

REVIEWS

Kay Armatage's Storytelling

Toronto filmmaker Kay Armatage's latest film, *Storytelling*, is a tale constructed by the marriage of seven short myths.

This year's Canadian Images Festival program described *Storytelling* as an "award-winning film" which "features performances by master storytellers telling tales which together outline the trajectory of a lifespan, from creation, birth, heroic adulthood, to death and regeneration." The program notes that "The stories are intercut to effect an almost Proppian analysis of narrative and to suggest an alternative position for women as producers and heroes of culture."

As Armatage herself comments on the film's intention: "I wanted the stories to not only construct to tell the story of a lifespan, but to include a number of categories in the folkloric cycle. I also wanted a story that would provide a critique of stories themselves."

Implicit in the film's structure is a deconstruction of traditional narrative forms and mythic folklore. The film disassembles the short stories and carefully reassembles them into one tale which reiterates their individual messages. However, because the editing from one story to the next is largely determined by the storyteller's own rhythms, the focus of the film is on the telling of the tales, not on the critique of narrative form. Thus it becomes an exercise on continuity editing, visual pleasure and good performance.

British theorist and filmmaker Peter Wollen, attending Canadian Images, said he "was very interested in *Storytelling* because it uses so many kinds of styles. It's more about styles of storytelling, than stories in themselves. Most of the storytellers in that film would tell the same story in totally different ways, so the focus of the film is more on the telling than on the tale. The way she cut it emphasized different tellings as well."

The fluid movement established in *Storytelling* is undermined only at the very end of the film. Armatage regards the film as "an emotional journey that the audiences goes through by their own delight and emotional involvement, and the critique comes in at the end." This 'critique' - a break in the pacing which denies the audience the expected ending of a story (as well as the film) -

serves only to frustrate an otherwise flawless flow of well-timed cuts.

"There is an emotional trajectory which finishes (when a street rapper, Grand Master Caz, is winding down) but then the movie isn't over. It has the shape of a story whose ending is not the end," says Armatage. But this idea of narrative criticism is introduced too late in the film for the point to be made clearly, if at all. The ending essentially breaks the established form, making for a loosely constructed conclusion.

Throughout the film, camera movement is minimalist, save for a few simple tracking shots. Armatage emphasizes the need for this specific lack of movement: "I wanted the storyteller to speak directly to the film audience. There's only one way of doing that if you want to maintain eye contact: you don't have the camera moving around. All the storytellers practice their art by either standing or sitting down. They don't range around a stage. It's not the type of performance which involves action. They concentrate on the voice, the face, and on the words. So you can't have them searching around for a tracking camera that's doing its own little arabesques around them. And I didn't want the cinema technology to mediate between the storyteller and the audience. I wanted it to be a clear, direct relation."

Armatage utilized this same one-on-one, performer-to-audience formula in her earlier film *Striptease*. With both movies she acknowledges the intended use of voyeuristic pleasure, purposely excluding the third person (audience) to achieve a direct spectator/spectated arena. In practice, the films read like traditional documentaries where film is regarded as truth. They avoid any analysis of voyeurism whatsoever.

The subject matter of *Striptease*, combined with a voyeuristic viewpoint, launches it into another realm of criticism entirely. The content of *Storytelling* is better suited to a motionless gaping camera: the storytellers use the boundaries of the frame to their advantage, and create movement through imagination as well as story content. When cutting from one story to the next, Armatage considers this movement within the stories, mixing them so that they effortlessly overlap.

"We edited on journeys or movements through space (in one story someone goes down in the water, which cuts to a story where someone comes up in the water). Yes, there is a very clear movement in the film that is around transformation. There are four transformations in a row. The shadow puppets drink the

magic potion and the woman comes back as a flying leopard, and the man comes back as a prince or a devil. In another story the skeleton woman is transformed (a young woman licks this old woman clean or her wounds when they are at the bottom of the river). There are changes of season. In one story they're talking about winter turning to spring; spring turning to summer. In another story they're talking about a passage of time. They are all intercut." Like a well-crafted puzzle, the images do create a fairytale.

Armatage specifically selected the background imagery and settings to further emphasize the traditions of narrative: "They're a narrative for the stories themselves. In the shot of Laura Simms in Central Park, to the left of the screen behind her is a sort of fairy tale castle and on the right behind her is a Turkish pavilion. And Grand Master Caz (the rapper) is shot in front of a wall of graffiti. Constance de Jong (telling a fairytale) is shot in front of a video pyramid because I wanted her to be completely surrounded by televisions to suggest that the contemporary technology doesn't have to clash with the oral tradition. In fact, there is some kind of alliance between the narrative tradition and television." However, she doesn't go

on to define what 'in fact' that alliance is.

In the final analysis, the traditional format employed in *Storytelling* is like a skeleton draped with carefully selected details which do not disturb the precious narrative structure. Yet it works, making the film a story worth telling again.

Suzan Ayscough ●

STORYTELLING p.c. Atlantis Films Ltd./ Kay Armatage co-production d. Kay Armatage p. Seaton McLean ed. Margaret Van Eerdijck cam. Mark Irwin, c.s.c., Steve Fierberg set des. Sandy Kybartas sd. mixer Aerlyn Weissman cam. asst. Robin Miller gaffer John Herzog grip David Zimmerman loc. scout Peter Mettler res. Maureen Harris p. asst.'s Paul McGloshlan, Tom Reid stills Christopher Lowry titles Meta Media. Made with the assistance of The Canada Council. **Special Thanks To:** Northrop Frye, Dan Yashinsky, Joan Bodger, Barry Dickson, Allan Dickson, Norissa Chrichlow, Ruth Hill, Steve Jenkinson, Jerry Dee Lewis, Helen Porter, Charlie Ahearn, The Whitney Museum of Modern Art, Video Pyramid by Nam Jun Paik. **Stories told by:** Gioia Timpenali ("Eury-nome," "The Magic Drum"); Brother Blue ("Caterpillar and Butterfly," "Once I Had A Brother"); Laura Simms ("The Necklace"); Ron Evans ("The Story Of Marie D'Orion"); Alice Kane ("Why The Chaffinch Watches The High Road"); Grand Master Caz (of the Cold Crush Four) ("Rapperville"); Constance de Jong ("I.T.L.O.E."); **Shadow puppets by:** Hank Bull **String figures by:** Ken McCuaig **Dist.** Atlantis Television Int. Inc. **running time** 55 min. **colour** 16mm.

MINI REVIEWS



● The elusive John Kim Bell conducting

Mini Reviews in this issue catch up on two independently-produced 16mm films made in 1983, and available from two sources.

JOHN KIM BELL

A "cinematic portrait" of John Kim Bell, a young conductor of symphony orchestras, of Broadway shows, and for ballet companies, who also happens to have been born on the Caughnawaga Indian reserve near Montreal.

Bell began as a piano prodigy, progressing to a promising concert pianist, but eventually becoming interested in "show" conducting. In the 1980-81 season, he was appointed apprentice conductor with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra under Maestro Andrew Davis, making his debut in May 1981 with that orchestra. Bell's varied career now includes

guest conducting a number of orchestras on the North American continent, and continuing to conduct Broadway hits such as *A Chorus Line* and *On Your Toes*, along with assignments for the Eglevsky Ballet Company and the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

A lively opening to the film sparks immediate interest. Andrew Davis stands in the wings swapping quips with Bell, who's about to go out and conduct. However, from this high there develops a curiously lethargic pace, and Bell seems rehearsed and ill-at-ease with the camera focussed upon him. Sequences devoted to him conducting, in rehearsal and performance, seem endless and, since a 37-minute film is difficult to program, some judicious pruning of these areas could bring it to a TV half-hour.

But, ultimately, this is a disappointing film. There's the nagging feeling

● Yes, there is narrative after television as Constance de Jong demonstrates in *Storytelling*



photo: Aerlyn Weissman