

REVIEWS

Eric Till's

If You Could See What I Hear

Judging by Eric Till's recent feature films, the director is in hot pursuit of a boffo theatrical hit; a bona fide Hollywood popcorn popper. As if to shed his parochial media image of being a TV man (Till reached prominence with the CBC series *The National Dream*), his films are taking on more and more of an American look and feel. Last year it was *Improper Channels* with Alan Arkin and Mariette Hartley. Before that there was *Wild Horse Hank* and *Hot Millions*. All suffered from varying degrees of "cutesy" and predictability but were excusable when lined up against Till's fine television achievements, most notably *Bethune* with Donald Sutherland. But his current entry into the box office sweepstakes, *If You Could See What I Hear*, cannot be so easily excused. Amassed here is an insulting and totally absurd amalgam of clichés and formula: the kind of film that makes cinema lovers eye Hollywood with contempt.

Tom Sullivan (played by Marc Singer) is a campus Casanova. He's "into" writing music, playing golf(?), horseback riding, sky diving, drinking beer and perpetrating college hijinks. One wild and crazy All-American boy. The clincher is that Tom Sullivan is blind. But he's too dumb to know it. How many variations of this have shown up on the TV Movie-of-the-Week is anybody's guess, as are the reasons why Till and his co-conspirator, writer Stuart Gillard, felt this mish-mash of a premise was worthy of a feature film. Whatever their reasoning, the two are hopelessly mistaken. The "overcoming the personal handicap" genre has been so overmined on both the tube and the big screen that it would take considerably more than a simple thematic twist—a blind man who refuses to accept he's blind—to open the floodgates on our tears. And it would take filmmakers with considerably more talent than Till and Gillard to warrant another look at the subject. Instead of a slightly interesting story of a man coming to terms with his personal tragedy, we are treated to a long string of cobwebbed sequences.

While at school Tom falls in love with a beautiful black coed (played by Shari Belafonte Harper in what must surely be one of the most leaden debut performances in recent memory), only to be heartbroken by her inability to deal with his condition. Tom is upset by this. If he can accept her blackness, why can't she accept his blindness? It seems like a fair trade-off but, alas, the relationship is not to be. It doesn't take Tom long to rebound. By the next eve he's off womanizing with his best friend Will (played by R.H. Thomson). Will is sort of a seeing-eye dog to Tom... a fact inane pointed out on more than one occasion.

Grafted onto this anemic story line is a healthy (that should read unhealthy) dose of slapstick and schtick from a more recent film phenomenon: the whacky campus romp. All this, of course, must have been shrewdly decided upon to win a wider audience. What instead results is an unholy cross between



● The up-beat triumvirate of Shari Belafonte Harper, Marc Singer and R.H. Thompson

Animal House and *The Miracle Worker*.

This kind of creative impotency imbues almost every aspect of the film. Marc Singer, who is being touted as a major new talent by the studio, works very hard at making his Tom a likeable guy. To be kind, Singer's performance is energetic. To be not so kind, he just tries too damn hard. It is one thing to be high on life (as Tom is supposed to be), and quite another to run around like an "asshole" (to borrow a recurring term from the film). Singer gives us precious little insight into Tom. He repeatedly resorts to pratfalls designed strictly to get a laugh. Who should take the blame for this, Till or Singer, is up for speculation. But in a film where the main character is solely present to win our hearts, and the actor portraying him manages to do the exact opposite, the actor's performance must be put into question.

Sarah Torgov who plays Patty, the pretty little creature who eventually calms Tom and marries him, fails a little better. But Torgov is given pathetically little to do. Till circumnavigates their relationship and is content on spotlighting Tom's female hunts at a bar where he plays piano during summer recess.

R.H. Thomson as Will Sly, Tom's dry-witted pal, proves that he's one of Canada's most versatile actors, comfortable with "comedy" as well as straight drama. His performance in *If You Could See What I Hear* is welcomingly tethered. But as with Torgov's role, Till never bothers to elaborate on Tom and Will's friendship, restricting it to fights in bars and picking up girls.

A great deal of the messiness in this film stems from Gillard's painfully disjointed script. The premise, the plot, the dialogue, all have an out-of-date ring to them. For instance, a five-minute sequence has Will putting on his blind

friend about the proper way of wearing socks. And when Will comments on the musical abilities of the blind to a bar owner, the man retorts "Yeah, but they make lousy astronomers." This sort of stuff may not come entirely unexpected from the writer of such TV gems such as *The Donny and Marie Show* and *Captain and Tennille*.

Howard Makin's photography is pretty, too pretty. His fog and star-filtered approach is totally inappropriate to the low-level humour being presented here.

What is particularly objectionable about *If You Could See What I Hear* is the claim that it is a true story (a claim that is made not once, but twice, during the credits). By stressing this fact Till and Gillard seem to be seeking absolution. They should consider themselves lucky that the real Tom Sullivan will never get to see this picture.

S. Paul Zola ●

IF YOU COULD SEE WHAT I HEAR

p.c.: Cypress Grove Films Ltd. Production exec. p. Gene Corman, Dale Falconer p./d. Eric Till co-p. sc. Stuart Gillard prod. consultant Tom Sullivan d.o.p. Harry Making C.S.C. art d. Gavin Mitchell ed. Rod Haykin prod. mgr. Joyce Kozy King 1st asst. d. David Shepherd 2nd. asst. d. Richard Flower loc. man. Otta Hanus continuity sup. Lili Fournier prod. acct. Ann Fitzgerald prod. sec. Debbie Zwicker prop. mast. John Fisher set dec. Earle Fiset sp. eff. Martin Malivoire wardrobe Patti Unger makeup Ken Brooke hair. David Beecroft gaffer Ray Boyle key grip Steve Sheridan ed. Eric Wrate ad. ed. Jim Hopkins 2nd. unit d. Rod Malenfant 2nd. unit cam. Bert Dunk stills Bill Langstroth Marni Grossman unit pub. G.R.O.-Glenda Roy pub. Guttman & Pam (USA) music performed by Helen Reddy & Tom Sullivan ("You're the One") l.p. Marc Singer, R.H. Thomson, Sarah Torgov, Shari Belafonte Harper, Douglas Campbell, Helen Burns Harvey Atkin, Barbara Gordon, Sharon Lewis Lynda Mason Greene, Tony Van Bridge, Jack Creley, Neil Dainard, Michael Tate, David Gardner, Noni Griffin, Adrienne Pocock, Hugh Webster Eastern Cdn. dist. Citadel French Cdn. dist. Cine-360 Western Cdn. dist. Roke Film Distributors colour 35mm running time 103 min.

Stuart Gillard's Paradise

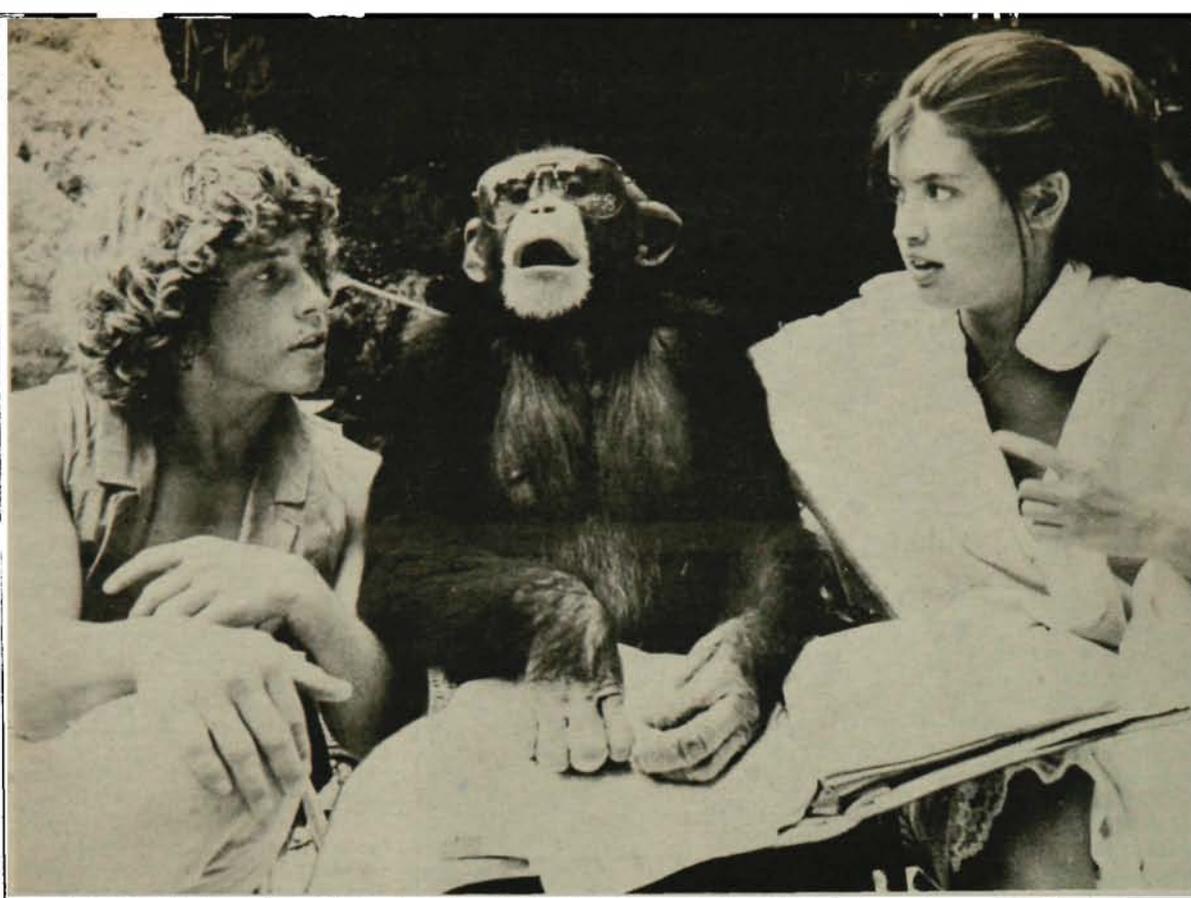
Paradise, a strange mix of *The Blue Lagoon* and *The Wind and the Lion*, offers the not particularly edifying spectacle of two clean-cut American teenagers frolicking unclad in sylvan glades while the creatures of the forest coo and snorkel at their feet. This picture is afflicted with the terminal cutes—of course, any film with not one but two (count'em) funny, loveable chimpanzees (which are African forest animals, not Iraqi desert beasts) is enough to strain the patience of any adult.

It is Baghdad, 1823 (it is never made clear why the film is so precisely dated) and Sarah, a young English girl (Phoebe Cates) with a flat American accent, is on her way to Damascus with her faithful manservant, Geoffrey (the usually reliable Richard Curnock). Joining the caravan is David (Willie Aames), an American boy travelling with his missionary parents (Neil Vipond and Aviva Marks.) However, the beautiful young girl, who actually has a rather pudgy, unformed face, has caught the lustful attention of the Jackal, an evil Arab shiek (Tuvia Tavi), who is willing to kill to get the girl. Soon after, he attacks, wiping out everyone but David, Sarah and Geoffrey, who escape into the desert. They quickly lose Geoffrey, who is murdered by the Jackal, and are forced to press on alone, discovering perfect little oases every few miles; which is a good thing, since the Jackal is in hot pursuit and David is in the habit of saying things like "If we miss Damascus, we can hit Alexandria," which, according to my atlas, is several hundred miles beyond, with an awful lot of sand in between.

They build homes (rather elaborate sets that are straight out of a Gilligan's Island view of life) and discover each other's sexuality. Mind you, with Cates' full-body tan, it looks as if she's been hanging out in the sun for years, something rather unlikely for an English girl in 1823.

They run around in clean, designer loincloths, never experience hunger, and manage things without difficulty until the Jackal shows up. (What I want to know is how does the Jackal, a deadly Arab chieftain, a scourge of the desert, manage to keep missing these two incompetent teens, who look as if they'd be more comfortable boogieing on the disco floor than dragging their camel through the desert. I rather like the camels—they're wonderful beasts, pregnant with comic potential, as when Arnold Schwarzenegger punches one out in the current *Conan the Barbarian*. They are shamefully underexploited here, replaced by those unfortunate chimps who were last seen as accomplices to the felonious assault committed on *Tarzan* by Bo and John Derek.)

Director Stuart Gillard is suing the producers, RSL Films, over questions of salary; he is also concerned about the addition of some nude/sex footage. While the added material stands out, bearing no visual or stylistic resemblance to the rest of the film, the producers may



● Roughing it in a desert *Paradise*, Willie Aames, "Doc" and Phoebe Cates

have done more damage in the editing. Gillard, with his experience as a sketch writer, probably provided balanced scenes that fulfilled some of the genre requirements. When David goes to rescue Sarah from the Semitic beast, for instance, we see him poised on the hill above the camp. Next, we are in the tent where Sarah is being prepared for her wedding night (she looks like she's waiting for a bus) and suddenly, David appears in full purdah. How did he sneak into the camp in broad daylight? How did he get the clothes? Where's the suspense? Did Gillard write the scene like that?

Elsewhere, one of the most consistently interesting elements of the cast-away genre is how they survive. What do they build their shelter from? How do they get food? What new philosophical and ethical questions are formed? Even the *Blue Lagoon* didn't push the natural limitations of their resources too far. In *Paradise*, the Kids suddenly

PARADISE p. Robert Lantos. Stephen J. Roth exec. p. Bruce Mallen. Howard R. Lipson co-p. Wendy Grean d. & sc. Stuart Gillard creative consultant Gene Corman prod. des. Claude Bonniere music comp. Paul Hoffer d.o.p. Adam Greenberg costumes Julie Ganton. Mary-Jane McCarty ed. Howard Terrill asst. d. Jim Kaufman sup. Monique Champagne prod. sup. Manon Bouger Boyer loc. man. Gady Levy 2nd asst. d. Zion Haen 3rd asst. d. Nitzan Aviram -d. mixer Eli Yorkani boom Yochai Moshe chimp trainer Boon Narr asst. trainer Paul Reynolds unit pub. Lana Iny stills Yoni Hamenachem p. sec. Judy Wassermil sec. Hava Nastovitch crowd man. Ze'ev Ziegler prod. accountant Harvey Edinoff focus puller Yossi Zicherman 2nd asst. cam. Avi Koren loader Gidi Porat chief make-up Blanche Schuler asst. make-up Lili Ben Meir. Gabi Genigold wardrobe Tami Mor asst. wardrobe Rina Ramon asst. art d. Ariel Roshko set dresser David Varod. Mordechai Kormush props buyer Zvika Haen props master Ladi Veeleheim key grip Yacov Bukman grip David Saranga. Yonatan Nativ gaffer Abraham Leibman genny operator Yossi Shmuel hd. wrangler Yoski Heusdorff wrangler Deddy Heusdorff camp man. Razi Haen asst. camp man. Citan Alon asst. camp Itzhak Shrika. Efraim Adjami transp. captain Mike Hartman asst. ed. Rit Wallace. Hagit Anin stand in for David Gal Cohen stand in for Sarah Ronit Caspi 2nd unit d. Aharon Shemi 2nd unit cam. Danny Shneur underwater photographer David Philosoph Lp. Willie Aames. Phoebe Cates. Richard Curmook. Tuvia Tav. Neil Vipond. Aviva Marks Joseph Shiloach p.c. R.S.L. Films (1981). American dist. Embassy Pictures. Cdn. dist. New-World Mutual. Running time 100 min. colour. 35 mm.

have this immense house on the beach. Where did it come from? How did they build it? Did the chimp tell them? Where do they get the yards and yards of extra cloth that they use as decoration, and why don't they make some clothes? This is the desert sun, remember. They should be in a constant state of burn and peel, if not sunstroke and death, rather than nicely tanned.

The second major problem of the film is its sex. In *The Blue Lagoon* (forgive me, I am about to compare *The Blue Lagoon* favourably to another movie), one could see the growing sexuality of its heroes because they were marooned as children. The socialization process was not nearly complete. With adolescents (19th century remember?) the taboos are locked in place, so it is thoroughly unlikely that the sexual curiosity displayed by Sarah and the elaborate sexual techniques shared by them are even vaguely appropriate. In this sense, *Paradise* is sort of a pre-Victorian *Parky's*.

On the positive side, director Gillard displays some solid camera sense and gets excellent work in the Nestor Almer-dros mode, from Israeli cinematographer Adam Greenberg. The rest is trash.

George Mihalka's *Scandale*

The master of the modern day American porno film genre, Russ Meyer, made the profitable discovery that North American males would fork over large amounts of cash to watch castrating females triumph over hapless males. His first film to really exploit castration anxiety was *Vixen*; it was followed by *Super Vixens*, *Beneath the Valley of the Super Vixens*, and so on.

It's interesting to see castration anxiety turning up as one of the central tropes in *Scandale*; interesting, that is, in establishing a hypothesis about what critical psycho-dramas the makers of the film

are acting out. The climactic scene, in which scissors are applied to the genitals of the bound and pleading government official, who had been a sort of father figure throughout the film, must certainly be of some significance to the filmmakers. After all, it is preceded by enough male genital flag-waving, if I may coin a phrase, to telegraph to even the most unperceptive audience the fact that the filmmakers "do protest too much," and are trying to disguise a profound anxiety about the matter. And, whereas Russ Meyer always convincingly distances himself from the castration anxiety he depicts, those in charge of *Scandale* would seem to have neither the psychological maturity nor the technical ability to pull off such a feat.

That being said, I take it all back. I have no idea what problems, if any, those guys down at RSL have, or don't have. And I have nothing against pornography, per se (with the usual caveats against the involvement of minors, brutality and so forth). Why, just the other day I wandered down to the local Bijou to see *Prison Girls* in 3D, and I thought it was a hoot.

But I thought *Scandale* was witless filth. It didn't just make me sick, it made me angry. And it insulted the people of Quebec by portraying them as a bunch of morons. The fat people jokes and the portrayal of gays were very unpleasant, and the scene in which the fat, moronic Quebecois is so startled by the sight of a

transvestite that he urinates on his shoes was the most offensive moment I've seen on film since the baby was run over by the motorcycle gang in *Mad Max*.

Not that *Scandale* is some sort of peak *épater la bourgeoisie* experience. Nah, it's a very lethargic cast that stumbles through these hoops. Was it professional embarrassment that slowed them down, I wonder? Downers? I mean, there were some pretty impressive talents involved here, although you'd never know it. Was there some sort of religious cult initiation going on that made everyone look so tired?

But even the worst sow's ear has some potentiality for becoming a silk purse, so I might mention that even in the midst of all this career mass-suicide that was taking place on the screen, the cinematography was just fine. It was always a pleasure when what there was of a plot set some of the characters outside, so we could see those delicate shadings of light that are one of the saving graces of a Quebec winter. And Nanette Workman was good in a little cabaret number she put on for us... In fact, that sequence had the wit and the energy that the whole film should have had.

I mentioned that the film had some sort of plot. It was sequenced (just like any porno film must be to get by the censors) with little bits of a story that, in this case, had something or other to do with the Pornobec scandal stuck in between the sex scenes.

I could go on to ridicule individual participants in this venture, but why bother? It would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

David Clarke ●

SCANDALE p. RSL Films Limited d. George Mihalka sc. Robert Geoffrion mus. Tony Roman d.o.p. François Protat ed. Rit Wallace p. man. Wendy Grean p. acct. Manon Bougie-Boyer p. sec. Jacky Lavoie 1st a.d. Matthieu Vibert 2nd a.d. Arden Ryshpan loc. man. François Leclerc sc. superv. Monique Champagne casting Andrée Champagne dancers' casting Kathleen Graham focus Michel Girard clapper/loader Patty Morein gaf. Don Saari best boy Charles Hughes key grip Serge Grenier sd. mixer Donald Cohen boom Gabor Vadney art. d. Csaba Kertesz asst. art. d. Michel Denuet set dec. Frances Calder set props. Claude Charbonneau asst. set props. Pierre Plante ward. des. Paul-André Guérin ward. mistress Mary Jane Wallace make-up Marie-Josée Lafontaine hair André Lafrenière asst. hair Denis Muller sills Alex Dukay, Attilla Dory unit man. Jacques Lesflaguais asst. ed. Chantal Bowen sd. ed. Autone Productions Inc. superv. sd. ed. Richard Lightstone dialogue ed. Tony Reed, Patrick Dodd ed. eff. ed. Susan Monika Dorfman Lightstone assts. ed. Susan Schneider, Ross Overbury Lp. Sophie Lorain, Gilbert Comtois, Alpha Boucher, François Trotter, Robert Des Roches, Sylvie Boucher, Douglas "Coco" Leopold, Les Freres Brosse (Jean-Pierre Alonzo and Robert Morrissette), Nanette Workman, Marcel Giguère, Jean-Guy Moreau, Denis Larocque, Liliane Clune, J.-C. Robillard, Marie-Alyne Joyal, Jean Chevalier, Sonny Forbes, Gayle Garfinkle, Celyne Verreault, Les Soeurs Ciseaux p.c. R.S.L. Films (1982) running time 97 min. dist. Vivafilm/Cine 360

● *Scandale* runs rampant behind closed doors... Here, Sylvie Boucher and Gilbert Comtois



John N. Smith/
Michael McKennirey's
Gala

Dance, in one sense, lends itself naturally to a medium which by its very nature is congenial to movement. Film, like dance, consists of movement in time and space, used expressively. The many types of "cinematic movement" (from camera movement to camera angles, to the pace and rhythm created by cutting, mixing, dissolving, camera speed, etc.), can contribute immensely to the dance experience.

The degree to which a dance film utilizes cinematic movement to enhance, integrate and transmit the dance experience, determines the artistic level of the film.

This does not mean that a dance film is ineffective unless it is a complex cinematic extravaganza, pulling all a filmmaker's tricks out of the bag. But it does mean that the film should be a part of, and impart to the audience, a true dance experience.

For this reason, *Gala* is only a partially successful dance film. Given the limitations the filmmakers were working under, it could be no more than a passive record of the Canadian Dance Spectacular which took place at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa on May 30, 1981.

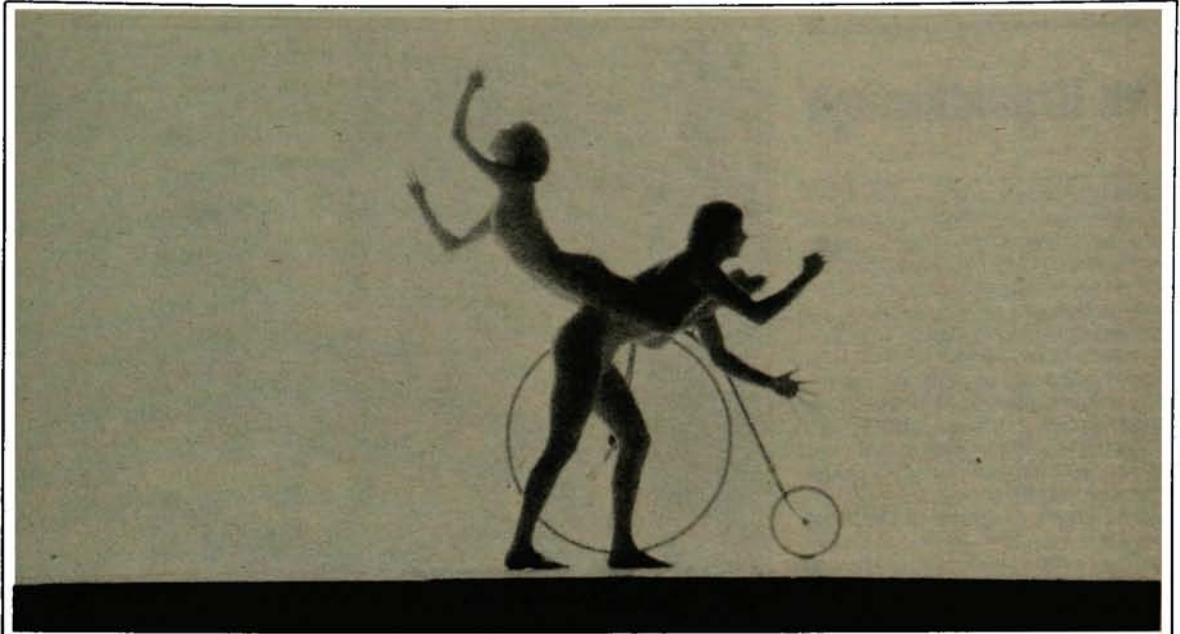
There was no possibility of causing acting to be performed (for the camera), of shooting the dance performances many times in an effort to register the best performance from the best point of view, or of selecting and combining the most effective shots into a continuity. There was no chance that a camera could have been placed on the stage or a crane over the stage so that the camera movement could have been more integrated with the dancer's movement. In short, this dance performance was not made for film. The film, in this case, was made for the dancers.

The importance of filming (or televising, as was originally planned) this performance was indisputable. It was a first in Canadian dance history: eight of Canada's foremost dance companies on the same stage on the same night. The participating dance companies were The Anna Wyman Dance Theatre, Danny Grossman Dance Company, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, Le Groupe de la Place Royale, The National Ballet of Canada, The Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Toronto Dance Theatre and Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers.

The Canadian Association of Professional Dance Organizations (CAPDO) organized the event to deliberately draw attention to and promote Canadian dance, both nationally and abroad. It was to be a two-hour live telecast which CBC producer Norman Campbell (who retains producer's credit for *Gala*) had spent months planning for. But just days before opening night, the CBC had to pull out over a labour dispute with its NABET technicians.

Gerry Eldred, then president of CAPDO, said: "Performing for audiences at the NAC was, of course, important, but the telecast which would bring our dancers into homes across the country was the heart of the event. If we couldn't have that, we certainly wanted to at least record the situation."

Enter the National Film Board (NFB),



● The Anna Wyman Dance Theatre

whose directors John Smith, Cynthia Scott, David Wilson and Michael McKennirey had been involved, with the same eight dance companies months before the event when they travelled across the country filming their one-hour documentary, *For the Love of Dance*.

John Smith, Colin McIntyre (of CAPDO) and John Goldsmith (director of Public Relations for the NAC) began the herculean task of negotiating between the various unions and government agencies involved. Once the NFB had committed themselves (and one million dollars) to the film, considerable administrative, artistic and technical problems had to be ironed out in a very short period of time. Contract obligations had to be worked out between the NAC stage crew, orchestra musicians and conductors, eight dance directors, choreographers, stage managers, set designers and lighting directors, as well as pay schedules for the 95 dancers.

They had to obtain NABET's permission before they could commence filming and to respect collective agreements with other performing arts unions. Director John Smith recalls: "Agreements were being made at 5:00 p.m. Saturday and curtain time was at 8:30 p.m."

Technical problems arose over the computerized lighting system, which although bright enough for TV, was insufficient for film. In just one day, everything was re-lit. To top it off, the cameramen were unfamiliar with the choreography, so they had to photograph intuitively and instinctively. Smith refers

to this entire technical and bureaucratic ordeal as a "director's nightmare."

But with the admiration and respect that Smith, McKennirey and Scott had developed for these dance companies during the on-the-road filming of their previous documentary, the directorial trio had strong feelings about the need to film this spectacular. The effort was deemed more than just worthwhile; it was essential.

What of the film itself? As mentioned earlier, it is effectively a documentary record of a dance performance. Seven cameras were placed at strategic points of view throughout the hall and backstage. Camera lenses were selected, speeds were set at 24 frames per second, and the entire action was filmed as it unrolled before the camera's "eyes." What we are left with, on film, is a competent but unimaginative handling of the material. Colours are, for the most part, intense and crisp, with good separation values, probably very true to the tonal clarity of the actual event. The Dolby stereo sound is admirably clean and full, with virtually no leakage from audience shufflings and coughs, or the heavy landings of dancer's feet.

Most of the dancing is filmed in medium-long shot, which shows the dancer's full bodies and fluid movements to greater advantage. Very often the entire stage fills the screen, and one is left with the illusion, as in Bergman's *Magic Flute*, that we are watching an actual stage performance.

But it is in the camera movement and shot-to-shot juxtapositions that this film

occasionally misses and momentarily loses the fluidity of the dance. Toronto Dance Theatre's *Baroque Suite*, with its angular and geometric configurations, must have been difficult for an unfamiliar camera crew to follow, and at times, what ends up in the frame is not the central thrust of the action. In Danny Grossman's *Higher*, however, closeups of the two dancer's facial expressions were essential to a conveyance of the sexual overtones of the piece.

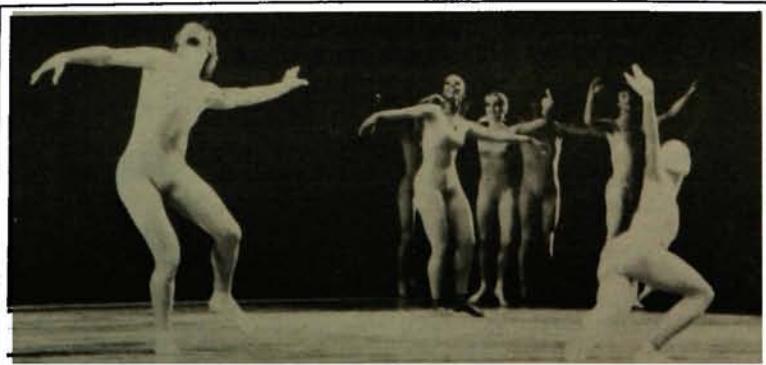
Highpoints of the film are Evelyn Hart's joyous and light-as-air performance in the Royal Winnipeg's *Our Waltzes* and the visually engaging *Dance is... This... and This* by the Anna Wyman Dance Theatre. Between performances, the film cuts backstage to the dressing rooms and wings, where dancers are shown in varying degrees of pre-performance jitters, concentration and even relaxation. The National Ballet's Celia Franca and Evelyn Hart of the Royal Winnipeg receive most of the backstage cameras' attention, thereby contributing a thread of continuity on a more personal level to the film.

As dancers scrutinize other companies' performances intensely from the wings, in some of the most genuinely unselfconscious of the backstage footage, we get a real sense of the dancer's commitment to their art. They are at some times spellbound, at times amused, and at times amazed.

With the filming of the Spectacular, these companies now have a very effective public relations tool in *Gala*. It is to be shown widely abroad, according to Smith. Aside from distribution through the regular NFB library network, *Gala* will be shown on national television and in runs at selected theatres nationally.

It should accomplish what it was intended to do: increase public awareness of the rich diversity and creativity within the Canadian dance community.

Lyn Martin ●



● The Toronto Dance Theatre

GALA p. d./ed. John N. Smith, Michael McKennirey, d.o.p. Savas Kalogeras, performance cam. Susan Trow, Tony Lanzetta, Roger Rochat, Barry Perles, Roger Moride, backstage d. Cynthia Scott cam. Paul Cowan, Andreas Poulsson post-p. ed. Hans Peter Strobl loc. record. Claude Hazanavicius ed. ed. Andre Galbrand exec. p. Adam Symansky p.c./dist. National Film Board of Canada (1981) running time 90 min colour/16 mm. VTR