

# ROUGH CUT

by Robert Rouveroy C.S.C.

Hah! Cruel and unjust punishment was inflicted upon me the last week of September. For unclear reasons I was selected to be the C.S.C. delegate for the adjudicating committee of the Canadian Film Awards. For five days we unworthy specimens of the film industry were subjected to a visual bombardment of the two year output of said Industry. Under the kind tutelage of chairman Gerald Pratley, who is herewith awarded letters of brevêt in diplomacy, patience and intestinal fortitude for bringing us safely through the shoals of bickering, arguments, outright blackmail, self-interest and so forth, we reached the peaceful shallows of coherence and surprising solidarity. Surprising, because despite our diverse interests we are sure that we did our very best and have presented to the final judges the most worthy efforts of our fragile industry.

## Location: Nat Taylor's Screening Room

Two battered projectors and roughly a ton of film. We're all very quiet, suitably impressed by the honour bestowed on us.

Gerald has quickly disabused us of dreams of glory or recognition. We're supposed to do all this pre-judging for the love of it. Impressive red folders are issued, accompanied by tiny flashlights. We have to turn it all in at the end, probably for an auction, as otherwise the Canadian Film Awards might not have enough money. Curtain rises.

## Action

After suffering two reels of a totally disjointed feature movie, parameters are quickly drawn. To avoid heart failure, we will suffer only the first ten minutes silently. Thereafter, by mutual consent, we will garotte the hapless projectionist and move on. So we see **Black Christmas** in part. It rates a polite handclap. **And I Love You Dear-ly** promises a lot of sex but does not

deliver. Mel Blanc's ghost would shudder at the poor imitation of **My Pleasure is My Business**. Xaviera's assets droop sadly but considering the wear and tear and milage are better than you would expect. But why is this movie so strangely sexless?

**The Parasite Murders** was a parasite on our good time, and was quickly strangled. So was **The Mourning Suit**. And then came the first quietly competent movie: **Lions for Breakfast**. One juror even sobbed a little. **Sudden Fury** was very obviously a very low budget picture but we all would've liked to have seen the ending. **Recommendation for Mercy** was the old wham-bam effort with a *cinéma-vérité* effect and only stood out in the quality location recording by Jim McCarthy. Here a technical observation. We either must have received a very bad print, or the original was shot on 7242. Some blow-ups of 16-35mm from 7247 or even 7252 were so incredibly good to be virtually equal to original 35mm film. But in this case the very bad film quality we saw was an important factor in the film not being accepted. We could not bring ourselves to recommend mercy.

**Monkeys in the Attic** gave us a lot of trouble. It made one juror furious. Another found it a masterpiece, and was supported by several others. The rest of us, for various reasons, resented the film. So, in truly Canadian fashion, we evaded a showdown and relegated it to the experimental film category, to be decided upon later. In the end, it sank.

**Eliza's Horoscope** presented the first intelligent use of light as a tool to enhance the story. Most other features show great competence in lighting the set until a satisfactory f-stop is achieved. You know, the old key-fill-back situation. Some experimenting is done, without getting the desired effect, as in **Monkeys**, or **Child under a Leaf**. Even so, **Eliza** was marred because three cameramen were used, and only one (I don't know who) used light as a brush, to create that special something.

By this time fatigue was creeping up. We now has seen most of the features and had come to the 35mm entrys in the other categories. So we suffered a great deal through **The Basement**, among others. It had been a long day.

## Days Two and Three

By this time the ice had definitely been broken. Catcalls and whistles greeted the films thrown at us. We were now paralysed by the endless stream of The Canadian Documentary. It has often been said that this is where the Canadian Filmmaker excels. There is an endless fascination with the affairs of Indians and Eskimos, a collective guilt complex over people badly done by. Regrettably, they're still badly done by these films which are relentlessly boring, pompous and pretentious. By now, we'd moved to the National Film Board premises, downtown Toronto.

However diverse and opinionated we were, there is something in film that is compelling, if it is done by true talent. We began to realize that most of us were chosen to adjudicate not because we are the best in our field, but because the better ones, who were the first choices, were out there making films. But we could not help but recognize that talent when it popped up like a diamond among pebbles. We found also that it had very little to do with money. After all, the CBC and National Film Board have jammed all categories solid with their products and so few ever make it to the finish line. And of those few, many are made with rock bottom budgets. For instance, why should NFB's **Goldwood**, made by Kathleen Shannon touch us so urgently, with its dead simple story, made in a straightforward way? Or **Sable Island**, by Dalhousie University, with, most probably, a miniscule budget. And **Potlatch**, by Dennis Wheeler, or **Cree Hunters of the Mistassini**, the only two "Indian" films in the line-up. The last two films for once did not talk down to us, or to the Indians.

But to see and recognize each of these gems we had to sit and suffer through endless miles of self-abuse epics. Sometimes, unintentionally, we were entertained by a total lack of imagination, like the one that must have cost a bleeding fortune shipping several filmcrews to the dark continent. The culture shock was so great that the filmmakers ended up showing us one crew shooting pictures of the other crew, registered by the third crew.

Deathless prose cluttered up unrelated and poorly shot images in another

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epic. Yet another, made at great expense, panned around China in eleven minute chunks. Another consisted of zooms only.

## A Track

I am thoroughly cured of the zoomlens. Only after seeing 131 documentaries in 3 days am I firmly convinced that the invention of the zoomlens is the work of the devil – or the patron saint of the opticians. Surely the zoom has set filmmaking back about 30 years. I would like to propose a new law for cameramen: That a bit of the budget for the film be set aside so that the cameraman, at the beginning of the shooting day, is allowed to get the zooms of his chest so to speak, whereafter the director will put a firm lock on the zoom barrel for the remainder of the day. Only when the cameraman develops a tick in the eye, or shows his imbalance otherwise, like frothing at the mouth, and only after thorough discussion with the director and after signing in triplicate, will the zoom-barrel be unlocked. For one shot only! Which the smart Director will discard on the cutting room floor.

## B Track

But when the use of the zoom is inevitable in those very rare cases, when it reveals an important part of the story or is the visual counterpart of the exclamation mark, the Director should sit down with the editor for a heart-to-heart talk. He will threaten the editor with mayhem if he dares to cut in the zoom. That goes for the pan too! Only in very exceptional circumstances can such cuts be justified and for all practical purposes these happenstances will come once in a director's lifetime.

## C Track

The problem is that I have been guilty too in the past. I cringe when I have to sit at my rushes. It is most probably an incurable disease or even obsession of all cameramen to swing that zoom handle. But I swear! After suffering these five days of mindbending visual plethora I promise to leave the zoomhandle alone – if I can. May-be taper off, slowly? Please?

## Main Track

We shoved the chairs around late at night at the NFB screening room. We were firmly convinced that the NFB uses all the money they get on making film. They surely have skimmed outrageously on the means of showing them. The projector room has two B & H Filmo-Sounds, those automatic machines that grab the leader out of your hand and chew it up. A feeble light reaches a screen set at the wrong angle, emitting a parody of sound at 50% wow and flutter, through a loud speaker system that buzzily chops off anything under 400 cycles or over 4000 cycles. The projectors are not nailed down: once in a while half the image is cut off because the machine moved. Sometimes the light doublers fail to cut off the other projector, resulting in a double image dimly seen. It reinforced the suspicion that no human is meant to sit through this visual assault and remain sane. The image was often obscured by great wads of film scrapings, hair and dirt. Coffee cups half filled with cigarette butts balanced on the edge of the grime-covered projector pedestals. No janitor must ever have entered this screening room: open filmcans gathered our butts and just sat there, cups crunched on a floor streaked with spilled coffee. A calcified doughnut hid in the recesses of my seat. But what the hell.

## Composite

The last day was spent (foolishly, as it was a brilliant Sunday) in undergoing psychic surgery in Experimental films. Out of a murky pool of impressions sprang a Joyce Borenstein film, **Revisited**, that soothed a punished eye-ball and proved to everyone's satisfaction that you don't have to be demented to make experimental films.

The Adjudicating Board broke up late that night. To our vast surprise the system worked. In the end, there was very little disagreement on the outcome. Out of the monumental mass of garbage we had chosen the best of the Canadian Films. For some reason, talent does rise above the morass and is quickly recognized. It does show immediately, in the first reel, in the first minute. And money or big budgets don't help much, if at all. If it is there it shows, that's all. And so we hardly ever compromised and then only in those cases where it was a toss-up.

It is probably impossible to define talent. Or Art for that matter. Maybe it is easier to define what it is not. And so I offer you my views in the form of 'do's and don't's' for the filmmaker who intends to submit his films to a Festival. Here they are.

## Slash Print

- Film is a business. Its first responsibility is to entertain. If you can't get people to sit down and look at it, you've failed.

- Don't do everything yourself. If you are a cameraman/director/editor/soundman/producer/scriptwriter all rolled up into one, you'll end up in self-abuse. If you haven't learned to please others, how can you end up pleasing yourself? Do you really think that you have the nerve to throw out a scene you shot yourself hanging upside down by one toe from a helicopter? Film might be the only "art" form that gains strength from the contributions of many talented people.

- Don't ever use four minutes of titles and credits on a six minute film.

- Don't ever talk down to people or issues.

- Don't use words to explain what's happening on the screen.

- Don't use words to tell us something that has nothing to do with visuals.

- Don't presume we know what you're talking about. It might be clear to you. But you have to make it clear to us first.

- Get to your point in the first frame and never let go. Otherwise you'll never get a chance to show your last reel.

- Don't fall victim to Parkinson's Law: that time and space exist solely for the purpose of filling it up. There are very few films that would not be vastly improved by drastic cutting. Have a crash course in commercial watching. Yes, commercials. It is incredible what vast amounts of storytelling go into the one minute commercial. Or even the 30 second ones.

- Learn at least the fundamentals of filmmaking. Look at what Eisenstein does, without a zoom lens or panhead.

- Find yourself a good editor and offer him frankincense and myrrh on suitable occasions. He's your ace-in-the-hole.

- Don't bore us. You can be dead serious without boring, but if you bore, you're dead.

- Don't be afraid to make us giggle. Outright laughing in a Canadian film

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is too much to ask. This happened just once with our adjudicating committee. The film was called **Voodoo**. Never made it because it was a sexual joke and it is well known that Canadians only procreate by cloning.

• However, if you really feel strongly that you'd like to make a sexy film, please include a make-up person in your budget. Acne on a girl's or guy's behind is a definite no-no. Some films looked like medical case-histories.

• And above all, to make sure you have a failure, call Art in.

If imitation is the greatest compliment, good old Ingmar Bergman must be the biggest fat-head in the world. Please leave the good man alone. Don't you worry, if Art is around he'll show up. Time and time again, we found Art popping up here and there unexpectedly in little films and big ones. Art has to do with unpretentiousness, honesty, modesty and all other kinds of values that so utterly escape the average filmmaker.

Art will come to those films that entertain you first of all. Art and Entertainment are not always synonymous but if you can't get the audience's attention, you can't make an artful film.

So now, up to Niagara-on-the-Lake for the finals.

### Answerprint

Day after day the poor jury has sweated through the meager wares we have presented them: feast and famine follow each other inexorably like the Chinese water torture. We understand when on Sunday they blindly lash out and refuse to award the coveted Etrog to the Experimental category. The Wendy Michener award is likewise denied and for good reason. We fidget, 800 strong, in our fancy seats at the Shaw theatre to see **Les ordres** walk away with 3 awards. It is little known that the adjudicating committee has not even seen the film. We let the film through on the basis that a few of us had heard a lot about it, some even professed to have seen it. To tell you the truth, the same thing happened to **Duddy** and **Why Rock the Boat?** Even **Janis** was not seen at all, but all of them were passed because we had heard about them.

Everyone in that theatre is hungry; the elaborate tent out on the lawn promises to give an excellent repast to sooth the disappointments and hurt feelings. Alas, we are fed swill. Even

the dinner is somehow reminiscent of how films are made. Lots of glitter and very little sustenance. But auld acquaintances are renewed and fresh ones are added. It does not often happen that the filmmakers meet each other to commiserate on the failing market. Off in a corner I meet Kathleen Shannon of the NFB who did the beautiful **Goldwood**. This film made it to the finals and was distinguished by the fact that it was the only one that the adjudicating committee did see in its entirety. I congratulate her but she draws a bead right between my eyes: it seems she's rather upset with some rather inane comments I've made on these pages a while back regarding the similarities between cameras and women in general. I admit fault, be it rather reluctantly and we part company, not as friendly enemies, rather as violent friends. Ravenously hungry after this encounter I attack the less than groaning tables anew, blandly assuring the unbelieving waitress that my unfinished plate was snatched away by someone when I wasn't looking. I see Henry Fiks who did the beautiful cinematography on **Monkeys in the Attic**. He assures me he didn't understand the story either, so don't feel bad if you can't make head or tail of it.

Ken Gregg CSC simply *glows* with very good reason. His Etrog for lensing in the non-theatrical category is well deserved. It's a pity that Sid Adilman of the *Toronto Star* does not feel that the cameraman is too important: neither Ken nor Paul Van Der Linden, who did the exquisite photography on **Eliza's Horoscope** is even mentioned in his Monday reportage. After all, we're only technicians, right? Henry is rather fed up with the Canadian Film scene. It's disheartening when one of our best cameramen has to decline jobs for the CBC who in this day and age still persist in offering seventy-two dollars for a ten-hour day to free-lancers. Richard Leiterman also has had it. He sold his house and will shortly take off to friendlier places. John Foster has done a grand total of eight days for the CBC this year, he now is doing very much better for the American market. Yes Virginia, there is a depression going on in the filmworld and the mood at this Festival is grim indeed. Yet, there is a heartening sign though. The new generation of cinematographers has a few outstanding people coming up. Like Mark Irwin who left school not so very long ago and is already lensing some very good film.

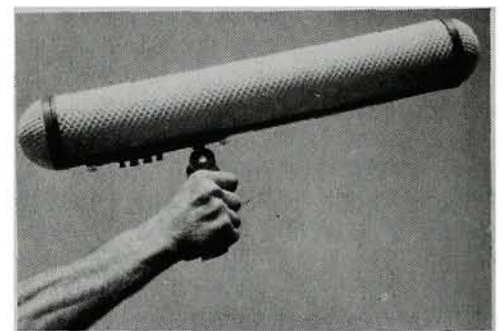
**The Understudy** was in the finals, and I hear he was breathing down Ken Gregg's back. An apology is in order. Some time back I had Mark as a camera assistant and I fear I was a bit condescending to him, young guy and all that, and I tried to impart some kernels of hard-won wisdom to him. I positively hate to admit it, but he taught me a good lesson with his **Understudy**.

### Trailer

And that, really, sums it all up. It looks like I learned a great deal myself from being involved in this particular Festival. I thank the organizers for giving me the chance to accept with equanimity the swift kicks in the ass to cure me from complacency and conceit. As sure as there is a Great Gaffer in the Sky I will conduct myself with kindness and humility on my next job, always aware that there is a young s.o.b. waiting in the wings to do better. That is, if I forget myself and start zooming again. □

(continued from p. 19)

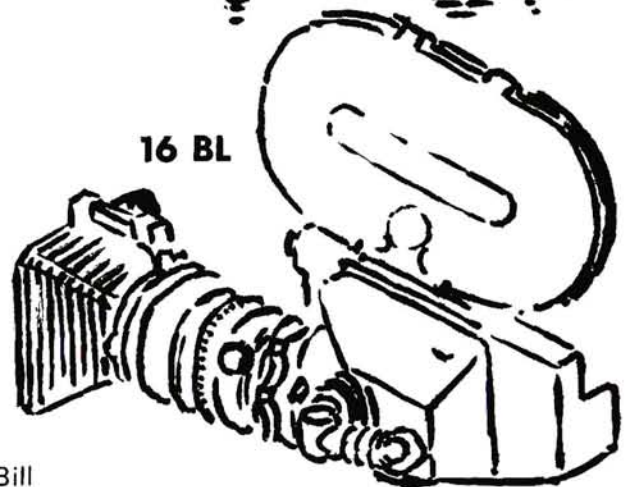
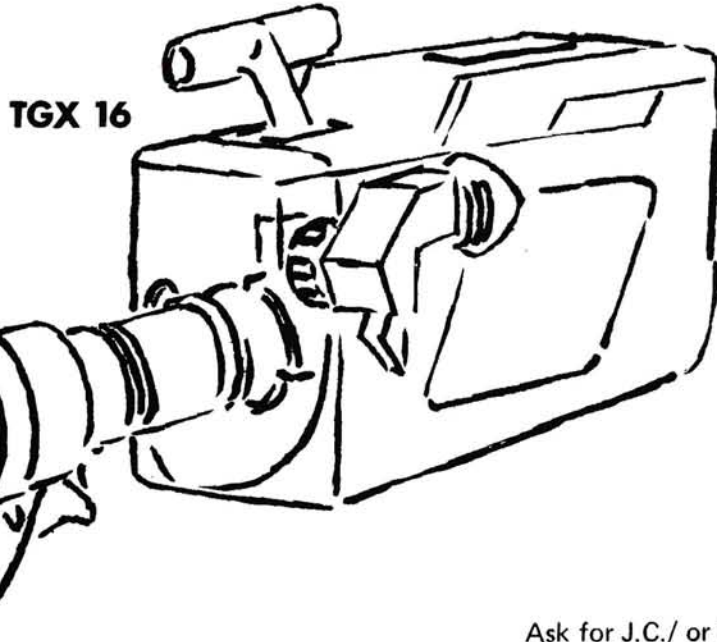
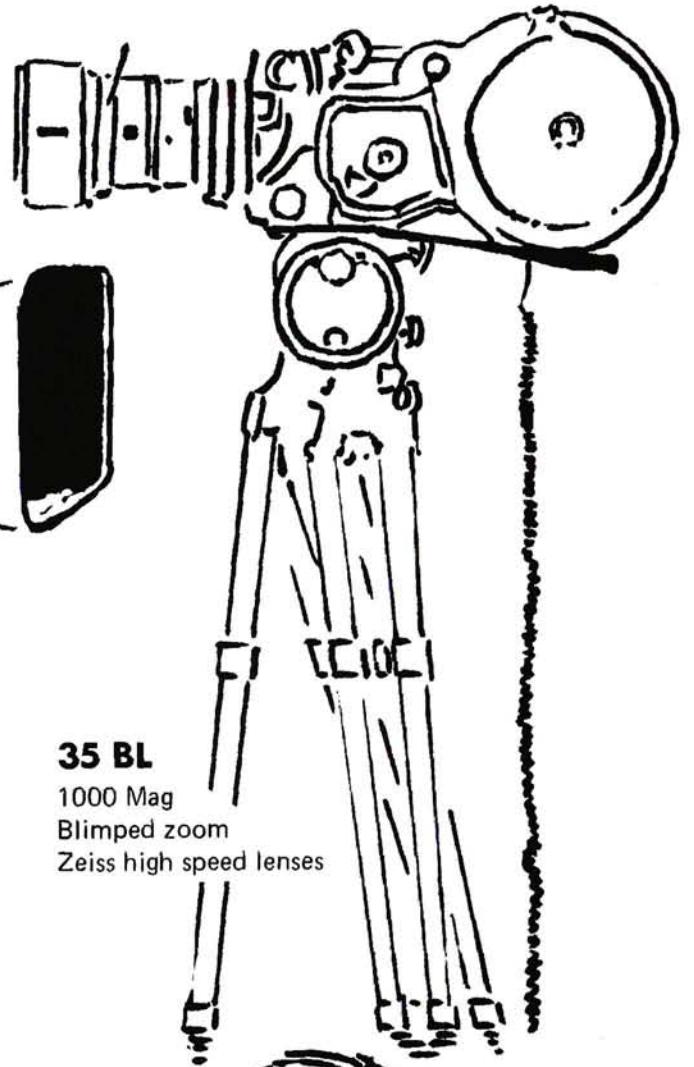
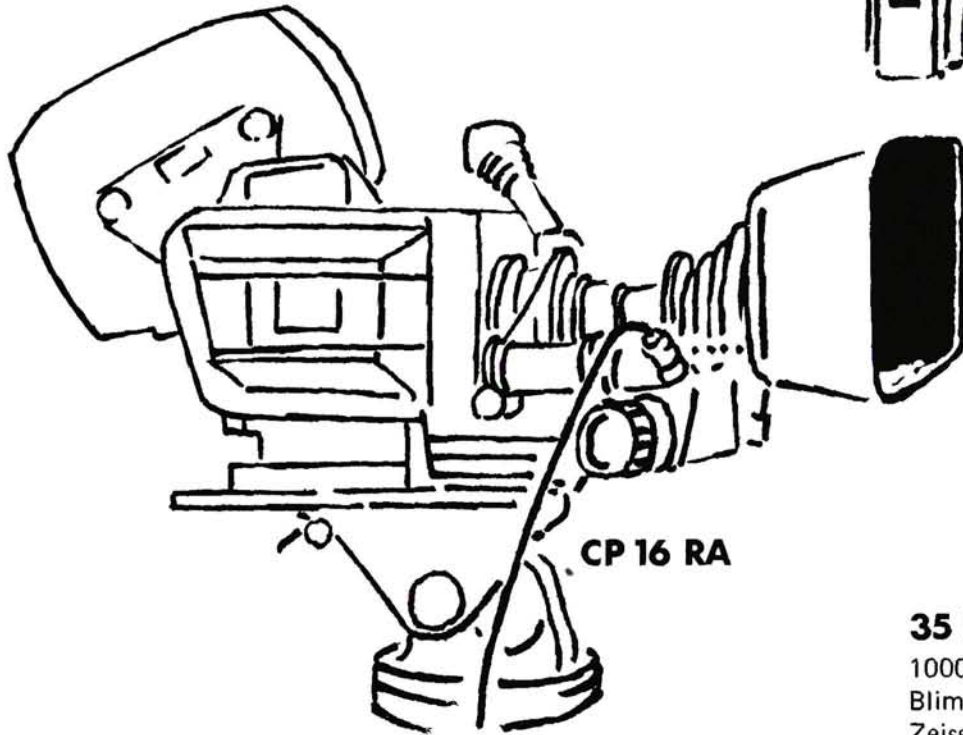
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