



Nancy Sivak, left, and Jillian Fargey perform in *Protection*, playing now at University Cinemas.

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Film offers inside look at child protection

By MICHAEL D. REID
Times Colonist staff

Erik Paulsson is a do-it-yourselfer, but don't ask him to lay tile or plaster walls.

He's better at plastering posters, triggering e-mails and organizing screenings ... whatever it takes to sell his movie.

Just call him the Shell Busey of "self-distribution."

What the producer lacks in cash, he makes up for in sweat equity.

Paulsson is behind those movie posters seen around town this week for *Protection*, which opened Friday at University Cinemas.

They may be big and glossy but they aren't advertising a Hollywood blockbuster.

They're pushing Vancouver writer-director Bruce Spangler's acclaimed low-budget docu-drama based on his experiences working for five years as a disillusioned B.C. social worker.

Filmed over two weeks from a screenplay Spangler wrote in 10 days, *Protection* is a model of stark realism as it conveys an insider's view of child protection in B.C.

In *cinema-verite* style, Spangler's bleakly convincing slice-of-life observes a beleaguered Surrey social worker (Nancy Sivak) who must remove two kids from the home of a loving but strung-out heroin addict (Jillian Fargey) and her ex-con boyfriend.

Blessedly free of polemics and pulsing with gritty realism, the film is a grim, devastating account of the emotional toll such challenges can take on overworked child protection workers and clients who, fairly or otherwise, find themselves accused

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of child abuse. Spangler does an exceptional job of showing how such scenarios aren't black-and-white.

"I've come to know that parents are not monsters, and that social workers are not evil agents of the state and also that they are not simply heroic," says the 42-year-old filmmaker. "The truth lies somewhere in the middle."

Protection is such a hard-sell that skeptics warned Paulsson not to bother. Undaunted, he kept going.

"There was no way I was going to let two years of hard work end with a forgotten film," said Paulsson. "Great films get into theatres."

Buoyed by glowing reviews and awards — *Protection* was named best first Canadian feature at this year's Victoria Independent Film and Video Festival — the filmmakers achieved in fits and starts what many said would be impossible.

"We were courting small distributors and even bigger ones but they don't pay much attention to Canadian films," said Paulsson, whose film began its snail-paced theatrical release in Montreal in January after making its world premiere at last year's Montreal World Film Festival.

Paulsson, who was unable to lure a Canadian distributor for English Canada, raised funds himself to release the film in Vancouver and Toronto. He financed it through television pre-sales to The Movie Network and Movie Central.

Funds being tight, he used guerrilla marketing techniques like poster-taping, contacting community groups and dropping a 20-foot banner without a permit in locations like the mouth of the Burrard Street Bridge long enough to coax a rush-hour buzz.

His efforts paid off when *Protection* grossed \$10,000 during its opening weekend at the Fifth Avenue Cinemas in Vancouver in June. It was the highest single-screen opening weekend gross for a Canadian film since *New Waterford Girl*.

Paulsson believes the film's success in Vancouver is because his Red Storm Releasing decided to promote *Protection* like a Hollywood studio picture, including taking out a full-page ad in a Vancouver newspaper.

Armed with \$50,000 from Telefilm for more marketing, Paulsson is preparing to roll out *Protection* in other Canadian cities, including

Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Winnipeg and Ottawa, anywhere he can find a theatre operator willing to give his movie a chance.

The filmmakers also received a publicity boon they hadn't counted on. This week the B.C. government announced cuts to the Children and Family Development Ministry's budget that critics claim could take us back to the days of Matthew Vaudreuil. The six-year-old died in 1992 after months of abuse by his mother, prompting the Gove Inquiry into child protection in B.C.

"It's excellent timing because the film raises so many questions," said Paulsson.

"If the government is potentially chopping a huge chunk of the budget, kids and families could be affected and that would be a tragedy."

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Meanwhile, Spangler's pitching the film overseas at The London Screenings film market, and the production partners are gearing up to make *The Damage Done*, a feature focusing on street kids in east side Vancouver.

"It's a follow-up to *Protection* because it follows what can happen to those kids from damaged homes."