

***Archangel* was ostensibly Maddin's introduction to the world of** "real" movie making: scheduled, crewed, budgeted; headed by a producer and requiring a distributor to make it all worthwhile. Faced with ever increasing budgets and crews as his career moved on, however, Maddin would later look back on the *Archangel* shoot as impossibly idyllic.

Inspired by historical events and a strange 1933 vaudeville-type picture called *International House*, Maddin and his Drone-friend John Harvie came up with a story involving a diverse group of hotel guests trapped together during the Bolshevik uprising in the northern Russia community known as Archangel. Setting the story in that time and place and coming up with the title were Harvie's principle and invaluable contributions to the movie, but his spirit, according to Maddin, pulses through the project with the vitality of lifeblood. His participation in *Archangel* was cut short for reasons copiously but never adequately explained.

With a final script by Maddin and George Toles, *Archangel* became a complex, almost spherically narrative piece which spends the bulk of its running time drawing itself into ever-tightening spirals of repetition. The movie's high-contrast pictorial qualities were sufficiently impressive to attract words of praise from, among others, Stephen H. Burum, a cinematographer known for his work on several Francis Coppola films (including the black and white *Rumble Fish*) and on every Brian De Palma production since *Body Double*. It would also win a Best Experimental Film award from the National Society of

Film Critics.

Archangel would become — and remains — a favourite film to a modest but strongly-opinionated group of people, but has managed to baffle and alienate many more. Its themes of amnesia and confusion rise up off the screen like an opiate to infect the audience; viewers seem to have as much trouble identifying the characters as the characters do each other. As to what exactly is going on at any given moment, that's anybody's guess. And the director himself is not exempt: quoted in J. Hoberman's review of the film, Maddin claims that "*Archangel* is a film literally directed by an amnesiac delirious from the strangeness of directing a film."



Tell me now about the genesis of Archangel.

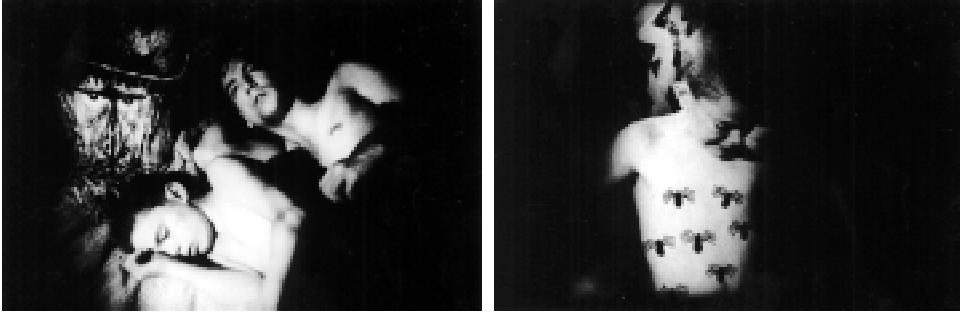
By the time I finished *Gimli Hospital*, John Harvie had re-entered the picture just briefly enough to fire me up about this place, *Archangel*. We spoke very collaboratively about the story in its early stages. I've always loved Harvie's way with an eyebrow and a facial expression, and he's a real natural silent movie actor. So I originally cast Harvie in the lead.

I was going to direct and co-write, and Harvie was going to co-write, star and produce. But I think he was articling at the time, and this was very time consuming, so I hired Greg Klymkiw to produce. Harvie dropped out at that point, because he and Greg don't like each other much. So Harvie disappeared for another few years. Drones aren't allowed to spend more than a few minutes together before drifting away, anyway.

The natural decision then must have been to hire Kyle McCulloch to play the lead.

Yes, I called up Kyle. One thing you could always count on with Kyle was that he'd be wearing the same clothes and sitting at the same address, ready to go with a lot of enthusiasm and no complaining. So it was a good move in the end.

Harvie dronishly buzzed in while I was editing and stood in for a few pickup cameos, so he is in the picture. The lead character, John Boles, was named after him, because his full name



left: David Falkenberg and Kyle McCulloch in *Archangel* right: Falkenberg attacked by animated spiders.

is John Boles Harvie. And he in turn is named for the 1920s singer and 1930s actor, John Boles. One of the worst actors of all time, in fact. He's in *Stella Dallas* and he sang with the Paul Whiteman orchestra.

With Archangel you couldn't afford to spread the shoot over eighteen months. Did this alarm you?

Archangel was a nice transition picture. I was terrified to work on a schedule, and I did have a schedule, but I made sure I had thirty-five days. That would certainly be a longer schedule than any other Manitoba film ever had.

Greg worked very hard on that movie, with no frills and always with an eye towards saving money. He was happy to have an office with a bathroom right beside it, which most producers would see as vile and foul and invasive, but to Greg it was a luxury. On *Careful* he shared his office with the camera department, and you had to cut through the kitchen to even get to the office. Klymkiv was really good at pinching pennies.

The other people on the movie that really stick in my memory are the art department. I can't quite remember how I came to hire all of them, but Jeff Solylo had made the poster and opening credits for *Gimli Hospital*, and was really important spiritual support for me. We shared a love for archival photos and the same books and music. We listened to old scratchy 78s together and fantasized about having a radio show called "S Is For Scratchy." So he was the spiritual art director on *Gimli Hospital* more than anything, because there wasn't much real

art direction. On *Archangel* he had much more of a hands-on involvement, drawing a meagre salary, and working full time on the picture after we were both laid off from archival work. He was head of the art department.

Michael Powell, this odd, ageless guy I had met at one of George Toles' screenings of *The Dead Father*, started mumbling puns, and so I hired him to make props. If he'd chanced to wander through the lives of Hanna and Barbera and Chuck Jones, about fifteen great mumbling, punning cartoon characters with glasses and gap-toothed grins would have been the result. A fine soul who knew his materials. But it was like the Stonehenge gag in *Spinal Tap*, but in reverse. You'd ask him to make an eighteen inch sign and he'd make an eighteen foot one. He worked at night, so every morning it was like going down to the Christmas tree to see what Michael had left there.

I asked him to make something that I had seen in a propaganda book called the Electric Bone Knitter. You'd put it around your leg and an electric current would go through. It was believed during the Great War that this would encourage bone healing. In the *International House* version of the script it was big enough for two people to go in together. But finally I just wanted something big enough for Kyle McCulloch to stick his leg in. Michael asked how big it should be, and I said "As big as a bread box." I don't know what the bread boxes in the Powell home are like, but he built something the size of a Great Dane dog house, with a Jacob's Ladder mounted on top and spinning wheels on the side. I had Kyle crawl through it on a series of treasure hunts for his lost love, and Michael Powell himself played the male nurse who fired it up. Greg Klymkiw dubbed it "The Electric Sodomizer."

What cinematic traditions were you drawing on for Archangel?

In the months after *The Jazz Singer* was released, it was common to graft primitive soundtracks onto existing movies to bring them up to date with the new technology. This was called "goat-glanding," named after a popular medical fad of the day in which monkey and goat glands were transplanted into people – apparently without any horrifying rejections or side effects – in an attempt to correct impotence. So it was a way of making movies more potent. This part-talkie genre was first and foremost in my mind at the time, and I loved it and was proud of it. It was kind of like having the prettiest girlfriend: the part-talkie was the strangest

and most wonderful gal, and I was the cock o' the walk strutting around with the part-talkie on my arm. I knew no one else could have it, because no one else would have the nerve to make a part-talkie. I felt brave and proud.

At the time I liked to justify it to people at film festivals and so on with the simple logic that silent movie vocabulary has been discarded, and it's free to pick up off the busy roadside of the filmic industry. I was a scavenger picking up these lost vocabulary units and was free to use them in any way possible, the way crazy eccentrics stucco their houses with broken 7-Up bottles. I figured there was a very tasteful and elegant precedent in the part-talkie genre. Some of those movies are quite lovely. Some of them even had little partially coloured sequences in them, like *Lonesome. L'Age D'or* is my favourite part-talkie of all time. And I love what von Sternberg did, well into the thirties, by freely mixing intertitles with full talking. So I felt I had a palette full of options at all times: I had intertitles, mime, dialogue, voice over, and I was going to use them all. Just as a sore-armed pitcher will resort to an ephus pitch [a pitch which travels almost straight up as the pitcher shrieks "eep!"] now and again. Every now and again I'd come up with a shot so ridiculous that it felt like an ephus. I never did do it, but I wanted to put the microphone in a vase of flowers and make everyone lean in and talk into it while the camera was bolted down.

When you watch a child colouring, they don't slow down when they've been seized with inspiration, and I felt seized. Even though I did have a leisurely seven weeks to shoot it, I never gave any particular shot more than a second's thought before shooting it. During editing I cursed some of these harefooted decisions, of course, and it became at times something of a horse collar around my neck.

I had my eight year old nephew tied up to a pole with an apple on his head, and a guy from my mom's senior's home was playing Kaiser Wilhelm, who was going to execute this little boy. But my nephew started complaining that he was going to be sick, and ten seconds later he threw up. Kaiser Wilhelm caught the puke in his hands, thus saving the dirty concrete warehouse floor, and then my nephew fainted. He was tied up, so he didn't fall, and I just waited until he woke up to get the shot. But people started screaming at me that I was a monster, so I untied him and we did the shot later.



Clockwise from top left: The famous cascade of bunnies begins; Boles (Kyle McCulloch) dreams of his Iris; while Danchak (Sarah Neville) dreams of her Boles.

Did the circular structure of the film emerge during the editing?

I don't really like reinventing movie scripts in editing. I don't think I'm a good enough editor to do it. So I just cut it the way it was in the script, dropping things that didn't work. And then it was a matter of making it as short as possible. Its few adherents love the movie's obliqueness and opacity, but if I had it to cut over again, I'd make the plot a little easier to grasp. I certainly intended to make a movie that had a story, and there is one there. But whenever I was faced with an editing decision and I could make the obvious or less-than-obvious choice, I always opted for the less-than-obvious. It's being released on DVD, and Greg Klymkiw and I will have a chance to do one of those chatting tracks. Greggy wants to talk about anecdotes and things, but I think I'll take the opportunity to tell the story to people, like those narrators used to do in Mexico when movies first came out.

Do you naturally lean towards the now old-fashioned methods of editing?

With Steenbecks [a flatbed editing machine], editing is exhausting and it's not necessarily always pleasurable, but at least you're behind the wheel. Maybe if I learned how to operate a computer system myself I'd feel better about it. But Avids and the like always come with someone else attached. They can be nice, and they can be on the same wavelength as you, but the fact is there's a wavelength required to be on, and I'd rather bypass it and plug directly in to my movie. All these blind endorsers of progress refuse to acknowledge the step back you always have to take with one step forwards. Sometimes it's two steps back and one forward, or one back and two forward, but I can't stand the people who refuse to acknowledge this tradeoff. I love Walter Murch's book *Blink Of An Eye*, because the last chapter is devoted to the glories of handling celluloid between your fingers and standing up at a Moviola. He likens rewinding your roll at the end of the night to an oil painter putting a canvas upside down or looking at it in a mirror to make sure the composition is strong from every different angle. The mere act of having to watch your film while it's rewinding enables you to literally know it backwards and forwards, and you get to know the rhythms. That's not just highfalutin' fancyspeak, that's the truth. Whereas with a computer you just press "Shut Down" and go home. You never get to know every frame of the movie like you do on a Steenbeck. I'm really just echoing Murch, but

these are the points that really stick with me.

Just to get back to slugging the Canadian model of making movies, half the time they hire an editor who's busy editing while the director's still directing, or, in the director's absence, constructs a rough assembly, so that by the time the director comes on to supervise the cut, he isn't at all familiar with the outtakes.

I have nothing but good things to say about the editor I worked with on *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs*, Reg Harkema, who's since gone on to direct his own pictures. I loved working with him, and he was very kind to work with a eunuch like me. I'd already been de-nuttied by his very hiring. He understood that I was upset when he was hired; we had it out right away, and now we understand each other and are very close.

Did Archangel encourage in audiences the reactions you hoped it would?

I felt like I knew what I was doing on that picture, right through to the interlock, which is where you get to see the film and the sound all together for the first time, at least in the old technology days. Just Gregg and I watched it, and the movie hit us like we'd eaten about fifty peyote buttons. We loved it. Of course, we knew the story backwards and forwards, so it wasn't until the premiere at the Toronto Film Festival that we realized we had a completely incomprehensible story. There was an incredibly high walkout quotient. You learn a lot about the way people walk out of movies when you make a dull picture, or a picture that loses people. You're watching the movie on tenterhooks, praying nobody else leaves. You think you have people, and then one person will get up. You wonder if they're going to the bathroom or escaping, but either way that one person standing gives courage to about ten other people who want to go. People were leaving by the dozen. There was one guy asleep in the front row, and my daughter, out of filial loyalty, piled some popcorn on his head.

Greg was really hurt, but my defense mechanisms had kicked in and it wasn't so bad for me. Walking back to our cars afterwards, we could overhear people complaining about the movie. It was just like Warner Baxter at the end of *42nd Street*, overhearing people talking about how he has it so easy with stars like Ruby Keeler to make the show for him.

But the movie got some excellent reviews and the National Society of Film Critics'

award for Best Experimental Film.

Yes, and they don't even give that award out every year, I suppose because there isn't an experimental film made every year. I felt proud of it, and to this day it remains my favorite disfigured secret child. I guess I hope I make a film that's well known some day so that someone might be compelled to take another look at *Archangel*.

George and I, as screenwriters, certainly learned a lot from the high walkout quotient. We felt people didn't mind the look of the movie, or the stylized acting, but even people who wanted to like the movie couldn't give themselves over to it, because they were lost and bored. So we made sure with *Careful* that we had a script that was as clear as the mountain air. Of course, we heard the same comments all over again.

I tried to animate *Archangel* with a pro-war sentiment, of the kind you can find in periodicals dating from the First World War. I couldn't believe how glorious they made it seem, even though it's just a bunch of guys in trenches slaughtering each other. I thought that, coming out of twenty-five years of intense anti-war feeling, it would emerge as the most irritating pro-war movie since *The Green Berets*. But since I'm not really pro-war, it got watered down considerably. And then, ironically, by the time the picture was released in 1990, the Gulf War was brewing, and by the time the movie really got seen by anyone, in early 1991, George Bush had a 93 percent approval rating because he was bombing the hell out of Saddam.

The movie had its very first screening in Munich, and there's some really good anti-German propaganda in there. I remember a couple of blond beasts at the back of the room



Shadows are the cheapest props of all: gesticulations on the battlefields of *Archangel*.

putting up their hands in a very rigid manner to get my attention, and asking me if I didn't like Germans very much. I told them "No, no. I love Germans!" It seemed the prudent thing to say. I was waiting for years for a question about the minstrel [in *Gimli Hospital*], but instead here I was getting questioned by Aryans who wanted to know if I liked them or not. I had a more ready answer for any angry minstrels out there than I did for the Aryans.

The movie is a real tribute to Gregg and his in-the-trenches producing skills. It cost \$340,000, and I think it must have one of the highest dollars-on-the-screen ratios ever. *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* had a little less on the screen in some ways than *Archangel*, and it cost a lot more. The machinery of production was so slow [on *Ice Nymphs*] that I just ended up shooting entire scenes in static two- or three-shots. That would have been perfectly apt in *Archangel* or *Careful*, made as they were with the spirit of the part-talkie haunting the sets. Being an old baseball fan, I'm dying to come up with a way to measure this ratio statistically, like a slugging percentage. I would say *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* is way below the Mendoza line.