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Veteran filmmaker determined to make Canadians laugh

By DANE LANKEN
of The Gazette

"The disappointing thing about making a comedy in Canada," says Larry Kent, "is that it can't win prizes. There's something in the Canadian psyche that says don't be frivolous.

"It's not that we lack humor. It's that we don't want to let it out. I'm not

even hoping for a Canadian Film Award."

Larry Kent, the Canadian filmmaker, was talking about his new film, a comedy entitled *Keep It in the Family*. People who know say that the movie is funny, and with John Gavin starring, it ought to be a major hit.

But Kent is apprehensive.

"The problem," he says, "is that we come from a documentary tradition, and not only that but a National Film Board documentary tradition.

"Look at an NFB film and you see John Grierson, a Scots Presbyterian. The mood of Montreal, of most of Canada, is Scots Presbyterian. Their marriage has produced a repressed, non-joyous, earnest cinema.

EXPRESSES

"We are really frightened of comedy, of larger-than-life characters, of anything that expresses some lifeblood."

Though he recognizes that without the Film Board, Canada would likely have no tradition in film at all, Kent thinks it's time we broke out of the serious mood we've been in for so long.

"I think *Keep It in the Family* is the first real comedy in Canada, at least on the English side," Kent said. "Any other Canadian comedies have had serious subjects and downbeat endings.

"But this is real comedy. Everything works out in the end. It's a celebration of life — which is what comedy should be.

"You know, if you consider the *Nouvelle Vague* in France, what they did is they broke out of the tremendous professionalism of the classic French cinema and created something new and fresh.

"We've got to break out of Scots Presbyterianism. We've got to celebrate. Art is a celebration."

Kent sees the effects of NFB reserve everywhere.

SUCCESSFUL

"It's in the CBC, in its lack of stars. Look at all the Canadians who are successful in television in the U.S. Artists leave Canada, they break out, they're free. Peter Cullen is funnier in the U.S. than he ever was in Canada.

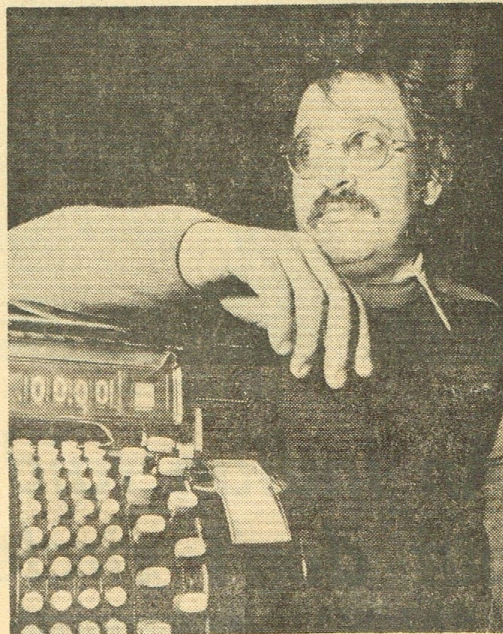
"The NFB has produced great cameramen, but in the tradition of film lyricism. What you end up with is filmmakers who rely on the camera, and that becomes self-indulgent and you end up with boring movies.

"That's just as true on the French side as it is among English-language film makers."

Despite whatever limitations Canadians have placed on their artistic development, Kent is the first to admit that the film industry here has undergone tremendous changes.

And he ought to know, because he is both a founding father and regular contributor to the feature industry here.

Kent, born Lawrence Lionel Kent in Johannesburg, South Africa, 33 years ago, took off as a young man "to see the world" and ended up in Vancouver. There, he worked his way through UBC as a composer for the Vancouver



(Gazette, Garth Pritchard)

Larry Kent . . . apprehensive

Sun and managed to save enough pennies to make his first movie.

PROOF

The film was *Bitter Ash*, and while it won no prizes, it did prove that someone working in Canada could make a feature film on his own and get people to look at it, something virtually unheard of at the time, 1963.

Kent followed with *Sweet Substitute*, which did win prizes including a Special Jury Award at the 1965 Montreal International Film Festival, and *When Tomorrow Dies*, which won more prizes.

In 1967, he moved to Montreal and made more features including *High, Facade* and *Fleur Bleue*. He also (believe it or not) spent a year or two with the NFB and directed two short subjects.

Today, Kent, who sports a mustache and round steel-rimmed glasses and lives with his wife and two children in TMR, is awaiting the release of *Keep It in the Family* — it opens next week at the cinema in Westmount Square — and working on his next film, another comedy tentatively entitled *Jealousy*.

"It's amazing what has happened to the feature industry in Canada," he says. "It's become a competitive, healthy thing.

FUNDING

"There's money around now, you see, and private funding is absolutely necessary. You still need the government; I think the CFDC is great.

"A few years ago, before the CFDC, \$50,000 was a big-budget film. *Keep It in the Family* cost half a million, with a loan from the CFDC.

"I also like that \$100,000 grant system for young filmmakers. I only wish it had been around when I was starting.

"These young filmmakers coming up, they bring a tremendous amount of vitality into the industry. Though I've

noticed," he adds, "that the guys who are making the really good films are the ones who have been around for years."

"And another thing," Kent says, "is that there are producers now, knowledgeable film people who don't want to be directors. They just give support to the filmmakers.

"That's what I like about Cinepix (the Montreal outfit that produced *Keep It in the Family*). Support. Now I understand what a producer is. They used to be only something that got in the way."

CHANGES

If Kent has seen changes in the industry, he has also noticed shifts in his own outlook.

"Sure," he says. "When I started I was very big on Bergman and Fellini. Now I'm a great admirer of American movies. Martin Ritt's *Hud*, or Robert Rossen's *The Hustler*. Or *The Godfather* — to blend story and camerawork and action into a three-hour gripping experience is a phenomenal achievement."

Admiring as he is of that dramatic achievement, Kent nonetheless decided to make a comedy.

"It's very challenging to do comedy," he says. "It's much more difficult than drama. It's much easier to make people cry than laugh.

"The timing is so important, you've got to be specifically aware of what you're doing at all times. I've got a fantastic amount of experience. I feel confident as a filmmaker. But I was certainly learning things while making *Keep It in the Family*.

"John Gavin was very good," he adds. "We were looking for a Cary Grant type for the part and he was the closest we could find. He's a very good comic, very professional.

"It all worked out very well."