

FILM REVIEWS

in service, we sense feminist indignation. The paradox comes when the director uncovers nothing but expressions of contentment among the nuns as labourers. If Létourneau meant to comment on church hierarchy and politics then it would have been more appropriate to treat the question of hierarchy within the convent itself. In fact, the day to day running of the convent, the people behind its apparently smooth operation, are never seen.

It is a priest, whose habit it is to ring for the dinner that the good nuns have prepared for him, who makes one of the telling comments on the experience Létourneau documents. Gently, he reminds us that these women face death without fear.

The final images of the film show the preparation of and closing of a coffin, and the procession of the sisterhood that accompanies it to the grave. It is rare footage, not only because cameras are usually foreign to even semi-cloistered convents, but because the audience

shares in the intimacy of the ritual.

A word should be said about the cinematography by Jean-Charles Tremblay, who has approached his task with the same thoughtful concern for detail that he found among those he was photographing. He understood the quality of silence in the vaulted architecture, in the swaying habits of the nuns, in their work, and, at his best, toned his lighting and movement to those elements.

Most of us adopt a certain reverence of perception to the religious sisters we encounter in life, and perhaps the mystique exists nowhere stronger than in Quebec where, at one time, almost every family sent one of its daughters into religious life.

Change in Quebec means that convents such as the home of the sisters of Saint-Famille will possibly disappear. This film helps us to understand the attraction and the reality of the choices *les servantes du bon dieu* have made.

Joan Irving

even more strikingly, the film itself reiterates Shilling's style through its similar use of color, texture, and faces. Vivid and colorful settings for his on-camera interviews often repeat the tones and hues just previously seen in a Shilling portrait. The words of the narration are as direct as the honest expressions captured in the painted portraits. As well, the film incorporates bold contrasts of texture and tone to highlight special moments.

As documented in this film, Shilling's life as an Indian artist has been one of continuing struggle, reaching its lowest point in 1975 when he faced death from heart disease at age 34. A series of self-portraits made over several years clearly reveals a young man struggling with inner and outer conflict. Facing death was a turning point for Shilling. The filmmakers, having shown us the vitality in his work and surroundings, at this point in the film include a sequence utterly drained of colour, a bleak wintry drive through barren landscape that works effectively as metaphor. Following successful heart surgery, Shilling's life and the screen itself become infused with a resurgence of color and activity. We see Shilling surrounded by family and friends, building a home, studio and art gallery on the Rama reserve. Final shots of the artist and his wife Millie with their first baby convey a wonderful feeling of harmony. Photographed inside the home they have built, this closing sequence of family portraits provides a simple and poignant finish to a film about cycles of life.

The Beauty of My People has won the awards for Best Direction and Best Scriptwriting in the American Indian Film Festival held in San Francisco, 1979. It is Alan Collins' directorial debut, though he is known for his editing expertise on such features as *The Brood*, *Love at First Sight*, *The Clown Murders*, *I Escaped from Devil's Island*, *Von Richthofen and Brown* and television work including *The Newcomers '1911'* (directed by Eric Till), *We've Come a Long Way Together* (Don Shebib), and *Backlot Canadiana* (Peter Rowe).

The experience of viewing *The Beauty of my People* is an inspiring one. Devoid of sentimentality and cliché, the film simply and powerfully shows us one man in the process of transcending limitations. In a remarkable way, *The Beauty of My People* urges each one of us to become who

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The Beauty of My People

d. Alan Collins, sc. Gary George, narr. Sherman Maness, ph. Dennis Miller, Robert New, ed. Alan Collins, sd. David Lee, Terry Cooke, m. Court Stone, p. Alan Collins, p.c. Nova Picture Productions (Toronto), col. 16mm, (year) 1978, running time 30 minutes, dist. National Film Board of Canada.

"I paint because there is no other way to express the beauty of my people," says Arthur Shilling, the Ojibway artist who is the subject of this award-winning documentary. Similarly, filmmaker Alan Collins expresses the powerful beauty of his subject by structuring the film along a narrative line of personal, human struggle, and by meticulously attending to stylistic elements that coincide with Shilling's own visual work. The result is a film that achieves harmonious unity with its subject.

As a painter, Arthur Shilling's work is characterized by a bold use of color and broad brush strokes which critic Peter White has called "reminiscent of Van Gogh." He is primarily a portrait

artist, using his relatives and friends on the Rama reserve as subjects. Collins' film shows us dozens of these portraits, along with the people and landscape which inspired them. But



Arthur Shilling, an Ojibway artist who faced death at 34 photo: Rudi Bies

we are, to believe in and express our talents. As Shilling says of his own life-work, "The only time I'm going to stop is when I'm dead."

Joyce Nelson

Night Flight

d. Desmond Davis, sc. Alvin Goldman, ph. Paul van der Linden, ed. Ion Webster, sd. Henri Blondeau, sd. ed. Danuta Klis, sd. mix. Michel Deccombes, p. designer Bernard Durand, a.d. Bernard Durand, set dec. Reäl Ouellette, props Francis Calder, Herminio Bilhete, André Gagnon, m.d. André Gagnon, cost. Françoise Laplante, l.p. Trevor Howard, Bo Svenson, Celine Lomez, Ted Follows, exec. p. Lawrence F. Mihlon, p. Howard Ryshpan, Susan Lewis, p.c. Marlow Pictures Inc., (year0 1978, col. 35mm, running time 23 minutes, 55 seconds dist. The Singer Company and The Learning Corporation of America, a subsidiary of Columbia Films.

Somewhere this plane would founder in darkness... Drowned by the night... Night's apple trees that wait upon the dawn with all their flowers that serve as yet no purpose. Night perfume-laden, that hides the lambs asleep and flowers that have no color yet.

—Antoine de Saint Exupéry
1932

Night Flight is the story of men who risked their lives or the lives of others to deliver the mail during the early days and nights of aviation. "Safety first was the obsession of those early days. Planes were to leave only an hour before dawn, to land only an hour after sunset," writes St. Exupéry.

In his novel, St. Exupéry develops two characters, Fabien, the pilot and Rivière, who sends his men into the depths of night, against the advice of others. His story is a classic. High school children read it in their 2nd year French classes. English majors read it in their Comparative Literature Studies. The prose of St. Exupéry is poetic.

"The night flights went on and on like a persistent malady,... help must be given to these men who with hand and knees and breast to breast were

wrestling with the darkness, who knew and only knew an unseen world of shifting things, whence they must struggle, out, as from an ocean."

What could a filmmaker do to recreate these words in a visual form? Almost an impossible task, one might say. One would first have to decide whether a poetic/dramatic film is possible. Peter Watkins was successful with **Edvard Munch**, but his film lasted almost three hours.

The photography is the most outstanding element of the film **Night Flight**. Cinematographer Paul van der Linden certainly deserves credit for this. **Night Flight** opens with a red sun-streaked sky. The image is captivating and as the titles appear, one suddenly notices a tiny biplane approaching from a far corner, creating a hypnotic effect. The viewer watches the vehicle as it grows against the sky. One is again entranced by the lovely image of a plane taking off at night, cradled by a fire-lit runway.

From a commercial point of view, the principal objection certainly would not be the slick 35mm presentation. The major problem with the film is its inability to evoke an emotional response from the audience. The film seems to need a touch of roughness to make the story believable. One wants to feel that the skies are treacherous. Black and white 16mm footage would have helped to create a rougher effect, but it was out of the question — artistic qualities are

important, but distribution values are godly.

Even the pilot Fabien (Bo Svenson) seems rather soft in character. The 20th Century exalts in presenting feminized-male roles. If one wants to establish the impression of a manly character, one does not always want to see an actor gazing dreamily from his comfortable bed or talking sweetly to his wife.

How does one create a dramatic context? How does one give a character depth? Fabien's personality is non-existent in the film. Who is he? The conflict seems to be that the film continually tries to take off in a dramatic direction, then in a romantic direction. Unfortunately the two directions fail to be integrated and the viewer goes up and down as often as the plane.

Superficially constructed scenes (man kisses wife goodbye at the airport) do not create substance. Buenos Aires, ostensibly the locale, does not become Buenos Aires just because a sign says so. (**Midnight Express** was shot in Malta and not in Sun Valley for this reason. And wives who sit around fireplaces thinking of their men makes one think of the old saying... sugar and spice and everything nice...

The Rock Hudson-Doris Day image of man and woman should have been circumvented by a slightly more realistic relationship (e.g. **The Glass Cell** by Geisendorfer). Perhaps a more realistic decision would have been to eliminate the female element altogether. The film



Fabien (Bo Svenson), a brave man who pilots night mail planes

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is only 23 minutes in length and only so much can be developed within that limited amount of time. This is a long standing problem with films that try to adhere to the story line of a book.

Without the false romance, the film would have been stronger. One deathly shot shows Celine Lomez (a wife who doesn't look very upset about the fact that her new husband may soon die) gazing out towards a lake. The film constantly tells — with a voice over narrative — rather than shows what one should feel.

The strongest moments of *Night Flight* occur during a perilous storm. A plane — a cloud ridden sky — solitude. And the most poetic moment transpires as the plane's fuel runs out, and it falls into the sky — an excellent finale — but unfortunately the film takes off again in another direction. Why? To destroy a poetic moment is certainly the worst artistic sin.

Night Flight has already played on CBS prime time. It has also been sold to NBC and ABC affiliates, and European markets are presently bidding for the film. As yet, CBC and CTV have not touched it.

The Singer Company spent as much on advertising *Night Flight* as they did

on the \$300,000 production. Marlow Pictures, Inc. headed by Howard Ryshpan and Susan A. Lewis, completed the film in two months, with 10 days of actual shooting at Cooper Airport in St. Lazare. The airplane appearing in *Night Flight* is a 50-year-old Curtiss Fledgling and was rented along with pilot Ken Bertch from Cole Palen of The Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome in Upper New York State for \$3500 and expenses.

Producer Howard Ryshpan is best known as an actor and director of theatre and for his work as first assistant director and casting director of *Lies My Father Told Me*. Susan Lewis recently worked on the film *Superman*.

Night Flight premiered in the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. It was a first class affair with dignitaries and heads of state in attendance as evidenced by the secret security guards. Their perfume company Guerlain, who originated the scent 'Vol de Nuit,' handed out elaborately enveloped samples of its product. And Howard Ryshpan thought, "They must think we live in some quaint townhouse in Montreal."

When the film was over, the \$20 used office supply furniture went back. Marlow Productions lives in a walk up

on Sherbrooke west. The only element of 'elegance' is the gold frame which circumscribes the *Night Flight* poster. So it goes with American sponsored Canadian productions.

Lois Siegel

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