

## Pierre Falardeau and Julien Poulin's **Elvis Gratton**

*Elvis Gratton* is an exceptionally tricky bit of work. To succeed at what it's doing - let alone succeed as well as it does - it has to be.

For me, the tricks began before the movie, with the Festival of Festivals capsule description that made it sound like a very dreary documentary. Two minutes on TV news is all I've ever needed to see to be convinced of the total shoddiness of the Elvis cult and the banality of its followers. The thought of 20 minutes of watching a "prosperous Quebec couple... devote their spare time to preparations for the husband to enter a televised Elvis Presley look-alike contest," with the Elvis cult details "lovingly fetishized" was enough to bring on nausea.

The first few minutes did bring on nausea. The lighting sound and camera techniques are all thoroughly documentary, and there's Elvis Gratton himself, eating like a pig, with the TV on the kitchen table providing the only light, addressing the camera directly and getting into a stupid argument with his wife. Only the thought that one cannot write paying reviews from unseen movies kept me in my chair.

By the third sequence, I was laughing out loud. With his wife in the bath, yelling for him to turn the music down, Elvis Gratton begins rehearsing his act. He loses the timing, blows the gestures, sings off key and sets his fat belly to wobbling when he tries out the patented Elvis leg-shake.

He's awful and he's hilarious and he doesn't care a bit. He's having a grand time, which makes it okay to laugh and go on laughing as he works his frizzy hair into a not-very-Elvisoid pompadour and grins at it in utter satisfaction, as he bitches like a spoiled bride over the details of his wife-sewn costume and lectures the camera on the superiority of Americans, especially Elvis, over the Québécois while he gives his airbrushed van a very loving washing.

Dreary documentary has turned into cheerfully berserk comedy and Elvis Gratton seems like a comic, likable guy who's using the contest and the movie to let loose his natural hamminess.

Then Elvis Gratton turns mean. He gets grabby hands and a dirty mouth for a teenage girl who won't put out for him. And just as I realized Elvis Gratton was not a very likable man, it also dawned on me that this was not a documentary and Elvis G. was an actor.

His name is Julien Poulin and he's also listed as co-director. He is very good, with a brisk sense of timing and a remarkable ability to make physical comedy look natural and spontaneous.

The pick-up scene doesn't sacrifice any laughs, despite what it does to the character and the nature of the movie. The laughs keep rolling along right up to the end, when the point to all this trickery becomes clear.

Elvis Gratton is satire. Classically, satire gets defined as something like, "comically telling home truths about people," or, "laughing at people's foibles," or, "a comedy that gets people to laugh at their own foibles."

By the final sequence, I was laughing so hard my face hurt. Elvis G., in skin-tight suit, pompadour and guitar, is posing for publicity shots. His conversation with the photographer escalates into shouted slogans that give us his honest view of the world he lives in, his credo.

The movie has already told us there are thousands just like him. The movie's tricks and the intercutting of live-action with black and white publicity stills make him their spokesman - Elvis Everyman. The effect is hilarious, though the sequence may not be: after laughing steadily for 18 minutes, it's hard to stop cold for the last two.

His world view is greedy, selfish, sexist, reactionary, vicious and stupid. The truth behind the Elvis mask is not a pleasant one, but I can't say if it's a true truth. I don't know the Québécois that well. But the movie makes it seem true and I've run across Elvis cultists elsewhere and caught similar echoes and I know that people like Elvis Gratton exist and are plentiful.

Outside the theatre, I overheard a stranger say, "I was married to a Quebec man once and, you know, it's true, that movie. I could see that in him and his friends."

In Quebec, I hear, it's raising a lot of controversy, which is my idea of a good argument for its being true and, if it's as true as it is funny, *Elvis Gratton* may be the best hard-core satire ever put on film.

Andrew Dowler ●

**ELVIS GRATTON** d. sc. ed. Pierre Falardeau Julien Poulin cam. Alain Dostie ed. Serge Beauchemin boom. Michel Charron gaff. Jacques Paquet grip. Emmanuel Lepine cont. Joanne Prgent asst. cam. Daniel Gervais a.d. Rene Poirier dec. Jean-Baptiste Tard access. Daniel Huysmans make-up. Micheline Foissy unit man. Claude Cartier p. Bernadette Payeur p.c. ACPAV 16mm. colour running time 30 min.

## Alex Hamilton-Brown's **Life Another Way**

In the year of the handicapped, the media was inundated with stories about sightless, armless, generally less fortunate people, who, with ingenuity and courage, overcame obstacles to the "good life." Hamilton-Brown's documentary *Life Another Way* looks beyond the handicapped's 'difference' to what makes that 'difference' good.

With framed head and shoulders, the grandmotherly Beryl Potter in her Scottish lilt tells us her life story. Her beginnings are ordinary enough, portrayed through a montage of black and white photographs. And when we think we know her, Hamilton-Brown shows her in the harsh reality of life: a woman who has suffered an unusual destiny brought on by simply slipping on a package wrapper. The shocking result: a blood clot in the knee developed into phlebitis, requiring the amputation of a leg. Soon after, she loses two other limbs and the sight in an eye.

With conviction, Hamilton-Brown takes us into the heart of this woman's life. She confides that she contemplated suicide. Then her perspective suddenly changed and she realized a new purpose: "When the able-bodied become disbodied they need a bridge to handle the shock." Potter founded the Scarborough Recreation Club for the disabled: a lively social centre that never refuses anybody, one for people who are different, not because they are fat or exceedingly beautiful, but because they are disabled.

Hamilton-Brown's portrait of this club doesn't miss a detail. A direct cinema camera shows the regulars in their struggles and joys: a young man with a paralyzed tongue learning to speak through a machine; a swimmer paralyzed from the waist down winning a medal at the Canada Games; Eddy Rice,

a stand-up comic with crutches, getting his audience convulsing with laughter as he jokes about his physical condition. Hamilton-Brown lets these people shape their world authentically, knowing that if he doesn't talk for these people, they will speak for themselves.

We feel awe as the little masteries of life most of us take for granted appear in novel ways. In the quiet of her home, Beryl is at the sewing machine and her single hand works on a dress pleat. Later in the kitchen she pares a potato lodged on a bed of nails. It is a down-to-earth, nitty gritty aspect of life that most of us are incapable of conceiving. Yet in some odd way it all seems so ordinary - so complete in itself.

The wide-eyed school kids are speechless as they meet Beryl Potter for the first time. She raises her stump arm and emphatically says, "You're not afraid of this?" The children giggle and ask, "How do you get your clothes on?" "... your watch...?" She tells them she dresses just like them on the bed. ... And that she's actually a grandmother.

If there is a criticism of the film, it is that the film has some difficulty in integrating a very personal portrait of the handicapped with their political and somewhat militant objectives for a full life. However, through Potter's own radical lifestyle and its strong political motivation, the film discovers a meaningful linkage point.

Hamilton-Brown's honesty and warmth bring us a full community of life. It is as if he works within this incredible woman's vision, telling her story as her eye, her witness - given her a bridge so that her purpose be realized.

It is a satisfying film that makes you think twice about what you have.

Kalli Paakspuu ●

**LIFE ANOTHER WAY** p./d. Alex Hamilton Brown ph. Robert Rouveroy, CSC add. cam. Lance Carlson ed. Tom Hilderley re-rec. The Mixing House sd. mix. George Novotny ed. Yan Moore orig. music Pat McKee sc. Dean Taylor assoc. p. Fern Crawford p.c. Hamilton Brown Film Prod./Avcomm Ltd. running time: 52 min., colour. 16mm.



● Reaching for satirical heights, Julien Poulin as Elvis Gratton



● Beryl Potter takes an admirer for a ride