

# MACLEAN'S

## REVIEWS

## FILMS

## Ottawa gambled some of our money on a naughty film—and won

BY KASPARS DZEGUZE

LATE IN THE SUMMER of 1968 a leather-jacketed hood drove his motorcycle into a Montreal convent school and emerged minutes later with a pretty blonde named Valérie perched on the back seat, riding away for ever through the convent's front gate. With her she carried the fortunes of Cinepix, a small Montreal film distributor-turned producer. *Valérie* was what's known in the trade as a "sexploitation" film. It was Cinepix's first production, and it could hardly have been a more spectacular beginning.

The film opened on May 2, 1969, at the Parisien theatre, in the shadow of Montreal's Place Ville Marie, and earned \$40,000 at the box office in its first week. After 20 weeks in Montreal and engagements in about 125 theatres throughout Quebec, it had grossed more than \$500,000. In Beauharnois and a half dozen other small towns attendance exceeded the population. A dubbed English-language version played in theatres across Canada, bringing its gross Canadian earnings to \$1,250,000. Not bad for a film that cost \$85,000 to make.

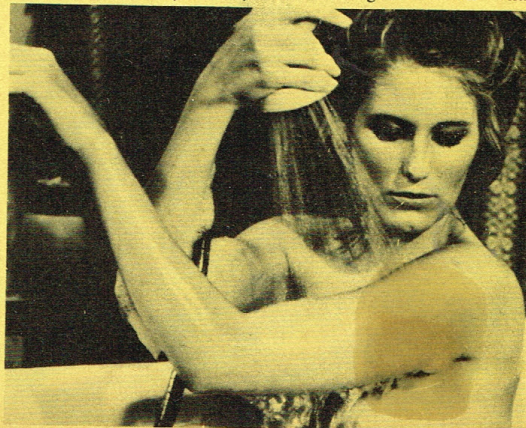
But *Valérie* was just that — the beginning. In the last year Cinepix has become one of the most profitable film-production businesses in the country. *Valérie* has been distributed in 26 countries (in Paris 25,000 people saw the film within 15 days of its opening). It will be shown in Hong Kong and Singapore. It was the first Canadian film purchased in Finland and Yugoslavia. And Cinepix has since produced three more just like it, with a little financial help from the federal government's Canadian Film

Development Corporation.

*L'Initiation*, the company's second film, went before the cameras in September, 1969, and cost about \$200,000. It opened at the Parisien on January 28 and in the first week grossed \$60,000 (the same week, the widely advertised Swedish film *I Am Curious, Yellow* was playing in a Toronto theatre of comparable size and grossed \$48,000). Receipts from *L'Initiation* have been running between 30% to 50% higher than *Valérie*.

*L'Initiation* has already repaid the Film Development Corporation its investment. The CFDC now awaits its share of the profits (its first on any Canadian film in which it has invested), which are to be taken from the film's future earnings.

The government corporation's association with Cinepix has outraged some. CBC film critic Gerald Pratley, who saw the company's third film — the as yet unreleased *Love In A 4-Letter World* — at a commercial showing in Cannes, sounded off in the showbusiness weekly, *Variety*:



Danielle Ouimet as Valérie — \$1,250,000 from an \$85,000 film

"If the argument is that films like *Love In A 4-Letter World* will be a good investment and the taxpayers' money will not be lost, then a case could be made for public financing of prostitution." CFDC director Michael Spencer says, in reply, that "the CFDC does not take a moral position on the proposals submitted for consideration. Nevertheless, one of the conditions of participation is that the film be acceptable to the board of censors of at least one province [both *Valérie* and *L'Initiation* were passed without cuts in Quebec, although censors in other provinces demanded changes]. Anyone trying to put money into films must realize that films are going in one direction: sex."

John Dunning, easygoing president of Cinepix, crosses his legs on the desk of his office in the company's squat one-story headquarters in suburban Montreal. He is unruffled. A distributor since 1962 of primarily foreign films, many of them sexy, Dunning has felt for some time that he knows what will sell. But it wasn't until he met Denis Heroux, the 20th would-be feature-film maker to lay a project before Dunning and his affable French-Canadian vice-president Andre Link, that he felt "this was a sensible idea from a fellow who was ready to take guidance on what

sort of film to make."

Heroux's script for *Valérie* was written on "tissue paper, often in the back seats of taxicabs or at hurried conferences in restaurants." That ride through the convent gate plunges the film's young heroine into a fleshy sexual jungle of topless go-go dancing, lesbianism and prostitution before she regains the man she loves in a sloppy, moralistic ending.

"We felt we had a formula with *Valérie*," says Dunning. "It's necessary to look for a story that could happen in any country in the world. If you put jokes in about your mayor, the guy from Japan isn't going to buy it."

But Heroux, who also directed *L'Initiation*, has given up sexploitation films. "I think sex is finished in Quebec," he says, "although Cinepix will probably go on making this type of film." Even Danielle Ouimet, who stars in both *Valérie* and *L'Initiation*, thinks there will be a change in the public's taste. "People aren't going to be interested in seeing sex much longer. Cinepix should get into funny films."

Dunning is receptive to the comedy idea. "If M\*A\*S\*H can conquer Cannes — Z won last year — then the public taste is changing. Obviously the satirical sex-comedy with an anti-establishment flavor is in favor."

Cinepix will start production on two more films, one French, one English, this month. Dunning has succeeded in arranging American distribution next month for Cinepix productions through Allied Artists. He smiles when he recalls that the offices in which he can now so casually prop his feet used to belong to 20th Century-Fox, which recently cut back on its real-estate holdings in Canada and the United States. And, as if his daydreams weren't pleasant enough, Dunning confides that his night dreams are equally placid. "I have no guilt pangs," he says. "I sleep well." □