

Soft-core sadism makes money for Cinepix



Marilyn Chambers in 'Rabid'

'Rabid' low key but full of horror

By CONNIE TADROS
for The Gazette

Much to everyone's horror, film director David Cronenberg has done it again. The Montreal-made 'Rabid', his latest feature (in English at Loews and in French at the Parisien) is a creepy film which works well and is curiously restrained — for a horror film, that is.

The scenario is his own. After a terrible motorcycle crash, Rose, played by Marilyn Chambers, has emergency surgery. The doctors use a special process of skin grafting to replace her abdominal organs.

What is supposed to become the stomach gets addicted to the blood plasma which she receives intravenously, and she turns into a modern-day vampire.

To feed the stomach, she takes her victim in her arms, hugs him and permits a penis-like organ hidden in her armpit to penetrate any part of his body and suck in blood.

Unfortunately, Rose also happens to carry a rabies-like illness which allows her victims a few hours before they die in which to become feverish with desire for blood, foam at the mouth and bite someone else, thus transmitting the fatal illness. Montreal is hit with an epidemic.

Cronenberg is clever, and his film for Montreal's Cinepix — now that you've read the worst of it — is surprisingly low key. He doesn't lean on the music or the lighting for effect, but is happy with his script, good performances from Chambers and Frank Moore, and a few special effects.

Cronenberg writes simultaneously about violence, sex and death. When Rose feeds on a victim, her face reflects the pleasure of orgasm and she leaves her 'lover' faintly exhausted. Cronenberg gives us sex without sex and death in innocence.

Until the end, Rose doesn't realize that she is the cause of the epidemic storming Montreal. When she finally begins to understand, she organizes a little experiment to prove to herself that she is blameless. Bitten by her own victim, she dies.

Cronenberg's horror is effective because he uses situations which could possibly happen — medical experimentation being the theme of his first horror films — and avoids introducing monsters, devils and the like.

He refuses to use sex as a come-on or to let his films become overly violent and disaster oriented. Cronenberg is content to play games with the minds of his audience. At heart, he is a puritan.

By ANTHONY MAULLUCCI
for The Gazette

Some people believe Canada makes one type of film: Those that lose money. Not true.

Some people think the only kinds of films Canadians make are lyrical movies depicting familiar strife, man's eternal struggle against the elements, and NFB documentaries. Not true again.

Canada has its own studio which makes money producing and distributing shock, horror and sex-related features. That studio is called Cinepix and it's located in Montreal.

It produces French and English features dealing with such diverse subjects as prostitution, de-frocked priests, and the occult. These films are strictly commercial, and in those terms are very successful.

Some of the titles may be familiar: 'Loving and Laughing', 'Keep it in the Family', 'The Parasite Murders', 'Death Weekend', and now 'Rabid'. These films are low-budget, costing on the average of \$400,000. 'Death Weekend', starring Brenda Vaccaro, cost a record-breaking \$800,000 and is rumored to be the most successful Canadian film ever.

In comparison, 'The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz' cost about \$1 million to make and grossed about \$2.5 million in Canada alone. Yet while a film with artistic pretensions such as 'Duddy Kravitz' may gross in Canada twice what it costs, a low-budget commercial film may gross three or four times its costs.

And while most Canadian feature films are losing money, those Cinepix produces show a profit. Unlike most other producers, Cinepix also distributes its own films.

Many Cinepix films have been financed in part by the Canadian Film Development Corp., but the film company is also involved with making movies the CFCF would not touch. Unlike most other producers, Cinepix also distributes its own films.

For example, there is a highly successful series of films based on the outlandish antics of a Testonic lover of uncontrollable urges named Isa.

The first of these films, 'Isa, She-Wolf of the SS,' was produced and made in Hollywood by a survivor of a concentration camp, and Cinepix was involved with its distribution. The second, 'Isa, Harlem-keeper of the Oil Sheiks,' was co-produced and distributed world-wide by Cinepix. The third, 'The Tigress' is being produced entirely by Cinepix and is currently in production in Montreal.

Isa may be the first female villain in cinema history: The woman men love to hate. The films are billed. Isa takes great pleasure in torturing



Actress Dyanne Thorne (Isa) and director Jean Lafleur on the set of 'The Tigress.'

men, but she also enjoys having sex with them, and her sexual appetite is insatiable as her lust for cruelty. However, Isa is not thoroughly wicked; her one weakness is love.

A pattern emerges in the films — most men are unable to satisfy Isa and she is continually on the lookout for the ideal lover. Eventually, she succumbs and falls in love — usually with a secret service agent. Inevitably, she softens, only to realize that she has been used as some kind of pawn by the man in order to free the people she has under her domination. Ultimately, Isa becomes the victim.

It is difficult to say why the films are so successful. One theory is the Isa phenomenon may be the result of a backlash by some men against the women's lib movement. The fact that a female authority figure such as Isa is seduced and finally victimized, humili-

ated, or destroyed by a man may reassure men who feel threatened by strong women. But these films appeal to women too. Perhaps some women want to identify with a strong rather than the traditionally weak heroine.

As punishment for her supposedly unnatural dominance, Isa is brutalized by the triumphant men at the film's close. Is there some connection here with the social phenomenon of female assault and male sadism towards women now being reflected in fashion magazines? Whatever the reasons, this formula sells extremely well.

On the basis of the success of the first film, Cinepix decided that Isa should continue in a series, somewhat like James Bond. The first two films have been distributed in every major country in the world.

In Italy, Switzerland, and Belgium, Isa plays in the best cinemas in town. In Belgium, they are ranked as the fifth highest grossing films per year, along with movies such as 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest'. She also does very well in the U.S. and Canada, except in Saskatchewan and Alberta where the films have been banned.

According to Cinepix, the Isa pictures reflect the horror in the world today. In fact, Isa is classed as horror-adventure drama in most countries.

They are purported to be escapist movies, not sadism and masochism specials, although there is a certain amount of sadism and cruelty incorporated into each story as an extension of Isa's character. There is also some lesbianism. But mostly, there's female nudity and simulated love-making, all adding up to a soft-core rating.

Cinepix believes that an X-rating would be suicidal both financially and legally. In Canada alone, Isa must meet with the approval of no less than 10 censorship boards, one for each province, and while some are anti-sex,

other are anti-violence, and still others are anti-politics.

But when she gets to the theatre she earns quite a handsome profit for her creators. Cinepix is evasive about just how much the films make. They are low-budget, costing \$250,000, and this is important to their profit factor. But the films look as if they cost three times that amount.

The primary reason for the low cost of the films is that Canada doesn't have the union problems that plague American productions and help to keep their budgets high.

'The Tigress' opens in a Stalin work camp, Gulag 14, at the time of Stalin's death. Isa is running the re-education camp but flees for her life after Stalin's death.

The second half of the film opens in Montreal at the end of the Russian-Canadian hockey series about 15 years later. A few of the Russian hockey players go to a massage parlor, accompanied by a secret service agent who is the only survivor of Gulag 14. Isa, now owner of the massage parlor, is observing her establishment on closed circuit television from her chateau up north in the Laurentian mountains.

She recognizes the secret service agent and has him picked up and brought to her chateau. She then tortures this man whom she was unable to break in the camp.

But, you guessed it, she falls in love with him, and the remainder of the film deals with the Russians' attempt to capture this agent and Isa.

As long as Isa continues to make money, for Cinepix and the English professor in Toronto who writes the scripts, you can be sure she'll be back in yet another horror adventure.

In fact, her next escapade is already in the planning stages. It's going to be called 'Isa Meets Bruce Lee in the Devil's Triangle.'

Show's chances fade

NBC's Emmy decision: Silence

HOLLYWOOD — (UPI-AP) — NBC held back a decision yesterday on whether it would present a 1977 telecast of awards for achievement by members of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

It appeared, however, that the Emmy Program would not be shown this year.

The academy was torn by an internal struggle between its east coast membership and the west coast chapter which includes most of the top writers, producers, directors and actors — including Mary Tyler Moore, Carol Burnett and Henry Winkler.

Many of the stars have announced

they would boycott the broadcast and would not accept awards.

Robert T. Howard, president of NBC network television, already had postponed the scheduled May 15 Emmy awards program.

In a letter April 7 to national academy president Richard Rector, Howard wrote that "unless you can satisfy us by April 15... that a program meeting your contractual obligations can be supplied for telecast, we will have no choice but to cancel."

Howard was in Los Angeles yesterday but spokesmen for NBC said there was not yet any word on whether the program would be shown.

Rector, contacted at his San Francisco office, said he had not been notified whether the program was on or off but said the academy was confident it could produce a show despite the west coast member boycott.

"We're going ahead with the plans and nominees will be announced as scheduled," he said.

The nominations had been postponed in hopes the internal dispute could be settled.

Bill Storke, NBC vice president in charge of specials who would have handled the Emmy show, said in New York he did not know yet whether the Emmy program would proceed.

An NBC spokesman in Los Angeles said the setting of the April 15 deadline did not necessarily mean that a decision would be made on that day.

The dispute is mainly a matter of New York versus Hollywood.

Hollywood claims New York runs the academy but 90 per cent of prime time entertainment, artists, craftsmen, writers, producers and directors live and work in the Los Angeles area.

Grant Tinker, producer of several prime time shows, says, "New York argues it originates as much TV as Hollywood. True, if you count daytime games shows, soap operas and news programs."

Amateurish 'Let's Save Canada Hour' altogether appalling

It's depressingly typical of a certain mentality in this country that the CBC English network could put on a TV show called 'The Let's Save Canada Hour' and fill it with sketches based in large part on American TV and movies.

This time we can't even blame Toronto, though the show was shot there, because it was co-produced by Montrealers Wayne Grigsby and Gary Flaxton, partly written by Grigsby, and numbers among its performers Yvon Deschamps and Jean-Guy Moreau. The final writing was done in California a couple of months ago, which may possibly account for the American flavor of the show. Deschamps was there on

other business but co-stars Don Harron and Grigsby were on the CBC payroll, which is nice work if you can get it.

'The Let's Save Canada Hour', which will be seen on CBC-TV tomorrow at 7 p.m., is another in the doomed line of French-English variety shows attempt-

Radio & TV

by Joan Irwin



ed sporadically over the years by the CBC English network. This one, billed as a satire of Canada's bilingual heritage, stars Deschamps and Harron (sometimes in his Charlie Farquharson character), plus Moreau, Al Waxman and Mary Traynor.

How Deschamps ever allowed himself to be drawn into such a juvenile and amateurish undertaking is anybody's guess, but if he's hoping to further his career in English-speaking North America this is hardly the way to go about it.

The show seems to be based on the idea that nobody can figure out how to do a 'Let's Save Canada Hour.'

First they try an 'All in the Family' approach, renaming the sketch 'La Famille Pouffe' after the CBC French network series 'La Famille Plouffe' which made history by also becoming a hit in English on CBC-TV.

It's introduced with a takeoff on an air-freshener commercial whose concluding words are: "What you smell is lingering bilingualism. Try Backlash, the household cleaner that banishes bilingualism from the air."

Deschamps reacts to the sketch with: "What a dumb show. You know what's wrong with Canadian TV? They try to do it like the Americans and they can't."

The man is not unobservant, but what's he doing mixed up in this misguided adventure?

Then there's an unfunny Deschamps monologue about violence in TV newscasts, followed by a simulated K-Tel commercial touting Trudeauism and federalism. If you're still with the show, and duty alone kept me at the screening, you'll have to face a film sequence à la National Film Board about French-English relationships in a primitive log cabin, then another skit based on a breath-test commercial.

The crudest sequence of a thoroughly unappealing show is a take-off on 'The Exorcist' in which a little girl turns green (like a frog, in case you were missing the point) and won't speak anything but French.

"Who could confront this evil?" demands on unseen voice, so 'The Federalist' is sent for, exorcises the French devil and returns the girl to her sweet, English-speaking self.

"Baloney, that doesn't save the

country at all," comments Deschamps. How painfully true.

Moreau returns, this time as Laurier LaPierre to interview Deschamps and Harron as Charlie Farquharson about the history of the Quebec-Canada problem. The sequence is full of sexual double entendres which appealed hugely to the Toronto studio audience.

In the final scene Deschamps delivers his message: "I care about Canada but I care about Quebec even more. It looks as if this discussion (about Quebec and Canada) will go on for 50 years, and Quebec can't wait that long."

Harron responds with a non sequitur about Ontario farmers plus the absurd old idiom that only the presence of Quebec distinguishes Canada from the U.S. The band strikes up "Tout le monde est malheureux" and the thing is finally over.

Malheureux, and not in Vigneault's upbeat sense, is right. The hour is ill-

conceived, clumsily put together, ham-handed, and altogether appalling.

The kind of people who enjoy hearing French-speaking Canadians referred to as "frogs" and "peeps" may find 'The Let's Save Canada Hour' hilarious.

Other reactions may range, as mine did, from boredom to anger to disbelief. I suspect that the majority of viewers will simply turn it off, which in my view is the appropriate response.

Tonight, beginning at 6:30 p.m. CBMT's 'Quebec Report' devotes its full hour to an interview with Cultural Development Minister Camille Laurin on the subject of the white paper. CBMT's 'Midday' on Monday will have an hour and a half with the minister on the same topic beginning at 12:30 p.m.