



... LARRY KENT ...

CANADA'S ORIGINAL INDIE FILMMAKER

words by shane twerdun

Ten years ago I met Larry Kent and my life was changed forever. I had just graduated from Vancouver Film School's acting department then I stuck around employed as an on-call maintenance man, moving chairs and cleaning rooms, desperately trying to earn my stripes and make my way onto a set. There was a buzz around Larry Kent's arrival for a two-week shoot, but there was little I knew about him other than he had directed a bunch of important Canadian films and had a reputation for being an embittered, possibly senile, cinematic renegade with a quick temper and a foul mouth. Little did I know that this 79-year-old bear would become one of my best friends and teach me the true value of filmmaking, life and how to become a better person.

(top)
On set of *Bitter Ash*, 1963
frenchphoto.

“It was home to whores,
thieves and drug addicts.
I could relate in some way.”

Enter Shane; early twenties, unkempt and walking swiftly. He has a tripod across his shoulder and a confused look on his face. He rounds the corner from the hallway and into the foyer.

I encountered Larry for the first time in the foyer of the school. He was standing in front of the bulletin board reading an article about himself. I noticed he was groaning and rocking back and forth on his heels, emitting a noise like a snoring toad. He was short, thick and solid, like a bank safe that had sprouted legs. His doublewide running shoes were—and often still are—untied. His shirt hung low, just above his knees, and was covered in all sorts of stains. His massive hands looked like hockey gloves and swung heavily just above his knees. Hair poked out of his ears like white straw. From behind, he looked like an old ape.

I introduced myself and he spun around, giving me the once-over with his eyes. “Do you know how to use a camera?” he asked. I lied and told him not to worry, that everything would be fine. I had no idea what I was doing. “You dorks have no idea how to make a movie. I mean who are these fucking people?” I smiled weakly and he just shook his head and slapped me on the back with his giant hand. “C’m on kid. Let’s go.”

Larry Kent was born in South Africa in 1933 and spent his formative years at St Mark’s boarding school in Swaziland. Restless and hungry for adventure, Larry ran away when he was 11, eventually making it all the way to the Belgian Congo, a journey that lasted over a month and covered more than 2500 miles. After school, he made his way to Canada’s West Coast where he discovered the two loves of his life: his wife Mary (who he has been married to for over 50 years) and filmmaking. At that time, nobody in B.C. was making films, so Larry decided to start, becoming the premiere independent filmmaker in Canada and kicking of a long career of firsts.

Cut to the basement of a small house. A 29-year-old Larry Kent sits on the floor with pages of paper around him. He hits an Olympia typewriter with his index finger, jamming the keys.

In the early 60s, Larry wrote, directed and financed his first film: a 28-minute short called *Hastings Street*, set in Vancouver’s iconic DTES neighborhood and told the

story of Charlie, a young man fresh out of jail after three years. Charlie is steadfast to stay on the straight and narrow, but doing so proves harder than expected. His options to earn a honest living are running out faster than his money, and with his life on the line, he needs to return to crime once again in order to survive. Larry cast local actors and had his friend Dick Bellamy shoot it because he was the only person Larry knew with a 16mm camera. “I can’t explain why I made this film. I’m not able to intellectualize it, I just had a feeling,” he told me. “Hastings St. was a place of alienation; it was a place of people on the edge. It was vibrant in an ironic way. It was home to whores, thieves and drug addicts. I could relate in some way.” As an immigrant in Canada, Larry thought of himself as a person that comes from another country, never quite home and always *the other*.

When Larry shot *Hastings Street* in 1962, the only other films that were being made in Canada were either documentary films or films that were funded and produced by the CBC. “As far as I know, I was the only person making fiction films. I was also the only person doing it on my own.” But like many trailblazers, Larry’s route was not without difficulty. For instance, none of them knew what they were doing on set. “All I knew was that I believed in the story. I had a connection with it,” says Larry. How strongly did Larry believe in the story? Enough to wait an astounding 45 years to complete it. Principle photography on *Hastings Street* was done without sound and by the time Larry found someone that knew how to record dialogue for film, he had all ready shot another movie. Larry shelved *Hastings Street* for the next 45 years, until 2007, when he convinced a group of young Vancouver filmmakers to record the sound and release *Hastings Street* for the first time.

Larry created the most buzz with the release of *Bitter Ash*, the feature he had put *Hastings Street* on hold for to create. It was the first feature length independent movie to come from Canada, but credit for creating a new genre was soon overshadowed by the film’s



On set of *Bitter Ash*, 1963
frenchphoto.

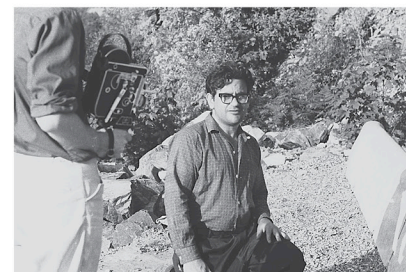


content. “I was not a guy trying to make a commercial movie, or get a job at the CBC,” Larry says. “My movies come from the gut—this was the kind of thing that I was surrounded by at the time.”

Bitter Ash was the first Canadian movie to show nudity and the sexual freedom that was becoming prevalent in Vancouver in the early 60s. Audiences were polarized by the film; some thought it was a breakthrough in cinematic freedom, while others were so against it they contacted the authorities, forcing the film to be withdrawn from screens after just the first day.

Newspaper spins onto the screen.
Headline reads: “*Bitter Ash* banned from B.C. screens!”

The press was appalled at the graphic sexual nature of the movie. Larry explains: “Canadians were, and still are, very cautious. At the time, they were still reeling from the depression and everyone was selling this American ideal of what life should be. My movies showed that the 9-5 job can be very devastating. I wanted to show the frustration of living like that. I think it upset a lot of people because it was true and they didn’t



want to admit it.” Larry was successful in convincing the UBC student union to allow the film back on screen and they agreed under one condition: it could not be shown to the general public. At a McGill University screening in Montreal, the doors were chained up after the theatre was filled, but the audience outside was so outraged that they couldn’t see the film, they ripped down the doors and flooded the theatre anyways. “We were double full that night,” Larry says and laughs. “People were everywhere, you couldn’t move.”

Larry continued to make films that examined relevant political issues like women’s rights, sexuality, drug use, violence and alienation. His voice was singular in Canadian culture and soon began to expand beyond the border to people all over the world. Fritz Lang, Roberto Rossellini and Canada’s own David Cronenberg have all been quoted citing Larry Kent as an inspiration to their work. “I would not be making films if it weren’t for Larry Kent,” says Cronenberg. “I remember watching these movies and thinking: what are these films, who’s making them, and how are they getting made?” When Larry met Jack Nicholson at the Montreal Film Festival in 1967, he found



he had a fan in the young actor. Nicholson agreed to make a movie with Larry, requesting \$5000 to cover his alimony and child support during filming. Larry was unable to find the money and Nicholson instead went on to make *Easy Rider*.

For all the attention Larry's prickly persona garners though, it's easy to overlook his human side. In 2007, five years after that day we met beside the bulletin board,



Film still from *Are You With Me*
(in production)

Larry asked me to star in his latest film: an experimental, totally improvised movie called *Ex/ley*. We shot in Vancouver over the course of three weeks during which time Larry and I would spend up to 18 hours a day together. Each day after shooting, Larry and I walked together for another few hours talking about film, art and life. Larry can almost seem like a cartoon, someone totally brazen and larger than life, but his human side is what makes him a really great director. He understands the subtlety of human nature and he's fascinated by the inner motivations behind the actions we take. He taught me that this is the place the character really lives. During those talks with Larry we gained each other's confidence, and in the process, became very close friends. As an actor, you want to be able to trust the director you're working with, and by the time we were ready to shoot, I would have done anything for him.

Last summer I was with Larry in Montreal premiering our film at the Fantasia Film



Film stills from *Hastings Street*, 1962

Festival. At that time, some friends and I were shooting a documentary about Larry called *Are You With Me?* We had been filming him for a week straight and were getting ready to head back to Vancouver. It was a hot day and we all decided to rest on the steps of the art gallery. I was speaking with Larry about the despair one feels after seeing their movie for the first time on the big screen. I had just suffered a horrendous emotional crash after premiering the film to a crowd of 45 people. I felt a sense of damage and despair when everything we had gone through over the last four years culminated in what I felt was a total disaster. But Larry, for all his gristle and fire, has a very gentle side and he spoke to me calmly, putting everything into perspective. At that moment, I felt incredibly close to him and decided to ask him a question he had been evading me on that entire week.

"What do you think you will be remembered for?" I asked. "After it's all said and done, what do you think it will be?"

He leaned back on his elbows and looked long into the distance. "What do you think?" he responded. Larry is a master at turning the question around and putting it back on the person asking it.

"Your persistence. You've made all these films without having to compromise you're vision. You never quit."

"Yeaahhhh, but you're wrong and I'll tell you why." This is Larry's favourite thing to say. "I think that's just the obvious choice, but if I really had to answer truthfully now, and I'm being honest, is that the films for me were about working with the people. There's nothing in the world better than making a film with people you love. I would say that people were better people after working on a film with me. Going through that process together does something to you that you can't find anywhere else, wouldn't you agree?"

"Of course," I said even though I was a little shocked at his answer and considered it to be a massive understatement. At nearly 80 years of age, he looked back on his life's work, and saw that it wasn't about the movies, but about the people he had worked with. His motive all along was to help them become better people.

Larry rolled onto his side, offered me his hand and I pulled him to his feet. I had to catch a plane back to Vancouver, but I wasn't ready to say goodbye. My eyes welled with emotion behind my sunglasses.

Larry swung his arms out and said, "Come here kid." I leaned in and hugged him. "Love ya," he said.

"Love you too Larry."

He let me go and made his way down the cement steps of the gallery. Without turning around, he waved a giant arm in the air as a final salute and walked into the distance, down the cobblestone corridor, the tapestry of the city glowing gold in the soft afternoon light.

The hero disappears into the horizon as the sun sets slowly in front of him. Cue music. Roll credits.

As you read this, a friend and I will have begun principle photography on a modern re-telling of *Hastings Street*, with Larry's blessing. Like Larry said, there was just something about the story that created an emotional connection. It's a privilege to be able to make a movie, not a choice. You're always struggling to tell your stories. You struggle with yourself, you struggle with the people around you, you struggle with the logistics of making a film without any money. I didn't choose to be an independent filmmaker; I became one out of necessity. If you want to make a film, you need to be able to rise above the odds and I don't think I'd have the faintest clue how to do that if I hadn't met Larry Kent. □