

Poor script, poor production

The Pyx makes even devil-worship look bad

By WARREN CLEMENTS

Since *The Pyx* is probably the first Anglo-Canadian feature film to show signs of cracking the international market, it seems heretical to suggest that it is anything but a huge success.

Unfortunately, the movie is so badly written and poorly acted that even director Harvey Hart's arty tracking shots and continual flashbacks can't disguise a basically hollow story.

Despite its effective use of the Montreal locale, *The Pyx* is at heart an American-style action flick, combining the plots of *Klute*, *Rosemary's Baby* and *Dirty Harry* in a very weak framework. It could be argued that Montrealer John Buell's novel of *The Pyx* was written 15 years ago and predated those three films, but that doesn't excuse the filmmakers from resurrecting the dusty tale in 1973. What *Time Magazine* termed "a tantalizing thriller...with a neck-snapping climax" is in reality a lukewarm whodunit with few clues, little suspense and an anti-climactic ending.

Everyone involved is at the mercy of the script. Karen Black, playing a call-girl who falls 20 storeys to her death in the opening sequence, is presented in a superficial fashion as a non-practicing Catholic who is hooked on heroin and walks around without a bra.

Christopher Plummer, the super-detective who tries to find out what happened to her, is a plastic Bullitt with no motivation and less wit. Donald Pilon, Plummer's "eager beaver" sidekick, is permitted only a few curt lines and shoves.

Nobody in the film is memorable; the characters simply walk around mouthing lines and walking up and down stairs. A scene between Black and her younger sister, who's undergoing heroin withdrawal in an institution, is simply two minutes of wasted hysteria. A scene in which Plummer's girlfriend accuses him of spending all his time with the dead hooker not only springs out of nowhere, (aside from Otto Preminger's touch of necrophilia in his 1944 mystery, *Laura*), but is never followed up.

Worst of all, the plot cheats the audience. Since the call girl falls off the roof clutching a medallion, you'd think that the police would immediately search the penthouse and run tests on the medallion. But a tape recorder with tapes of a Black Mass, sitting on a desk on the penthouse, isn't noticed until halfway through the film. And Plummer doesn't learn until near the film's conclusion that Black's medallion is a pyx, a clam-like shell used to carry the

sacred Host in the Roman Catholic mass.

Worse still, he learns it from side-kick Pilon, who not only knows the dictionary definition of the "lunule", but the English translation of the word as well — which is pretty odd, since few English-speaking persons have even heard of a "pyx". And why, one wonders, didn't Pilon recognize it the first time he saw it? Surely at least one detective on the Montreal force is a practicing Catholic? Well, you see, films run for two hours, and if you let the cat out of the bag in the first five minutes...

The Pyx is a long crescendo leading through gory murders and obscure photos to the secret of the pyx and an inverted cross found around Karen Black's neck. The dialogue is at best uninspired, at worst corny, the bad guys are less evil than laughable, and devil-worshipping is so old-hat in 1973 that when the crucial climax comes, you keep expecting something else to happen. It never does. Just for kicks, they tell you in the closing minute that the detective's wife died in a car crash.

The producers scraped together \$200,000 from the Canadian Film Development Corporation to make this film and \$800,000 from the Royal Bank of Canada — which should cut into "Mary's" salary for the next few years. *The Pyx*'s producer is Julian Roffman, best remembered for his god-awful 1961 production of *The Mask*, a 3-D Canadian film starring *Under Attack*'s Bill Walker as a detective.

The executive producer, Maxine Samuels, was responsible for the CBC series *Seaway*, a show about as entertaining as a film of your local streetlamp. And as it turns out, *The Pyx* has all the production values of CTV's *Police Surgeon*, the show which introduced embarrassment as an art form to a mass audience.

While the Montreal environment is captured in all its glory, complete with "joual" and skyline, the extras look painfully self-conscious. Even the main Quebecois actors speak their English phonetically, which robs the lines of all feeling and conviction.

There are only two good points about *The Pyx*: the first is an entertaining musical score, and the second is the fact that it is not the only commercial English-Canadian film on the scene. George Kaczender's *U-Turn*, a beautiful and moving light romance, is scheduled to open soon at the York II, and that's worth saving your \$3 for.



Karen Black, as an addict-hooker on the run from the forces of evil and corruption, flees down a corridor from her pursuers in *The Pyx*.



Actors in *AC/DC* exorcize media demons at New Theatre.

Brutal and devastating

AC/DC is a total experience

By BOB Mc BRIDE

The New Theatre's production of Heathcote Williams' *AC/DC* is devastating. The play is brutal and demanding; the theatrical experience is total.

It bombards every sense relentlessly — and fittingly so, for the play's frenzied action is the medium for its message: mass-media's threat to the individual personality.

AC/DC is set in a deliberately ambiguous present. Its characters are carefully chosen victims of future shock. We enter a machine-age playground populated by fragmented personalities who speak a composite language of pop-hyperbole mixed with technological jargon.

Under the expert direction of Tim Leary (an ironic but apt coincidence), the New Theatre actors keep audience emotions honed to a high pitch, while retaining sufficient energy to bring the play to its stunning conclusion. Gary Files and Bonnie Britto are convincing as the hedonists, in their unthinking acceptance of a technological paradise. And Richard Partington, as Maurice, the McLuhanesque mad-

man, gives a performance so vibrant that he threatens to overshadow all other characters.

He is saved from this dubious fate through the growth of Sadie, played by Evamarie Johnson, who becomes the plot's central character. Her erotic seduction of the bewildered and uncommitted Perowne, played by Peter Jobin, is the climax of a remarkable exorcism of media-demons, which in turn paves the way for Perowne's ultimate leap into a machine-induced oblivion (or nirvana?).

Heathcote Williams' play provides a bleakly pessimistic outlook. We are asked to choose between the total acceptance of a "freaked-out" society (which may result in "electric-madness"), and intellectual lobotomization (literally), which leaves us at one with the world but only at the expense of our personal identity.

This message is disturbing, almost completely numbing. The theatrical experience becomes a reminder of our potential demise.

AC/DC is playing through October at the New Theatre, 736 Adelaide. Reservations available at 534-1928.

Henry VIII's death brings sigh of relief

Henry VIII and his Six Wives, opening tomorrow at the Eglinton Theatre, will go out like a lamb — Lady Caroline Lamb to be exact. For those acquainted with ill-conceived historical dramas, the parallel will be only too clear.

The entire basis for the movie is contrived: the good king Henry, lying on his death bed, recalls his eventful past, including a few events for which he wasn't even present. There is no discernible theme to his ramblings, no meaningful beginning, and no end other than his death (for which the viewer can only breathe a sign of relief).

The film marks an obvious attempt to cash in on the popularity of the BBC TV serial recently aired on the CBC, but it doesn't in any way approach the excellence of that series. Since the television segments were by nature episodic, they could present an in-depth study of each royal wife. The movie, however, attempts to boil down each episode and at the same time incorporate meaningful political events of the epoch. The result is a superficial overview which blurs every issue and comments upon none.

Keith Mitchell, who played Henry on the tube, brings to his role moments of regal energy and passion, but often seems as confused by the script as the audience.

Charlotte Rampling, as Anne Boleyn, and Lynne Frederick, as Catherine Howard, are better able to cope with their relatively brief roles, and Miss Frederick even stirs the audience's dormant emotions slightly when she is executed for marital improprieties.

But we are soon lulled back into slumber by the likes of Donald Pleasance, an unlikely Cromwell in transit from *Wedding in White*, and Michael Goodliffe as Sir Thomas More. Judging from Goodliffe's performance, no-one is likely to forget

Paul Scofield. Even the expected costumes and pageantry do little more than touch upon the mediocre — although in this film, mediocrity is a welcome relief from tedium.

Director Waris Hussein must shoulder most of the responsibility for this debacle. It seems simply a case of beating a dead king once too often.

Down the Road is a fine effort by Stephen Stills

By DYNAMITE C. STRANGE

Unassuming as it seems, *Down the Road* by Stephen Stills and his current Manassas group is a fine effort, unsmudged by the excesses which Stills has been known to affect in some of his previous work.

With plenty of full chording, fast-back rhythms and Latin-American figures (drummer Joe Lala's contribution), the group establishes an easy-rolling, almost sumptuous mood from the very beginning, and is able to sustain it throughout with a smooth assurance.

Stills' voice sounds a little rough at times, but this only adds needed edge to his delivery and is in keeping with the no-nonsense unpretentious approach of the album. There are some nice harmony numbers, too, particularly Chris Hillman's *So Many Times*, which is reminiscent of the Byrds' version of *Satisfied Mind*, done some years back. Of the backing musicians, Joe Walsh (James Gang, Barnstorm) stands out with some dirty, well-timed slide guitar lines.

Blending and mingling elements of diverse styles, Manassas has come through with a very entertaining little album, short on ambition maybe, but interesting just the same.