

Termini station hits you in the face



Andre Souroujon

A



Termini Station's director Allen King (left) and actress Megan Follows (right) discuss their roles in the film.

by Mikel Koven

Canadian director Allen King and actress Megan Follows spoke to *Excalibur* about the new film *Termini Station* recently screened at the Festival of Festivals.

King worked in collaboration with his wife, Colleen Murphy, who wrote and co-directed the film.

"I've always intended to do that," King began. "If I can have the writer on set, I like it. Shostakovich said conductors hate modern composers because they have the task of interpreting them. But for me, it's very simple. The text is paramount, and you have to get the text right, before you start.

"Once you do, it is like proof-reading, you always find little pieces and passages that have mistakes in it, or you don't understand [something], whatever. If the writer is there, you can say 'I don't understand this. It may be my problem, it may be the script's problem; maybe I'm dense, maybe you've missed something.' And the actors can do the same.

"[If] it is a question about authorship? There is a common notion in film that the director is the author. That is not the case unless the director has written the script. Otherwise, he is interpreting. Or sometimes it is a very close collaboration. So it is very much a film by Colleen Murphy, and myself."

He lets the power of the script

and the performances carry the movie. He doesn't allow the camera to intrude on their intimacy.

"It is really essential," he continued. "I mean, your job as a director is to provide an environment in which people can work. Visually, the same way. If you start to draw attention to the camera work, or scenery, or sets, or all of that sort of thing, then you take away from the performances. And this piece is about what happens between these people. [Everything else] is just support.

"Another thing that happens with Canadian actors, particularly, if you can draw at it and give them the freedom to work it... most of them don't want to do a star turn. In some venues... one

actor will set out to kill another, in order to come out on top, to be the star. If you try that in Toronto or Vancouver, you don't work. Nobody will work with you. There is the capacity for ensemble work, if you build on it. And we did."

The cast works very well as an ensemble. However, there are still two stars shining brighter than anyone else: Colleen Dewhurst and Megan Follows.

Follows is now in her early twenties and her character in the film, Micheline, seemed to be the first step on her much anticipated road away from the children she's previously played.

However, Follows pointed out that Micheline is not her first adult.

"I played Rachel Brown in *Inherit the Wind*, and she was 22 years old, but much more naive. So she was quite a bit younger in her thinking. But this one is a woman who, although her age is the same, due to her life, she has been forced to age much quicker."

Playing a character like Micheline, who is a teenage prostitute, must have put her into an odd headspace.

"I don't know about odd. Although she wasn't familiar to me in the beginning, I could identify with her quite strongly by the end. I think it was quite difficult to finally... let her go, than I would have thought. I really like this character a lot. I think for all of her faults, all of her abusiveness in the way she treats people, I can understand how she's reacting to that, and where she is coming from. I like her. She's not likable, but I like her."

Termini Station's publicist suggested the character of Micheline is closer to the real Megan than *Anne of Green Gables*.

"I do have a foul mouth, but I reserve it for specific company," responded Follows.

Regardless of what King said, Follows is the star. But the possibilities of being stereotyped and pigeonholed are great.

"I generally go with my gut instinct in terms of what I like. It is hard if you try to be specifically strategically minded. You can lose sight of what you want to do. I have been lucky that the things I want to do have worked out strategically... but I try not to be

concerned with that because everyone else is. I just do what I want to do, the best I can."

I went to see *Termini Station* with the hesitating thought that this was a "strategic project." I was dazzled by the film's sincerity. This is as far from a strategic film as you can get.

Follows agreed. "This was a very sincere project. I responded to the sincerity of the script immediately. It is extremely cleverly written, very funny and very moving. And when you believe that much in the script, and I believe we all did... it becomes a labour of love.

"I think all too often people are concerned with style, and content gets put on the backburner. I think what has to be paid attention to is the content of the piece. It has to come before anything else. What you are saying, and how valid it is, even if it is something you don't want to hear, [must come first]. All too often people close their ears to what they don't want to hear, even if it is true.

"I don't believe our film is a nice movie. I think it is a very powerful movie, I think it is a very funny movie, but it is not a comfortable movie. It is extremely uncomfortable. I like the fact that it is the type of movie that you either love or hate. There are not too many people who feel neutral about this film."

People who know the Anne of Green Gables films, and who know Follows only as Anne, will be quite surprised, possibly a little shocked...

"Possibly disturbed... I'm not nearly as concerned with that as other people seem to be. I think it is easy for people to pigeonhole you... [Although not an actress to be stereotyped, I'm] not going to make it my life's ambition. That in itself, you can put all of your effort into that and still do garbage work. Just because you are doing something different, doesn't mean that you are doing something good or interesting. Different for different's sake, I have a problem with."

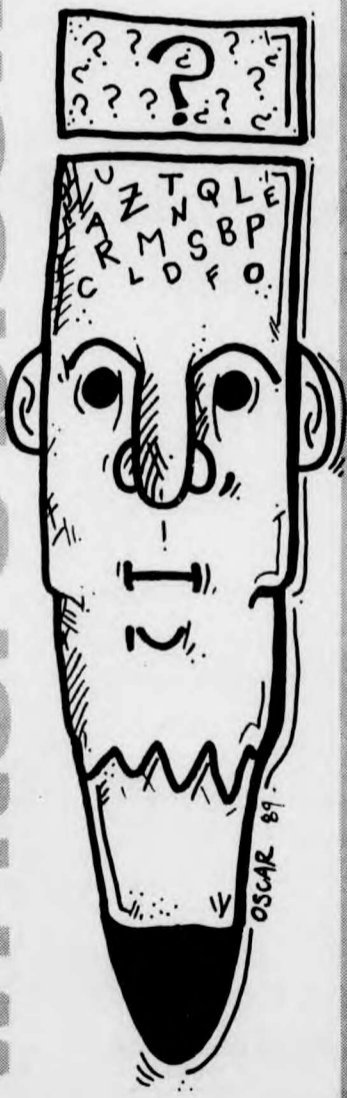
Final comment?

"[The film] is like a fist that comes off the screen and hits you in the face, and doesn't stop."

She's right.

column

writers block



by Ira Nayman

Anybody with a pen and paper can write. But, it takes a lot more to be a writer.

A primary consideration is commitment. Major writers like James Joyce and F. Scott Fitzgerald had novels rejected dozens of times before making a sale (if you're not Joyce or Fitzgerald, adjust your sights downward). The average income for Canadian writers last year was \$9,550, although if you removed the most successful authors, added writers who don't make anything at all and then took the average, you might get a better idea of what you can expect. (Perhaps I should mention independent wealth as a pre-requisite).

The competition is fierce. Of the 25,000 scripts registered with the American Writers Guild last year, less than 500 were produced as movies. The executive story editor of one CBC program said that they received a hundred submissions a week. It isn't my intention to discourage anybody; it's just important to realize that the rewards of writing are more likely to be creative than financial, and that establishing a writing career takes a substantial commitment of time and emotional energy.

(Umm, I intend to at the necessity of a post-secondary

education; I'm just looking for the best way to write it.)

Given your commitment to write, an understanding of human nature is essential. It may be based in Freudian psychology, it may be Jungian, or Berglerian, or contain some ideas of your own. In life, people always do things for a reason; in art their reasons for doing things should, for the most part, be apparent. (Good art explains human behaviour; great art explores the contradictions in human behaviour.)

It also helps, although it isn't always necessary, to have compassion for, or at least an interest in, the characters you're writing about. If you don't care about them, you'll find it close to impossible to make an audience care about them, and your effort will be largely wasted.

An ability to observe others is important to good character development. Listening, a dying art in our self-centred society, is a priceless way of not only learning new speech patterns, phrases, accents, etc. but understanding the way people see themselves; every person is a hero in his or her life story. Physical observation not only garners you a wealth of physical characteristics, but also provides such things as posture, movement, gestures, etc. Detailed observa-

tion is essential in order to give characters depth, to make three dimensions out of two.

Another consideration, often overlooked, is humanity's place in the universe. You don't have to make direct references to this in your story; nonetheless, how you view this question will affect what you write. A god-centred universe, for example, is one where, generally, good and evil are clearly defined, justice is expected, and those who do wrong are punished; a man-centred universe, on the other hand, does not require clear definitions of good and evil, making justice harder to expect, and punishment largely irrelevant.

(I know, I know, I promised a word about post-secondary education. Trust me — it's coming.) Command of the medium you've chosen to write for is also pretty important. In prose, it is necessary to learn the rules of grammar in order to best know which to break, and how; otherwise, you're just sloppy. Script-writing for film and/or television demands a greater command of the medium because they are so technical.

Command of the medium can be overemphasized, however, particularly in the electronic media, where it seems that characterization and story develop-

ment often become secondary considerations. Thus, you get technically brilliant works which are essentially sterile at their core (the dreaded ET Effect), and an increasing number of works about media itself because that is primarily what the artist knows (*sex, lies and videotape* and *Speaking Parts* are two recent examples). This does a terrible disservice to the millions of interesting, worthwhile stories that could be told, but aren't, and the people who would want to see them.

Finally, post-secondary education. Umm, yeah. Right. I suppose it's a good way to learn how to use a medium, although I suspect the emphasis on technical aspects in film schools is a large part of that problem. You could probably learn a lot of important things from psychology courses, although direct observation is still of vital importance. You could learn a lot about the human condition from a philosophy course, although you would still have to decide for yourself how the universe is run. Ultimately, my feeling is that the only way to learn how to write is to write. A post-secondary education, while an important part of a person's life, is not necessary.

And you thought I wouldn't get around to it!