structure that I'm setting up, but I'm not... for instance, I feel one's rootedness is a result of the decisions one makes in one's life in terms of who one connects oneself to as opposed to necessarily being the result of an inherent national make-up, or psychological make-up.

**Cinema Canada:** That is basically one of the lines in *Next of Kin*. However, in that and *Family Viewing* you do present a situation where the decision to join with someone who has more, and stronger, ties — family, community, a strong cultural identity...

**Atom Egoyan:** Sure, but it's a question of how we perceive that individual. Many people have perceived the Armenian family in *Next of Kin* as being the model family. You hear people say they are able to communicate with each other, that they are very warm and ebullient and have a sense of where their passions are and how to use those passions to enjoy life, which is a very traditional way of perceiving the ethnic personality. Well, again, I'm not of that mind.

I think that I try to make it quite clear that these people are all isolated as well. That is perhaps a result of their being overly emotional in their way of regarding things. They've gone to the point where they can't communicate with their daughter. What interests the character in *Next of Kin* is not so much that the family is totally different from his. That's only his immediate attraction.

His attraction is to be or play a therapist or the role of the therapist and to play the role of the son in a very archetypal sense. That's how he enters the family. Now, once he's there, then we see a transformation as he begins to shed the archetypal idea of son and actually begins to relate to these people as human beings. I wanted to get a sense of the progression from the idea of the national identity or something that could be objectified, to something that has to be dealt with in a much more realistic and a much more immediate way.

**Cinema Canada:** One of the things that I liked very much in *Next of Kin* is that you show how the different cultures clash intergenerationally and within the person of, for example, the daughter in *Next of Kin*.

**Atom Egoyan:** What one tries to do is to take elements of one's own experience and abstract them. I wouldn't say that my father is like the character in *Next of Kin*, though of course there are elements — which you then tend to exaggerate because it is a drama — and then you bring in other elements.

For instance, I would say that the story that *Next of Kin* tells, or the setting it's

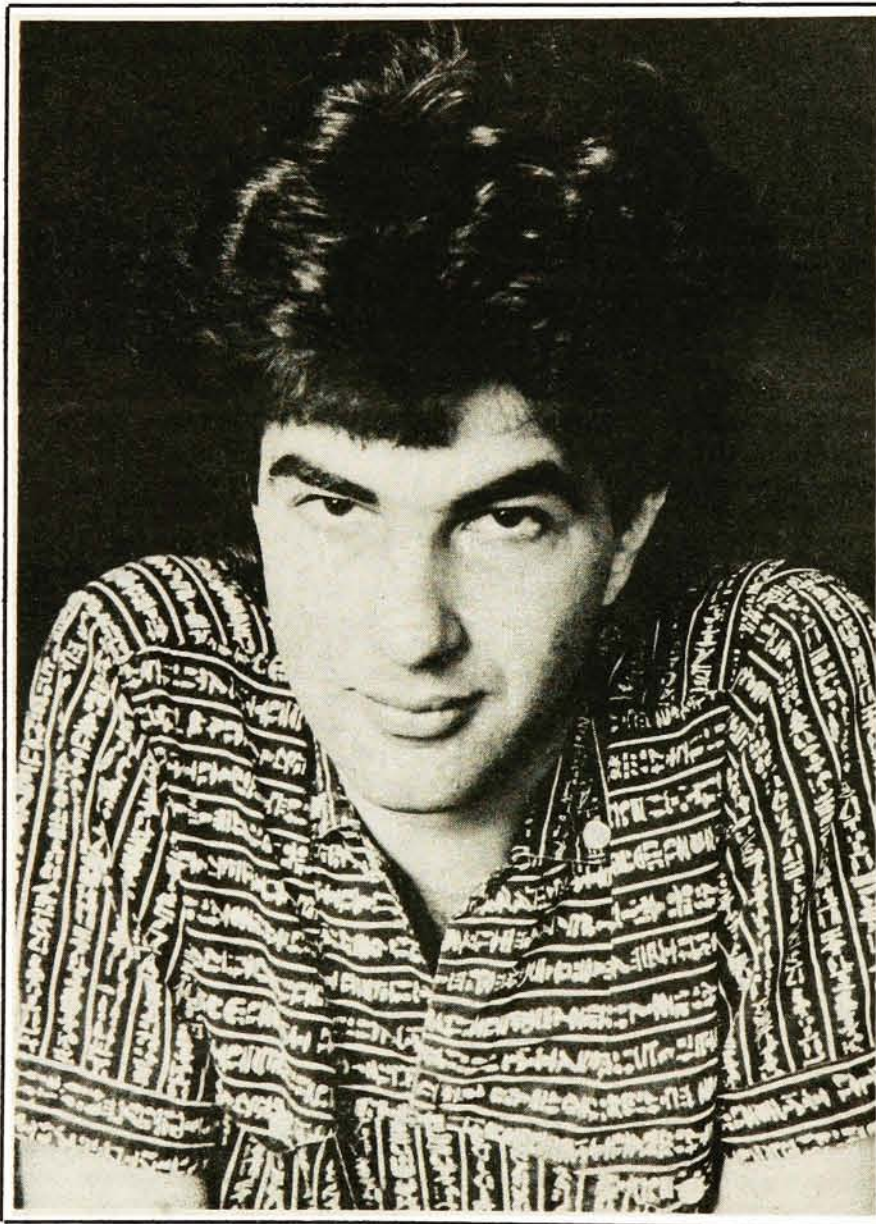
taking place in, is much closer to the Armenian community in Montreal than it would be to the Armenian community in Victoria, which is the community I was brought up in and which totals about 10 people, as opposed to 30,000 in Montreal. Now I'm very exposed to that other community because my relatives are all there, and I travel back and forth, but again you take certain elements, you try and understand your own emotional attraction to these elements, and you take that and you use it to form a character, to form a structure.

Many Armenians might find it quite offensive that I tend to have these people as lower-class merchants because the majority of Armenians, in Montreal say,

you know, make alterations and find how to best fit into it of course, it becomes something else. Part of being a director is letting the actors have the opportunity to do that and feeling whether or not they're being honest, whether or not their performances are being true to them.

In *Next of Kin*, I was working with actors who actually happen to be members of the community, who either had gone through, or knew people who had gone through experiences very close to what was being described in the script. They were able to give it something which becomes quite magical. At a certain point, you actually feel these people are living those parts.

photo: Kaloust Babian



look at themselves as being at least middle-class. Again, it's not a specific event in my life or someone else's life that I'm trying to present to the viewer. It's rather an emotional state of mind which I can then abstract.

If you were to read the script of *Next of Kin* you might find it quite cool. Quite detached. But the moment you populate these figures of your imagination with real personalities and you allow them the opportunity to breathe in those roles, to try on these lines as though they were garments, and then,

**Cinema Canada:** Is the character of the daughter in *Next of Kin* an alter ego for you?

**Atom Egoyan:** Sure, there's an element of that. She was my way of addressing some internal problems within that family. Her stubbornness was something I feel close to. But then when Peter (the WASP character) suggests to her that sometimes it's important to pretend that we're something that we're not in order to obtain equilibrium, that says something that I also feel very close to.

One of the attractions of writing is that

you see a certain sense of disorder and chaos or very uncontrolled energy in the world around you, and part of the joy of writing is that you can sustain the illusion that you can control these various elements, that you can somehow have someone do something which will affect a certain action, which will then lead to this particular resolution.

**Cinema Canada:** In *Open House*, *Next of Kin* and *Family Viewing* you have this very, very WASP young man as your protagonist. Why a WASP young man?

**Atom Egoyan:** Because there's an element in me which is a WASP young man. I would be misleading anyone if I was to try and tell them I was ethnic. There's an element in me which is, but there's also an element in me which has gone through the Canadian English school system and that is WASP. The WASP young man is the blank canvas in my films. That's the character that for me is easiest to paint, who I can also feel very close to.

**Cinema Canada:** I find that in *Next of Kin* the family is tyrannical. It is demanding. It is imposing a cultural perspective on the daughter. "You're not living my way, I don't want you in my life." The WASP family is tyrannical as well but on a completely different level — the non-communication is more evident.

**Atom Egoyan:** That's right. It's just two differences in human expression and you're very correct in saying that by being very emotional you're being just as silent because that's what that family is about. When I was writing *Family Viewing* and I was dealing with the home movies and I got to the home video tapes, I didn't want to make these people Armenian. I didn't want to do that but something in me said you have to have a separate language there. You have to stress this person's distance. You know, when this man, when this 18-year-old is looking at this image of himself as a child, which is this very potent image, he has to be speaking a language that he doesn't understand any more. That is my logic. That is what I followed the emotional power of. Someone can perceive this and say, 'WASPs fuck up immigrant's lives'. But that has not been my experience, and it is not the experience I wish to give to other people. It's an angry experience and I'm not angry about that. I'm not angry about the way the WASP community has suffocated my personality. It hasn't at all.

**Cinema Canada:** No. I don't see that either but I do see it as a kind of exploration of the expression of cultures that are very different and you do show the differences. For example, the relation between the father and the son in *Family Viewing* is very, very complex.

**Atom Egoyan:** In the conventional commercial film, you have this character, the boy, who's Michael J. Fox — who should be Michael J. Fox — someone

who's immediately attractive. But, of course, this goes against the logic of the situation. If you've been raised with a man like that as your father, you would assume certain of his characteristics, which this boy does. There's no question that he is this man's son. My overriding concern there was not to make him this sympathetic character, not to make him the accessing to the audience but to make him true to this situation.

Now in terms of the ethnicity that we see in the tape, my imperative there was to stress the theme of a lost past. And the most obvious way of doing that was to show a lost culture. I'm not making a statement about that culture and you won't even know what the statement is unless you understood Armenian, and sure enough I've tailored certain aspects of the film for an Armenian audience because there are certain things that are said between the grandmother and the mother, which give us some clues. But it's not in English. You're not expected to get it. I'm glad it's not in English because it's too obvious. I preferred it as...

**Cinema Canada:** *The obviousness is not important. I think for example that having the family history erased by images of the father fucking with his new girlfriend is almost too much but, it's the daring to risk crossing that limit which makes it powerful.*

**Atom Egoyan:** He's seen as this monster but I can say I love that character. I love the complexity of this man who finds that he can only be aroused when he's in the process of physically erasing his past. Putting trivialized images on top of that. He never looks at these. He's never interested in seeing these recorded images. We gather that because the son says so. It's the process he finds stimulating. I found that, 'what an interesting character.' You know.

**Cinema Canada:** *He's not a sympathetic character but I didn't see him as a monster.*

**Atom Egoyan:** I find him quite sympathetic in his own way, you know, because he's suffering, he's suffering from a disease. It's a 20th-century disease and it's something that he has subjected himself to because of some pain that he's gone through. This woman leaving must have been very painful and this is his way of dealing with that. It's the wrong way but it is very common.

**Cinema Canada:** *In both your features and Open House you depict some kind of visual technology of some kind. Could you tell me a little bit about your concern with that as well.*

**Atom Egoyan:** The technology that we have available to us now has tremendous capacity to either trivialize experience or enhance it, depending entirely on how we decide to use it. I'm not condemning it. I'm just very concerned about its misuse. I think that particularly of instruments which enshrine sentiment — a camera, a projector, a slide projector, a videotape monitor, these

are bits of technology which the industry has told us can make memories come alive. To quote one of the actual ads.

That is a very very potent and dramatic device. Make memories come alive. I find that very complex as a notion and I certainly find that as social phenomenon it concerns me. And it ties in very easily with my wider concerns. In terms of why human beings deal with each other in certain ways.

This whole notion of someone going through a very complex process of arriving at a very simple truth, well, when you have the technology to make that complication that much more confounding and when that's set up and when that's placed as a societal weapon or as a societal cure for your alienation, it's obvious to use that as a device in one's films.

**Cinema Canada:** *But in your films it often acts as a release. In Open House you have the slide projector showing the house. In Next of Kin the young man gets to see a videotape which shows another problem family and that ties him into the other family. Which is also a release for him, the acting-out of*

*the character. And in Family Viewing it's a release and an explosion in a way.*

**Atom Egoyan:** I think that basically any artist who's dealing with certain fundamental human emotions has to deal with them in the context of the particular, very specific concerns of the society he's setting the story in, or more specifically, the society in which that artist lives.

I was reading an article the other day which is really appropriate. Apparently they tried to stage this thing in a classroom where they had a video monitor that was doing a live recording of the teacher in the class and they staged this. What happened was that at one point they had two thugs come in and attack or pretend to attack the teacher, right, and then they recorded the class' reaction. Apparently everyone in the class turned to look at this on the monitor. That's their way of dealing with violence. Dealing with an exceptional or a very alienating emotion or something that they didn't... because that makes it more comfortable.

A friend of mine's girlfriend was murdered recently and when I saw the news I couldn't deal with it. I pick up the Sun

and there it was splashed on the second page. And all of a sudden I felt more comfortable with it. 'Oh yes, this is how something like this is actually trivialized.' And the process of trivialization, we come to terms with it you know.

**Cinema Canada:** *It's interesting because in Family Viewing you don't come to terms with it. It isn't so much trivialized as desecrated.*

**Atom Egoyan:** Well, the patriarchy is desecrated. The way that he uses the technology to sustain this patriarchal structure is desecrated. Yes but what also must be addressed is the fact that, as in *Next of Kin*, the boy's way of his entry level, his entry point is through the same technology. So there's an ambiguity there.

**Cinema Canada:** *Family Viewing. I want to ask you how you achieved the visual effects. The images themselves work on several levels. You have the very direct video that you see. And then you have this other video image in the apartment and then you have the film. How did you achieve this, especially the effect in the apartment?*

**Atom Egoyan:** It's the first time I think it's been done. I was only able to do it because of this new technology that was made available. There's a lab here in town, PFA labs, and they make very high-quality kines from video to film. I decided to shoot this entire condominium sequence as if it were a TV show. So I had two cameras I was live-switching like in a TV show. All the editing was made on the spot. We mastered it all onto one-inch tape. Then we transferred that to film. So it actually is a videotape image but it's transferred to film directly.

What I was playing with in the film was setting up a correlation between the idea of generations in the family and generations of images. The common parlance in video is that you talk about first generation, second generation and third generation video and so it's an obvious metaphor for the way the family works in the film. If you were to see the condominium scene as the first generation because it's the highest quality, then you begin to see the home movies as being second generation, they were shot on VHS, which is then transferred to kiney, it's an older generation; then you have the detective and the surveillance stuff which is another generation because it's filmed off a monitor, there's a way of systematically pushing the film in terms of viewing what generation you're seeing at that particular point. It's a very important part of the film.

**Cinema Canada:** *Are you happy with Family Viewing?*

**Atom Egoyan:** I feel confident about *Family Viewing*. When I made the introductory speech at Ottawa I said, 'No more of this hemming and hawing, well-I-don't-know-if-you're-going-to-like-this kind of stuff.' I said, 'I will tell people that I'm proud of this work' because I am. I'm generally proud of it.

## FEATURE FILMS

**Family Viewing** (86 minutes, color) A story of mixed and found identities set in a nursing home, a condominium and a telephone sex establishment. Completed in March, 1987. **Next of Kin** (72 minutes, color) Award-winning feature currently being distributed throughout North America and Europe.

## TELEVISION FILMS

**The Final Twist** (25 minutes, color) Produced for the series "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" by Universal Studios and Paragon Film Productions. Director. 1986.

**In This Corner** (55 minutes, color) 'For The Record' C.B.C. anthology series. Broadcast in February, 1986. Director.

**Open House** (25 minutes, color) Independent production broadcast on "Canadian Reflections" series on the CBC, 1985. Writer and director.

## SHORT FILMS

**Men: A Passion Playground** (7 minutes, color) Independently produced 'poetry video'. Cinematographer, director, and editor. 1985.

**Free to a Good Home** Written for the National Film Board of Canada, 1986. Unproduced.

**Spat** (7 minutes, color) NFB workshop production. Writer. 1984.

**Ceremony and Allegory of the Medieval Hunt** (27 minutes) Educational short produced for the Media Centre, University of Toronto. Producer and director. 1983.

**Peep Show, After Grad With Dad, Howard in Particular** Award-winning student films. Cinematographer, writer, director, editor. 1979-1981.

## THEATRE

**Open Arms** Full-length play produced in Toronto. Winner of the James Buller Award for Best Original Play in the 1984 Multicultural Theatre Festival.

**External Affairs** Full-length play developed at the Tarragon Theatre, Toronto.

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