

the title. Good idea. It worked for **Mork and Mindy**, **Laverne and Shirley**, and **Starsky and Hutch**. It has a nice ring to it, but what's it about?

Bill Davidson has decided on a title that explains it all: **Matt and Jenny, On the Wilderness Trail 1850**. Whew!

Actually, it's a good hook for a television series — two orphaned children searching the New World for their lost relatives. The format provides for a small continuing cast, young Matt and his sister, Jenny Tanner (Derrick Jones and Megan Follows), and the two adults who serve as their guides and protectors through their travels: Neil Dainard as the suave and mysterious Adam Cardston, and Duncan Regehr as the intrepid and wily woodsman, Kit. Throughout the series, these four encounter a variety of adventures and guest performers.

Unfortunately, the program tends towards a stultifying earnestness. Young Matt is never allowed a moment's levity. "We'll make it Jenny, don't worry," and similar phrases, inhibit any potential, childlike spontaneity. While jumping ship in Halifax, Matt and Jenny invite a young cabin boy to join them. In refusing, he draws himself up to his full four-foot-ten height, dons his most philosophical. Kris Kristofferson's demeanor and replies, "It's the sea... It's my home, I guess..." Or the scene where Kit is asked why he risks his life to try and save strangers from a forest fire. Is he crazy? "Not crazy... just a man who wants to help his neighbours," he responds.

The children's dialogue poses an obvious problem for producer (and writer of the first two scripts) Bill Davidson. Children do not normally speak as if they were pint-sized accountants. Only in a script would a 12-year-old, asked if the Indians in Canada are savages, reply, "No more than a gang of sailors in a Bristol Pub on Saturday night."

The kids are much better when they have no words to speak. There is a great sequence in the opening episode when a huge convict is loaded onto the stage coach with Matt and Jenny. No dialogue, just camera angles, cutting, and Jenny's expression: enough to tell us of her fears and doubts, not just of this monster three feet away, but also of her predicament, alone in a wild, strange land.

Another plus is Kit's grand entrance! At the last possible instant, as a rattlesnake is about to attack Matt and Jenny, an off-screen shot suddenly blows its brains out. Kit then materializes in the middle of the trail, rifle at his side, grin-

ning like a slightly crazed Daniel Boone with wild eyes, and full of mysterious warnings and suggestions. But who wouldn't be slightly out of sync with the rest of the world after living *his* life in the woods?

In the opening episode, director Joseph Scalan's action sequences (the rattlesnake and a runaway raft) had children in the audience screaming. The first two episodes both look, and sound good. Matt Tundo's photography, and Ron Harrison's music are super!

The series also makes two significant statements: the Indians aren't really savages; and there were Blacks in Canada in

the 19th century. It is the Tanner family that Kit tries to rescue from the fire. They may be the children's missing relatives. But he fails to find them. At the end of the show, a ravaged, exhausted Black family emerges from the charred woods. "Hi, I'm Rufus Tanner from Kentucky." A great scene! And the point is made without it having been bludgeoned into us.

But to return to the title for a moment: fortunately, it informs us that the setting is in 1850. Consequently, we can ignore the Toronto Island ferries — though they might have at least kept the Vibram soles on the work boots out of the close-ups!

Charles Lazer

SHORT FILM REVIEWS

Jack Bush

d. Murray Battle. ph. Mark Irwin. add ph. Bob New. Camera asst. Robin Miller. David Webb. Greg Farrow. still ph. Joff Nolte. ed. Peter Maynard. sd. ed. Margaret van Eerdewijk. re-rec. Len Abbott. addnl. resh. Godfrey P. Jordan. graphics David How. m. Don Thompson's arrangement of "Basin St. Blues-1944" courtesy of Mrs. A. Jack Teagarden. resch. Gary Gegan. Joe Showler. black & white videotape Robert McLaughlin Gallery. video camera John Newton. color videotape Wendy Brunelle. unit admn. Lise Turcot. Silva Besmajian. co-ordinator Louise Mortisugu. exec. p. Don Hopkins. consulting p. James Beveridge. p. Rudy Buttignol. assoc. p. Peter Maynard. p.c. Cinema Productions, a division of Light Images Ltd., for the National Film Board of Canada. Ontario Regional Prod. (year) 1979. running time 56 minutes, 50 seconds.

I always sit down to watch documentaries on artists with trepidation. Probably because I find art exciting, and generally find films on artists the opposite. **Jack Bush** got me thinking about this; because 24 hours after seeing the film, I still feel delighted from the experience.

The strength of Murray Battle's film is that it both breaks with several art film conventions and carries a feeling of spontaneity. We all know the conventions — the reverential tone of the filmmaker face to face with the creativity of the artist, the precise commentary carefully delivered, the detailed panning shots over the paintings or whatever, the archival shots, the

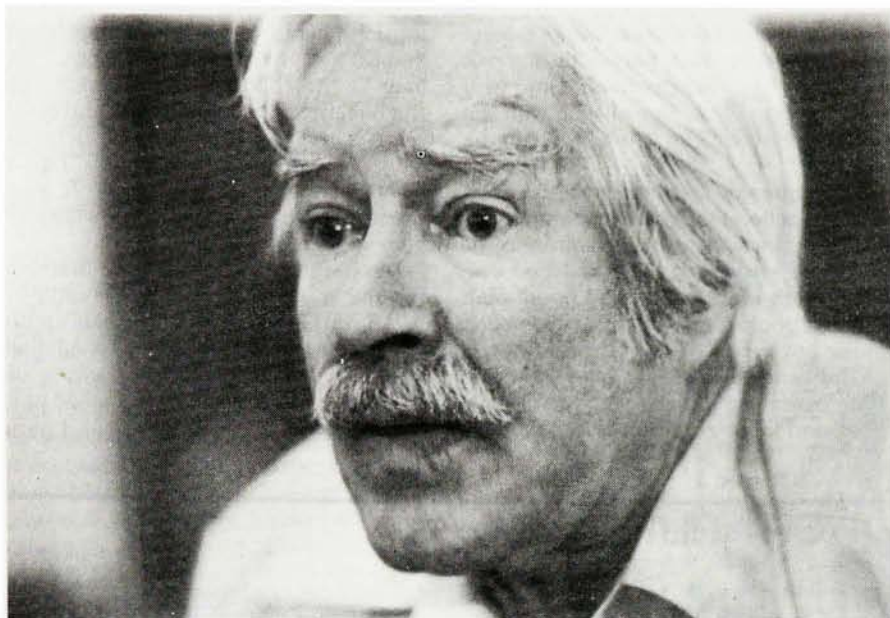
talking head reminiscences from the artist and tributes from those who knew him/her...

Battle and Buttignol have made a film which is a celebration — a celebration of both life and Bush's art. Jack Bush is dead. He died after the film had been begun. Much could have been made of this — of Bush being cut off in full flower, only nine years after being able to quit his job as a commercial artist to paint full-time. But his death is peripheral to the film. We learn about it almost elliptically; it is mentioned in conversation, and the only really direct reference to it (apart from a title at the close of the film) is Clement Greenberg's expression of intense sorrow near the end at the loss of a deep friend and fine artist.

The downplaying of Bush's death is part of a general scheme. The filmmakers have almost ignored Bush's personal life. We do not learn how he died; we know he was married to a Montrealer, had three children, nine grandchildren, but that is all. We learn that he did commercial art for a living, but none of his feelings about it — except that he would rather have been a painter. We only get an autobiographical outline. What the film concentrates on is Bush's artistic search and how that fitted into the history of Canadian art.

The film is essentially a collage — a black and white videotape interview with Bush (transferred to 16mm film) by John Newton in 1975; a fragment from another videotape interview, this time in colour; film shot at the opening of the Bush retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario; Bush and American critic Greenberg touring that exhibit on a later date; interviews with Greenberg; conversation among

SHORT FILM REVIEWS



Jack Bush

artist friends of Bush; the animation of archival photos; and footage of his paintings.

The film moves among these elements with the videotape as the core. (Yes, a talking head, but fortunately shot in an easy-going half-inch way.) The editing and overall shooting respond spontaneously to the personalities and situations. For example, Greenberg sitting at a Steenbeck editing machine reacting to footage from the videotape interview, or sitting on a sofa at the Bush home, dealing with the question of what paintings Bush showed him at the first meeting in 1957. The filmmaker stepping into frame, interrupting Greenberg, handing him paintings and asking him, "Was this one?" and getting Greenberg's unstudied reactions.

The sequence comes off as an ordinary conversation which happened to be recorded. Above all, there is the fascinating tour of the retrospective with the two relaxed friends, filmmakers in tow. To

have shot this tour was a gamble. But it worked. (Hats off to cameraman Mark Irwin and soundman Bryan Day.) What Battle achieves here is sometimes meandering, but in sum a most interesting, lively, demystifying discussion about art in general, and Bush's art in particular — techniques, use of colour, his artistic concerns, and some intimation of what triggered his paintings.

Throughout, the filming of the paintings is exemplary. We are shown the whole painting. There are none of the usual pans crawling over the surface or zooms in. The "how" of filming art arouses much debate, but in this case the wholistic approach is best, because we are seeing the paintings in the way that Bush and Greenberg discuss them.

The use of archival material is nice, too: used not as sequences in themselves, but intercut with the video footage, as Bush talks about his career and the history of the abstract movement to which he be-

longed: although this leads to one of the film's weaknesses — the stills at times seem cut-aways and I consequently felt them being taken away from me when I wanted to look at them longer. The conversation among Bush's artist friends is good too. While a clear idea of Bush and his relationship with young artists comes through, there is no resolution of what tradition Bush falls into. But this is in keeping with the non-dogmatic tone of the film.

The choice of Canadian jazz pianist, Don Thompson, and his music for the film is a felicitous one. (I wondered when filmmakers were going to discover Thompson.) In an eight-hour session in his studio, he improvised the music for the film. Rather than weaving through the film, the music is used in a few discrete sequences. It complements the panning camera at the opening of the retrospective, elsewhere symphonizing with the colour and mood of the paintings: low notes for the dark colours, high for the lights, and that bittersweet quality of the closing elegiac sequence.

As previously mentioned, the film does have weaknesses; the Bush-Greenberg tour appears too long. As in the videotape interview, there is material here that seems unessential. But, all in all, the film is a delight. It is edited with panache, directed with intelligence and warmth. Once again, cameraman Mark Irwin proves his worth.

The film may not be popular with everybody in art circles because it eschews a straightforward informational approach. They might find it too simple in its didactic content. And, too, it relies a lot on Clement Greenberg, who arouses negative reactions from some in larger art centres. But certainly, this film is an excellent introduction to Bush and his art. It's the sort of film which removes barriers. One surely feels less threatened by, and more understanding of abstract art as a result of seeing it. Above all, **Jack Blush** is a celebration of that connection between art and life.

Don McWilliams

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