

A man she didn't love.
A marriage she couldn't leave.
A murder she can't explain.



EDGE OF MADNESS



LIONS GATE FILMS PRESENTS A CINÉGRUPE / CREDO / GREGORIAN FILMS PRODUCTION AN ANNE WHEELER FILM **EDGE OF MADNESS** CAROLINE DIAVERNAS PAUL JOHANSSON COREY SEVIER AND BRENDAN FEHR AL SHAM
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID FRAZEE PRODUCTION DESIGNER LOUISE MIDDLETON COSTUME DESIGNER LINDA MADUEN EDITOR ROBERT LOWYER MUSIC RANDOLPH PETERS EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS MARIE-CLAUDE BEAUCHEMPEL DEREK MAZUR JACQUES PETTIGREW
AND CHARLES K. PITTS BASED ON THE SHORT STORY "A WILDERNESS STATION" BY ALICE MUNRO WRITTEN BY CHARLES K. PITTS AND ANNE WHEELER PRODUCED BY BILL GRAY DIRECTED BY ANNE WHEELER

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Meeting in the middle

A Wilderness Station, a murder mystery set in Manitoba circa 1850, is currently filming in and around Winnipeg, with May 11 scheduled as the feature film's wrap date.

The project, from Montreal's **CineGroupe**, Winnipeg's **Credo Entertainment** and Vancouver-based **Gregorian Films**, was written by **Charles K. Pitts** and **Anne Wheeler** and is being produced by **Bill Gray**. Pitts, Credo's **Derek Mazur** and CineGroupe's **Marie-Claude Beauchamp** and **Jacques Pettigrew** are exec producing.

Directed by Wheeler (*Better Than Chocolate*) from a story by **Alice Munro**, the film stars **Brendan Fehr** (*Roswell, The Forsaken*), **Caroline Dhavernas** (*Out Cold*) and **Corey Sevier** (*Little Men*). The action starts with 18-year-old Annie stumbling into the Fort Garry trading post half-mad after wandering through the wilderness for several days, claiming to have mur-

dered her husband, a 20-year-old pioneer. The murder mystery unfolds through intercepted letters to her sister, wherein Annie describes the circumstances leading to the death.

Funding for the \$4.5-million project comes from **Telefilm Canada**, the **CF3**, **Manitoba Film and Sound**, the **Independent Production Fund** and federal and provincial tax credits. Distribution will be handled by **Christal Films** and **Lions Gate**.

New film lost in Wilderness

DIRECTOR Anne Wheeler's *Suddenly Naked* may have proven popular with the Genie jury, but her latest feature, *The Edge of Madness* (aka *A Wilderness Station*), is currently languishing under the radar.

The murder mystery, set against a backdrop of 1850s Manitoba, was passed over by the Toronto and Vancouver film festivals and opened on Dec. 6 on just one screen in Vancouver. The film is produced by Montreal's CineGroupe, Winnipeg's Credo Entertainment and Vancouver-based Gregorian Films, and is distributed by Lions Gate Films.

"I'm stupefied that we're having such a small release. That's typically Canadian. Done for not much money, we've got some incredible locations. But we don't have any stars. That's the whole thing right there," Wheeler scoffs. The film's cast includes Brendan Fehr (TV's *Roswell*) and Corey Sevier (*Little Men*).

It didn't help that Sarah Polley, originally tapped to star in this adaptation of an Alice Munro short story, pulled out of the project and was replaced by the lesser-known Caroline Dhavernas (*The Baroness and the Pig*).

"I worry for this movie. It's an important film," Wheeler says. "We did a day of press and are running advertisements, but it will all be decided on what happens now," she adds, with an eye on the opening weekend.

This kind of suspense would drive any filmmaker to the edge of madness. •

Etan Vlessing

DEEMED DICEY BY BIG BROTHERS

There should be more chances to catch the documentary *Little Sisters vs. Big Brother*, but you never know. Even when the locally made flick—about censorship and Canadian law—made its premiere at the Gay and Lesbian film festival here in August, it ran into snags from the B.C. film-classification board. Now it gets a TV airing, on PrideVision, Saturday (December 7) at 8 p.m. But even with such a friendly setting, director **Aerlyn Weissman** is jumping through hoops to get her film to broadcast.

Weissman and producer **Carl Green** must obscure some identities before public exposure. In a call to the Georgia Straight, the B.C.-based director sounded a bit steamed that she can't just show her film and move on.

"Under the rubric of copyright law, trademark infringement, administrative guidelines, institutional policy, and

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caution around insurance liability," she explained, "what we see and don't see is being rigorously controlled. The end result is de facto censorship, allowing for a pretty narrow range of expression. You know, I haven't made some revolutionary, barn-burning documentary; this is pretty civilized discourse on a public issue. We don't have genuinely protected freedom of speech,

and the fact that laws are applied selectively means that you never know where you stand."

The generally upbeat movie is scheduled to be shown on Global stations, and CBC has expressed interest, but the filmmakers have found broadcasters and journalists skittish on the subject of, well, their skittishness on the subject. "The fact is, we just have no tools to fight censorship in this country. And when there isn't even the will to do it..." Weissman says, trailing off with a sigh.

GO ASK ALICE! Local writer-producer **Charles K. Pitts** has a thing for **Alice Munro**. Maybe not for the famed short-story author herself, but there's something about her concise,

mordant, and distinctively Canadian style that gets his juices flowing. In 1990, he decided to write an adaptation of Munro's 1940s-set novella *The Lives of Girls and Women*, even though her agent refused to grant his producer, Raymond Massey, the rights. Stubbornly, Pitts got the script to the reclusive writer herself, and she helped bring the agent around.

It was eventually turned into a CBC-TV movie. Most budding filmmakers would, at this point, move on to some other Canlit icon, but Pitts tackled another, more challenging Munro piece. A *New Yorker* story anthologized in the 1995 collection *Open Secrets*, "**A Wilderness Station**" was a tale of one teenage girl's trial by ordeal in 1850s Ontario. His version went through the usual tortured production history, led by his own Gregorian Films, which eventually hired director Anne Wheeler, who also worked on the script.

At one point, Sarah Polley and

Ethan Hawke were slated to star, but Polley walked because of casting differences, and the film—with hands-on production by Bill Gray and Derek Mazur—was shot with unknown actors in 2000. The result, rechristened ***Edge of Madness***, opens Friday (December 6), and after five years on this one project, Pitts is ready to move into more TV series and MOVs through a new company, Novalis Entertainment.

"The two films I've been involved with," Pitts recently told the Straight, "have brought back more than double what their investors put into them. Art can make money, if you know how to reach the Masterpiece Theatre audience. I was always attracted to Ingmar Bergman, and Alice Munro just happens to be one artist who writes at that depth. You could mine her work indefinitely, but I am looking at some other writers at the moment."

• **KEN EISNER**

Pioneer Hardships Haunt Wheeler

BY BETH McARTHUR

Laura Ingalls had it made compared to Annie Heiron. When Herron, the naive, orphaned protagonist of Anne Wheeler's 19th-century murder-mystery movie, *Edge of Madness*, is sold into marriage to an abusive Scottish homesteader, there is no Michael Landon riding to the rescue. Only on that day when Annie is found wandering alone, crazed, in a snowstorm, and confessing to murder, does the town's paternalistic legal authority investigate the girl's familial circumstances. Distinguished by multiple flashbacks depicting marital rape, adultery, betrayal, and death, *Madness* could accurately be considered *A Little Shakespeare on the Prairie*.

"This is a very Shakespearean story. This is a Greek fable. It's a parable," Wheeler explained of her and Charles K. Pitts's adaptation of Alice Munro's short story "A Wilderness Station". (See related story in Movie Notes on page 83.) In a Vancouver hotel to promote the film, which opens on December 6, Wheeler told the *Georgia Straight*

that she wrote *Madness* in a pseudo-mystery structure and cast young actors Caroline Dhavernas, New Westminster native Brendan Fehr, and Corey Sevier in the lead roles to make the historical drama, set in Manitoba circa 1850, appealing to youthful viewers.

"I really wanted the younger audience to be able to put themselves in these people's shoes so that they understood who we are," she explained. "I think when we see most of what Hollywood's put out, it's been like *Little House on the Prairie* and it's been a lot of people around 25 to 30 or 35 years old playing the new homesteader. The reality was that most of these people were teenagers."

Exploring the lives of homesteaders is not new to the 56-year-old director. Nearly 30 years ago, Wheeler made her documentary short film "Great Grandmother", a project that celebrated Canada's pioneer women and for which Wheeler amassed "a roomful" of research about life at the turn of the century. But it was the contents of a diary she received—in which a woman recounted her life on a homestead where,

for eight years, she didn't see another soul except her children and her abusive husband—that lingered with the director.

"He had a place where he locked her up when he went off the homestead," Wheeler recalled. "I always thought of her. I always thought it was a story that really moved me."

"I mean, you were a piece of property. You couldn't own property; you certainly had no right to speak your mind. We've come a long way."

As for Wheeler's sudden incarnation as a western Canadian tragedian—she also recently directed a movie of the week examining the RCMP investigation into B.C. serial killer Clifford Olsen—the director asserts that she's not planning to abandon lighter-themed material such as her international hit *Better Than Chocolate* in order to dwell on the dark side.

"My Indian name is Madeva Muggdha," explained the director, who spent time in ashrams in the '70s. "It means 'madly in love with the devil and the divine'." Wheeler smiled broadly. "I like to see all the colours." ■

Edge of Madness

Starring Caroline Dhavernas, Paul Johansson, and Brendan Fehr.
Rating unavailable.

Opens Friday, December 6, at the
Cinemark Tinseltown

• **By JANET SMITH**

Even before the first line of script begins, it's obvious that director Anne Wheeler has turned an enigmatic Alice Munro short story into gothic melodrama. To the sounds of orchestral swells, a woman in a hooded cloak stumbles through a blizzard. Then, blazing across the screen, comes the film's cheesy title: *Edge of Madness*. At this point, you can be forgiven for expecting something akin to *Jane Eyre* spun into a Harlequin Romance.

Thankfully, the film improves after its over-the-top beginning, but the misstart immediately sets off the kind of nagging "what if" questions directors don't like crit-

ics to raise: like, what if someone with a subtler hand had tackled this story? Wasn't there the potential for a more haunting take on this snapshot of feminist frontier history? Something that could achieve the dark poetry of Jane Campion's *The Piano*?

We'll never know the answer, but in the meantime, we at least get an atmospheric look at lust and jealousy on a wintry prairie plain. Wheeler, who gets a cowriting credit with Charles K. Pitts, has evocatively changed the 1850s setting of Munro's "A Wilderness Station" (part of the *Open Secrets* anthology) from Ontario's Huronia region to Manitoba. More problematic is her recasting of the tale as a conventional detective story: Annie (Caroline Dhavernas) stumbles into the trading post of Fort Garry, confessing murder, and the local legal authority, James Mullen (Paul Johansson), must determine if she's insane or should be hanged. As Mullen uncovers clues, Annie's experiences are told through flashbacks. The abusive Simon (Brendan Fehr) brings her out to his remote homestead in an arranged marriage. Passions start to flare as Simon's young brother George (Corey Sevier) becomes

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Edge of Madness

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increasingly outraged at his sibling's treatment of his sister-in-law.

Wheeler does a good job of building the sense of isolation: with its skeletal trees and wispy snow drifts, the Red River Valley locale looks about as cut off from the world as the moon. Fehr and Sevier create well-defined opposites, one rough and stubborn, one gentle and artistic. Newcomer Dhavernas has an ethereal screen presence, but there's not enough development of her character's motivations: in Munro's story, a few lines make it clear why Annie would take off with a strange man to a harsh land. (As an orphan, her life options are dismal.) Here, though, it's written off to eager naiveté. The issue of her sanity is not treated seriously enough to throw events into question. And the scenes with our fur parka'd Sherlock seem stiff and contrived.

In the end, Wheeler herself may be too determined to play sleuth, to explain things in overt detail instead of leaving that sense of eerie uncertainty that makes Munro's work so satisfying. Munro's tale is the kind of fascinating Canadian herstory that is epic enough to tell on film. Yet with unknown actors (Sarah Polley reportedly pulled out of the project) and a vision that too often goes over the edge of melodrama, the movie will probably be relegated to a few domestic screens—stationed in the relative wilderness of Movieland.

Director takes positive view

1 6 2 11 2001

Anne Wheeler is proud of her new work despite getting snubbed by film fests in Toronto and Vancouver

By KATHERINE MONK

She's been referred to as a directorial version of Yoda — a serene, tranquil and zen-like presence on the set. But these days, Anne Wheeler is feeling just a little frustrated.

After slogging away in the Canadian film industry for decades, and generating a solid reputation through her body of work that includes classics such as *Bye, Bye Blues* and more recently *Suddenly Naked* and *Better than Chocolate*, Wheeler is suddenly feeling like an outsider in Canada's film clique.

Her last effort, *The Edge of Madness*, was not selected for the Toronto International Film Festival. Wheeler could deal with it. After all, her previous four films were chosen by Hogtown's programmers.

She had a harder time with her rejection by the Vancouver International Film Festival — her hometown film party.

"I don't really understand it," she says. "I think it's one of my stronger films, and more in keeping with something like *Bye, Bye Blues*, which I still get letters about I've made a lot of films and I think I'm doing a pretty good job. So it was a bit of a surprise not getting in to Vancouver, but what do you do? They're probably trying to focus more on young directors — so they can lay claim to discovering them."

Wheeler's frustration with *The Edge of Madness* is certainly understandable.

The film, based on an Alice Munro short story titled *A Wilderness Station*, is a rustic period piece about a young woman who marries a homesteader (played by former Mission resident Brendan Fehr), and later becomes tangled up in his murder.

Part tragedy, part murder mystery, part feminist history lesson, *The Edge of Madness* was originally supposed to star Canadian celebrity Sarah Polley. But when Polley pulled out at the eleventh hour, the team was forced to recast in a big hurry.

Taking Polley's place was Caroline Dhavernas, a relative unknown. She does a great job, but without Polley in the mix, the distributors lost interest in pushing for a wide release. The result of all the casting snags is that *The Edge of Madness* will be released in Vancouver — and just Vancouver — this Friday.

If the film takes off, the release will go wider. But the struggle for any

Canadian film to find an audience is usually of epic proportion, and sometimes that gets the best of Wheeler.

"It's a bit like having a lost child," she says. "You always give it your best and you just want people to see them. That's why I do TV, because at least that way, you can be sure that a few million people will see what you've done."

Wheeler is no stranger to the small screen, and whenever possible, she lets both worlds collide. In *The Edge of Madness*, she capitalized on her friendship with *DaVinci's Inquest* cinematographer (and director) Davidz Frazee.

The two met while she was directing one of the *DaVinci* pilots, and when the script for *The Edge of Madness* (then known as *A Wilderness Station*) came in her direction after it was adapted by local producer and writer Charles Pitts, she let her *DaVinci's* experience craft more than the cinematographic element. She grafted an

entire murder mystery line on to the stark, layered, Rashomon-like story about an early chapter in Canadian history.

Wheeler was also forced to change the setting from Ontario to Manitoba's Red River Valley because the Manitoba film commission was offering some much-needed financial incentives.

She doesn't see the shift in locales, nor the *DaVinci*-like take on the story, as anything more than dramatic licence and good business sense. The story, she says, is universal.

"To me, this was a piece of reality that was never exposed before. We all have the *Little House on the Prairie* fantasy of what it was like back then. I thought it was a great opportunity to pay tribute to those women who helped settle this country."

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The Edge of Madness opens at Tinseltown on Friday, Dec. 6.

Madness on the Canadian frontier

Period murder mystery has feel for bitter hardship of 19th-century West

EDGE OF MADNESS

Starring Caroline Dhavernas and Paul Johansson.
18A, 99 min. ★★½

By MARKE ANDREWS

Edge of Madness, Anne Wheeler's adaptation of an Alice Munro short story, comes with an 18A rating, likely due to the film's sex scenes, which are more rape than rapture. Watching the young bride and her brusque groom share the marital bed is enough to swear you off sex for a month.

Mind you, they're about 120 years too early for *The Joy of Sex*.

The young bride is Annie (Caroline Dhavernas), who staggers into Fort Garry in the middle of an 1850s Manitoba winter claiming she has murdered her husband. She resides at the local jail while Hudson's Bay Company lawman James Mullen (Paul Johansson, a former University of B.C. basketball star) investigates her story.

Annie says little, but writes long letters to a girlhood chum, the contents of which are revealed in flashbacks, where we learn of her marriage to the cold-hearted and abusive Simon (Brendan Fehr) and her attraction to his younger brother, the kindly George (Corey Sevier). As the three build a cabin by the river, living and sleeping in close

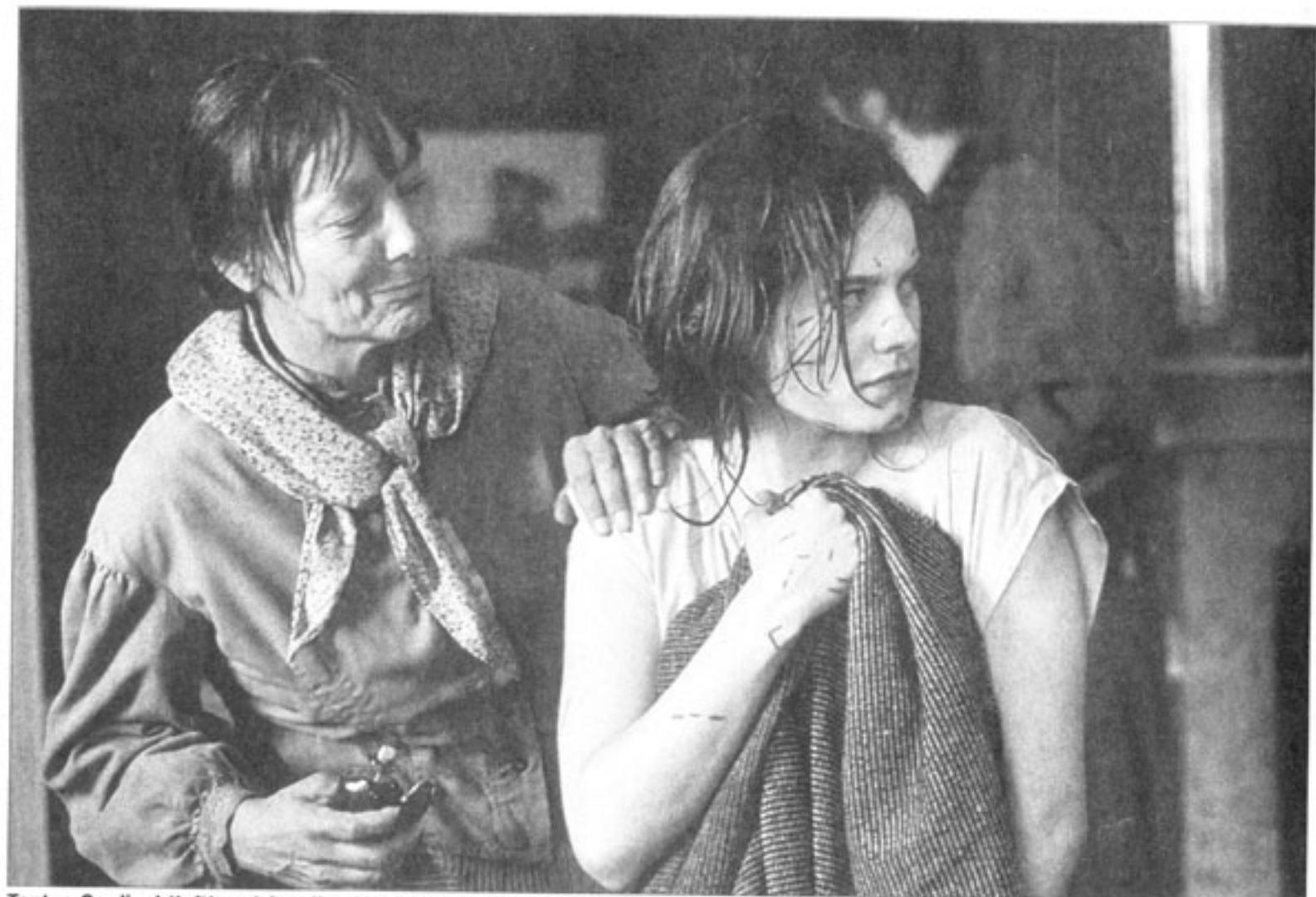
quarters, passions rise to the surface.

Wheeler, who co-wrote the screenplay with Charles K. Pitts, attempts that most difficult of film projects: telling a story from the perspective of a passive character. Annie's character arc covers a lot of ground, but so much of her development comes from within. Her dialogue is more inner than outer, and so the audience must often connect the dots.

Much of this is due to the period setting, to which Wheeler remains true. In the 1850s, women weren't given a lot of freedom to express themselves. (One male character says in a huff, "It's a mistake to teach girls to read.") Staying true to the era, Wheeler constructs a kind of frontier feminist fable, with more than a touch of Harlequin romance. This latter quality shows through in scenes involving Annie and the peach-fuzzed George, who tells her, "If you were my wife I would worship you."

The film certainly doesn't lack for atmosphere. The scenes along the banks of the Red River, as Annie and the two brothers build their log cabin, communicate such hardship that you almost feel the north wind going through you. At night, wolves serenade the restless sleepers.

What *Edge of Madness* needs most is an actor who can carry



Tantoo Cardinal (left) and Caroline Dhavernas in Anne Wheeler's drama *Edge of Madness*.

the load. Dhavernas has presence, though her character's passivity limits her. Tantoo Cardinal, who was a force in Wheeler's

Loyalties, has a minor role here.

None of the men really stand out, although Fehr makes a good villain.

As a period film, *Edge of Madness* isn't up to Wheeler's *Bye Bye Blues*, but for anyone interested in a story from the heartland, it

definitely deserves a look.

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At Tinseltown.

Malcolm Parry



TOWN TALK

DONOVAN BAILEY, the retired “world’s fastest man,” took a leisurely run at a New York-cut steak in the Opus hotel’s Elixir dining room Friday. The Jamaica-born Canadian Olympic sprinter



Fiege, Bailey

and three tablemates also uncorked two Australian Shirazes — an Eileen Hardy '98 and a like-year Rosemont Balmoral — that list for \$200 each on the Davie-at-Hamilton

joint's list.

Bailey was revving up to help friend and former national-team massage therapist **Janiece Fiege** raise \$50,000 for the Saint James Community Service Society's Powell Place emergency shelter at a private function Saturday.

The 12-year-old facility accommodated 800 women and their children over the last year. But 1,800 more had to be turned away, said development director **Heather Dunsford**, who'd love to take your benevolent call to 604-606-0388.

CHARLES K. PITTS was also at the Opus Friday, tossing an after-party for *The Edge of Madness*, a feature movie he co-wrote, produced and had director **Anne Wheeler** shoot in Manitoba. Set

on Canada's 1850s frontier, the murder-mystery had just premiered and begun a two-week run at the Pender-at-Abbott Tinseltown complex.

Kelowna-raised **Paul Johansson**, who plays a lawman in the movie, looked suitably bruised — but from a real-life drama. He was parking his truck at LA International Airport, Johansson said, when a pair of thieves asked for the keys — or else. What they got was a flurry of punches from the burly former UBC basketball star and team captain. Others hurried to the fracas, he said, and the bad guys beat it.

A self-confessed former school bully and rowdy teenager, Johansson said he's directed and just finished editing his own first feature film — the \$6-million *The Incredible Mrs. Ritchie* — that portrays events in his life then. The movie, “about unconditional forgiveness,” has **Kevin Zegers** as a Johansson-like character working for a woman — played by two-time Oscar nominee **Gena Rowlands** — who believes her late husband is embodied in the plants in her garden.



Charles K. Pitts showed his *The Edge of Madness*, star **Paul Johansson** showed scars.