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# IT'S IN OUR BLOOD: CANADA'S HORROR STORY

Canadian films are cerebral, arty and dull, right? Like hell. This Halloween, remember — our movie industry has its roots in terror, thrills, guts and gore, writes **Chris Alexander**

**B**eing the thoughtful, reserved Canadian film fan that you are, it may shock you to your wholesome, maple-syrup-swilling core to learn that some of the most pillar-quaking, outlandish and upsetting motion pictures hail from our otherwise culturally highbrow home and native land. Indeed, Canada's now multi-layered cinematic roots lie deep within the realm of the bizarre and ultimately begin in 1960s Quebec, when two rebellious men decided to stand up and make a difference.

From cheeky art-house nudies to high-rise death orgies; from vein-draining armpits to castrating Third Reich divas; from blood-spattered miners to lethal throat-destroying, shish-kebab skewers, visionary Canadian movie moguls John Dunning and André Link once swam upstream against an old world French Catholic morality, breaking rules, blazing trails, nurturing some major-league talents and weaving a sensationalistic pop culture mosaic of Canadian film, the likes of which has never been, and most likely will never be, equalled.

Since the dawn of commercial film, Quebec had been at the conservative censorial mercy of the Catholic Church. Hundreds of films deemed "morally offensive" (no anti-Church sentiments, no double beds) were either banned outright or butchered so badly that the end result was often incomprehensible. In the early '60s, however, the province's Quiet Revolution brought an equally loose and open stance on the arts. Seeing an opportunity and recognizing that Quebec — and indeed all of Canada — had no effectively profitable theatrical film production or distribution system, local lad John Dunning, whose father had owned movie houses in Quebec for years, formed the company Cinepix.

Realizing he couldn't compete with the big fish in obtaining "quality films," Dunning joined up with Hungarian-born U.S. film sales agent Link and opted to take a different route, import-

ing the sort of cinema that the province had long been denied. "Before John and André stepped in, the National Film Board dominated film production in Canada," notes Canadian film historian and editor of indispensable website canuxploitation.com Paul Corupe. "There were a few small, independent pictures made and distributed throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, but they were mostly made by directors unaware of the realities of trying to get a film distributed into the largely American-owned theatre system. Cinepix changed all of that."

Suddenly Quebec screens were unspooling reels of steamy melodrama, soft-core pornography, kung fu (Cinepix was in fact the first outfit in North America to distribute the early films of Bruce Lee), horror and even some long unseem, controversial classics. In the mid-'60s Dunning and Link managed to get their paws on a print of Tod Browning's notorious 1932 melodrama, *Freaks* — the film that almost destroyed MGM and did in fact destroy the film-making career of *Dracula* vet Browning — giving it a French dub and causing a media uproar by "borrowing" (from Barnum and Bailey, no less) a gaggle of real freaks for the premiere. But it was the raunchier offerings — European sex and drug potboilers that Dunning refers to as "prostitution films" — that really shocked the system and made the box office purr.

Believing that they could effectively create their own brand of prostitution films, Dunning and Link ended up lensing a uniquely Canadian wave of hot and heavy art-house smut, starting with the infamous happyhooker vehicle, *Valerie*. *Valerie*'s success led to a whole slew of sex films affectionately dubbed by the Canadian media "Maple Syrup Porn," and Cinepix quickly became not only the most profitable film distributor in Canada, but a full-blown production house to boot.

In 1970, budding Toronto filmmaker, and future *Ghostbusters* mastermind, Ivan Reitman

took a train to Montreal to the Cinepix offices. He had just completed producing a lurid comedy drama called *The Columbus of Sex* and was seeking distribution. Not only did Dunning and Link end up releasing the film but, admiring the young man's creativity and enthusiasm, eventually took him under their wing in a free association that lasted more than a decade.

**A**fter the release of Reitman's gory, gimmicky dark comedy *Cannibal Girls* (starring future SCTV alumni Eugene Levy and Andrea Martin), Dunning and Link brought him on board to co-produce a script by a bratty but equally energetic up-and-coming artist that was to be co-funded by the newly minted Canadian Film Development Corporation (later to become Telefilm Canada). The script bore the colourful title *Orgy of the Blood Parasites*, but was later renamed *The Parasite Murders*.

It eventually became known as *Shivers* (tagline: "If this picture doesn't make you scream and squirm, you better see a psychiatrist!"), the first commercial film of future Can Con horror auteur (and current *A History of Violence* helmer) David Cronenberg.

"Connecting with John and André was a minor miracle for me at the time," remarked the notorious filmmaker in a special interview conducted for the recent DVD release of *Shivers*, "because it was a desert everywhere else. Ultimately, with Cinepix I found people who understood my script, understood what it was and could be."

Indeed, thanks to tireless marketing efforts by Dunning and Link, *Shivers* became an instant international exploitation hit and arguably the first real Canadian horror film. Cronenberg's blood-spattered yet thoughtful study of a phallic, pre-AIDS sexual parasite infecting the inhab-

itants of a Montreal highrise was box-office gold but critical poison, especially on these shores. Seminal (and recently defunct) magazine *Saturday Night* published a scathing review of the film that doubled as an all-out slam of Cinepix and the CFDC. Link retaliated by editing and distributing a pro-genre pamphlet for public consumption he called "Is There a Place for Horror in Canada's Film Industry," which has since become the stuff of Canadian pop culture folklore. It was this mixture of integrity and passion that truly separated the Cinepix aesthetic from the rest of its grindhouse contemporaries.

"If it hadn't have been for André Link's unwavering defence of Cronenberg's vision, of *Shivers* and of horror in general," says Corupe, "this country would have undoubtedly lost one of its brightest directorial talents."

Certainly the company's feelings about the edgy filmmaker

and his cerebral (and highly profitable) approach to the genre stayed strong enough for them to produce his next feature, the intense vampire plague thriller *Rabid*, a sort of remake of *Shivers* that featured porn queen Marilyn Chambers as patient zero. Both of these early films are a case study in observing an artist slowly, and publicly, refining his craft.

"When you watch *Shivers* and *Rabid*," adds Cronenberg, "what you see is me going to the John and André school of filmmaking. They were wonderful mentors."

However visceral and controversial the two Cronenberg films were, they paled in comparison with a motion picture that, to this day, is still spoken about in hushed tones. In 1975, after the success of *The Night Porter* and Cinepix's own distribution of the Eurotrash sleaze classic *Love Camp 7*, Dunning commissioned kinky University of Toronto professor Jonah Royston to pen what was then and is still perhaps the ultimate exploitation film, Don Edmonds' *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*. In it, busty ex-showgirl Dyanne Thorne plays Ilsa, the sadistic warden of a World War II German medical concentration camp.

Between graphic bouts of sexual torture, Ilsa explicitly beds the hunkier male prisoners before viciously removing their manhood with dull instruments.

Dunning and Link farmed out production to American shock guru David Friedman (*Blood Feast, 2000 Maniacs*), who hired Don Edmonds to direct and shoot the picture on the abandoned sets of, believe it or not, long-running TV hit *Hogan's Heroes*. So vile, so horrific was *Ilsa* that Friedman — who with partner H. G. Lewis had once spat out some of the most reprehensible gore movies of the 1960s — opted to remove his name from the final cut.

As expected, the film came under fire for being anti-Semitic, but, when Link screened it privately for revolutionary NYC Rabbi Kahane, the avant-garde holy man stated publicly that "this film is not anti-Semitic... it's anti-humanity."

*Ilsa* went on to massive international success, spawning two official sequels (the last of which actually takes place in Montreal) and a slew of sloppy, increasingly offensive imitators.

**I**n between raising hell with the hardest of exploitation, Dunning and Link were also churning out family fare like the quirky *Mystery of the Million Dollar Hockey Puck*, the Stompin' Tom Connors vehicle *Across This Land* and Reitman's massively successful summer camp comedy *Mentals*, starring a young Bill Murray. Their return to horror in the '80s rode the coattails of the "slasher" film phenomenon, cemented by *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, but actually was sparked by a Canadian film, Bob Clark's 1974 hit *Black Christmas*. Both released in 1981, Hollywood veteran J. Lee Thompson's *Happy Birthday To Me* and George Mihalka's seminal dead-teen flick *My Bloody Valentine* were distributed through major American studios and both are considered major contributions to this generally disreputable subgenre.

As the '80s progressed and home video became an enormous threat to the theatrical world, Cinepix joined forces with Famous Players to create C/P, which was in turn bought out by Lions Gate Films. Today, Dunning and Link are as enthusiastic and active as ever (Dunning is putting the finishing touches on the script for *My Bloody Valentine 2*), even winning multiple Gemini awards for such projects as the critically acclaimed TV movie *Princes in Exile*. But it was during those golden years — when both the cultural elite and the raincoat set first shared space, huddling together in a crowded cinema to see the un-seeable — that Cinepix was doing something truly revolutionary.

"John and André pushed the boundaries of Canadian film into previously uncharted territory," notes Corupe. "By capitalizing on the fears and desires of audiences all across Canada, they produced entirely unique movies that continue to challenge popular perception of our woefully neglected industry."

So this Halloween, when you scream for something scary, do yourself a favour and tip your toque to the brave men who once painted our screens with broad, bloody strokes, temporarily turning our land into the Great Red North. Dunning and Link, Canada salutes you.

Chris Alexander is a columnist for the Canadian horror magazine *Rue Morgue*.



TOP PHOTO: Stomach trouble is just the beginning for Allan Kolman in *Shivers*, the 1975 film that built an audience for Canadian film and a career for director David Cronenberg.  
ABOVE: A young Eugene Levy and Andrea Martin helped Ivan Reitman get his start as a director in *Cannibal Girls*. It was also Reitman's calling card to become a producer, backing Cronenberg.