



● "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 'contrapt's' 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.

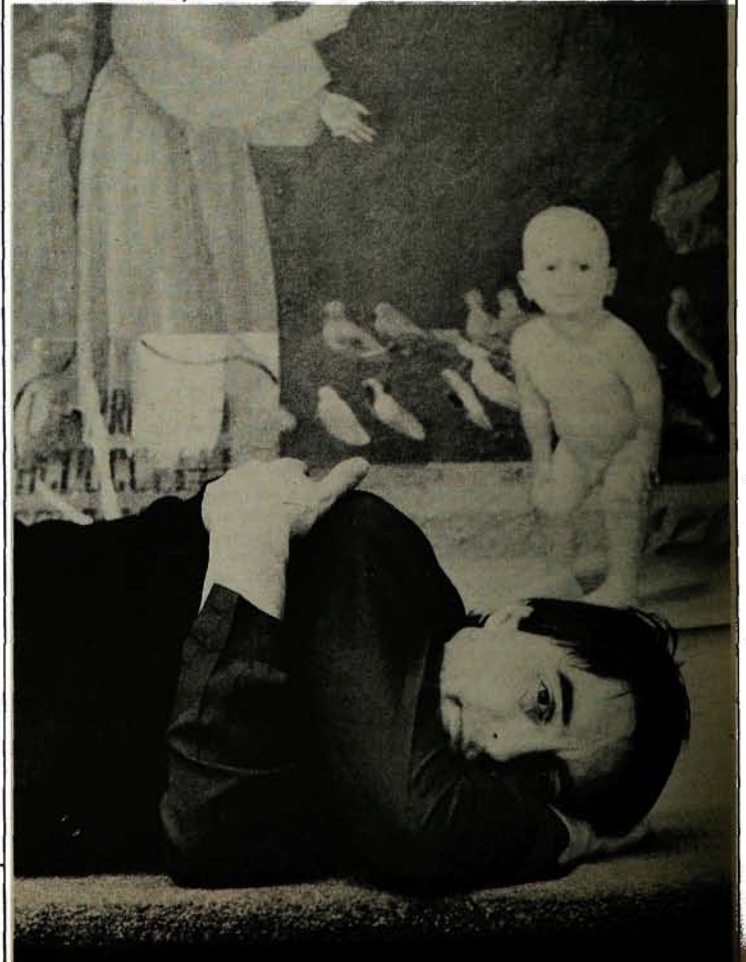
David Buchan shuffles across a stage waving a toy pistol, "Killing time in Red Leather." A wardrobe artist who expresses himself through clothing, Buchan advocates "Style without function, form without content, art for art's sake."

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



May does not finally cut the Toronto art scene to pieces. He purées it. The artists and dealers and buyers all come out bland: an oddly pathetic band of con-persons and hustlers. The verdict, it seems, is not that this or that is art, but that there is no art. "Warhol," says May, "predicted that the 1980s would bring forth no art." We gather that May concurs.

I don't, and I suppose that is the source of my own uneasy response to *Off the Wall*. In many ways it is an excellent film. It will probably win awards.

Merv Walker ●

OFF THE WALL d./ed. Derek May d.o.p. Barry Perles mus. Ludwig Van Beethoven - Piano Sonata no. 32 interpreted by Richard Gresko loc. sd. Claude Hazanavicius, Ingrid Cusiel sd. ed. Danuta Klis asst. cam. Al Morgan elec. David Willet p. asst. Anna Pafomov unit admin. Tamara Lynch, Bob Spence commentary written/spoken Derek May re-rec. Hans Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll additional mus. The Artists' Jazzband/Mendelson Joe - "ANNIE SMITH" public sculpture by Henry Moore, Sorel Etrog, Michael Snow, Kosso Eloul p. Tom Daly exec. p. Barrie Howells p.c. National Film Board of Canada (1981) col. 16mm. colour. running time 55 min. 36 sec.

Mazur/Elkin/Lower's

The New Mayor

The New Mayor is a recently released National Film Board production which goes a long way in helping people to understand and care about the obviously vital world of politics. Produced and directed by Winnipeg filmmaker Derek Mazur, the 38-minute documentary is a lesson in civic politics that works effectively on two levels. It offers a highly visible model of the structure of city government; and, by focusing on individuals - where they've come from and what they're trying to accomplish - it draws distinct lines portraying the make-up of the city's population, dramatically depicting how the different factions battle at City Hall to have their say and get their share. Real people are at the core of the film.

The film is situated in Winnipeg, "a city of many problems but few issues." It concerns the 1977 mayoralty election and the aftermath, in which the newly elected mayor slowly learns the ins and outs of his position. While Mazur concedes that Winnipeg is not the most dynamic and modern of cities, he makes it clear by referring the viewer back to the General Strike of 1919 that the city is by no means a placid island of harmony. The basic division between the ethnic working class and the burghers of the

WASP establishment still exists and provides a tension to an on-going struggle that is the story of Winnipeg city politics.

The new mayor of the film is a son of the largely ethnic North End. He finds himself alone in the midst of groups and individuals whose interests are clearly vested.

Mazur uses graphics and uncomplained voice-over to show us where the mayor stands in relation to true power and clout within City Council. Constitutionally, the mayor is primarily a figurehead; if he wants to be a real political force he must walk a delicate line between the executive committees and informal political blocs within City Council and the public. Timing, personality and the deft use of the media are crucial if he wishes to keep his office meaningful.

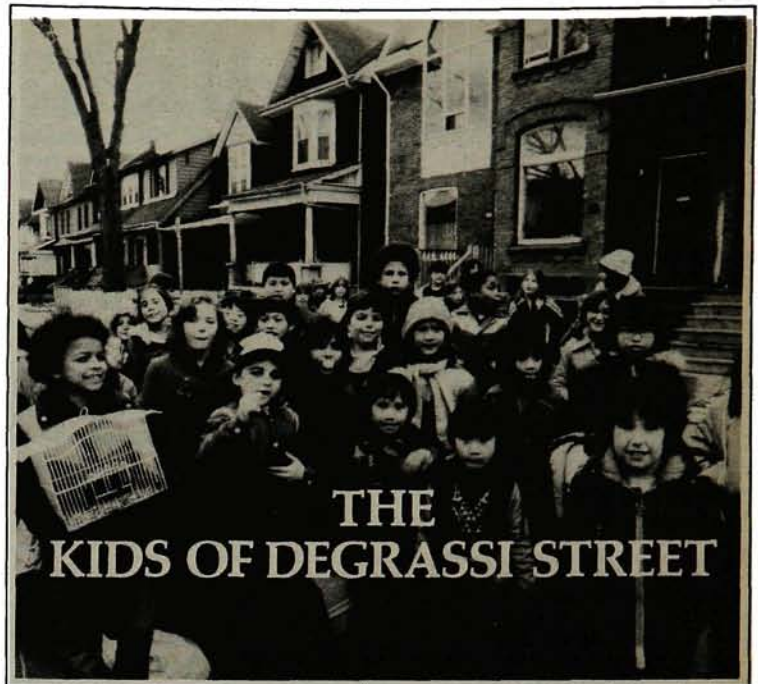
The story element which Mazur creates is the key to the effectiveness of the film. His camera overcomes bureaucracy, formality and the obvious awareness of the subjects being filmed, to inject drama into the confrontations with lobbyists and opponents, the planning sessions with advisors, and the moments when the new mayor must stand alone. Even in a film as clearly articulated as this one the "issues" - many-sided land development deals, or a move to rearrange the structure of City Council - are never simple; the viewer may lose track of exactly what is to be lost or won, but never is there any doubt about who is against whom, and why.

Mazur verges on creating caricatures: the members of the establishment power bloc at City Council are framed to look like a line of fat-faced, cold-eyed portraits on a courthouse gallery wall... and the mayor virtually huddles at his desk while he plans his next move. But this is not Mazur propaganda, it is storytelling. It helps the viewer, who is also likely to be a voter, understand the workings of one of our political structures in a way that television interviews, glossy photos and prepared statements never will.

The NFB should screen *The New Mayor* in as many communities as it can. The people will appreciate it. It should also send someone like Derek Mazur out to tackle something on the provincial or federal level... I'd enjoy experiencing the way his camera would look at Peter Lougheed.

John Brooke ●

THE NEW MAYOR d. Derek Mazur, Ian Elkin, Bob Lower ed. Bob Lower d.o.p. Ian Elkin asst. ed. Tom Yapp sc. Bob Lower animation Stephen Rosenberg sd. ed. Jane Creba re-rec. Clive Perry, Wayne Finucan Prod. Ltd. p. Mike McKennirey, Derek Mazur, Michael Scott exec. p. Michael Scott, Barrie Howells p.c. National Film Board/Prairie Production Centre (1980) col. 16mm running time 38 min. 17 sec. dist. NFB.



Linda Schuyler/Kit Hood's

"The Kids of Degrassi St."

Kit Hood and Linda Schuyler's *Playing With Time* production company is up to great things with its series of children's films based on the lives of "the kids of Degrassi St." *Ida Makes A Movie*, *Cookie Goes To Hospital*, and *Irene Moves In* are three 25-minute films which focus on *Ida*, (who is nine and three-quarters), and how she learns to see beyond herself as she deals with new people and situations in her life. It's a formula, but thankfully, as the producers refine it, the scripts get better and the characters become more delightful.

The films build basic moral lessons into their stories. In *Ida* it's telling the truth, in *Cookie* it's loyalty to friends, and in *Irene* it's sharing and being open-minded toward people who are new and different. In *Cookie*, a lesson on going into the hospital for an operation is also provided for the young viewer.

These tight little dramas work so well primarily because they have what so many other Canadian films are still desperately seeking - great scripts. Writer Amy Jo Cooper understands the perspectives and the language of 1980s' middle-class kids in a most refreshing way. Refreshing, because the characters are neither too clever nor ironic like the ones on American sitcoms, nor are they overly goody-goody. Rather, they are right in tune with now, living in renovated houses and talking about "complexes" in just the right way: you know they've been a party to adult conversations about these things, but you also know that they aren't really full-fledged armchair shrinks quite yet.

The children who play the kids of Degrassi St. are talented and obviously very comfortable not only with Cooper's scripts, but with Phil Earnshaw's camera and the directorial methods of Hood and Schuyler. The two little girls, the precocious *Ida*, played by Zoe Newman, and *Cookie*, played by Dawn Harrison are as natural as you could want. Their

friend Noel, played by Peter Duckworth-Pilkington, appears to have to work with his lines and expressions, but he is still the perfect foil for *Ida* and *Cookie*. Nancy Lam, who plays *Irene* in the third film, is another excellent young performer.

The films are thoughtfully structured so that there is a minimum of adult influence as the stories unfold; it is just the kids working things out among themselves. The world of Degrassi St. is seen almost exclusively from their point of view. Hood and Schuyler have three more episodes currently in production: *Bradley Buys A Suit*, *Lisa Makes the Headlines*, and *Sophie Minds the Store*. It will be interesting to meet these new characters and find out what is happening with the originals. *Ida's* bathtub scene in *Irene Moves In* really did it to this reviewer; I'll be waiting. It is sincerely hoped that many more viewers, young and old, soon have the pleasure of seeing these fine films.

John Brooke ●

IRENE MOVES IN p./d. Linda Schuyler, Kit Hood sc. Amy Jo Cooper cam. Phil Earnshaw ed. Allan Collins p.man. John Helliker sd. Andy McBrearty mus. Lewis & Archie Manne, Wendy Watson mus.arrang. Calvin Sauro, Paul Zaza gaf. Jim Aquila asst. cam. Chris Wilson, Debbie Parks cont. Sue A'Court props Amy Jo Cooper, Peter Lam re-rec. George Novotny l.p. Nancy Lam, Zoe Newman, Dawn Harrison, Peter Duckworth-Pilkington II, Allan Meiusi, Edna Sternbach, Linda Lam, Barry Coe

IDA MAKES A MOVIE d./p. Linda Schuyler, Kit Hood sc. Amy Jo Cooper from the book by Kay Choroa cam. Phil Earnshaw sd. Andy McBrearty ed. Kit Hood asst. cam. Wendy Walgate props Georgia Hood mus. comp. Lewis & Archie Manne mus. perf. Wendy Watson re-rec. George Novotny l.p. Zoe Newman, Dawn Harrison, Edna Sternbach, Allan Meiusi, Lewis Manne, Michael Bawcutt, Elvy Yost

COOKIE GOES TO HOSPITAL d./p. Linda Schuyler, Kit Hood sc. Amy Jo Cooper p.man. John Helliker cam. Phil Earnshaw sd. Andy McBrearty ed. Kit Hood asst. cam. Chris Wilson grip Greg Palermo p.asst. Wendy Vincent, Doug Macpherson mus. Lewis Manne, Archie Manne mus. arrang. Paul Zaza l.p. Dawn Harrison, Zoe Newman, Peter Duckworth-Pilkington II, Sue A'Court, Annette Tilden, Clem Marshall, Phil Williams, Allan Meiusi, Edna Sternbach, Ralph Harrison, Nancy Lam

p.c. *Playing With Time* Inc. (1981) dist. Magic Lantern/Canada, Learning Corporation of America (U.S.A.)

