

Citizen Gangster: A drama of postwar Canadian life

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The following is an edited version of a comment written as part of the WSWWS coverage of the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival. The Canadian film Citizen Gangster, originally entitled Edwin Boyd, has now opened in certain movie theaters in North America.

To most of those who come on business to the Toronto film festival, social conditions in the host city are of little interest. (That 57 percent of the industry “delegates” who attend the annual event enjoy household incomes of more than C\$100,000, and 23 percent more than C\$150,000, according to a 2010 economic impact report, is not immaterial in this regard.) To many festival attendees, “Toronto” is merely an adjective that goes first in the festival’s title, an event more readily identified with a handful of upscale hotels, bars and restaurants.

In fact, general conditions of life in Toronto are changing for the worse, in line with decades-long trends and, more immediately and dramatically, attacks on the working population everywhere since the financial crisis of 2008. One sees it on downtown streets. The number of people picking through the garbage or sleeping on sidewalks, including only a block from the festival’s offices, has increased.

Statistics bear out one’s personal observations. More than 600,000 people in Toronto now live at or below the official poverty line. The city’s welfare caseload grew by 15 percent between December 2008 and December 2009. Food bank use increased by 14 percent from 2009 to 2010.

As the WSWWS noted in 2010, “On any given night, an estimated 5,000 people sleep in shelters or on [Toronto] city streets. In 2009, 33,000 people were homeless some time over the course of the year. For those who do have jobs, the average hourly wage has been virtually flat for

two years, coming in at \$22.86 per hour in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Rental rates are so high that a quarter of a million households spend at least 30 percent of their monthly income just to keep a roof over their heads. And of those households, 50,000 are forced to devote half of their monthly income to housing. Meanwhile, Toronto rents continue to rise at more than twice the national average.”

According to a poverty fact sheet, the annual income needed to afford a one-bedroom apartment in Toronto is C\$38,000. Fifty-five percent of single parents in the city earn less than that, 31 percent of couples and 69 percent of people living alone. In other words, the struggle to make ends meet is an increasingly painful reality for hundreds of thousands in the city.

A study released by the United Way in January 2011 pointed to the increasing concentration of poverty in decaying high-rise rental housing. By 2006, nearly 40 percent of all the families in high-rise buildings in the City of Toronto were poor, up from 25 percent in 1981. The authors point to various reasons for the concentration of low-income tenants in high-rise buildings, including the targeting of new private-sector housing “almost exclusively at better-off families.”

“Housing market forces are only part of the story however,” the report points out. “It is the broad forces of income inequality that have been gaining momentum since the 1980s which have created the conditions for concentrated poverty. This has resulted in a significant decline in the incomes of families, in real terms, over the past 25 years, and an increase in the number of families living in poverty.

“In the City of Toronto, the median income of all

households, in adjusted 2006 dollars, declined by \$3,580 over the 25-year period, from 1981 to 2006. But the decline among renter households was nearly double this amount, at \$6,396. In the inner suburbs, renters suffered even bigger losses in their annual incomes over this period.” Taking inflation into account, household incomes in Toronto have declined by 10 percent over the past 15 years.

Toronto’s right-wing millionaire mayor, Rob Ford, is spearheading an attack on municipal services and jobs that will result in a further deterioration in the quality of life for the vast majority of the city’s population. The violent suppression of the G20 protests in Toronto in June 2010 by police, 7,000 of whom were deployed in the downtown area, with 1,000 arrests and the use of snatch squads, teargas and rubber and plastic bullets, revealed the real state of social relations in the city and the country as a whole.

One would think that conditions of life in the nation’s largest city and metropolitan area might intrigue Canadian filmmakers (southern Ontario as a whole contains some 25 percent of the country’s population). Yet, alas, in the nearly two decades I have been attending the festival, I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of works dealing dramatically with that general subject.

However, films made in Canada treating matters generally lumped into the category of “identity politics,” gender, sexuality, race, etc., have never been in short supply. No, never in short supply, but not very interesting or illuminating either, for the most part.

For that reason, it seemed of some objective significance that the 2011 festival presented a work that depicted social relations in Canada in a relatively harsh light, that did not take as its premise the “kinder, gentler” nature of capitalism there, that scraped away the surface and discovered the brutality of the social order.

This was *Citizen Gangster* (originally entitled *Edwin Boyd*), directed by Nathan Morlando. The film offers a fictionalized account of a real-life bank robber in Toronto in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In Morlando’s film, Boyd (Scott Speedman) returns from World War II, with a British wife (Kelly Reilly) and two children, and finds few opportunities for veterans.

The family lives in poverty. “I didn’t bring you over from England to live like this,” he says.

Boyd turns to robbing banks, successfully knocking off several before his wife discovers the truth. “I’m not crazy,” he explains in the face of her shock and fright, “the world is crazy. I’m its mirror.” The film captures something important about the realities of postwar life in Toronto, with virtually all its scenes seemingly (and fittingly) shot in raw, cold, grey weather. This was an economically grim time, but also socially volatile. After six years of war and sacrifice, following on the harsh Depression years, Canada experienced a powerful strike wave. In 1949 in Toronto, the year Boyd began robbing banks, a socialist (Trotskyist) candidate won 23 percent of the vote in the city’s mayoral election.

Again, whatever the filmmaker’s conscious intentions, he manages to capture some of this social volatility in an initial scene in Toronto’s notorious Don Jail, where Boyd eventually ends up and from which he breaks out twice. Kevin Durand gives a remarkable performance as the explosive Lenny Jackson, another bitter veteran and one of Boyd’s eventual partners in crime, who lost a foot back in Canada working for the railway.

Although a period piece, *Citizen Gangster*’s potshots at the banks (during one robbery, Boyd asks customers and tellers, “What good have they [the banks] ever done you?”), its concern with the fate of war veterans, its unsympathetic attitude toward authority, all this speaks to the present-day and present realities in Canada. The inclusion of a scene of a double hanging (Jackson and another gang member were executed in 1952, for shooting a policeman) is grisly and disturbing.

Someone is paying attention, not everyone is fooled.



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