

# FILM REVIEWS

## Les Rose's THREE CARD MONTE

d. Les Rose, asst. d. Tony Hill, sc. Richard Gabourie, ph. Henri Finks, ed. Ron Wisman, sd. Peter Burgess, Paul Coombe, m. Paul Zaza, Jim Caverhill, l.p. Richard Gabourie, Christopher Langevin, Tony Sheer, John Rutter, Cathy Mankle, Sean McCaan, Lynne Cavanagh, Valerie Warburton, Jim Caverhill, Ross Cotterhill, exec. p. Richard Gabourie, p. Ron Iveson, p.c. Regent-hall Film Productions, (year) 1977, col. 16mm blown-up to 35mm, running time 91 minutes, dist. Ambassador Films.

Unlike most of those Canadian films which have enshrined the loser as hero (or vice versa), Les Rose begins this, his first feature production, on a rather more optimistic tone. When Busher (Richard Gabourie) is introduced, he is riding into a typical southern Ontario town on a bus, with the tools of his trade — a deck of cards in his hand, a Racing Form on his lap, and his pool cue at his side. He is a hustler, and an aging one at that, but the first impression one gets of him is that of a kindly entertainer, as he holds a little girl entranced with a game of Three Card Monte (“the oldest scam in the world”). That Busher is a kindhearted and sentimental guy is evident, for as he leaves the bus, he turns back and gives the child a card with a five dollar bill taped to it.

For a while Rose and Gabourie (who also wrote the script), maintain a light note. Busher quickly relieves two rather dense garage mechanics, Ryan and Walker (Tony Sheer and John Rutter), of their money and their customized car with a dazzling display of pool that mightily impresses an 11 year old hanger on at the poolhall named Toby (Christopher Langevin). Although he is at first reluctant, Busher lets the boy, who is running away

from the Children's Aid, tag along with him after Toby saves him from a beating at the hands of the two disgruntled hicks. From then on they are partners. In quick succession they fleece a used car salesman of a vehicle, bamboozle a truck driver in a rigged crap game, win big at the racetrack and pick up two stranded hitchhikers, Nicki and Clorissa (Lynne Cavanagh and Valerie Warburton). Busher finds that the boy's plucky attitude seems to bring him luck while Toby is a father figure he can look up to.

Had the film remained on this level, it might have been a fair variation on themes that Peter Bogdanovich had explored in *Paper Moon* or Mark Rydell in *The Reivers*. This appears to be the way in which Rose was taking the film. Gabourie, however, seems to have had other ideas. He chooses, perhaps naturally, to concentrate on developing Busher, and as he does, the character becomes somewhat less attractive than he initially was. His vanity increases with the size of his bankroll, and leads him to see himself as a ladies' man. With simple minded machismo he picks up a girl with a line that even young Toby sees through, and then falls asleep on top of her before he can make love. He sprinkles his conversation with lines that sound like they come from Mickey Spillane or some other tired tough guy — (“If you want a story, go to a library”). In his more maudlin moments, though, Busher realizes just what an anachronism he is. “My style,” he says, “went out with porkpie hats and '56 Chevys.” Gabourie has enough natural bluff to make this kind of acting work for Busher, but it means that he leaves the other characters floundering.

Although Les Rose tries to pick up some of this slack, the impetus of the film slows considerably when Gabourie is off screen. Tony Sheer and John Rutter play the two mechanics as a twisted cross between an Abbott and Costello routine and Harvey Keitel and Robert DeNiro's fights in *Mean Streets*.

This only works in one sequence, where Ryan tries to kick down the door to Busher's room, but merely puts his foot through it. (“Now we'll probably hafta pay for the f..... door,” says Walker.) Elsewhere, the antics of these two seem silly at best, useless at worst. The two girls don't advance far from being stereotypes either. Valerie Warburton's Clorissa is the “tramp” — she takes Busher's money and leaves with a slick barroom musician (Jim Claverhill, who also sings the background songs). Lynne Cavanagh's Nicki, on the other hand is equally cardboard as the “good” girl who sticks by Busher and Toby and is rewarded with a train ticket to Winnipeg (!)

Where the film really fails, however, is in the treatment of Toby. In order to make this kind of adult-child relationship work, it would have been necessary to develop both characters to an equal degree or at least make them both interesting. One thinks here more of the interaction between Ellen Burstyn and Alfred Lutter in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* rather than the better known pairing of Ryan and Tatum O'Neal as an example of how this works. Rose and Gabourie do not seem to be interested in this, however, which leaves Christopher Langevin in something of a vacuum. He is notably hesitant in his acting, with only one scene, with Lynne Cavanagh, to show what he can do. His scenes with Gabourie never have much depth. This makes the rather forced happy ending seem ridiculous and artificial.

Perhaps the real problem with the unevenness of *Three Card Monte* lies, as usual, with the chronic undercapitalization that is all too characteristic of our feature films. If the \$167,000 budget for *Outrageous* was regarded as ludicrous, the budget for this film, \$100,000 is nothing short of absurd, considering that it was shot in 35 days, almost no location being used more than once. While it is true that money can not save a bad production, the lack of it can hinder a good one. These

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economies meant that Rose could not afford to retake scenes to any great degree, to use a more expensive color stock of film, or to help the most inexperienced of the cast (Langevin) with his acting.

This should not, however, negate the fact that **Three Card Monte** is something of an achievement, especially for Richard Gabourie. Against all odds he fought for his project, developed it with Ron Iveson, convinced the initially skeptical Les Rose to direct it, and then went out and personally sold it to a distributor. This kind of energy and dedication richly merits the recognition which he received at

the Canadian Film Awards ceremony, where he was given both the Best Actor and the Wendy Michener Awards. Although **Three Card Monte** is less than a success, (though three weeks at Toronto's Imperial Theatre is by no means a failure), it is noteworthy for what it promises for the future. The Canadian film community can never have enough of people like Ron Iveson and Les Rose who are willing to take risks like this, and it especially needs people like Richard Gabourie who not only believe in their films but have the hustle to go out and sell them as well.

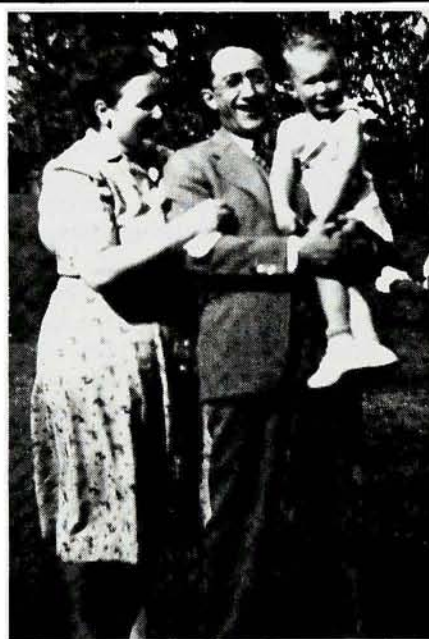
J. Paul Costabile

## SHORT FILM REVIEWS

### A.M. KLEIN: THE POET AS LANDSCAPE

d. David Kaufman, asst. d. David Hillel, sc. David Kaufman, Usher Caplan, ph. Rodney Charters, ph. research Anne Epstein, ed. Stephen Lawrence, sd. Don Book, John Gundy, Brent Haliskie, David Appleby, sd. ed. David Appleby, sd. rec. Don Book, John Gundy, Brent Haliskie, m. Cynthia Moseley, Albert Kussin, Lyndamae Harris, l.p. the off-screen voice of A.M.Klein as interpreted by Earl Pennington and on-screen narration by David Lewis, Sophie Lewis, Irving Layton, Leon Edel, Max Garmaise, David Rome, Colman Klein, Ruth Wisse, p. David Kaufman, asst. p. Patrick Masterson, p.c. David Kaufman Photography (Toronto), 1977, col. 16 mm, running time 58 minutes, dist. Marlin Motion Pictures

It's a rare but real pleasure to be 'knocked out' by somebody's first film. David Kaufman's documentary on the Canadian poet A.M. Klein is a stunning work, with none of the weaknesses usually noticeable in novice films. In fact, **A. M. Klein: The Poet As Landscape** could rank with some of the work of Donald Brittain, the veteran Canadian documentarist. Kaufman reveals a si-



A.M. Klein enjoying a day out on the Mountain

milar painstaking attention to subtle details in the soundtrack, the same respect for the poetic potential within a voice-over narration, and an eye for visuals which work in counterpoint to words. His integration of Klein's poetry within the narration makes for a smooth flow from exposition to quotation, avoiding that jarring sense of a poem's insertion into material of a very different style. Partly, this is achieved by the use of Earl Pennington as the reader for the narration, but more precisely it is the result of fine writing in the script and a feel for the nuances of language. As

well, the film is visually rich in religious symbolism, conveying the uniquely Catholic and Jewish neighborhoods which made up Klein's Montreal.

Klein was a product of the St. Urbain Street milieu - a Jew writing in English about the concerns of his people, against the background of French Canadian Catholicism. He deeply understood the sense of community and ritual so important to both groups, and his poetry connects them in a common landscape. It is perhaps for this reason that David Lewis, the former NDP leader, calls Klein "the archetype Canadian." His work reconciled seeming differences among people, finding common ground in their daily rituals, traditions, and deep cultural roots. Interviews with other friends and colleagues, including Mrs. Sophie Lewis, the poet Irving Layton, Ruth Wisse, and writer Leon Edel, explore the passion for literature and compassion for humanity which characterized this man for whom "poetry came like breathing." A major figure in the Canadian and international literary scene during the 1930s and 1940s, Klein was also a lawyer, journalist, community leader, and family man. Kaufman's selection of poetic excerpts, old photographs, and interviews creates layers of a personality thoroughly at ease with the most seemingly diverse strains of life and letters, from Talmudic scholarship to the avant-garde writing of James Joyce.

But central to Klein's life and at the structural center of this film is the Holocaust of World War II. Using rare archival photographs, the filmmakers have constructed a devastating sequence of stills from Nazi rallies, European ghettos, concentration camps, and wartime destruction. Placed at mid-point in the film, the sequence effectively conveys the impact which this war had upon A.M. Klein. He never fully recovered from it and, in the words of his son Colman Klein, was simply "not prepared for the evil and destructive world" which had emerged so horrifyingly during this period in history. A nervous breakdown in 1954 marked a kind of "non-physical suicide," as well as the termination of his writing career. The man who was "the voice of Canadian Jewry" and