Graham Parker's
Anne's Story

In a film dealing with the rape of a little girl and its effect on her as a young adult, there is enormous dramatic potential just waiting to be realized. Unfortunately, in Anne's Story, a recent CBC television movie directed by Graham Parker, this potential remains just that - and the film never rises above the merely interesting.

Anne is a child of six visiting her grandmother's farm for the summer. One day her uncle follows her into the barn and rapes her. Fearing his threats, she tells no one and becomes quiet and withdrawn. When her father comes to get her at the end of the summer and announces that he and her mother are getting divorced, she says nothing. As a young woman, the effects of the trauma are still with her as she struggles to become a country and western singer. To escape her boozing mother she marries a young man but her inability to respond sexually soon causes the marriage to fall apart. She moves back home and there meets Matt, a kind and gentle man to whom she eventually reveals her secret. They start to travel together (platonic) as a singing duo, until finally Anne overcomes her past and begins a physical relationship with him.

It doesn't take undue cynicism to find the script, written by Graham Woods, a little too simplistic and tidy to be truly satisfying. The story of the girl with the tragic past who meets a sweet and sensitive man who changes her life in a familiar formula. Still, the plotline might have worked (again) if it were not for some other major shortcomings of the film.

The first problem is the film's style and editing. The pace is choppy, and events occur before they have been given proper time to develop. For example, Anne's husband Matt is introduced as a gentle sadist before he asks her to marry him and "they are off to Niagara Falls for their honeymoon. Likewise, Anne's relationship with Matt is established as one of love rather than of intimacy when she tells him about her past. This is hastily presented and the viewer is left to infer a great deal.

The film's elliptical style is appropriate, however, for the two scenes dealing with the rape itself. The scene in the barn is cursory and the rape occurs off-camera. Only Anne's fear before the assault and her uncle's violent threats afterwards are shown. When years later, Anne tells Matt about it, music overdubs the dialogue and within a few shots she has told him and is crying in his arms. Director Parker is to be commended for his handling of these scenes: an approach that avoids exploiting the trauma and sensationalism of rape which other films - equally well-intentioned - fail to do.

Where Parker fails - and in a major way - is in his presentation and development of Anne's character. A quiet and introverted person like Anne reveals herself in subtle ways; nuances and gestures take on heightened importance as keys to understanding her character. Consequently, time and a sensitive shooting style are required. But Parker provides neither: While brevity and a sense of distance were necessary for the two key scenes above, these elements work against Anne's character by inhibiting viewer identification. The film certainly elicits sympathy for Anne, but sympathy is an outwardly directed emotion: what Parker fails to do is establish a sense of empathy, which is inward. This drama about rape (strangely) has very few emotional scenes - intense or otherwise - and thus keeps the viewer distanced from the material.

The acting in the film is good, but not exceptional, as none of the performers are really given a chance to show what they are capable of. Karen Woolridge, as Anne, handles the dramatic and musical demands of the role equally well, giving a sensitive performance as the material allows while displaying a quality singing voice. The same holds true for Brent Carver, as Matt, who comes across well despite his very demanding role. The supporting cast is also convincing. So there is little doubt that the film would have benefited if these performances had been given the opportunity to move fully develop their characters.

Like much CBC drama, Anne's Story sadly suits the middle ground it ends up being neither boring nor exciting. This happy medium approach may suit some material, but in this case only serves to betray the potential of its subject matter. The film successfully avoids melodramatics and other such pitfalls, yet fails to achieve or even explore the inherent dramatic intensity of its story.

Linda Gorman

Jennifer Hodge's
Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community

Cinema verite filmmaking has always been a powerful tool for political action. This is certainly the case with Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community, Jennifer Hodge's most recent work. The film is a controversial one and it caused a great deal of media flurry this summer when its public screenings became the scene for outbreaks of community unrest. The film looks closely at explosive issues in the Jane-Finch area of Toronto, an area of high unemployment, racial tension, and growing dissatisfaction with the powers that be.

The Jane-Finch corridor was a 1950s attempt on the part of Toronto city planners to move the urban poor into a new housing project on the city's edge. High-rise housing 25 miles from the city's centre, Jane-Finch is now somewhat of a suburban nightmare characterized by high-density housing, with 60,000 people crammed into an area the size of six square city blocks. At least 15% of this population is West Indian, and filmmaker Hodge focuses on the plight of this visible minority, especially in terms of employment, culture shock, and police-community relations.

Some of the most poignant moments in the film are those where the people who live there are trying to be a new immigrant, unfamiliar with the culture and struggling against all odds to make a life. One Jamaican woman, Rosemary Brown, talks openly of working for seven years to bring her children to Canada, only to be ads that she and her children know one another after such a lengthy separation. Other interviewees talk about the difficulties of being unemployed, and/or stigmatized by living in Ontario public housing. The film gives an incredibly intimate portrait of people struggling to keep their pride in the face of high adverse circumstances.

But the film also focuses on police-community relations, and here it has struck a sensitive nerve. Exploring the consequences of police harassment, the film raises the challenging question of racial discrimination. "This is the people's side of the story," Hodge told the Reporter, "and this is how they do that." To me, it is obvious in the film and in the community's reaction to the film, that the police represent the dominant culture, and here it is the frontline to speak of that culture. Hodge herself admits: "Many ways they represent the powers in society, the agents of employment, of social planning, the people who control these people's lives. Not surprisingly, then, they are the target for much of the rage in the film. Perhaps justifiably so. In their interviews with
John Harrison’s
Thanks for the Ride

Thanks for the Ride, a half-hour dramatic adaptation of Alice Munro’s well-known short story, is the National Film Board’s latest, and one of its best, ventures in producing dramas. This Ontario Region production may even make a lot of people at least temporarily forget their hostility towards the Board’s dabbling in drama.

The Board has long enjoyed an international reputation for producing excellent documentaries and animated shorts, and a national reputation for dismal dramas. But in the last few years, the much-sputtered “beached whale” has produced or helped produce some excellent dramas: Bravery in the Field and First Winter won Oscar nominations; Les beaux souvenirs carried on the grand tradition of Mons Oncle Antonio; the recent regional productions — The Pedlar from Manitoba and The Gospels from francophone New Brunswick — are competent dramatic pieces; and, of course, the Board played a seminal role in that national standout, Empire, Inc.

Maybe it is because writer/director John Harrison has followed the NFB’s mandate of showing a real slice of Canada to Canadians and the world that his quiet but intensely moving drama works so well. Harrison has lavished attention on capturing the flavor of the cottage country around Georgian Bay which forms a meaningful backdrop for the story. The rich, authentic soundtrack evokes a real sense of place; Rene Osashi’s remarkable yet subtle cinematography captures its essence.

Unlike so many dramas which are beautiful to look at but whose story limps along or dies — Two Solitudes springs to mind — Harrison’s finely structured script paces the action and the character development in a most believable way.

The major character, David Sullivan, sensitively portrayed by Carl Marotte, is a 19-year-old rich kid who isn’t quite sure who he really is. One Saturday night at the end of the cottage season, David goes cruising with his hyper-horny friend, George, who wants to find “a few local licks and poke them.” They do just that. But this seemingly routine adventure into the dynamics of sexual power-playing with Vicky, a bitter survivor of summer quickie ‘romances’, has a deep and telling effect on the naive David.

The story itself is 14-carat Alice Munro. Characters struggle for some sense of self-knowledge via their relationships and are confronted by a world that changes very little and where even minor personal changes are paid for with major pain.

Harrison has wisely reshaped the story to fit the film medium and he placed it in a contemporary setting. To gain authenticity and get a flavor of the language and mentality, he discussed the story with several groups of teenagers from the region. The research shows. The banter is natural and real. (And painful: George doesn’t want to go to the movies because a Canadian film is playing.) Harrison also utilizes parts of Munro’s dialogue as when Vicky’s down-trodden mother, played with disturbing realism by veteran actress, Clare Clouter; explains how “lovely it is for people to have things.”

The real strength of the film, however, comes mainly from the stylish direction of Harrison, whose film Way of the Willow garnered First Prize at the 1982 New York Film Festival. His camera work is constantly on the move, catching a nuance here, a subtle gesture there, always omni-present without being obtrusive.

To help get the over-all fine performances from his young actors and actresses, director Harrison rehearsed intensely for several days before going on location. This is not often done on low-budget dramas, with sometimes disastrous results. Here the time, money and energy spent pays off. The actions seem natural, and the characters comfortable and spontaneous with one another.

Perhaps the only flaw is a technical one: the night scenes produced in the lab do not meld with the real night-shot scenes. This is a small blemish on a film that has already impressed several CBC producers, and at least one independent, enough that they are considering hiring Harrison as a director.

Thanks for the Ride is a powerful story evocatively told (Alice Munro herself liked the film version). The film works on its audience in part because Harrison has dealt head-on with the truth of the story’s theme — dealing with one’s sexuality — even in the sex scene where the characters are faced with powerful realities, and where the director might have backed away. Harrison’s honest approach will, unfortunately, limit the film’s academic use as it will most likely be banned in schools, thereby depriving a very large high-school audience from seeing and discussing one of Canada’s finest short dramatic films.

Still one can always hope the CBC will showcase Thanks for the Ride in prime time this fall so that a wide spectrum of Canadians can see a little more of themselves and their country as reflected in their art.

Tom Shoebridge •


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