

The best of the Yorkton shorts: Mini-reviews

by Dale Winnitowy

YOUTH STRESS

d. Nicolas Stiliadis p. Syd Cappe, Nicolas Stiliadis
dist. Health Media Distributors, Toronto. 24 min.

Because *Youth Stress* avoids becoming heavy-handed and institutionalized, it hits more nerve endings than others before it. It deals with the causes and consequences of youth stress as well as suggesting ways to handle it.

Narrator Don Francks' dramatic conviction is the thread that successfully pulls together this high-energy, but calculated, analytical documentary. Visual explosions from live rock concert footage to a splashy pop-artist album cover collage to a '50s clip of a black-jacketed Marlon Brando are used advantageously; interviewed authorities are succinct and comprehensible; and the teenagers and parents make countless universal statements with unabashed honesty. Their statements sting with emotions that many feel but too often can not express. A film guaranteed to bridge today's generation gaps.

TWO SINGING BOYS

d. Stephen J. Payne co-p. Rachele Charron p.c. A
La Mode Prod., Toronto. 5 min. 15 secs.

Delicate and appropriate harpsichord music accompanies this sensitive look at a couple of street artists who recreate the 15th-century Frans Hals painting entitled *Two Singing Boys*. The director's decision to spend only three minutes detailing the actual chalk sketching and the effective aerial shot of the stunning finished product both work in the film's favor.

Payne unfortunately devotes too much time to the rain washing the chalk dust into the gutters, as if struggling with a way to end the film. The impermanency of sidewalk chalk art and its ill-fated ends is non-verbally hinted at, but not overly-stressed. Payne's ability to express so much in five minutes with such dignity is his victory.

TRANSITIONS

d. Mike Douglas p. Tom Dodd p.c. Alberta Agriculture, Edmonton. 15 min.

This documentary drama examines a common rural problem: what will happen to the family farm when the parents die or retire?

The conflict is between the parents, the son (Tom) who has stayed to faith-

fully help on the farm, and the son (Dave) who has left the farm "because he didn't see a future in it." Although a kitchen scene between Dave and his mother is overly melodramatic, a later supper table scene at Tom's home more than compensates. Emotions flair and some unexpectedly refreshing acting occurs. The exacting script accurately conveys the family conflicts, concerns and perceptions. The resolution of the conflict may seem too simple at the time, but rather than belabor the point, the director has chosen to indicate that discussion and pre-planning can not only save the farm but the family too.

TRAPEZE

d. Mino Bonan p.c. Société Radio-Canada, Montreal. 7 min.

Mino Bonan's first animated short is fascinating, mysterious and masterfully executed. His ability to depict height and motion with near magical use of perspective is what makes *Trapeze* unique.

A rope ladder falling to the ground offers a dizzying view as the trapeze artist ascends to his perch. As the figures begin to swing towards each other the viewer dangles in mid-air inches below their meeting point. The sensation of their movement plays with your equilibrium.

After the performance the trapeze artists metamorphosize into birds, are locked into cages, and then hung up in the back of the circus wagon. This mysterious ending is reminiscent of the fantastical delights often designed by eastern European animators.

Bonan could have eliminated the musical behind the curtains introduction without harming the deception as well as shortened the overly-long swinging mid-section. But it is his spell-binding animation that, like a trapeze artist, 'flies through the air with the greatest of ease.'

THE TEMPERATE RAIN FOREST

d. Don White p. George Johnson exec. p. John Taylor p.c./dist. NFB, Montreal. 16 min.

What begins as a straight-forward classroom styled documentary exploring the environment and ecology of the Pacific Northwest's temperate rain forest evolves into a masterful photographic statement from Don White and his camera crew.

The narration takes a back seat to the fluid, near-poetic camera work and delicate soundtrack. The impish musical score accompanying a whimsical tree-frog sequence, an underwater scene of a salamander stalking a worm choreographed to a doom-laden throbbing beat, and an impressive closing shot of the forest from a rising helicopter are only a few impeccable moments.

This is a film that grasps the enchantment of nature with the delicacy and power of a G.M. Hopkins poem.

NO VACANCY

d. David Geddes p. David Geddes, Cal Shumiatcher, p.c. Cloudfire Pictures Inc., North Vancouver, B.C. 13 min.

Crisp shots of dynamite being planted in the walls of Vancouver's Devonshire Hotel open David Geddes' *No Vacancy*. Almost eulogistic, this film does more than examine the demolition of a 60-year-old building as it also questions the staircase upon which progress is ascending.

Black-and-white stills, perfectly scripted passages to fill in the flavor of the '30s and '40s, and sparkling big-band music slip in and out recreating the personality and dignity that resided in the hotel during its heyday. Geddes' camera mingles with excited young faces and wistful older people, but the most ambitious scene is a final walk inside the Devonshire past gutted rooms, frayed wires and tattered mattresses while a haunting soundtrack foreshadows its imminent death.

The closing aerial shots are chillingly war-like; the Devonshire crumbles and performs the ultimate waltz of death amid clouds of dust and the appalling joy of destruction that fill the streets.

OPUS TWO

d. Niv Fichman p. Barbara Sweete, Larry Weinstein p.c. Rhombus Media Inc., Toronto. 59 min.

To achieve the entertaining level that Fichman does as he follows three teenage classical music prodigies on a demanding journey through the Canadian Music Competition is no easy feat. His major assistance comes from violinist Barry Shiffman, pianist Yuval Fichman and cellist Wendy Morton, whose conviction, individuality and inter-action are shared with the camera without inhibition.

Opus Two is the follow-up to *Opus One* filmed five years ago. Superb sound editing brings the classical pieces across very well, but the development of the teenagers' personalities often overrides the musical quest. Tension rears during practices; the natural, vibrant humor of the pianist who transforms himself into an intense extension of the piano when performing; the taut, frustrating moments the violinist lives at the edge of every nuance of character inevitably succeeds in drawing you closer to the trio. In the dressing-room after their final performance, you are ready to accept their self-criticizing, second-guessing of the judges, the momentary flaring of tempers, and the pianist's poignant imitation of their teacher's reaction.

Fichman's affectionate camera does stray during an unnecessary shopping-center excursion and his ending drifts into sentimentality. But the impressive qualities far outweigh the shortcomings. The film has the charm of a home movie polished with professional elan - the trio becoming intimate characters you are swept into caring about.

PASSING SHADOWS

d./p. Charles Konowal p.c. Charles Konowal, Regina, Sask. 15 min.

In *Passing Shadows*, Konowal attempts the seemingly impossible: to travel the inner pathways of poet Andrew Suknaski's creative impulses. Konowal's perceptive camera traces with acute visual detail the painstaking, methodical, and, at equal turns, happenstance search Suknaski undertakes to discover the images and emotions that fill his poetry. He wanders along bookshelves, across faces and into the shadows pursuing the moments and symbols of truth that Suknaski strives to translate into words.

The creative process Konowal encounters is one of false starts, brittle hopes, broken dreams and discarded clichés as Suknaski's laborious researching, concentration, and imagination battle frustration and mediocrity. The director's struggle with the creative process proves to be as successful as the poet's.

MARATHON - THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE

d. Alan Jacques p. Alan Jacques, Patrick Ramsay p.c. Marathon Film Prod. Inc., Burnaby, BC. 15 min., 10 secs.

Filmed on location during the Vancouver International Marathon, Alan Jacques' short digs below the sweat and muscle cramps to discover the personality of runner Carmine Morelli.

Working with an excellent script, Morelli's narration appears in two guises - some is heard while he is actually out training; the remainder is a voice-over during Marathon scenes. The soul of the film is the discovery of what motivates Morelli to want to push his physical and emotional capabilities to the peak levels required to last the 26 gruelling miles.

The synthesizer soundtrack is exceptionally well-paced. In addition, the myriad of camera angles used to capture the race is everchanging. What could have been a painful endurance test for the viewer has been edited so the intensity and energy are retained but stride-after-stride tedium is avoided. A masterful slow-motion shot - expertly cued to the music - of a water glass being tossed to the ground becomes a ballet-like reflection of the dignity and inner strain of the runners. That essence is why runners call a marathon "the ultimate challenge".

IN THE MINDS OF MEN

d. Dale Hartleben, Bon Kennedy p. Dale Hartleben, Mark Epstein p.c. Visual Education Center Ltd., Toronto. 29 min.

In 1945 the preamble to the UNESCO Constitution stated, "Since war begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defense of peace can be constructed." When the General Assembly of the United Nations proposed a film highlighting the untold miseries of

war, Hartleben decided to carry the torch.

In the Minds of Men is horrific. Nothing is subtle about war. The physical and psychological damage that results is irreparable. But somewhere the values of men went astray. The long, lonely marches towards death continue in more sophisticated and horrendous ways daily.

Hartleben's collage is skillfully edited as he traces slaughter and decapitation through Roman mosaics, Greek vases, Egyptian wall paintings, Japanese prints and Goya's Spanish art, and then bombards the viewer with the realities of the First World War and the more than one hundred wars of the past 30 years.

Cold, sad-eyed men in trenches, one-legged veterans parading past rows of crosses, kids boxing, Scouts tossing knives, a child's wailing fear of a gas mask, goodbye kisses surrounded by raised guns, gutted cities, long lines of coffin carriers, an old man stumbling through the rubble of his neighborhood, scarred Hiroshima victims and sketches of the disaster by survivors, a child asking, "Why do we have war?", first-person voice-over recollections of atomic bomb survivors, daisies wilting and birds dying in a slow motion atomic radiation onslaught, and faces of fear turned upwards unsure if dreams or death will fall upon them... The message is clear: war is not fun.

This film does not put blame on anyone, but asks all men to reconsider and try to answer that plaintive child's question. There is no good answer, as this film shows.

Hartleben's blend of graphic war scenes with sensitive, emotional moments is a powerful match for the foe he had chosen to battle.

I THINK OF YOU OFTEN

d. Scott Barrie ed. Paul Box p.c. Afterimage, Toronto. 10 min.

A haunting Beethoven piano soundtrack and exceptional First World War footage create a tapestry so sensitive to the script that director Scott Barrie will reap accolades whenever *I Think of You Often* is shown.

Utilizing a series of three letters from a young Canadian soldier to his girlfriend, the film traces his departure, his arrival at the European war theatre, and his trench warfare experiences. The smooth transition from exhilaration, adventure, and camaraderie to the fear, doubt, sadness and disillusionment of horrific, death-dealing war can be credited to Paul Fox's exceptional editing.

The unsung heroes of this film are the camera crews who originally filmed this 65-year-old archival footage. Defying rain and mud, shells, and lack of food or sleep, they stood in the line of fire armed only with cameras and courage; the incredible results are their silent memoirs.

The letters provide a script that overflows with the soldier's heart and some and the film matches the words in the same penetrating fashion. A ten-minute masterpiece.

EXTRAORDINARY VISITOR

d./p. John Doyle p.c. NIFCO, St. John's Nfld. 23 min. 30 secs.

Laughter rears its delightful head in this hilarious dramatic spoof. Newfoundland

director John Doyle takes the liberty to rewrite the Fatima Letter opened by the Pope and has inserted references to "Terra Nova" and "Confederacione".

A wonderful, subtitled, deceptive opening introduces the droll portrayal of the Pope and his secretary. This is followed by the simpleton tourist humor of John the Baptist who is sent to St. John's to investigate the befuddling Fatima Letter references.

From John the Baptist's critical appraisal of a statue of himself to his comparison of the McDonald's chain to the links of a rosary, to the subliminal seduction of his hotel room TV set, to his downfall at the hands of an amorous Canadian lady, to the final credits scene of the Pope phonetically reading the contents information on a candy bar wrapper, this film, true to the Canadian spirit of SCTV or the *Air Farce*, hits the satirical funny-bone.

ESTHER WARKOV: A SPY IN THE HOUSE

d. Elise Swerhone p. Patrick Friesen p.c. Winnipeg Film Group, Winnipeg. 23 min.

Esther Warkov has built an international art reputation from her North End Winnipeg home. Her simple, down-to-earth personality and environment contrasts delightfully with her complex arts.

She openly explains her endless borrowing of ideas from sources as far-reaching as the corner coffee-shop to pictures in encyclopedias to magazine liquor ads. Although she repeatedly claims "I don't work in symbols", her paintings overflow with pastel surrealism and subconscious symbolism. She tends to create unpredictable collages in her mind and then lets those feelings drift like dreams onto her mesmerizing canvases.

To understand Warkov's art may not be director Elise Swerhone's objective, but in an unassuming way she has at least begun the search, so Warkov's soul and art appear reachable.

L'ESPRIT DES NEIGES (Snow Dream)

d. Claude Grenier p. René Piché exec. p. Raymond Gauthier p.c./dist. NFB, Montreal. 20 min.

Filed in north-central Manitoba amid stark pre-Cambrian rock walls and a bleak snowscape, Grenier and his astute cinematographer, François Beauchemin, create a mythological masterpiece.

Three passionate snow sculptors encounter a massive boxed block of snow. Devoid of narration, the near-religious intensity of the men becomes unnerving as they create a cabalistic snow monolith/totem that becomes as enigmatic as a surrealistic myth.

Powerful close-ups, spell-binding night photography, and a mesmerizing soundtrack weave an air of mystery into each scrape of the sculptors' blades.

The contrast of nature's slowly eroded rock and ice masterpieces with the calculated work of the men leads into the philosophical realm of myths.

And when the rain begins and the fire erupts, questions about the impermanence of man-created art, the endurance of dreams, and the innocence of primitivity drift like a spectre across the final frames.

L'Esprit des neiges dwells in a country of legends and poetry.

DELICETO, VITA SERENA

d./p. Constantino Magnatta p.c. Constantino Magnatta, Toronto. 26 min.

Magnatta returned to the small southern Italian town Deliceto, his father's birthplace, to discover "la vita serena" (the serene life).

The Italian countryside, the postcard-perfect narrow streets of Deliceto, and the effervescent spirit of the people make this a warm-hearted travelogue that verges on becoming an innocent home movie. What makes that excusable is Magnatta's ability to not dwell at length on any scene. In the end, the limitless, endearing characters (is every Italian a born performer?) that Magnatta's camera meets in Deliceto are the life-blood of his film - a happy, home-spun momento that has found a true friend in Italian serenity.

DREAMFLIGHT

d. Philippe Bergeron, Nadia Magnenat Thalmann & Daniel Thalmann p. Nadia M. Thalmann & Daniel Thalmann dist. International Tele-Film Ent., Toronto. 12 min.

An unusual computer graphics animated short, *Dreamflight's* precise lines weave and twist and dance to an inspired soundtrack mix of six classical compositions.

Hipi (an other-worldly stick character) travels within time as he views the creation of earth and journeys through the Eiffel Tower, across the Atlantic and past the Statue of Liberty into New York's Central park where he encounters his first humans.

Although the 'it was only a dream' script is wanting, questions arise about the endurance of dreams and man's ultimate apocalyptic destruction. But the development of these ideas is left to imagination and unfortunately the answers disappear into the depths of Hipi's extra-terrestrial pond.

The seductive birth of our planet sequence, the startling revolving line recreation of the Statue of Liberty, the cloning of human forms, and the consistently imaginative use of common lines and shapes makes *Dreamflight* an exciting precursor of the computer-age of animation.

A LEAP OF A THOUSAND YEARS

d. Laurette Deschamps p. Michèle Renaud Molnar p.c. Ciné-Contact, Montréal. 27 min.

Thousands of South East Asians have had to flee their homelands in the past decade and relocate from tropical rainforests to the harsh seasonal changes of Canada. For the first ten minutes this documentary appears too self-congratulatory as public-sponsored families are examined. Their adjustment and success due to warm-hearted one-on-one contact with sponsor groups seem almost too good to be true.

Then we discover that government-sponsored families, who are often left on their own, are not fending with their problems as well. At this point an exceptionally primitive Laotian hill tribe family's cultural customs provide adaptation and acceptance conflicts. In their society pre-marital sex and teenage pregnancy are permissible, but those values conflict with social service helpers and school authorities' attitudes. The film attempts to show how the

building of a bridge to cross a thousand years of tradition will not be an easy task, but nevertheless a necessary one. As the credits run over a South East Asian teenager caught up in a winter street hockey game, a possible solution seems to be a goal within reach.

BREAD

d. Albert Kish p.c. Chbib Prod. Inc., Montreal. 11 min.

Bread is a non-narrative visual gastronomic success. From the wheat field to the mill to the kitchens and bakeries of the world, *Bread* is a mouth-watering, fast-paced documentary.

Not only are the smooth, comparative cuts from bread being hand-made to production line machine-made appetizing, but exceptionally strong use of form and camera angles will sparkle the tastebuds of photography gourmets. And it may be the first and last time you get to sit down in an oven and watch buns rising. Bring your own peanut butter and jelly.

A WAR STORY

d./p. Anne Wheeler p.c./dist. NFB, Montreal. 60 min.

From 1942 until the end of the Second World War, Canadian doctor Ben Wheeler was interred in a Japanese POW mining camp on the island of Taiwan. In *A War Story*, his daughter Anne Wheeler creates not only a tribute to her father but an emotionally charged film about courage and the power of human spirit.

Pared down from the full-length 82-minute production, this one hour version of Wheeler's one-man struggle manages to represent the hardships endured by thousands. Editor Ray Harper deserves credit for his successful molding of archival footage (including rare Japanese propaganda scenes), exceptionally realistic re-enactments, and interviews with former POW comrades. The words, moments and memories overlap elegantly.

Donald Sutherland's dignified, unobtrusive narrative reading from Dr. Wheeler's diary contrasts effectively with the spry recollections of camp comrades whose stories are blessed with equal parts of gratitude, horror, humor, and philosophical distance.

Their stories range from memories of Dr. Wheeler's medical accomplishments (in one case accompanied by a re-enactment of an operation performed with a razor blade as the only instrument available and no anaesthetic), to the gentlemanliness of the British who the day after their liberation were sharing their camp-fire tea with their former guards, to the ironic horror of long-awaited supplies falling from the sky and killing the men below.

A particularly inspired re-enactment depicts the prisoners breaking into a rousing version of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" only to be interrupted by a guard demanding quiet. After he leaves, a soft "Silent Night" slips from their lips; the shock of irony takes hold as the camera moves to Dr. Wheeler whose passionate words of hope and loneliness from the diary written to his wife are read over the delicate chorus.

The discriminating direction and the intensity of the emotions cannot be forgotten; Anne Wheeler has created an overwhelming tour de force.