

## FILM REVIEWS

In one scene when she parrots paragraphs from self-help books about giving and sharing, it can be seen how easily the supposed gospel truth in such books can be manipulated to serve any end. Warren Davis, once an official CBC face and voice, suffers from that old Canadian actor's problem of too much TV exposure. (Can you see Peter Kent as Citizen Kane, or Barbara Walters as Lady Macbeth?) And the attention to TV lighting values of 2:1 or 3:1 robs Spry of the expressionistic tools of shadow manipulation.

**Drying up the Streets** flirts with the skirts of sensationalism, even lifting them at times. It has none of the didacticism of *One Man*: it sensitizes viewers to social problems with shock.

Doug Isaac

## R. Martin Walters' MARIE-ANNE

d. R. Martin Walters, sc. Marjorie Morgan, adapt. George Salverson, ph. Reginald Morris, ed. Stanley Frazen, sd. Chris Large, m. Maurice Marshall, lp. Andrée Pelletier, John Juliana, Gordon Tootoosis, Bill Dowson, David Schurmann, Linda Kupecek, Bill Meilen, Tantoo Martin, p. Fil Fraser, p.c. The Motion Picture Corporation of Alberta 1978, running time 88 minutes.

*Marie-Anne* is the second feature to be turned out by Edmonton producer Fil Fraser, who made his debut in the Canadian film industry not too long ago with *Why Shoot The Teacher*. Like that film, *Marie-Anne* is a movie shot in Alberta on a subject drawn from local history, and as such it has a peculiar fascination for Alberta audiences. Until Fil Fraser came along, it seemed, people in this part of Canada had never seen themselves or their history fictionalized on the screen — unless it was in the course of an occasional Eastern-financed project, or during one of Hollywood's brief, absurd forays north. Thus the shock of finding that it's possible for *us* to make *real movies*



Marie-Anne and family at Fort Edmonton

about *our* lives and heritage (of course retouching them for painless consumption just like the Americans do) has tended to overwhelm any objective local assessment of the film's actual worth. The Alberta public flocked eagerly to *Why Shoot The Teacher*, as it is now doing to *Marie-Anne*, like proud parents going to watch junior in the school play; and for them the question of how good *Marie-Anne* is when compared to (say) *Pretty Baby* or even to *J.A. Martin Photographe* is likely to appear meaningless in the strictest sense of the term. After all, you just don't look at your own child's performance in the same critical light as you would Glenda Jackson's Hedda Gabler.

Nevertheless, if filmmaking in Western Canada is to escape from parochial smallness of vision, it must be judged

according to criteria just as rigorous as we would apply to any film and it has to be said that by these standards *Why Shoot The Teacher* is an artistic failure enlivened by moments of authenticity and insight, and *Marie-Anne* a movie of no special interest.

*Marie-Anne* (scripted by Marjorie Morgan and directed by R. Martin Walters) is the story of the first white woman to come to Alberta. In the interests of conveying some idea of a film whose major problem is that it seems completely boneless and insubstantial, I'm going to give a full summary of the scenario — more, perhaps, than you ever wanted to know about

During the lengthy credit sequence we see Baptiste Lagimodière, an agent of the Hudson's Bay Company, frolicking merrily through the autumn woods near Fort Edmonton with his



Indian mate Tantoo in the year 1805. He receives a message that his father has died, and that he must go back to Québec to settle the estate and look after his mother. Upon arrival, he's told by the local parish priest that it's time he married and is furnished with a number of recommendations. A late addition to the list is the priest's housekeeper, Marie-Anne, who bursts into tears and complains to her employer that she's 25 already and headed for a dismal future of spinsterhood and domestic slavery. Remaking her mother's wedding dress, she shows up resplendent at the ball that night, and captures the prince's heart in true Cinderella fashion. Cut to scenes of the early days of their marriage, a happy relationship clouded by Baptiste's yearning to return to the open sky and the prairie. Marie-Anne and her husband go to Fort Edmonton in 1808 and immediately run into difficulties with the Company Factor Mr. Bird, who sees Marie-Anne as a potential precedent for the conversion of the Fort from trading post to settlement — the beginning of the end for the local fur trade. He strikes Baptiste from the Company rolls until his wife is sent back east. Marie-Anne also causes a spectacular disturbance among the local Cree Indians: the jealous Tantoo assaults her and Chief Many Horses wants to buy her. This catastrophe is averted only when she goes out to the Indian camp alone to explain why she can't be sold. Many Horses saves face by adopting her into the tribe as his daughter. This even becomes the too-convenient, not-to-be-examined-too-closely escape from the plot's complexities: Marie-Anne can stay because she's an Indian and Bird has no authority over her movements and now Baptiste can return from his trading mission to join her in an idyllic reunion. This outline of the film's storyline is perhaps misleadingly exhaustive for a movie in which nothing of any consequence ever seems to happen. Certainly there's material here for a good film — but only for a film which wishes to intricately observe the niceties of its characters' behaviour and to dwell with quiet intensity on the beauties of period objects and landscape (as, for example, J.A. Martin does),

not for an up-tempo movie that's half conventional plotting and half historical celebration. The treatment of the characters falls squarely between these two poles, so that we're never sure whether to react to them as emotionally-tangled soap-opera characters or as two-dimensional figures in a historical frieze. Whatever individuality the characters do achieve is attributable mainly to the acting (good performances from John Juliani as Baptiste and, especially, from Andrée Peletier — who almost saves the movie, indeed — as Marie Anne).

As for the historical end of things, the film always looks like exactly what it is — a bunch of actors in brand-new costumes cavorting around the reconstructed Fort Edmonton. There's no sense that the objects we see have ever been used, or the clothing lived in; and no sense of the vastness of the wilderness or the distance from civilization — no sense, in a word, of the harshness and isolation, or of the grandeur, of life as it must have been lived in Alberta 170 years ago.

Nor is this unwelcome atmosphere of a small-scale fancy-dress outing dissipated by director Walters and cameraman Reginald Morris. All the interiors are bathed in second-hand Barry Lyndon firelight amber, and all the exteriors are brightly high-key as if lit for television (which, incidentally, is where Walters must have learned his occasional ugly habit of starting a scene with a closeup of some insignificant object and then doing a slow zoom — out to take in the surroundings). Then there's the minor annoyance of peripheral actors injecting an urban Anglo twang into the French-accented context, and the major annoyance of Maurice Marshall's lightweight music — relentlessly wisful and twee, as if assuring us that everything's going to turn O.K. no matter what temporary misadventures the principals might be enduring.

Maybe I'm being too harsh on *Marie-Anne*, which is, after all, an unassuming little movie. What need is there to come down hard on a film with such good intentions and such a transparent awareness of its own lack of ambition? But good intentions and polite unambitiousness are the

bane of the English-Canadian film industry, and it seems a pity to watch Fil Fraser heading down the same road without uttering a protest. Of course we can't produce super-slick superproductions, and we shouldn't want to (though I suspect that's what Canadian audiences do secretly want); but neither should we accept limitations of resources as an excuse for weak scripts and bad directional judgement. I'm sure that, like the parents at the school play, Alberta audiences will get a lot of pleasure out of *Marie-Anne*; but in merely demanding that their child get its lines right and not fall on its face, they will be overlooking a pervasive diffuseness and shallowness in both conception and execution — faults which will be readily apparent to viewers not in the family.

Bill Beard

## Ralph Thomas' TYLER

d. Ralph Thomas, sc. Roy MacGregor, ph. Vic Sarin, ed. Ron Wisman, m. Eric Robertson, l.p. R.H. Thompson, Murray Westgate, Sean McCann, Robert McClure, Sonja Smits, exec. p. Ralph L. Thomas, p. David Pears, p.c. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Radio-Canada) 1977, col. 16mm, running time 82 minutes.

This low budget, made for TV film, winner of the Montreal Film Festival for the best Canadian film out of competition prize, is a farming story with a bumper crop of paradoxes. It is too realistic to be fantasy: too fantastic to be real. Those given to classifications will find in this film all the features of a fable, a short story exemplifying a pinciple of human nature and concluding with an epigram. In this case, "Think Canadian First" appears in the last shot on the back of a truck, and in both official languages.

Of course, dealing with any film from a realistic perspective is always risky, since filmmakers from documentaries to experimentalists all lay