Kalli Paakspuu's

Maypole Carving

During baseball season in the summer of 1980, down in the Harbourfront park at the foot of Bathurst St. a strange obstruction appeared in right field sometime during the month of June. It was the huge trunk of a 700-year-old cedar tree. It had been filled in the front room near Squamish B.C., stripped and transported by truck to Toronto. With it came a small mobile office, and a group of people with a purpose as grand, it turned out, as the piece of wood itself.

They were going to carve something: a Cosmic Maypole! Great! We re-aligned our baseball diamond and continued on with our season.

Two years later, one Kalli Paakspuu, filmmaker, arrives at the Canadian Film Makers Distribution Centre with a 23-minute documentary describing the evolution of this Cosmic Maypole from the felling of the chosen tree in the lush B.C. forest to the raising of the finished icon, oiled and swirled with carved images, on a chilly October morning in an empty park in Toronto.

The film begins with a series of long, held close-ups showing a carver’s hands, wielding mallet and chisel, slowly fashioning the details of a face in the wood. Timothy Sullivan’s music complements perfectly to immerse the viewer in what is to be the essential idea of the film: slow, patient, painstaking work, performed in secrecy, but as a way of contemplation and learning and therefore creating.

During the establishing sequences as we see the felling of the tree and its eventual placement at Toronto’s Harbourfront, there is a voice-over in which designer Georganna Malloff explains the motifs and the story which the carving will depict. She has mapped the whole thing out for the carvers in red and black paint, and to be of assistance, she brings along the “The Dreamwork of the Whales.” The maypole’s various sections will provide a telling of creation’s beginnings, through a sequence of a highly mysteriousness which man will eventually attain.

Scoring (continued)
big screen. The oddly miscast Jack Wetherhill looks as if he had more fun doing The Elephant Man. That leaves us with those cinematic luminaries Cloris Leachman and Eddie Albert who are, supposedly, our bargain-basement rites of passages to the American distribution deal. Appearing quietly in a thankless supporting role is the one actor this film who’s got the face, talent and brains to be a great actor, Nicholas Campbell. When he looks at the camera you know what he’s thinking and when the words don’t suffice his body takes over. He’s such a great actor that he makes even the most lousy part look interesting. The producers of Scoring obviously never thought of Campbell for the leading role. Apparently he’s no loss for a second rate T.J. star-tennis player like Van Patten was their idea of inspired casting.

Taken all in all, Scoring isn’t really much better or worse than any number of Canadian films we’ve seen recently. Its budget, $1.5 million, is a fair price for any film these days if it is to recoup its costs. Scoring is a little film and, by definition, should have come from the hearts and minds of its makers. Had there been some emotional commitment to this project we might have had something here that feels more like a movie and less like a deal. John Dunning and Andre Link should be called upon to redress their wrongs and raise the budget for this film all over again. Write the script but this time without any aporous Hollywood notions of manufacturing a winner and find a director who’s willing to divest a little of his/her soul in putting it on the screen. Of course, real actors will have to be found for the parts but there are plenty of those around if you look hard enough for them. All of this may sound a touch preposterous but crazier things have happened in this business. Who knows, if producers start caring about the movies they make we may just have an industry after all.

David Eames

All the scenes and elements are autonomous, yet, by design, they overlap and connect with each other: a Cosmic Maypole.

Then comes the main body of the film which concentrates on the carvers. Chainsaws and axes are used to make the initial cuts. Then, as the maypole takes on a form, the tools become smaller and the work more delicate. But is difficult for the carvers, as they work at close-range on details of the still horizontal slab, to visualize the completed work. So designer Malloff is brought back during several scenes to make sure the rhythms and textures fit with the overall plan. It’s interesting to see a “director” at work, striving to make the concept and the physical materials emerge. The film could use much more of the presence of Georganna Malloff.

Chip by chip, the Cosmic Maypole nears completion. Two other sequences are inter-cut with the actual work on the wood. One hints at the engineering dynamics involved in raising the mammoth pole and the other shows the members of the maypole group appearing before Toronto city council, giving a progress report and appealing for aid in the matter of paying for the pole to be raised. As with the scenes involving Georganna Malloff more development of these elements of the project would have given the film a greater breadth. It’s always fun to see such worldly people as city politicians arguing and expressing themselves on the topic of such things as Cosmic Maypoles.

The film ends with the raising of the maypole on an autumn morning in the nearly deserted park. Those involved dance with pride and joy at their accomplishment, but one is left with the feeling that the whole project was carried out in near anonymity.

Technically, the film’s strongest element is the music track. This element is the strongest in helping to establish the feeling which must have surrounded the small group as they worked through the summer and fall. Paakspuu, who appears to have done her own editing, chops a few scenes off with a haste that is noticeable. Why didn’t she linger more, as she did with those beautiful opening close-ups? Rolf Cutts’ camera has some great moments, but I don’t suppose this falls back into director/editor Paakspuu’s lap, a little more thought beforehand to the rhythm of a story about such a huge sedentary object as a maypole could, perhaps have alleviated a little more in the way of variety in the cinematography. I don’t know what the budget was but, as stated, the thing was lying there from June right through to the World Series; plenty of time to study and story-board.

But the film is enjoyable and valuable. It explains the maypole, and, partially, the perspective of those who caused it to happen. It’s good that we have filmmakers such as Kalli Paakspuu whose curiosity and dedication would attract her to produce and complete a project such as Maypole Carving.

John Brooke

The genius of Treaty 8 Country is the genius of any great documentary: the ability to tell a story on its own terms. The hunt, in its own good time, becomes a political rally. But it is a political rally...