

Ira Levy's The Breakthrough

Right from the opening shot, *The Breakthrough* grips the viewer and does not let go for the next forty minutes. At the same time, the compassion in this compelling Canadian documentary makes the experience of viewing it so profound that one can't help but come away from it changed. No wonder the film has already won five awards. No wonder the United Nations premiered *The Breakthrough*. And no wonder that wherever the film is shown, it changes people and induces them to change their communities.

In large part, the power of *The Breakthrough* arises from its narrator, Nabil Shaban - a young man with a congenital bone disease which has left him with the appearance of half a body. But he can speak. And it is the heartfelt brilliance of his words that open us to seeing him as a whole person. He speaks for those who can't: people with cerebral palsy who cannot form words to say what is inside. What he and the film tell us is that now there has come a breakthrough: a system of visual communications called Blissymbols by which the cerebral palsy disabled can communicate and find their voice.

Throughout the film, we see how the pictographic symbol language has changed the lives of three people: a child, a teenager, and an adult. We see the child, Wendy, using her Blissymbol board to express her love and joy for living. Wendy, once thought to be mentally retarded until taught how to use Blissymbols, is shown in the loving surrounding of her family.

The second section of the film, concerning the teenager Paul, is almost an answer to the question of what may happen to Wendy. Paul has decided to attend the local high school. We see him on opening day, boarding the school bus, attending his first "normal" classes. The filmmakers have captured the painful atmosphere in the classroom, where the other students are reluctant to interact with Paul, the teacher is uptight and awkward about how to deal with his new student, and Paul is clearly frustrated. But we see Paul's courage and dignity, his patience in this most painful of situations. Having seen Paul's prowess and interactions at home, where he skillfully drives a tractor and communicates well with his family, we as viewers are in the position of seeing that it is the larger society that is now limiting Paul.

This is even more clear in the third section of the film devoted to an adult, Susan Odell. Having been institutionalized since she was five, she has nevertheless struggled long and hard to live as fully as possible. We see wedding photos of her and her husband (now deceased) which capture the joy of love and intimacy. We see her now fighting for her rights to live outside the institu-



● "... struggling long and hard to live as fully as possible": Susan Odell

tion. Its rather barren interiors contrast starkly with the lush outdoor shots in the section about Paul. Through Blissymbols, Mrs. Susan Odell expresses her desire to become a Blissymbolic teacher, to live in her own apartment. She tells us that she sees herself as a necessary, feeling and attractive person; what we have seen of her convinces us that she is right.

Ultimately, this is a film about the process of communication. That process always involves three key elements: a sender, a medium, and a receiver. Before Blissymbols, the cerebral palsy handicapped had no medium for effective communication. Now that the sender has a medium, the rest of the communication breakthrough depends on the receiver. Filmmakers Ira Levy and Peter Williamson have here ably prepared the larger society to open hearts and minds to receive the communications.

Joyce Nelson ●

Francine Langlois's Désiré

Social behavior has been examined from every conceivable angle. And no aspect of the subject has aroused more curiosity than that of taboos. In novels, newspapers and films, what is 'behind closed doors' often sends people scurrying to pry those doors open. The topic of homosexuality rates high on the scale of controversy - making it susceptible to sensationalism and cheap exploitation. As reflected in the success of *Cruisin'*, *La cage aux folles*, and the recently released *Making Love* and *Personal Best*, gay stories make for good box office. Unfortunately, this does not guarantee that the subject will be treated in an intelli-

gent or original fashion. Whether homosexuality goes 'legit' and appears on the big screen, or remains wrapped in plain brown paper, a risk is inevitably involved. Given the nature of the subject, there is a tendency to produce a voyeuristic vision of gay life that masquerades as a serious effort to spark new insights. The question then, is how to make a film that avoids the pitfalls that inevitably go hand in hand with provocative issues.

Francine Langlois' half-hour film *Désiré* (one of nine half-hour films to be produced through the Institut québécois du cinéma under its 'Plan quinquennal') offers one answer. The film examines a sensitive situation: a gay couple decides that the time has come for an addition to the 'family'. Josette (Josée Labossière) and Michelle (Johanne Seymour) are obviously comfortable living together, and like other 'normal' couples have reached a point in their lives where they want to have a baby. Michelle, however, delicate-

ly leaves the actual 'experience' of motherhood to a hesitant Josette.

The first candidate Jean Bernier (Jean Lafontaine), a rather bland, well-meaning fellow, is drawn into the arrangement unaware of the role he is to play. When he threatens to become more than just a temporary presence in the household he is swiftly replaced. Josette and Michelle then decide to change their tack. They inform the new prospect of his status in their plan. Gilbert (Marcel Gauthier) is hardly put off, and this second attempt is successful - except that Michelle is the one who finds herself pregnant.

Although the events in *Désiré* seem to fall into place almost too easily, what the film successfully emphasizes is that being gay does not necessarily have to conjure up images of people living on a razor's edge, unable to integrate themselves into society on their own terms. From the beginning, when we see Michelle picking up Josée at the adoption agency, we know these women are obviously comfortable with their lifestyle. And no attempt is made to disclose some defect that might confirm the usual suspicions. Being homosexual, in their case, is not a handicap.

The film sticks to the problem at hand - two women who want to raise a child outside the normally accepted conventions. The conflicts that ensue are dealt with in a gentle, humorous fashion. Both the men and the women have their share of problems.

What is missing perhaps is intimacy between the women. Although they are not asexual, at times they seem to be just good friends rather than a couple in love. But *Désiré* never falters in its initial intention - to portray two homosexual women who have accepted their choice of lifestyle, and who have not allowed their desires to be limited.

Pia Maris ●

DÉSIRÉ d./sc. Francine Langlois p. Jan Mark Lapointe d.o.p. Louis DeErnst ed. Babalou Hamelin asst. d. René Pothier sets Vianney Gauthier ed. Alain Corneau costumes Gaudeline Sauriol make-up Diane Simard asst. cam. Daniel Jobin cont. Brigitte Germain props Pierre Fournier elec. Marc DeErnsted grip Jean-Maurice DeErnsted boom Yvon Benoit unit man. Claude Cartier asst. ed. Angèle Bourgault p. sec. Louisa Lafleur original mus. Jacques Noël musicians Jacques Noël, Pascal Mailloux, Paul Grondin, Louise Babin, Serge Gratton l.p. Josée Labossière, Johanne Seymour, Jean Lafontaine, Marcel Gauthier p.c. Les Productions Et Caetera Inc. (1981) running time 27 min.



● "women obviously comfortable with their lifestyle": *Désiré*'s Johanne Seymour and Josée Labossière

THE BREAKTHROUGH d. Ira Levy p. Ira Levy Peter Williamson exec. p. Ronald Lillie, William Johnston d.o.p. Peter Williamson ed. Cathy Blow narrator Nabil Shaban research consult. Beth Bradshaw story consult. Lois Upper script consult. Siobhan Flanagan sd. ed. Louis Campese cam. asst. Clark Johnson, Robin Miller Winston Upshall p. man. Dee Simpson sd. rec. Peter Battistone Steve Jones Ed Smith Aerlyn Weissman color 16mm running time 40 min p.c. Lauron Productions Ltd., 1981 dist. Cinema Concepts International