Paul Almond's Ups & Downs

The contemporary youth film is an anachronism that's ahead of its time. Because it trades off images of innocence against an uncertain future, it simplifies the inflated reflections of our adult state of bankruptcy. The youth film thus becomes an excellent place for filmmakers to hide their shame and perhaps to expiate their embarrassment at having betrayed their own youth by growing old. This makes the youth film an accurate measure of the degree of cynicism prevailing in a national film industry at a given moment.

In the England of the late '50s and mid '60s, the St. Trinian's cycle of films about puehcenschool-girls represented a nadir in the fetishization of girls in a context of institutional bankruptcy (and a declining national cinema). Yet Lindsay Anderson could still filmically explode all that in If... Contrariwise, in the U.S. films like Blackboard Jungle or Rebel Without A Cause would only help develop a thicket of Gadgets and worse.

In Canada, the greatest triumph in the genre so far has been the reproduction of the swinishness of adolescence that largely epitomizes the reckless immaturity of Canadian filmmaking.

For Paul Almond's most recent feature, Ups & Downs, offers a diametrically opposing view of adolescence in a film that single-handedly attempts to reverse recent trends through inevitable pandering to the worst aspects of the North-American youth market.

A low-budget (just over $1 million), note especially in the U.S. has the advantage of drawing from the staff and student-body of St. Michael's University School in Victoria where the film was shot over the last two years.

Instead of the anonymous institutionalism of the North-American high-school, St. Michael's -- redubbed St. Martin's Prep for the film -- offers with its 1968 brick buildings the intimacy of tradition and the healthy expansiveness of wide playing fields. Here, in this Canadian version of the British public school, gone co-educational in the spirit of the times, the rich for a substantial fee exile the little creatures they have had the misfortune to bring into the world until such time as the young can finally do something useful with the family money. The small universe of the School, where the teachers function in Iowa pancake-fashion, becomes the coal through which the young rich learn about the games people play.

The kids of Ups & Downs are stolidly WASP, with their English and Brit. The landscape is evocatively Estonian, the religious atmosphere faintly Anglican; and there's plenty of emphasis on character-building sports (for the boys), lawn hockey or shows, jumping for the girls. The remote outside world is symbolized by Santiago, the scion of a wealthy South American family. The Canadian world beyond by Miss Natalie Ramone (Kim Prowse) who for a living removes her clothes in the local drinking establishment.

"The rich are very different from you or I," Scott Fitzgerald once sighed. "They have more money," was Hemingway's sarcastic reply. Within these parameters, the kids of Ups & Downs experience some of the ups and downs of life that lie ahead: obesity, friendlessness, death, sex and the breaking of tabs. It's all done with enormous affection and enthusiasm; the kids are wonderful, the teachers remotely eccentric; and Peter Benison's sublime cinematography delivers the images with a nostalgic clarity, from fresh faces and juicy cheeks to the lush B.C. rainforest. Ups & Downs is a nice, skillfully made film that demonstrates once again that what distinguishes the upper-class view of the world from the more vulgar is the fact that being in school is itself the sin of actuality upon the sincerity of the film's reflections.

Not that this will especially matter in terms of a young audience, and in a genre where Porky's has set the standard, perhaps all Almond could do was over-compensate. The result, though, is to lock Ups & Downs into some of the same set of determinants that produces theinity of the film's sincerity. The paradoxical intrusion of such 'realistic' considerations, since they are not explicitly developed, only casts a taint of rationalization upon the up.

If this Almond's hint that media, and that includes film, compromise life? Is that why he re-edited Ups & Downs to give it a more up-beat and up-market ending? The paradoxical intrusion of such 'realistic' considerations, since they are not explicitly developed, only casts a taint of rationalization upon the up.

ug the dawn of the second Canadian new wave, it does suggest the long for an innocence that, whatever its compromises, is at least our own. And that must be a sign of hopefulness in the surrounding dark night of Americanization.

Michael Dorland

UPS & DOWNS d/p. Paul Almond sc. Levin Evans, Paul Almond assoc. p. Michael Hanley prod. Robie Hoodley, Alison Kemble, Penell (Leslie Hope) ; back row: Derek (Eric Angus), Jeff (Bobby Perren), Chip (Andrew Sabiston), and Drifty (Gavin Brannan).

The kids from Ups & Downs: front row, Sam (Margo Nesbitt), Mouse (Alien Kemble), Penell (Leslie Hope); back row: Derek (Eric Angus), Jeff (Bobby Perren), Chip (Andrew Sabiston), and Drifty (Gavin Brannan).