



● "Deep truths" about the way families can react...

Bruce Glawson's

Michael, A Gay Son

*My mother was embarrassed
My father was upset,
They wanted me committed
Or taken to a vet.
The eye of the beholder
Is where perversion lies.*

"I need a Drink of Water," by
Jade and Sarsaparilla, from
their album of that name.

Michael, A Gay Son is an award-winning documentary on the subject of 'coming-out.' It is the second film of director/cameraman Bruce Glawson, an independent Toronto filmmaker. (His first film, *Contact*, was a documentary on autistic children.)

Michael offers documentary filmmakers in Canada several points to ponder; it is highly successful, reaching its intended wide public audience, providing a useful tool for counsellors and educators, and also receiving positive response from other filmmakers and critics who have selected it for a number of awards at festivals. The film takes chances, has some technical problems which would have been entirely unacceptable to its producers had it been an NFB or CBC production, happily transcends these problems, and stands as an example of what independent film in this country might do, if it were to free itself from institutional expectations.

Essentially the film is the story of Michael, a young gay man, who decides to 'come out' to his family. Michael introduces himself to the camera, talks about what being gay means to him, is shown walking with his lover, taking part in a support group of lesbians and gay men who share their experiences of coming out to their families, taking pictures of children at a craft table, printing those pictures, taking part in a group session with his parents, sister, brother and a therapist, again with his lover skipping stones at the beach, playing tennis, talking about his feelings, picnicking with gay and lesbian friends. The film is simple, clear, low-keyed. The point is the difficulty Michael has communicating with his parents; for he is a gentle person who likes being gay, it is a positive choice for him. But his parents don't approve of his choice to live out what he feels himself to be, and they don't accept his right to do that. The point is also that Michael gets consider-

able and essential support from his gay and lesbian community, as well as from his straight sister.

Structurally and in emotional impact, the two key scenes of the film are the support-group discussion and the family-therapy session. The risk the film takes is to juxtapose the use of non-actors portraying themselves in a spontaneous but controlled situation (the support group), with actors portraying Michael's family in an improvised dramatic setup (the family session). Due to fine scripting, strong cooperation from the actors and non-actors, and thoughtful direction, the amalgamation works. The technical problem is a shift in the camera style, from very wobbly handheld in the support group, to formal tripod work in the family session. I found the shift disconcerting in both of my screenings of the film for different reasons each time. The first time the formality of the family session emphasized the use of actors and distanced me from the material. The second, I found the wobbly camera in the support group distracting.

Bruce Glawson's motive in using some actors was to extend the parameters of the documentary material while avoiding violation of privacy and the manipulation of a real family, a motive increasingly accepted among new documentarians.

My own experience and that of my friends and acquaintances tells me that the portrayals of Michael's family reflect deep truths about the way families, which are apparently liberal and loving, can react to the announcement that a child's sexual orientation is "gay". Not always with gaiety, or joy, not always with compassion or tolerance.

I was recently present among a group of counsellors for a youth centre where the topic of discussion was counselling about sexual orientation. One courageous young woman announced that she was afraid of her own feelings about lesbianism, afraid she might "be one - and I know that's the most oppressed group there is." There are many oppressed groups, none more oppressed than those who hide their own identity. *Michael* performs a valuable function in challenging assumptions about who we all are, and what roles we play, in film and in life.

Barbara Halpern Martineau ●

MICHAEL, A GAY SON d./s.c. Bruce Glawson asst. d./ed. Arnie Zipursky sd. Charles Zamaria cam. Bruce Glawson asst.cam./light Richard W. Brown asst. cam./stills Lynnie Johnston orig. mus. comp. & perform. Peter Schaffter p.c. Bruce Glawson Productions (1980) dist. Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (Canada), Filmmakers Library (U.S.A.) col. 16mm running time 27 min.

Derek May's

Off the Wall

You may remember the experimental art films of the late '60s - the kind of film that was shot with a camera hand-held, it seemed, by someone suffering from Parkinson's disease. Derek May's *Off the Wall* is a far cry from that; the photography is smooth-surfaced and hard-edged, but it does have something in common with those earlier essays. Perhaps it's that the film, a documentary on the Toronto art scene, is so self-consciously artful.

The camera is a lazy observer; it lingers on skylines and stares vacantly into corners. Like the eyes of a guest on an obligatory visit, it wanders while the artists talk. May narrates: his voice-over ripe with the innate innuendo of precisely articulated British. The script circles slowly and slashes unexpectedly.

The film opens in an Ontario College of Art drawing class for first-year students. "Where will all these future artists go?" May asks in honeyed tones. Will they make money? They will, he concludes; "the banks are waiting to be decorated."

For the prospective *artiste*, the idea of decorating anything, especially a bank, is horrifying. During the last decade this horror has spawned conceptual art, art that cannot be owned. This experimentation has caused a heated debate, raising the question: is it art if it doesn't result in an artifact that can be owned?

Arnold Edinburgh, president of the Council of Business and the Arts in Canada, presents the nay side with eloquent hyperbole, describing a conceptual art exhibit in which "a woman would squat in the middle of a room and pee into a bucket." It's a con job, he

says. (The camera pans the skyline beyond the window and returns to Arnold who is holding forth on the pleasures of owning art.) For him art is very definitely an artifact - something that will hang on his wall and contribute to his identity.

At the other extreme is artist Billy the Kid, who 'contracts' devices of the sort that burn candles to hurl garbage can lids at water balloons and which self-destruct in the process. May's knife bites, "What if it doesn't work?" he asks. "It doesn't matter," says Billy. For him, the concept and the construction are the art.

We meet Mendelsson Joe who paints rather likeable little primitives and sings a song about his girlfriend who hovers about doing artsy things for the camera.

David Buchan shuffles across a stage waving a toy pistol, "Killing time in Red Leather." A wardrobe artist who expresses himself through clothing, Buchan advocates "Style without function, form without content, art for art's sake."

We also encounter Jack Pollock whose lectures to oohing gray matrons are conveniently illustrated by the paintings for sale in his own gallery.

And three members of the General Idea Collective who knew "if we were rich, famous and glamorous, we could say we were artists and we would be." Apparently they are, and they are.

Now these people, and the others in the film, are not nearly as vacuous as May shows them to be. There is a remarkable diversity in this art scene. Some of these are talented and thoughtful people, others are at least Toronto eccentrics, but May has somehow succeeded in putting them all under glass. People move meaningfully through meaningless locations and pause pregnantly. Even the roughest warehouse is faintly luminous, reminiscent of a Renaissance painting. And always the voice-over returns to cut a little deeper into one side or the other.

● Director Derek May

