

MICHAEL AND ANDY JONES IN THE ADVENTURE OF FAUSTUS BIDGOOD

By Peter Wintonick

Curatorial essay by Peter Wintonick to accompany the Cinema Lounge screening of Michael and Andy Jones', The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood, on February 27, 2010.

'To work such wide enchantment who call doubt it - You, Poet are the man, So set about it'

- The Director in the Prelude in Goethe's Faust (Part 1)

My last real connection with Newfoundland was sitting in The Newfoundland Bar on the Danforth in Toronto's Greek neighbourhood, confusing enough in and of itself, discussing oceanic cinema-life with photographer friend Robert Frank, which helped clear up the confusion. Beyond that, in my earlier days, I had hitch-hiked to Newfoundland three times. It was always a paradise to me: a land of good people, hard life and good times. The national motto on its' coat of arms could very well be 'life's a bitch, and then you die...laughing.' It is a funny place, (as in humorous). It is also a sad place, ruthlessly exploited and culturally colonized before and since the genocide of the original Newfoundlanders - the Algonkian speaking native Beothuk Indians, called "Red" because of their custom of daubing their bodies with red ocher. I've always had it in my head to retire to Newfoundland - to Ochre Pit Cove where the fisherman's committee once sought a million dollars of foreign aid from the U.S. State Department, after a rejection from its Canadian counterpart. The people of this small community thought that their request was reasonable because Newfoundland is a "Third World Province". I want to make personal cinema in Newfoundland because of these people and because the first film I saw in film school was shot there. I think it was actually shot in Newfoundland before there was a Canada. I remember the film had a lot of waves and boats and pirates and things in it. But more than all of this, I saw my first whale while on a ferry to one of those now disappeared Newfoundland out-port towns. O, Magnificent Cetacea, Where is Your Song Now? Which brings me to Canada's own epic and visionary 'whale of a tale', The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood, the classic, seminal and most important cultural landmark feature from *The Island*.

Now Faustus is what one would call a *vintage* film. It was completed in 1986 and nominated for three 1987 Genie Awards for its screenplay, editing and music. According to the liner notes on the film's newly re-released DVD; 'Faustus Bidgood chronicles the final days in the office of the obsequious little bureaucrat of the title (played with winning numbness by Andy Jones) who, after a decidedly lachrymose revolution, becomes the first ruler of the People's Republic of Newfoundland. Possessed of a profound guilt and a pornographic imagination, Faustus walks through life like a shell-shocked Milquetoast. His febrile imagination, constantly slipping between then and now, here and there, reason and nuttiness. Possessed of the formal energy of early Godard and the comic daring of

Monty Python, *Faustus Bidgood* is an unprecedented event in English Canadian cinema.” It is what I feel too, as I once wrote for Canada’s late, great national cinematic magazine, *Cinema Canada*.

Faustus Bidgood is our Moby Dick. The Jones’ are our Herman Melville. *Faustus Bidgood* gives Goethe's *Faust* a last name. The Jones' and the other creators of this wonderfully true tale have taken *Faust* by the tail or by the horns and tossed him into a soup of cod tongues where the characters also speak in tongues. And Boy, do they speak volumes about our culture and to the possibilities of our future cinema. The crew had originally wanted to open the film at The *Berlin Film Festival* because they thought Faust himself would be able to afford the airfare. But, instead, they opted for the *Montreal World Film Festival* because Montreal is more like Berlin than it realizes, and because the film is more like tomorrow than yesterday. In its time it also played at Toronto's *Festival of Festivals of Festivities*.

Faustus Bidgood incarnates all the classic storytelling techniques, from Shakespeare's prelude, five acts and epilogue to the Grecian diurnal cycle, all the right mechanisms and struggles, all the right twists in the road, the right cinematic verve and swerve. What is served up to us, in the form of an oblique reworking of Goethe’s famous *Faustus*, should have been a huge popular success, if it would have dawned on the Hosers in high places to give the right support apparatus to have allowed for the proper distribution of this important film. Today, it is much the same story.

People, at the time should, have been forced to watch *Faustus Bidgood*. Cinemas then, as now, should have been forced to show a minimum quota of Canadian films, to offset their *Avatar* sized profits. Audiences should have been tied down into their seats and attached to laugh-o-meters. If they didn't laugh their genetic codes off, then they would have no connection to the Founding Fathers of this Confection or to the Floundering Fathers of Newfoundland's own Confederation. Yes folks *Faustus Bidgood* is a million dollars of surrealistic mayhem. It is great and transformational story-telling. It is a "yarn" as opposed to the "yawn" that so characterizes our national cinema. Of course, I am unabashedly biased. I wear my *Faustus Bidgood* button on my sleeve. The film caught me in a fishnet of intrigue and lingerie. It was a fish story without the fish. A fish story where WE are the fish.

In keeping with the natural aural(oral) story-telling traditions of the Eastern part of this new found world, *Faustus Bidgood* is a film about St. John'sian dream theory, the internal workings of the cosmic comic-tragic psyche, fate as "the" ultimate fisherperson, and everything from A to Z (Aristotle to the Zoo). It is Kabuki-Newfie theatre, under the influence of Newfoundland's sister zen island, Japan. When I first saw *Faustus Bidgood* it was 9:00 am on a rainy morning. The place was almost packed, due in part to great advance word and the fact that it was raining

outside. The audience was unusually appreciative. I made notes and notes trying to write down every plot point, and all that what was happening. More notes than I ever made in University, 20 pages worth. *Faustus* is a film which is impossible to describe. It is a romp, pomp and rage, it is *Cinema de la Arty*. To describe the plot in a word...*wild*. To describe the film in a sentence...*what was that?* To describe it in a minute, a day or a week would take a lifetime. I knew *Faustus Bidgood* was a true film when the American critic left halfway through the screening just as the film started to get interesting. Who needs linearity?

Over and beyond the obviously effusive, yet obfuscating objectivity that has characterized this review so far, if only to examine *Faustus Bidgood* as a purely phenomenological experience, then it is both a phenomenon and illogical. That is to say, it is determinism with a demented face-lift. I re-watched the film earlier this month on the new DVD. It still remains a strange puzzle, slow to start, jerky, with strange characters, and for the first few minutes, as one settles into it, it feels a bit like a school varsity play prepared for a year end assembly. But then it starts to grow on you.

And above all, I was attracted to the deft and sure way in which the film is structured and edited. This is the strength of *Faustus*. Speaking as a former editor of films which turned out unintentionally funny, I realize how absolutely impossible a task it is to cut pieces of supposedly comedic celluloid together to make people laugh. I once worked with Ralph Rosenblum in New York City. Here was a man who taught Woody Allen, through good gene splicing, how to make it funny. I remember asking Ralph what the secret was to cutting comedy. He said, "Leave the Joke on the Screen". It was worth getting mugged in NYC for that lesson. And now it seemed, the secret was alive and well and living in an editing room in Newfoundland as well.

The multi-planar jokes in *Faustus Bidgood* work because the timing is right and the characters are crazy. They are ahead of the audience, but not over their heads. Just when you thought you had it all figured out, another element is added, another punch line, or non-sequitur or change-up, or it gets down right serious again. And then it furiously moves forward. The juggling and jostling of the various plots, sub-plots, subtexts and subliminals all divinely intertwine, juxtapose and extrapolate, as if it were legal to juxtapose and extrapolate. You sit back, scratching your head as the film drives literally to a climax. It all makes nonsensical sense, imperfectly. The black in white imagination of a film within an imagination within a television studio within a dream within a...it all makes perfect sense, within budget and without reason.

Although it is a much overused word, I think that the film was a stylistic "breakthrough". *Faustus* broke through a number of stereotypic Canadian style systems, scripted in workshops and improvisational rehearsals before the

next scheduled shoot. Andy Jones would arrive on the set with pages of (trans)script onto which were already superimposed "the Plot" i.e. what was necessary and needed. The shooting went on, in fits and starts, for a year with much downtime for reflection and reworking. Thus the process developed, without the luxury of seeing rushes which, for financial reasons, were kept undeveloped in the deep freeze for a year, while the *Faustus* team relied more on intuition and narrative risk to complete the production.

With the developing and work-printing came more headaches. Earlier trial demo versions, necessary for continued fund-raising, had to be scrapped and re-constituted. At one point, the negative went missing, someone claiming it was used as soundtrack spacing, but it eventually turned up in a lab's vault, an archive before its time. It wasn't that the filmmakers lacked advice. One certain *Culture Czar* of the *Institutional Cinematic Canadian Culture Machine* told them to "get a professional", that "they couldn't edit", and that it was the type of film that they "despised". But, there were others who saw in *Faustus* an original film just waiting to be born and it was with their assistance that got it made. NIFCO, CODCO, NEWFCO, NFB, and other acronymic elements came together to help produce this film.

Once, in an interview I did with director Michael Jones, he stated that: "In the next ten years, Newfoundland-made features will take their place in the off-beat cinema of the world". Jones would go on to make a more accomplished feature film about the Newfoundland independence Movement, called *Secret Nation*. The talent featured in *Faustus*, such as Mary Walsh, Andy Jones, Cathy Jones, Greg Malone, Tommy Sexton and Robert Joy and others, would go on to form the basis of the Newfoundland independent film, documentary and television media movement and to beget brilliant work like *CODCO*, *This Hour has 22 Minutes*, and *The Rick Mercer Report...* some of Newfoundland's, and Canada's most unique and satirical works.

Yes, twenty or more years later, I still believe there is hope for the resurrection of our national cinema as long as it is dressed up in our own indigenous truths. Of course it needs institutional and governmental support and agencies, and regulatory systems, broadcasters, distributors and investors that still believe in Canadian content which is Canadian. It is still up to the *Culture Czars* to discover for themselves what *Faustus Bidgood* and other films of its ilk are all about and then begin again to finance our own filmic future. They know about this in Quebec. Jones and Jones and the rest of their fellow *Faustus* travelers were, and are as talented as any Woody Allen, Monty Python or Stephen Harper ever were, their only fault...being seriously funny.

The only sin that these Newfoundland progenitors of Canadian comedy committed, it seems, was that they were from a "region" of "Canada". From a part of a nation, where Canadian culture meant then and mostly still means

today, being made in Toronto and in English. To use that horrible, centralist Canadian word *Faustus* is a *regional film*. But that phrase also speaks to a nation's *funny bone*, to its *cultural viability*, to its *future*. If audiences in Ottawa, Canada's Disneyland, can watch daily doses of the humorous machinations of our *Parliamentary Question Period*, at least when the House of Commons is not being prorogued, then there should be a place in every one of our nation's movie houses for the national funny bone and for a cinema that is sad, off-beat and hopeful or for independent movies like the *Faustus Bidgood's* of the country that Ottawa purports to be the capital of.

Perhaps, after an examination of the film's dexterous montage, its sinuous satiric plot and the revelations of its making, the most important thing to be said about *Faustus Bidgood* is that it is a serious work. It examines a psychological reality and cinematic time as Alain Resnais does. It dismantles national history, media, politics, religion and education as few others dare to. It turns the *Newfie Joke* inside out, replacing self-depreciation with angry, artistic self-assertion. It writes a declaration of artistic independence. It takes on the *big* questions and makes them absurdly questionable. Historically, it demonstrated, even if it was far from perfect, that Canadian and Newfoundland cinema had room to grow. And it did.

Faustus Bidgood is a film made on a dream by dreamers for dreamers. It created a reality in that dream life. That is what a national cinema is supposed to do, isn't it? Two dozen years after its making, we still can expect many more cinematic surprises from the New-found-lands of this land. From the Yukons, the Winnipegs, and the Montréal's, *Faustus* is the Brave New Cinema. It is revolutionary. It is pure. And, while the tired Canadian corporate cinema continually goes to the dogs in search of a big garish, violent or adolescent hit, *Faustus* is an example of a film which is free from dogma and the industrial imperatives of Canada's official culture. Then, as now, it is time to overthrow the *Culture Czars*, to take back the night, our culture and the day. Take back our stories and our screens. Let's have more and more from the Jones' of this Land. More and more films as valuable as *Faustus Bidgood* and...the whales just might be happy again.

About Peter Wintonick:

Peter Wintonick is a Canadian filmmaker, producer, critic and doc media activist. Well known around the world as a documentary diplomat, he spreads the gospel according to reality through his films. He co-directed one of the most successful Canadian documentaries ever made, Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and The Media, as well as several other documentaries (pilgrimage, Cinema Verité: Defining the Moment, Seeing is Believing: Handicams, Human Rights and the News, Second Sight). He is a former Thinker in Residence to South Australian Premier, Mike Rann. He won the Governor-General's Media Arts Award - Canada's highest such honour. He advises festivals,

organizes conferences about cross-platform documentaries with non-profit organizations like DOCAGORA.net. He promotes green-media issues with GREENCODE.ca and he holds workshops with emerging filmmakers, from China to Indonesia, from Mexico City to Montreal with the latter city being his home base and where he operates a film production and distribution company called Necessary Illusions Productions. He is currently developing several films with partners in Sweden, Canada and Asia.