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 and from Daily Life, 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, Rene Fonck of France, and the famous Red Baron – Manfred von Richthofen of Germany. Bishop was determined to get there, and ultimately, fact and legend. He achieved his aim and became a hero, with newsreels of him in action and more than a little luck paved the way.

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 75 minutes screening time and is simply a fine piece of work.

Joyce Nelson

Andrew C. Rowsome’s

Recorded Live

There’s nothing quite like making a 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 has grasped the essence of what made the First World War different from any previous war, a new technology placing the pilots in a quantum leap from hand-to-hand combat. At the same time, the filmmakers have seized the opportunity to explore the abstract beauty of the aerial warfare, giving us a sense of the other-worldly 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 exercised their artistic freedom, taking the opportunity to create a work that is satisfying and relevant to the present.

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REVIEW

If You Love This Planet

This first major film by director Terri Nash of Studio D at the NFB has become quite a focus of attention throughout North America. Not only has the film been awarded a special prize by the World Peace Council at the 1982 Leipzig Documentary and Short Film Festival, a Certificate of Merit at the 1982 Yorkton Film Festival, and a nomination for an Academy Award this year; If You Love This Planet has become a media cause célèbre by being one of three NFB documentaries recently cited by the U.S. Justice Department as "political propaganda" under the Foreign Agents Registration Act. As such, this film (and the two others: Acid Rain - Requiem or Recovery, and Acid From Heaven) would, when shown in the U.S. open with a disclaimer warning that it has not been approved by the U.S. government, and a list of viewers' names and addresses would have to be sent to the U.S. Justice Department.

So far, the result has been that thousands more people are seeing the three films than would have otherwise. If You Love This Planet certainly deserves such widespread viewing. It is a powerful evocation of what a nuclear war would be like.

The film is quite straightforward and simple, in the best sense of the word. It intercuts a 1981 lecture by Dr. Helen Caldicott, a former doctor turned radiologist and anti-nuclear activist, with actual film footage of survivors in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Dr. Caldicott explains the immediate as well as future effects of nuclear warfare, and archival footage from the Second World War is interspersed. The result is a film that is both powerful and informative.

But the primary focus of the film is Dr. Caldicott's speech to American students in Japan, and graphically alerting us to the horror and destruction that a nuclear war would bring. It is this peculiar marriage between the aural/visual landscape that unfolds right to the bodily effects of a nuclear blast that makes this film an incredibly powerful and thought-provoking piece of work. Silver has not so much made a film as artist and filmmaker that makes a scene, but has instead created an atmospheric portrait of a constantly evolving performance and performer.