it hurts us more than it hurts you"). He is sentenced to two years, two months, two days, two hours and two minutes in the infamous Children's Prison on Slimers' Island ("from which no brats return"). In the custody of the scaly Master Fish (Guy L'Ecuyer) and the beak-nosed Mistress Fowl (Joy Coghill), he is taken to meet the warden, the Hooded Fang (Alex Karras), a roaring former wrestler who determines to break the boy of his duplicative habit. However, Jacob, with the aid of the representatives of Child Power, The Intrepid Shapiro (Marfa Richler) and The Fearless O'Toole (Thor Bishopric), is able to discover that the terrible creature is himself quite the child, and so is able to liberate the small prisoners.

It is to Ted Flicker's credit that he does not try to embroider this fairly simple fable, and its message that the sensibilities of children should be respected, with any great flashiness, even if it does mean a rather uncinematic reliance on Richler's essentially verbal humor. Where he does use effects, it is with restraint, as in the trial scene, where Francois Prodat's low angle photography heightens Jacob's feeling of insignificance before the implacable Adult Law. The design of the Children's Prison, though it could be criticized for looking too artificial, is a suitable surreal experience for a child exposed to animated cartoons and television commercials, while the jeans-and-jersey uniforms of Child Power form a link to Jacob's siblings' games in the prologue (again, the same persons double the roles), and the comic heroes they (and Richler) dote on. The only effect that really does not work is the gray makeup on the non-overtly Canadian work of Michael Rubbo? It doesn't take place in Canada.

The ideas aren't Canadian in any particular way. No wonder. He's Australian. Yes, dismiss him. Well, he does work for the National Film Board. They're all aesthetes and Communists. They're, who are no account.

This very process has, in the past, lost us, great artists. John Grierson immediately comes to mind. It would be shameful, if the same attitude, prompted Michael Rubbo to leave Canada. In the past ten years Rubbo is responsible for at least two films that can rightly claim and have received recognition beyond our borders, The Sad Song of Yellow Skin (1971) about the Vietnamese interface with the West during the Vietnam War and Waiting for Fidel (1974) about an attempted interface between a Canadian capitalist and his guide, politician Joey Smallwood and Fidel Castro. In both films Rubbo, as narrator or visual participant has placed himself as filmmaker in the unusual position of explorer.

He admits interest, curiosity, sometimes bewilderment, but never the distant sophomoric or all-knowing sensibility that has in the past lent the label dogmatic, or more subtly, educational,
Diane Létourneau’s
Les Servantes du Bon Dieu


In art, death is rarely represented as a peaceful closing of the eyes.
Diane Létourneau’s 90 min. documentary Les Servantes Du Bon Dieu (The Handmaidens of God), filmed among the nuns of the convent of Saint-Famille in Sherbrooke, Quebec, is above all a film about passing on. It is about a dying order of women. Their convent, established in the 1890s, now faces closure because the sisterhood cannot attract youthful recruits. The average age of the sisters of Saint-Famille is 60.

The film reveals the tranquility of their aging. No words, written or spoken, in its way, a courageous film. Rubbo, by poking his camera into the enthralls of contemporary political thought, de-mythologizes the canonized experiments in Communism. Whether they be Leninists or Maoists. Does that mean that Rubbo implies advocacy of Democracy? Does it mean that there are limits to the potential of Government involvement in the private life? Or is he asking the question, “Can we live with the anxiety democracy promotes in individuals?” His own behavior in the film suggests the latter is a possibility. Certainly the figure of Solzhenitsyn, what he stands for, is the only positive element in the film.

Which brings me back to Michael Rubbo, the National Film Board and the Canadian audience. This film was produced in Canada, and one can be very proud that such a film could be made in this country. The film is mature, probing and satisfying on an intellectual as well as aesthetic level. And yet there is a question about the life of this film here in Canada. It is appalling to learn that this film has already been sold to PBS in the United States and shown at the Film Forum in New York. It has yet to be shown here except for screenings at universities and at the Grierson Seminar in Orillia. They love Mike Rubbo in the U.S. and embrace his work. Apparently we don’t. One doesn’t know who we are, but we exist, because Rubbo’s films have met a lot of resistance here in Canada. He sent the film to the U.S. first because he’s had too much non-response to his films at the CBC and because his films are only routinely distributed via district offices of the NFB. Apparently the CBC is not alone. The film was raked over the coals at this year’s Grierson Seminar.

This is very sad given the filmmaker and his work. Rubbo is a major artist. Perhaps the reason, to harken back to the beginning of this review, is his interest in international subject matter, lack of overt Canadian content. If it is so, the loss is ours. Next year Michael Rubbo will be filmmaker in residence at Harvard University in Boston.

Kenneth Dancyger

Two "petites" sisters of the Sainte-Famille
photo: Yves Ste-Marie

en, can transmit the humility and serenity we witness in the eyes and faces of the nuns whom we meet in this film. In our jagged age, it is a provocative confrontation.

The sisters of Saint-Famille were organized and still function primarily as a domestic service organization for the priesthood. In the film we see them at their daily duties and dedications, laundering, cooking, cleaning. Theirs are simple lives, lived with deliberation and a good deal of humor.

No one could fail to be captivated by some of the spunky, guileless old ladies who make their debut in Les Servantes du Bon Dieu. One feisty octogenarian tells us that she adopted a black habit, when most of the others wear white, because she likes black, always has, then gets up and shuffles off camera. There is zest also to the two nuns who live in the garage, to be closer to the automobiles for which they are responsible, who we find in serious discussion about the relative merits of the Pontiac and Chevrolet!

The nuns are curiously natural, though sometimes shy in front of the camera. It is the qualities we least expect to find among such women, namely their independence of mind and firm pride of vocation, that make them so attractive.

One senses that Létourneau was herself surprised by the personalities she encountered. Through a series of interviews, which we soon realize are of the same format (why did she join the convent, at what age, is her work satisfying?) we discover the wealth of character among the women living in this religious collectivity. The interviews also reveal something about conditions for Quebec women early in the century when the choice of a religious vocation often meant the only access to a career and life outside the home. (Until the Quiet Revolution, religious societies had responsibility for education and health care in Quebec, and many women made prestigious careers in these areas.)

In the end, however, the repetition in the interviews becomes tedious, and works against the tension of discovery. The director’s zeal in one area underlines a curious gap in another.

On one level, Létourneau is fascinated by the simple satisfaction with which all the work in the convent is done. There are languid shots of hands meticulously folding linens and ladling soup, silent views of women at work dusting some part of the sanctuary. Yet when the cardinal, speaking for the priests to whom the service is rendered, says with uneasy dignity, that the first quality of the nuns is their faithfulness...