

REVIEWS

Paul Cowan's

The Kid Who Couldn't Miss

The Kid Who Couldn't Miss is a beautiful piece of work. It is a feature-length documentary about Canada's First World War flying ace, William Avery ("Billy") Bishop, and, at the same time, it is a profound meditation on war itself. Filmmaker Paul Cowan and his excellent crew have crafted an extremely sensitive portrait of an era, giving us a context in which to understand the figure of Billy Bishop in all its complexity and a matrix from which has emerged the ethos of modern warfare.

The film is interwoven by three main visual threads: archival footage from the First World War, excerpts from the stage-play "Billy Bishop Goes to War" (written by John Gray with Eric Peterson), and present-day interviews with Bishop's contemporaries. The editing of these three main threads is extremely subtle and fluid, resulting in a work that intricately blends present and past, theatre and actuality, black-and-white footage with colour, illusion and reality, and ultimately, fact and legend.

The use of Eric Peterson from the stage-play is a particularly inspired decision. Through his on-stage characterization of Bishop, the film achieves a personal focus and an intensity that highlights other aspects, especially the extraordinary aerial photography preserved from that war.

Billy Bishop, the kid from Owen Sound, left Canada as a Royal Military College cadet to fight the war in France. When he first saw a plane fly over the muddy trenches, he knew that was the way he wanted to fight. Connections, charm and more than a little luck paved the way and he soon joined Britain's elite Royal Flying Corps. The champions of the day were Britain's Albert Ball, René Fonck of France, and the famous Red Baron - Manfred von Richthofen of Germany. Bishop was determined to join this select group. With his pilot's wings and his lieutenant's commission, he soon scored the required five kills to qualify as an ace. At age 23, Bishop was officially declared a hero, with newspapers glorifying his exploits daily to an adoring public. This was the first war in which the air was the arena for making heroes, with the dogfight the main

event. Soon the leading contenders were Bishop and the Red Baron.

Director Paul Cowan's search for archival footage from the war took him to The Imperial War Museum in Great Britain, the Bundesarchiv in Germany, the Public Archives in Canada, the Etablissement de cinéma et de photo des armées in France, Hollywood and other locations. His efforts uncovered spectacular aerial footage that has never been shown before. But it is the use of this footage that makes the whole film so brilliant.

Cowan and editor Sidonie Kerr highlight the balletic quality of the aerial footage, its dreamlike and ethereal visuals giving us a sense of the otherworldly side of this war, which, for the pilots and much of the adoring public, was often more like sport than deadly combat. In other words, the filmmakers have grasped the essence of what made the First World War different from any previous war: a new technology placing distance between combatants. For the first time, it was possible to kill without seeing the agony of the dying. In this sense, aerial warfare was a quantum leap from hand-to-hand combat. At the same time, the filmmakers gradually lead us through the abstract beauty of these dogfights to another plane of awareness where we see that the horror of killing has not been escaped through flight. This effect is largely accomplished by two absolutely riveting close-ups of enemy pilots dying in their planes. The strategic placement of these two moments in the film is absolutely perfect.

The Kid Who Couldn't Miss also shows us the subtle but insidious process by which the then-emerging media turned heroes into celebrities ironically victimized personally by this process itself. Once again, it is the presence of actor Eric Peterson as Billy that focuses this detail, making it emerge more forcefully than it could through simple voice-over narration.

This profound, beautifully crafted, multi-levelled film is well worth seeing. It lingers in the mind long after its 79 minutes screening time and is simply a fine piece of work.

Joyce Nelson ●

THE KID WHO COULDN'T MISS
d./sc./p. Paul Cowan exec. p. Adam Symansky ed. Sidonie Kerr, Paul Cowan d.o.p. Paul Cowan asst. cam. Susan Trow, Simon LeBlanc, Mike Mahoney, Maurice de Ernsted orig. music Ben Low sd. ed. Jacqueline Newell narr. William Hutt re-rec. Jean-Pierre Joutel, Adrian Cross l.p. Eric Peterson p. and dist. by the National Film Board of Canada 16mm, colour, 79 mins., 1983.



photo: Pat Chuprina

● Natalia Kuzmyn, left, and Marcia Cannon craving a hit of r'n'r

Andrew C. Rowsome's Recorded Live

There's nothing quite like making a 'first' film, except possibly losing one's virginity: both occur only once in a lifetime, both are loaded with anticipation, and, lamentably, both lead to similar let-downs. You can always tell a 'first' film by the way the young filmmaker - having tasted the forbidden fruit - is bent on trying everything at least once, in front of and behind the camera. With *Recorded Live*, a low-budget billed as a New Wave musical adventure, this curious phenomenon is multiplied by three. Witness the film's credit roll: produced by Michael Korican, Andrew C. Rowsome, Almerinda Travassos. Directed by Michael Korican, Andrew C. Rowsome, Almerinda Travassos. Written by Andrew C. Rowsome, Almerinda Travassos. D.o.p.'d by Michael Korican... okay, you get the picture. Admittedly, the practice has a lot to do with necessity, but someone should have alerted the above trio about the dangers of making a feature film by committee.

No one can expect a 'first' film to be without flaws. They come naturally with the territory. Therefore, any critical yardstick ought not to be concerned with the film's technicalities but with ideas and how they are expressed. No matter how low the budget and how limited the practical know-how may be, there's always the promise that a First Film may be cinematically fresh and brash, daring and irreverent - something to jolt the jaded in the industry out of their slumber. As *Recorded Live* emanates from the new counter-culture of Toronto's Soho district, the chances of this happening appear to be good. Certainly, whoever did the advance work for the film did a good job: the film had everything going for it before the curtains parted at its (November, 1982) premiere showing. The audience

was appropriately young and irreverent. The promise of a 'wild' time was dangled in front of them as a Roman maiden would dangle grapes. *Recorded Live*, they were told, was going to feature the hottest New Wave bands in the country.

In order to carry that kind of anticipatory build-up, the "directors three" of *Recorded Live* needed to open their film with nothing short of an audiovisual assault on the senses, with rock 'n' roll that was rough and raw. Instead, the film limps out of the gate with a very weak presentation of the title song, staged rather unimaginatively with the band False Colours mooning in front of clips from old cartoons. "What's your fantasy?" croons the lead singer in a Rudolf Valentino outfit. "What's your secret wish?" "What's your hidden hope?"

This is not to imply that all the music in *Recorded Live* is bad. Mama Quilla II, for instance, comes off very well (despite the horrendous sound quality - oops, no technical quibbles allowed with a 'first' film). But on the whole, most of the songs in the film - while labelled New Wave - are just not "bailly" enough to justify a feature film. Furthermore, the "directors three" - or is it the "writers duo"? - allow too much of their own hype to get in the way - "chi-chi" pretense tends to permeate the entire proceedings. And their storyline ('the parts that go between the songs' as I overheard someone say) is excruciatingly proselytizing, despite the fact that it was meant in jest.

The plot, threadbare at best, follows Robbin, a struggling young artist (although Natalia Kuzmyn plays her like a tired, aging hooker) who, to make ends meet, distributes "bootleg" videotapes of local bands (Hamburger Patti and the Helpers, Rhythm Method and the above-mentioned two). Robbin's customers are a Howard Johnson's assortment of characters that include a punkette, a priest, a professor, and a businessman. All crave the "illegal" rock 'n' roll tapes as if they were a mainline drug or pornography. It's hard to figure out the reasoning behind running this one-note joke throughout the film. It becomes

● The first of the modern-day knights in shining new technology



photo: The National Film Board of Canada