

How the taxpayer gets a slice of skin flicks

By BETTY LEE

THE STAFF of Cinepix bunches around an office television set listening to a review of *Love in a Four Letter World*, the company's new movie now playing in Montreal. Cinepix president John Dunning is there. So is his partner, Andre Link. Arthur Voronka who wrote the script and is co-producer of the film, circulates restlessly among the crush of secretaries, film-editors and publicity flacks. Torontonian John Sone who directed *Love*, stands dourly, hands shoved into his pockets.

"The Canadian Film Development Corp. put a lot of money into this thing," says Channel 12 reviewer Bill McCallum. "Therefore we should, as Canadian taxpayers, take an interest. It is a Canadian film in a way. Anyone who has hung around Sir George Williams University or the boutique area will recognize the locale. But if you think of Canadian as including things like maple syrup and Morley Callaghan and pine furniture, that's about where it stops. Because this is a skin flick." (The Cinepixers chorus shocked cries of "oh, oh!" and "shame!") They press closer to the television set.)

Mother's problem

"The hero of the piece is a kind of latter-day Dagwood Bumstead who is having problems with his teen-age daughter and who is alienated from his wife," continues McCallum. "The pretense is to be a story . . ." (Cheers from the Cinepixers). "It involves a couple of swingers on motor bikes. Father is up gazing out of the window. His teen-age daughter is getting dressed and undressed and she does interesting things like taking the pill with her orange juice. Mother is having her own problems all alone. We can guess what they are . . ." (Roars of approval).

"The plot develops from that point. The swingers move in next door and open up a psychedelic music shop. And a noble young thing who is thrown out of a Corvette in front of the stores moves in with them. She's prepared to do anything to earn her keep including an appearance in a most incredible scene. Bare-bottom up, she is dragged across a coffee table. The sound effects are incredible if you can imagine all that skin squeaking across this table . . ." (Screams of "oh, no!")

"There are moments of good performances. But the direction and the writing tend to ride up and down rather like a yo-yo. In fact, some of the writing sounds rather like an original Greek drama that has been translated rather badly. (You can't steal anything any more," shouts Arthur Voronka). Erotic? Sure it's erotic. There's an awful lot of skin in it. The thing reminded me of a late 1940 stag film. (Groans). But the music was excellent and so was the photography.

"You know, if someone I knew in New York said to me that he'd seen this picture . . . in other words, a feature movie made in Canada . . . I'd want to trade my citizenship for that of say, South Africa or Greece. I can't say I'd be terribly proud to be a Canadian. My star rating for *Love in a Four Letter World*? I'd give it one piece of popcorn."

Everyone guffaws again. Someone clicks off the set and the small crowd wanders away. "Well, all I can say," says one staffer as he heads for his office, "is that these reviewers are all pretty narrow. At least Cinepix has had the guts to make some movies in this bloody country."

John Dunning, a 42-year-old, tweedy Montrealer, leans against a desk. He smiles a little wistfully from behind his greying beard and says that no, he is not terribly upset about the criticism that is being chucked at *Love* from other directions as well as Channel 12. "After all, even this guy said the technical side of the picture was good. It's just that we're all getting sick and tired of being labelled as producers of skin flicks."

Happy love

Andre Link, Dunning's 38-year-old partner nods gravely. "They're not, you know. They're adult films." Dunning crosses his arms and continues. "I wish some of the critics would take a peek at some real skin pictures. There's nothing voyeuristic or pornographic about the movies we're making. We treat sex as a natural, normal part of living. We approach it as a happy thing. If Canadians see anything dirty in two people making happy love, then they must be pretty repressed, hung-up individuals."

Link rumples his already-rumpled hair and agrees that it is probably the fact that Canadian Film Development Corp. has been investing eagerly in Cinepix productions that has sparked much of the current criticism of the company and its films. "People in the establishment simply can't understand why Government money is being put into films that include some nudity and sex. Well, why not? Would they rather have the cash wasted on refitting some damned battleship?"

"Look, the CFDC is supposed to help get a film industry on its feet in this country. You can't have an industry if nobody wants the product. Well, remember it's the taxpayers themselves who are lining up to buy tickets for Cinepix films. Obviously they are not objecting."

Two years ago, few individuals outside of the cinematic trade had heard of John Dunning, Andre Link and Cinepix. It was known by those in the distribution end of the business that Dun-



French-Canadian actor Andre Lawrence and Susan Petrie embrace passionately as Cinepix cameraman shoots for another company feature, *It Ain't Easy*. A comedy, it's being shot in English.

ning's family had once owned a small chain of movie houses in Montreal but that the theatres had been closed or converted into billiard parlors when the television boom sliced into audiences during the mid-Nineteen Fifties. "Movies," says Dunning today, "have always been in my blood. They used to stash me in the back seats of the cinema when I was two years of age."

Cinepix was founded by Dunning in 1962 as a Canadian distribution outlet for French, German and Danish flicks. Many of the films were on the racy side but Cinepix, for example, handled the distribution for such acclaimed movies as *Z*. Eventually, the company expanded into investment deals with foreign producers.

First feature

Andre Link, a Hungarian-born French immigrant with a legal background and a passion for films, joined Cinepix not long after it got going. He is vice-president of the company. "You get to see literally thousands of films when you're in the distribution field," says Dunning, crossing his elegantly tailored knees, "and you begin to wonder why you can't make stuff that is just as good."

Valerie, Cinepix's first feature made in 1968, cost \$85,000 and was made with cash the company found on its own. The picture was written and directed by Denis Heroux, a Montrealer who was to become a major name in the Cinepix stable of writers, directors and producers. Dunning admits he toyed with the idea of asking for CFDC aid when Valerie got to the shooting stage (as an established distributor, Cinepix was almost assured of co-operation within the corporation's cautious terms of reference) but found the new Government body was still struggling to get started. The 2½-year-old CFDC has a mandate to promote a feature film industry in Canada.

Link remembers that Cinepix was skeptical about making any profit out of Valerie. "After all, it was a Canadian movie and Canadian movies are supposed to be poison at the box-office. Most of our talk revolved around how much we would probably lose. We were stunned when the movie became a smash hit in Montreal." Link admits that Valerie—which appeared in a slightly covered-up, English-dubbed version in Toronto—has earned 10 times its original investment (\$5,000) in two years.

CFDC co-venture

"The formula?" grins Dunning. "Well, we simply decided to show that call girls are people too. There's a kind of message in that, I suppose. Not many members of the public realize that even prostitutes can have sentiments."

Cinepix's second film, *L'Initiation*, also carried a message. "How does an 18-year-old girl approach the problem of giving up her virginity?" muses Dunning. "You read books about sociology and you find that boys are expected to have a sexual experience before they marry. But that seems to be a double standard. What about girls? We decided to take the girls' side of the question in *L'Initiation*."

L'Initiation was the CFDC's first co-venture with Cinepix. There are indications that after the solid success of Valerie, the corporation needed little nudging to kick in with an investment. Link refuses to give exact figures concern-

ing the CFDC's slice of the action (though it is known the film cost \$300,000) but he picks up a phone and asks his accountant to report on the Government's profit so far.

"They've got back their investment in a year," he says after a moment. "Plus a one-third profit." He figures that if box-office receipts in Paris mean anything, the Canadian taxpayers will double their investment in *L'Initiation* within another year. The movie will open in Toronto in a dubbed English version next spring.

Toronto, though should see Cinepix's third venture, *Love in a Four Letter World*—written and co-produced by Arthur Voronka—by this Thanksgiving. *Love*, which is another CFDC co-venture, was made in English and later dubbed into French. It may not be the kind of hard-core pornography that is oozing out of Denmark but it does contain some of the most realistic sexual footage ever filmed for the commercial screen. The film is now before the Ontario Board of Censors.

(Cinepix has one serious competitor in Montreal: Onyx Films Inc., producers—together with the CFDC and Famous Players—of the sex-and-violence movie *Red*. Interestingly, Cinepix is also involved as distributors of the film.)

Three more Cinepix movies, *The Awakening* (Cinepix-CFDC), *Heads or Tails* (Cinepix-Famous Players-CFDC) and *It Ain't Easy* (Cinepix) are either poised for release or in the production stage. The company plans to shoot at least four productions in 1971—all of them apparently available as possible investments for Canadian taxpayers—including one in Toronto. The Toronto film will be a movie version of Freda Bradley's curious treatise on sex, *How to be Sensual and Drive Him Wild*.

Sexual problems

Much of the original book deals with how a woman can excite her man by serving him drinks on her knees or dancing (in go-go girl costume) for his friends. Dunning says he is enthusiastic about the upcoming production, but

that he has sent Mrs. Bradley back to her typewriter to write extra material about how to be sensual in the bedroom. "There's no doubt," says Cinepix's chief, "that the story has all the makings of a great adult comedy."

Dunning is amiable, optimistic and proud as he chats about the Cinepix productions to be presented to their Canadian investors within the next few months. "Any married couple has sexual adjustment problems," he says as he examines color transparencies from the company's newest movie *The Awakening*. "But the adjustment problems of two defrocked persons is a lot more difficult. They have instilled in them the guilt feelings of the original sin and the vows they have taken and so on . . . so, we make a film . . ."

Men of the robe

The Awakening, in other words, concerns the sex life of a former priest and a former nun. It also involves a transvestite (a real transvestite who walked into Cinepix one day and asked for an acting job who is married to a lesbian. "They have sex," explains Dunning, "but even they had to make adjustments. She only enjoys making love to him if he wears women's clothes." He chuckles over a line in the film when both the former priest and the transvestite agree they are both "men of the robe.")

Later, in the Cinepix projection room he shows working print of the Famous Players-CFDC movie *Pile ou Face* or *Heads or Tails*. The film was written by well-known Montreal television scribe Gerald Tasse and features some of the cream of French-Canadian acting talent. The story revolves around a group of international swingers (male and female) who regularly hold a sexual convention at a secluded spot in the Laurentians. "Quite guiltlessly," says Dunning as he shows the film, "they go to bed with whoever they want."

The plot begins to thicken when one of the conventioners who cannot make the trip that year sends along an attractive young lady (via seaplane) to

join the group for a couple of days. "The point is," says Dunning, "that she is really a highly moral girl. In the beginning, she doesn't understand the sexual permissiveness going on around her. She figures they're all just a lot of nudists." Much of the action from then on, involves the complicated job of getting the newcomer to shed her clothes.

In the version that will probably show in Quebec, all of the actors appear in the full-length buff. Just in case other regions of Canada find all of that exposed flesh objectionable, though, Cinepix has prudently shot a three-quarter version that will stop, according to Dunning "just above the belly-button."

Andre Link sits back in his black-leather office chair and talks about Cinepix, Ottawa and the Canadian taxpayer. "Look, the Government is involved in the CBC and the National Film Board and those agencies make precisely the kind of films our critics would like us to make. But we are not subsidized by the Government. In some ways we spend more money on production than those agencies do. If you look at their operating budgets, you will see that little is actually spent on doing things. Most goes out on administration costs. I would say Cinepix injected more than \$1-million into the Canadian film industry during the past two years."

Public disinterest

"If the CFDC now decides to adopt attitudes similar to that of the other Crown corporations, then we'll never have a film industry here. Why should we? It's obvious that the public has displayed massive disinterest in the CBC and the NFB product. If the CFDC insists that film producers here turn out the same kind of stuff as the Government-subsidized corporations, then the \$10-million the CFDC has been given to invest in Canadian movies will go right down the drain. And we haven't gone anywhere."

He complains bitterly that one of the serious hangups of independent movie-makers in Canada has been the "socialistic" monopoly of the CBC and the

NFB over film production. "If a Government department wants a film made on say, agriculture, who gets the contract?" he asks. "The NFB or the CBC. That's no way to encourage a private movie industry."

"The point is that an industry has to have a wide spectrum. We've got to make all kinds of movies. And after all, the more commercial films we make, the more esoteric or artistic movies we can afford. If we have a narrow field of pictures that will be very hard to play both here and abroad, a lot of taxpayers will suddenly wonder if the CFDC experiment was all worth it."

Panting fans

Across town in Westmount, a Cinepix film crew is shooting scenes for yet another company feature called *It Ain't Easy*. The film is being shot in English and features Andre Lawrence the French-Canadian actor who is gaining swarms of panting female fans for his passionate performance in *Love in a Four Letter World*.

The film is dubbed as a comedy and involves the adventures of a WASP young man from the west end of Montreal who joins up with a hippie commune. Arthur Voronka who is co-producer of the film says there are fewer love-making scenes in *Ain't* than in other Cinepix productions but he laughingly agrees that the performers take their clothes off "quite frequently."

John Dunning is circulating among the technical crew giving occasional orders and telling again—and again—the story of the Channel 12 review. "He said the music was great," he tells young Toronto actress Susan Petrie, "but that he would prefer to be a South African or a Greek if someone discovered the movie was made in Canada."

Susan laughs prettily. She is a petite blonde with flowing hair who has played wholesome, girl-next-door roles on CBC television. She is reluctant at first to discuss her business arrangement with Cinepix, but after a while agrees that the whole experience has "been quite a shock." When summoned from Toronto for a screen-test, she says she was amazed that Cinepix seemed completely disinterested in her acting talent. "I was just asked to take off my clothes."

"But it's funny, you know. After a while it doesn't seem to matter. You become kind of brainwashed to the whole thing. Everyone takes the nudity for granted and everyone is very nice. This film, of course, is a kind of comedy. We laugh at the sex thing all the way through it. But if I was asked to do a serious film, I suppose I'd say yes. I really don't care any more."

Erog entries

Dunning leans against a wall, crosses his suede desert boots and grins when asked whether he thinks *L'Initiation* and *Love in a Four Letter World*, Cinepix's two entries in the 1970 Canadian Film Awards will win any major Erogs.

"You're kidding!" he says. "With the establishment in charge, they haven't got a chance of picking up a Best Film or Best Performance award. I feel they should get something for the technical work, of course, but I don't even dare hope for that. One thing though," he adds, smiling that wistful, Dunning smile, "we really have earned an E for Effort."



Cinepix president John Dunning, left, and his partner Andre Link look over negatives. They object to term "skin flicks."