

wouldn't be necessary with Festival exposure.

**Cinema Canada:** What are you planning now?

**Holly Dale:** We're going to do a feature next. You do a documentary and you don't control a situation. It's emotionally draining.

**Janis Cole:** Holly and I had a feeling when we started *Hookers On Davie* that this might be our last documentary before we do a drama, and while we might do documentaries in the future, this sort of completes a cycle of documentaries.

We have two scripts now. One is based on street experiences – not prostitution, but life in the streets. The other is about Janice Gamble (one of the subjects of *P4W*), who's doing 25 years in Kingston, about her life and the events leading to her imprisonment. There was a lot of interest in her after the film came out: people wrote to Parliament, CTV's *W5* did a report on her, there's been a lot of press.

**Cinema Canada:** Will it be low-budget?

**Janis Cole:** No, not low-budget.

**Cinema Canada:** Low-budget is anything under \$2 million.

**Janis Cole:** Okay, then it's low-budget. We're planning about a million, a million two, and we hope to write it over the summer and go into production late fall or in the spring. (By way of comparison, *Hookers On Davie* cost about \$60,000 cash, with about \$15,000 deferred, including the directors' salaries.)

**Cinema Canada:** Are you going to pay yourselves on this film?

**Holly Dale:** We've talked to a few people who are interested in raising money for us, and they tell us we have to pay ourselves. They're twisting our arms.

**Cinema Canada:** They're going to make you take the money? Take this cheque! That must be rough.

**Holly Dale:** Actually, it's a relief.

**Janis Cole:** It's real hard to put everything into a film and then wait for distribution. It takes a long while to see any money back.

**Holly Dale:** On *P4W*, we still haven't seen any money from the Premier Choix/First Choice deal.

**Janis Cole:** One thing about *P4W* was that it enabled us to get our own environments. We used to have to live together, and it was a nightmare. Because we work together, and our films are our lifestyle, it became very stressful to be around someone that much. Now, working sometimes 16, 18 hours a day, it's good to have your own space.

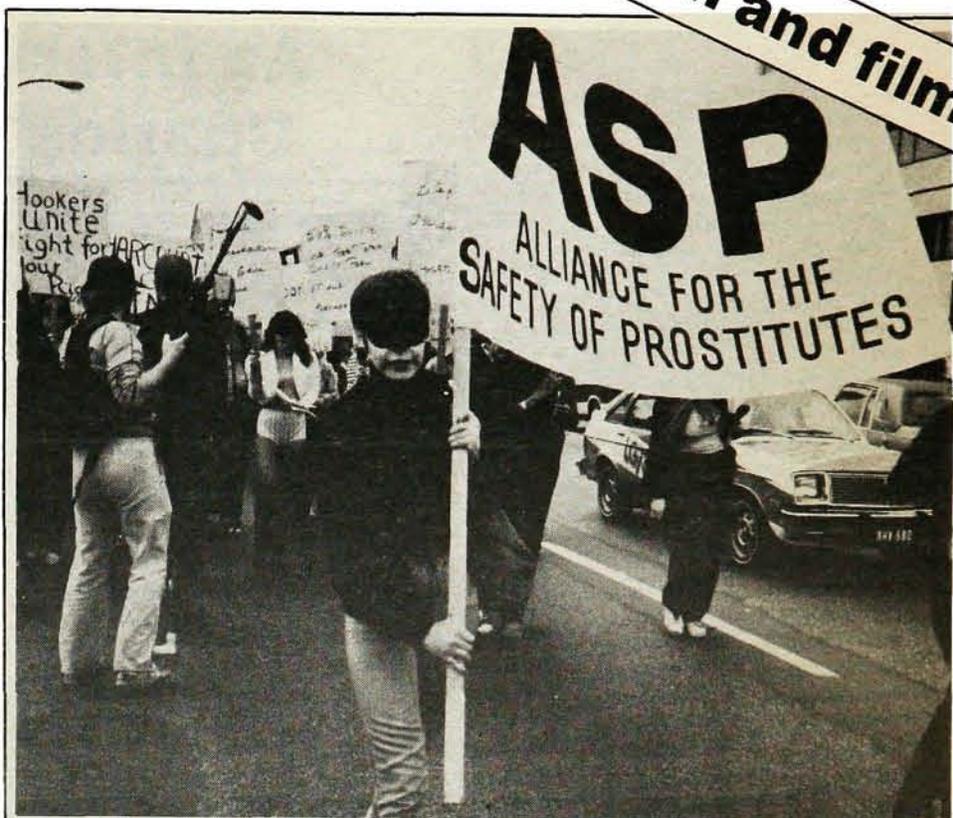
## Holly Dale & Janis Cole's *Hookers On Davie*

Filmmakers Holly Dale and Janis Cole have a unique ability to understand and sensitively document the inner workings of various subcultures, usually those of society's "deviants." *Hookers On Davie* takes us into the so-called "prostitution capital of Canada" – a tree-lined street in the heart of Vancouver's residential West End, minutes from Stanley Park. As the publicity material for this film tells us, Davie Street has become a kind of drive-in brothel where up to 150 prostitutes ply their trade, making available to the cruising traffic the full spectrum of prostitution-related activity including male and female prostitutes, transvestites, transsexuals, and an increasing number of juveniles.

Having established a bond of trust with their subjects, the filmmakers take us into their world by focussing on eight male and female prostitutes (who agreed to wear radio mikes while being filmed by a hidden camera). We see them working their territory night after night, negotiating with "tricks" and killing time with friendly personal banter when the traffic is slow. They also speak quite frankly to the camera in lengthy interviews which have been intercut throughout the film – interviews which reveal painful childhood backgrounds, some of the business aspects of their profession, and the dangers which confront them from noon till 4:00 a.m., seven days a week.

*Hookers On Davie* seems an attempt to demystify the profession. There is little glamour here, only long nights of sitting on yellow plastic milk cartons as the cars go by, or of talking about money and tricks at the close of the work-shift. The film's structure underlines, in a subtle way, the tedium and repetition. We return again and again to the same street corner, where the cars go by in assembly-line fashion and the same verbal exchanges take place between prostitutes and prospective clients. The favorite tavern hang-out after hours also becomes familiar to us through repetition. It is like any place workers might meet after their shift.

Because there is no voice-over narration for this film, we rely totally on the words and point of view of the prostitutes themselves, along with the shaping mise en scène and structure created by the filmmakers. "Direct cinema" has its strengths, certainly, but one of its weaknesses is apparent in this film. That weakness is the possibility that, whatever social group is being filmed, its inner contradictions (which may not be apparent to the members themselves) may also pass undetected by the filmmakers. An example from *Hookers On Davie* concerns the film's emphasis on prostitution as simply a job, a way of earning a living. That is how the prostitutes themselves see it, and the film does not question this viewpoint. At the same time, however, almost all the prostitutes interviewed seem to want to leave the street, at least before they reach 40, but they talk of having no education or other skills; prostitution is the only work they know. Thus, the film conveys the sense that they are trapped in this life, with no alternatives for other work. Even the mother of one of the



• Positive energy: organizing the prostitutes' community

transsexual prostitute says, "Where do they go and what do they do?" – as though there really is nothing else for these people.

But we also learn that, on a good night, a Davie Street prostitute can earn between \$200 and \$300, with no pimp to take his cut because these prostitutes work independently. This seems like an extraordinary income, one that *does* make it possible to plan for the future and conceive of alternatives. A basic question that the film does not answer is: what do they do with their money? While this may sound like a middle-class "Mrs. Grundy"-type question, it is central to our understanding. (After all, even at \$50 a night it would be possible to save up for a computer course, or whatever.) By not asking this basic question, the film avoids an even more central query: why do these young prostitute *stay* in the business?

One suspects that the answers to this question might cut quite close to the bone, raising psychological and emotional issues that would be difficult for both subjects and filmmakers alike. But by not raising such questions, the filmmakers allow another kind of mystification to surround the profession: that prostitution is either freely chosen, or it is chosen because there is a lack of other job alternatives.

Had the filmmakers focussed on the psychology of prostitution, not necessarily a moralistic frame of reference, the film might have brought us much closer to understanding the interpersonal dynamics of their subjects. We would come away from the film with a deeper insight into the underlying emotional "pay-off," or whatever it is, that keeps them working the streets. The film strongly conveys the bond of trust established between the prostitutes and the filmmakers – a bond that would seem to have been secure enough to allow for very probing questions. But there is a sense here that the filmmakers did not risk this bond by asking "tough" questions, questions which might have gone a long way towards helping viewers really understand prostitutes.

The film, then, does not go deep enough to give us new insights into the

whole question of prostitution. This is frustrating in that the seeds of potential depth are clearly there. All the interviewees talk quite frankly about their painful childhoods and the events which precipitated their initial experience in prostitution, but such past events seem strangely unconnected to the present, as though they themselves do not see the pattern. Obviously, prostitution is not just a job, as the film might have us believe. It is too deeply rooted in childhood trauma to be seen in such a light. By taking a "liberated" stance on this profession, the filmmakers have, ironically, given us a rather superficial film.

There are, however, several painful and personal moments in *Hookers On Davie*, moments that bring us closer to the people there. This is especially true of the transsexuals, who seem more open and emotionally expressive than any of the other women. One of them, Michelle, allows the filming of scenes with her mother, who talks quite personally about her "son, Mark" and her own feelings. The cooperation and openness from all the prostitutes makes us, in turn, care for and respect them. Nevertheless, I came away from this film with many more questions than answers, which may, of course, be what the filmmakers intended.

A highlight of *Hookers On Davie* is its emphasis on the prostitutes' attempts to organize as a community for self-protection. The scenes of leafletting, meetings, and a protest march have a real feeling of positive energy and mutual caring.

Obviously, Holly Dale and Janis Cole have once again chosen a highly charged and controversial topic, to which they bring their unique filmmaking style and human caring. Whatever its faults, the film cannot be taken lightly and will quite clearly generate much discussion and thought.

Joyce Nelson •

**HOOKERS ON DAVIE** p./d./ed. Holly Dale, Janis Cole cam. Nancy Blue, Paul Mitchnick sd. Aerlyn Weissman colour 16mm, 86 min., 1984 dist. Pan-Canadian Film Distributors, 214 King St. West, Suite 600, Toronto, Ont. M5H 1K4, (416) 596-2200.



photo: John Harkness