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DEAN WALKER'S

cinema report

Keep sex 'happy' is secret of successful feature film making

NOT EVERYBODY has noticed it yet but Canada finally has a feature film company that is making boodles of money.

Why, then, are the Canadian Council, the actors' union, the CBC, and our serried ranks of cultural Poohbahs not springing up and down in excitement? Because they do not like the main reason for the company's outstanding success: the fact that its movies offer lots and lots and lots of shapey bare bosoms and backsides for the admiration and appreciation of enthusiasts of all sexes. But it's surely a splendid change of pace for those who had always thought that Canadian culture in films had to include Indian sundances, icebreakers and long scenes of outdoorsmen staring into the distance. The development offers warmth in a long winter.

The winning producer-cum-distributor is Cinepix of Montreal; and the money it has made on its movies so far will make every Canadian producer want to tear the clothes off every performer he puts before a camera.

Cinepix was founded by John Dunning in 1962 to distribute European films in Canada. Dunning's parents had once owned Montreal movie houses; and he was soon joined by André Link. Cinepix distributed the award-winning *Z* among other big successes and eventually the company started putting some of its profits back into foreign movie production. Then, as Dunning told Betty Lee of Toronto's *The Globe and Mail*, because a distributor gets to see thousands of films and learns which ones make money and which don't, "you begin to wonder why you can't make stuff that is just as good".

In 1968 Cinepix decided to try. It put up \$85,000 to produce *Valerie*, the story of a call girl. Dunning presumed he would lose money on it



A scene from *Love in a 4-Letter World*, a "happy sex" film that is making happy producers.

because Canadian feature films have always lost money, but in the two years since it has earned ten times its original investment.

There certainly seemed no harm in trying again. This time Cinepix received a loan from the Canadian Film Development Corporation and made *L'Initiation* about how a good-looking eighteen-year-old girl approaches the problems — or challenge or delights — of giving up her virginity. That film cost \$300,000 and within a year the CFDC had received back its investments and was earning its very first profits.

I admire the CFDC for putting money into such movies because it surely knew that some backbencher would eventually huff and puff and splutter about the government getting into the skinflick business. It put up more money for Cinepix' third feature, *Love in a Four-Letter World*.

By this stage, money was rolling in and Cinepix quickly got three

more movies in front of the cameras: *The Awakening*, *Heads or Tails*, and *It Ain't Easy*. *The Awakening* concerns the sex life of a former priest and a former nun and, just to make sure all bases are covered, also involves a transvestite who is married to a lesbian. Dunning explains straight-faced: "She only enjoys making love to him when he wears women's clothes".

Stay above navel

By this stage Cinepix had started shooting alternative versions of its films: scenes for the Quebec market show nude actors and actresses in full-length shots. Versions for fussier markets stay carefully above the navel.

Cinepix also now puts money into other producers' efforts providing they have similar box office assets. The stars of one, *Deux Femmes en Or* from Heroux Films, are described splendidly by Sandy Ross in his *Financial Post* column:

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"Yes, they are just a couple of typical, wholesome, beautiful, voluptuous, sex-crazed suburban Montreal housewives. One strips for the man from the Bell who comes to repair the Princess telephone. The other seduces the man who comes to wash the rugs, amid a glorious thigh-deep flurry of carpet-cleaning foam. Together, they rip the clothes off the young man who delivers an order of Chinese food. And when the middle-aged man from the pet shop, who'd come to deliver a new budgie, blissfully expires in his sleep after an over-energetic *passage d'amour*, they hide his body in the basement because some of the neighbors are coming for cocktails . . ." That \$225,000 film grossed its first million almost before it was launched. Someone has suggested it will make \$2.5 million in Quebec alone.

If it all seems startling to many, it will not to those who see the full range of films out of Hollywood and Europe these days rather than just the classier or more middlebrow movies that reach the new cinemas in suburban shopping centres. The sleazier downtown film houses of Toronto each night unreel combinations of brutality and sex that revel in rottenness. The Cinepix movies are not of this type. They chuckle rather than leer at the human sexual comedy. Dunning has said: "We have a philosophy: we always portray sex in a normal way, and it is always a happy thing. We don't go in for anything kinky. No leather, no whips, very little abnormality. They've always been happy films. And they've always had more or less happy endings." He calls them adult films. "Pornography," he suggests, "is in the loins of the beholder".

Will wrath descend on CFDC?

So far, no real storm of disapproval has broken over the heads of Michael Spencer and Gratien Gelinias and the CFDC. But it's bound to come. The government, however, decided when it set up the CFDC that the new body would be a lenient bank rather than a booster of still more cultural messages. CFDC's role is to judge films on their commercial possibilities, not their artistic merit. It does however stipulate that producers of the films it backs must be prepared to make cuts demanded by provincial censors. In other words, they are not permitted to block the showing of their films simply by refusing to make cuts. To that extent the taxpayer must be guaranteed a run for his money.



The partners who produce profitable features films, John Dunning and André Link.

Each Cinepix film, therefore, is carefully constructed so that scenes which offend local sensitivities can be snipped out without ruining the plot.

So the Cinepix story keeps rolling along and the company will soon start shooting in Ontario as well. In the first six months of 1971 it expects to open six new films in Toronto.

Throughout most of Dunning's utterances just as in descriptions of his movies there blows a mixture of the lighthearted and the semi-solenn. The official printed synopsis of *Love in a Four-Letter World* is typical:

"Henry Haven, a film editor, has watched the growing outspokenness of youth's rebellion with interest and profit, using their battle with authority as the grist for documentary TV films. He becomes more detached and critical of the new world around him as well as of his family. The passion in his marriage has cooled and Vera, his wife, has erotic dreams in a world without Harry. Susan, their 18-year-old daughter, is becoming more assertive as her natural adolescent rebellion grows. This pattern is destroying a relationship with her father that was once close and affectionate . . ."

So far so good. It sounds like the lead to a tearjerker in *Chatelaine*. However, read on . . .

"Suddenly, Harry's life is confronted with reality: two hip young studs, Walt and Pierre, open a music store next to his home and studio and they are soon joined in the store and back apartment by a young hippie girl named Sam. Pierre begins dating Susan, and Walt be-

comes aware of Vera's repressed sexuality and assuages his growing appetite for Vera with Sam . . ." Before the 93 minutes of screen time is used up, Harry gets together with "a female co-worker and professional virgin"; Vera finds Walt "a means of unleashing the biological urges repressed for so many years"; Pierre and Susan set off to start a new life together; and Walt throws out Sam and returns to Vera. And somehow "Harry is left with the preacher who asks him for a donation."

And so the winding trail towards a recognizable Canadian culture winds on. But wait: there is yet another kink in the Cinepix success story. And this one is more Canadian than most of its elements.

Toward the end of last year, Cinepix celebrated the fact that it is the first Canadian film company to make any real money by selling itself to Kalvex Incorporated of New York.

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