

Ilsa: born in Montreal



A friend directed me to Paul Corupe's compelling history in *Take One* magazine on Montreal's connection to some of the planet's most radical movie mayhem and exploitation flicks. So I rang up the man responsible for much of it, 70-something John Dunning of Dorval.

The soft-spoken Dunning reports that he's a product of film-pioneer lineage. In 1906, John's dad, S.J. (Samuel John) Dunning returned to Verdun from New York peddling celluloid footage of the San Francisco earthquake. "He'd run around and put up a tent. He had these eight minutes of film and eventually he was able to build a theatre on 726 Church [aka de l'Eglise]," says John.

S.J. opened another theatre on 5th Avenue in Verdun and one at Monk and Briand, which a young John managed. "It was tough," says Dunning. "You had two steel mills and a tavern on the corner and some guys would come there full of beer and if they didn't like the film they'd cut the seats. I used to shudder every time we played a women's film."

Those under 16 were banned due to laws inspired by the Laurier Cinema fire of 1927. "My father didn't believe in that law. It was a provincial law so the local police didn't enforce it. But the church monitored the morals of the citizens, so the films were always cut to bits."

John wanted to be a doctor—"too many Dr. Kildare movies, I guess"—and was 17 and studying at McGill when his father died. He quit to take over the movie houses.

TV progressively diminished profits, so Dunning rented his theatres to production crews and eventually started making movies with Hungarian-born film distributor André Link.

The duo scored quick success with some sexy French-language efforts as well as Dunning's favourite, the romantic comedy *Loving and Laughing*. The flick contained a sex scene shot illegally atop of Percé Rock. Crew members were jailed in Vermont on suspicions of shooting an anti-Vietnam-war film.

In the '70s came *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS*, scripted by a hyper-imaginative Toronto English professor. The murderous Ilsa—who Dunning claims is the "first real female film villain"—has a habit of castrating men unable to satisfy her. Ilsa also chows down at a feast while a woman perches on ice with a noose around her neck, with predictable results.

"In those days it was about survival, whatever you could do to bring people into the theatre," says Dunning of the exploitation flick. "The violence is separated from the sex. We were very careful about that."

Ilsa earned money. "In New York, on 42nd street, people would shout and holler and talk in German accents at her," says Dunning. "In Belgium it ran for a year because it was banned in Germany, so Germans came there to see it."

Dunning produced two Ilsa sequels, including the tamer Montreal-shot *Ilsa: Tigress of Siberia*. "We were trying to legitimize her because we got a review in the *Washington Post* comparing Ilsa to James Bond."

Also slated was *Ilsa Meets Bruce Lee in the Devil's Triangle*. "We had Bruce Lee's widow onboard. He was going to show up as a ghost and set things right." It was never shot, nor was *Ilsa: She Devil of the Mao Mao*, inspired by Idi Amin. "We got distracted and got into something else, but I still have the tentative scripts."

Paydays and acclaim came with other projects, including *Meatballs* and some Cronenberg flicks, but Dunning pondered following other talent to Hollywood. "We had no reason to move. I like this town and our experience with the major studios wasn't horrific, but it wasn't very good."

Dunning is now penning the last chapters of his autobiography and promises a sequel to the slasher classic *My Bloody Valentine*, which will include eight minutes of crucial gore that censors sliced from the original.

He "sometimes" regrets not becoming a doctor. "But you do what you have to do," and apparently it paid off.

"But somebody said that what'll be written on my tombstone is: 'This was the producer of Ilsa.'" ■

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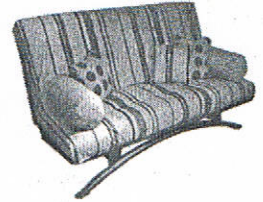
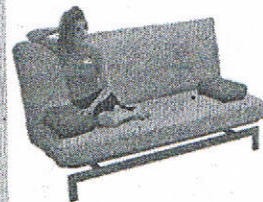
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