

Saturday Night

November 1970

50 cents



“My kids can read, and if they didn’t know before they will know now that I have smoked marijuana. I also think they have the brains to infer why I have stopped.”

MY FIVE MARIJUANA PROBLEMS, by Peter Gzowski

“Here is a very modern mayor, his mastery of the arts of communications disguising the fact that he is a most mediocre leader of Canada’s third largest city, Vancouver. Illusion triumphs over reality.”



THE SYMBOLIC POLITICS OF TOM CAMPBELL, by Allan Fotheringham



“Mrs. John Milton, Mrs. Shakespeare, Mrs. Dostoevsky, Mrs. Tolstoy, Mrs. Hemingway? Meet Mrs. Berton. You have so very much in common.”

PIERRE BERTON AND THE CPR, by Harry Bruce

“Dunning says the first thing that any film industry requires is an audience, and it doesn’t matter if you have to stoop to conquer it. You can reach up later.”



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Wouldn't you know that the first Canadian to
make money making movies would turn out to be
THE WALT DISNEY OF SEXPLOITATION



By Peter Desbarats

UP IN MONTREAL'S Waspish Westmount, in a huge white mansion that used to belong to the head of Power Corporation, some cameramen, soundmen, and actors have been making a movie called *It Ain't Easy*. The actors are, for the most part, naked. *It Ain't Easy* has a bit of a plot, a modest budget of \$300,000, and a great deal of bare skin.

When *It Ain't Easy* is released, Canadian critics will shake their heads sadly, count up all the breast shots, and yell "sexploitation." The Canadian public will ignore the critics and pack into theatres showing *Easy*, just as it did for *Valérie*, *l'Initiation*, and *Love in a Four Letter Word* — all films produced and distributed by Cinepix Ltd., of Montreal. Cinepix has shown that it is easy to be a successful Canadian filmmaker — the formula is sex equals audience.

The man who has thus put Canadian movies into the black for the first time is a forty-two-year-old Montrealer, John Dunning, who has been in the film industry, euphemistically speaking, since 1943. That year he inherited four small movie houses from his father; but by the end of the 1950s two of the theatres were television studios and Dunning was clinging to the industry by his fingernails as a director of a small French-language film house existing mainly on TV commercials. In 1962, he started a film distributing company, Cinepix, in the attic of one of his father's old theatres.

In 1968, *Valérie* took her clothes off, again and again, and Dunning simply took off. Today he's well on his way to becoming Canada's first authentic movie mogul. Which means, so far, that he's grown a beard, that it's greying rapidly and that nowadays he rarely gets home for dinner.

Listening to Dunning explain what has happened is like listening to Roy Thomson describe how he started out in the newspaper business. It all sounds so simple that you wonder why everyone isn't coining money out of Canadian movies these days, and why everyone used to say it couldn't be done.

Here's Dunning's version:

At some point in the late 1960s, he started to look at some of the European films he was distributing in Canada, particularly the ones that were making money. Two things struck him about these money-makers: some were lousy and all were sexy. He decided that lousiness had little to do with it. Canadian filmmakers had experimented widely in that area and none of them

had made any money. That left only one conclusion, and Dunning proceeded to act on it.

That's all.

IT DOESN'T SOUND very exciting, described like that, but in fact it was a revolutionary way of looking at Canadian film. It was in total opposition to the National Film Board philosophy of art-above-money.

People at the Board will tell you that they have nothing against commercial success and that they would love to see an NFB film rake it in at the box office. But the fact is, it almost never happens; and another fact, which is becoming apparent to more and more people, is that the Film Board mentality has affected every filmmaker in this country since it was imported from England in the 1940s — even the few filmmakers who managed to survive without working for the Board. As a result, there always seemed to be something *wrong* with Canadian films, whether they were produced by the Board or outside (with the usual exception of our sterling documentaries). Even rebels like Larry Kent and Don Owen, spreading psychedelia, skin and adolescent conflict across the screen, couldn't seem to throw off the influence, couldn't seem to forget about those astringent audiences in the screening rooms of the Board. Their films were sensations among Canadian filmmakers . . . but that isn't a very large cash audience.

A childhood of selling popcorn and taking tickets in his father's theatres in Ville Emard and Verdun guaranteed that John Dunning would never have a Board's-eye view of the Canadian film industry. As luck would have it, at the very moment that he perceived the success formula of his imported European films, he fell in with Denis Héroux.

Héroux was another maverick. After breezing through the usual course — lecturing in Canadian history at Collège Ste-Marie, writing a book and producing documentaries for Radio-Canada with titles like "I Wonder Where the English Went?" — twenty-eight-year-old Héroux was ready to blow his cork. He was ripe for Dunning's proposal that now was the time to make a Canadian film that would be truly unique.

Héroux' film about a convent-bred orphan who ends up as a prostitute in the big city broke every rule in the NFB book. The usual film crowd in Canada, both French and English, couldn't laugh hard enough. The plot was banal. The camera work was undistinguished. The cast, led by a former Miss Province of Quebec,

was an incredible assortment of old standbys. For many of Montreal's "in" set, watching *Valérie* was like spending an evening in a favourite bar or discotheque. Sooner or later, you ran into almost everyone you knew. ("Look, there's Jean-Pierre . . . I didn't know he had a mole on his . . .")

That was the initial reaction. But since then, *Valérie* has made a lot of money. She was shot in six weeks in 1968 at a cost of \$85,000, and she's since grossed almost \$1.5 million (Dunning's figure) in twenty-nine countries. And, as many girls before her have discovered, money *does* buy a lot of things, including respectability.

Dunning had little trouble rounding up \$200,000 — some of it from the new Canadian Film Development Corporation — for the sequel, which was entitled *Initiation* but which everyone called "Valérie Deux" or "Daughter of Val." Everyone also said that it was even worse than *Valérie* but it grossed \$100,000 in Montreal in its first four weeks. *Initiation* now has the distinction of being the first film not only to pay back the Canadian Film Development Corporation but to start earning money for it, which is the way the CFDC is supposed to work (for the information of all those who have been raising Cain about using taxpayer's money to subsidize dirty movies).

Dunning's third venture, *Love in a Four Letter World*, also received CFDC funds and also will pay them back, having opened in Montreal this summer in French and English to *Valérie*-size audiences. Of course the critics loathed it.

Denis Héroux now is finishing off his third sexpic, to be called *Awakening* in its English version. (All Cinepix productions are released as a matter of course with dubbed-in French and English sound tracks.) Another director, Roger Fournier, is shooting something called *Heads or Tails* while Arthur Voronka is completing his second Cinepix co-production, *It Ain't Easy*, which is about a Westmount lad who joins a hippie commune. It was scripted by Martin Bronstein, a former CBC comedy writer who spent the past summer on another Cinepix project: editing 50 minutes of made-in-Montreal sex scenes into a French film entitled *Comment les Séduire* (How to Seduce Them), translating it and issuing it as another Dunning special called, of all things, *The Feminists*.

IT ALL SOUNDS PRETTY CALCULATED, and it is. Which is why Dunning reacts strongly to accusations — about every few minutes — that he is a smut-peddler. He knows exactly what he is doing, and it's not that.

"We're not making these for the salesman trade, the afternoon business," he said. "These are adult films for both sexes. You don't find women manacled to the wall and that kind of thing. There's sensitivity toward women in these films because they're geared toward a mixed audience.

"I mean, compared with the stuff that's being shown in the States now, we're the Walt Disney of adult entertainment."

He turned on a critic recently and demanded, "What kind of films do you want me to make anyway? You can't make situation comedies now, or Lana Turner domestic situations, or even Westerns, unless there's a lot of brutality. People can watch those on television. Theatres have to offer something that you can't get on

television. So what kind of films do you want me to make?"

Dunning knows the answer to a decimal point, as Arthur Voronka discovered when he approached Dunning with the script for *Love*. For more than a year, Voronka and a writer, John Sone, had been undergoing the familiar Canadian experience of trying, without success, to find backers for their film. The problem was that Voronka, after twenty years in Canada as a set designer, director and successful producer of plays, film documentaries and television commercials, had never produced a commercially successful feature film. The absence of a real industry in Canada had prevented him from establishing any sort of track record. When he reached Dunning, the Cinepix president stated his requirements with the precision of a computer. The ratio of sex scenes to the full running time was figured to the second. The types of sexual relationships to be filmed were specified with Masters-and-Johnson accuracy. Voronka admits that the final script bore little resemblance to the original, but Dunning delivered what he had promised: an audience. And when Voronka wanted to start a second picture right away, the money was there.

"The theatre owners and distributors had faith in us," said Voronka. "They knew that we knew what a commercial commodity was. And what does that mean? It means that this time I have a crew of thirty-five and more than a hundred actors and it means that last week we were shooting helicopter footage in the Gaspé, beautiful stuff."

According to Dunning, the National Film Board has always had things ass-backwards. He says that the first thing that any film industry requires is an audience, and it doesn't matter if you have to stoop to conquer it. You can reach up later. Maybe he's right. Maybe *Valérie* — the little prostitute who started it all — will eventually be recognized as the true mother of Canada's film industry. Perhaps in some far-off time our best filmmakers will be awarded little gold figurines of *Valérie*. She will, of course, be shown naked. ★

