

MURRAY MURDERS A MEMORY

and calls it
RECOMMENDATION FOR MERCY



by Natalie Edwards

Recommendation for Mercy, 35mm colour 94 minutes. Directed by Murray Markowitz; Screenplay – Fabian Jennings, Joel Weisenfeld, Murray Markowitz; Produced by James P. Lewis, Murray Markowitz; Assoc. Producer Edward Wachta; Exec. Producer Alfred M. Berman; Director of Photography Richard Leiterman; Editor George Appleby CFE; Art Director Tony Hall; Music Composed and Conducted by Don Gillis. Starring: Andrew Skidd, Rob Judd, Mike Upmalis, Karen Martin, Michele Fansett. Produced in co-operation with Famous Players, Canadian Film Development Corporation and Astral Films.

more attention.

The following are portions of a taped conversation made after a screening of *Recommendation for Mercy*. When asked if he would like to read the transcript to change or revise his remarks or edit or even see the article before publication, Markowitz replied, "No. It's yours. Do whatever you want with it."

Morality

Talking of the power of film and its accessibility and the sense in which it is almost like a religion, providing a morality, Markowitz said:

"I think my films in a sense are morality films, like the old morality plays. Whether it's *More Than One*, about the retarded, where I'm taking a person who's supposed to be beyond the kind of – well, he wasn't really, or they weren't really in control of their faculties; and then you take *August and July*: it was a sort of parody on a love affair in the sense that it was two women; and then you take a boy, a 14 year old boy who's supposed to have raped and murdered a 12 year old girl, sentenced to hang, and then spent 10 years in prison – it's, you know, it's a comment on society."

"It's so – well, we sit around and we eat chicken and steak, and the slaughter is so systematic! And this continent spends millions of dollars on fostering wars in other parts of the world, and we see people being killed daily on TV. . ."

Questioned if the use of the abattoir scene, as a comment on all this, might instead be interpreted as simply being inserted for shock effect, as might the pictures of the girl's body, Markowitz began to speak of the material he uses in a film, and how he uses it.

On Exploitation of the Truscott Case

"I'm not concerned with the Truscott Case. I'm concerned with a 14 year old boy being sentenced to hang, and that's one of the things I'm trying to point out, and I'm trying to reach people and say: Look, this is one of the vehicles of drama, it's like Greek tragedy. Using that premise to build the story, build the film, become famous, become important, maybe fail, be dismissed as trivial and mundane – and ordinary.

"Every step along the way I've had problems with this image (Truscott Case). Losing locations. Big write-ups. I had an editorial in the *Mercury* in Guelph saying – a

When other people turn politely aside, or pretend to, Murray Markowitz focuses his moviemaking eyes and stares. He has quite a stare.

He peered at a masturbating boy in his first short film *Ode to Blake*, and got thrown out of Ryerson. He peered at an elderly alcoholic couple "living like gypsies" as he says, in his second short film *The Glass Ring*. For his first feature length work he turned his camera and his curiosity on some retarded people in *More than One*, a film frequently referred to as "sensitive" by reviewers who had recently been sensitized themselves by Allan King's *Warrendale*.

When Markowitz met Alexa DeWiel and Sharon Smith, two women in love living together in the country, his fascination with their adventure and their personalities resulted in the film *August and July*. This real-unreal fantasized documentary in never-never land was less agreeably called "A Married Couple for Lesbians" by reviewers Knelman and Fulford/Delaney, among other things. Exploitation of the women was a minor fault, compared to the boredom they felt, apparently.

His latest feature is *Recommendation for Mercy*. Ah, the Stephen Truscott case, you say. Everyone says that. Well, yes and no. Markowitz does admit to having his interest kindled by the Truscott case, but the movie is somewhat different in fact and development for two reasons: one, he wanted to make something more intrinsically his own and relating more closely to his own experiences and feelings; and two, he could avoid lawsuits and claims of plagiarism from the authors of books on the subject if things were changed and he stuck to material available to the public. As for the Truscott family, or the family of the murdered child, they're hardly likely to risk

headline on the editorial page — “PUBLIC BAMBOOZLED BY MURRAY MARKOWITZ”.

“They felt that I was being dishonest to the community about saying that this wasn’t the Stephen Truscott Case, when in fact it was — and that I had lied to the paper.”

Had he considered other endings for the story?

“Most people when they go to see this know what the story is and they’ll want to see how I look at it; how I perceived it and the story line I stuck to, the outline of that. To put in something like him escaping or getting off, it’s not in the guidelines of the story. I’m more concerned about presenting the murder: who actually murdered the girl, or how she was done: an obsession about this whole trend of violence.”

When questioned if people wouldn’t think this was exploitative of the Truscott story he said:

“Well, it’s exploitative in the sense that people wanted to do the stories from the books. (Other people). I think anything you do, *August and July* for example, people said that I exploited the girls. And *More Than One*, there was a big furor in the Mental Retardation Movement — they say that I exploited the mentally retarded and that this is what they were like. But this isn’t what they’re like, and yet it was the way I portrayed them.

“You know I go after things that in some sense are sensational, and I hope I’m unique in several ways in my approach to dealing with them.”

Markowitz sums up his feelings concerning exploitation with a story of a discussion with a friend. Finally, to the question of whether a thing was exploitative, his friend replied with a flourish: “For your pleasure, Madame.”

“I think that rings true, where you do something and it’s like the filmmaker is a carny man and he’s got an act and instead of juggling balls in front of an audience he’s got to put it on the screen, and stay alive, and put on his performance via that.”

Concerning the boy in the film, “John Robinson”, and his guilt or innocence:

“I think, in the main, it’s very clear. I feel that he’s innocent, but I tried to present the fact in such a way that the viewer can make up his own mind and some people who see the film are going to be sure he’s guilty, and some people are going to be sure he’s innocent.”

Later in the evening Markowitz remarks:

“I think that John, the lead, is very sympathetic. I see myself empathizing and speaking out through his eyes.”

On Exploitation of Violence

After condemning Premier Davis for suggesting in a speech that we should “scrutinize the kind of violent things that we see”, Markowitz continued:

“I fight for freedom of speech. I try to go as far as I can go in the work that I do, and try to do what hasn’t been done before, and try to present new things in cinema that haven’t been seen, or a new way of saying that, and I think violence is a preoccupation in this.

“In my own way I tried to make this a very violent, scary, horrific film.

“I think one of the things throughout it is the thread, the development of the scariness — was he murdering her or wasn’t he, and, with the psychiatric examination, with the imagining of the hanging, and with the preoccupation in his mind of whether he did rape her or not, explicit scenes of him actually killing her, raping her, strangling her; I’m trying to say what I feel and what I’ve experienced certain ways. I try to fantasize about reading this screenplay and trying to make it as effective an idea as possible, and try to communicate it to as many people as possible.”

Autobiographical Aspects:

Markowitz talks of the effect on himself of being accused of rape and imprisoned for a day before being released as innocent. He claims that under those circumstances he actually fantasized himself raping, as the boy does. Questioned if he thought that many boys dream or daydream of being in a rape situation, he answered:

“I think in this particular instance — I can only speak for myself — I never daydreamed about raping girls or smelling their underwear or anything like that. I think because, as I mentioned, I was involved in being in prison for a day for a rape, alleged rape, and being released, and trying to transmit the fears and anxiety that I had, via this boy, because of that became a preoccupation.”

Fran Kruschen’s Memory Laid to Rest

“It’s too bad you couldn’t see the titles because there’s one fascinating link in this and it’s in the credits, near the end. This film is the third and last in a trilogy dedicated to Fran Kruschen. In *More Than One*, one of the credits was to Fran Kruschen in the acknowledgements, (note: she was also credited with continuity on *August and July*) and in *Recommendation for Mercy* the victim’s name is Fran.

“In university I met this girl, and we knew each other about five years. I was an all-star halfback and I had nothing to do with the arts at all, and she was an art history student. It was almost a Strindberg thing of fascination for the upper class. I was sort of petit-bourgeois and I always wanted to understand at least her preoccupation with — uh, enter her world.

“Now I’m involved with other people. She doesn’t really exist now, in my life. She does exist as a person. I don’t have a love for her now. I mean, I’ve been in and out of love with other people since, but she’s been a unifying force in everything that I’ve done.”

“And I tried to compare a lot of things in terms of. . . That scene on the swings for example, I went through that two or three times. That wasn’t even in the script; that was an improvisation. There was a scene where there was a crew of 20 people around to shoot in the bush but it was too dark, very cloudy, so I thought this up and it worked quite well. It was always in the back of my head, where there’s just the two of them and he asks, ‘Do you love me?’ and it’s a thing where a man wants to be loved, exclusively. Well, you know: (she says) ‘I love you but I want to be with other people too.’ I don’t know how it’s affected other people, but in my life to this point it’s been really critical where people have stopped loving me.

“But anyway, going further, Fran, the literal or the symbolic thing, or the rape and murder of Fran, is a kind of putting to sleep of an image that was very powerful. She represented beauty and the unattainable love that I’ve always sought, and now I’ve reached a different plateau. It’s almost like the song — ‘If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with’ or something like that.”

Discussion of Fran led to comments on motivation for making movies.

“Well, for some reason I’ve gone out and made three features. And they haven’t all been acclaimed, you know. Some people think I’m a genius, and some people think I’m a bloody phony and I shouldn’t be making films. One of the things that has driven me, and I think that I work fairly hard; it’s an obsession, and the thing that has caused this is the inability to relate in my personal life, to develop some kind of substantial relationships. (The obsession) is to try to make it work out in some kind of film where it’s almost like having the relationship with the film instead of a person.” □

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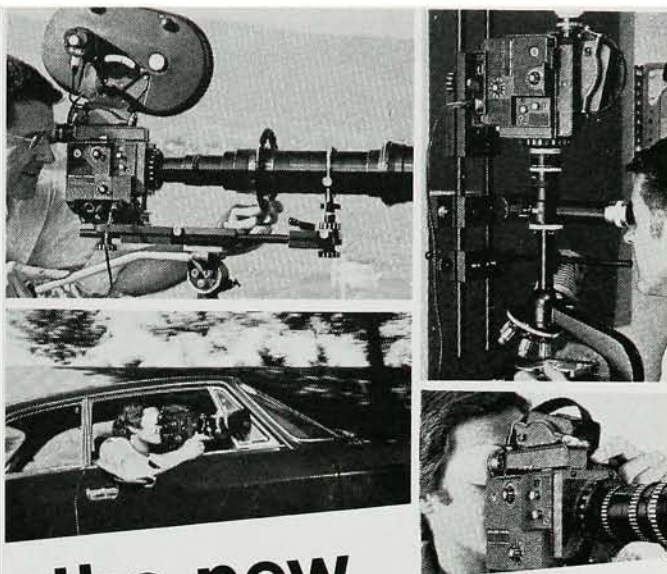
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