

## Daniel Petrie's **The Bay Boy**

Perhaps the real history of Canadian feature film and TV drama making is in what we call Hollywood. Though Daniel Petrie, at least before *The Bay Boy*, did not get much coverage as a "Canadian in Hollywood," he has survived there as a successful director, part of the Hollywood machine, a man capable of turning out popular successes (*Fort Apache: The Bronx*, *The Betsy*, *Resurrection*, *Sybil*) that were also films marked by creative ambition.

What makes *The Bay Boy* so interesting a proposition is that Petrie returns to his native Glace Bay, N.S. to do the film he has wanted to do for years: deeply personal, in-felt, growing out of his Canadian roots, but destined to find a popular mass audience through a kind of well-tested popular movie-making, so desperately needed in Canadian feature production.

English-Canadian films like *The Grey Fox*, *The Wars*, *The Bay Boy* are springing from what is surely fertile soil, in the manner that dozens of Australian films have expressed the Australian spirit in the last decade or so. And there is now a considerable pool of Canadian talent and Canadian production *cadres*. The Kemeny/Heroux team, who have already contributed to a similar, though better-established phenomenon on the Quebecois side, are among the leaders making things happen in the draconian worlds of production and co-production. *The Bay Boy*, to be sure, is their film baby.

The problem – the crux, as always, of the infernal Canadian film debate – is to translate this home-grown creativity into products that people will want to

see. Does Daniel Petrie succeed in wedding his obviously deeply felt home-experience to a film form that one might expect from him, thanks to his successful Hollywood experience?

The answer – as is the case with most of these things – is both a yes and a no. *The Bay Boy* is obviously a quality film, the very antithesis of so much of the shoddy imitation-American exploitation garbage until now (including some of this year's candidates for the Genie Awards). *The Bay Boy* has production values, the look and the feel of a movie of solid craftsmanship, unhampered by unreasonable time and money constraints. Claude Agostini's cinematography handsomely captures the battered, wooden sea-side houses of Glace Bay of the 1930's. And above all Daniel Petrie's fondness for his characters and his town shines through in the camera's treatment of places, things and people. No turgid, *grand-guignol* distortion here (a-la-*Wedding in White* of a dozen years ago) as Petrie looks back on his early days with a critical yet ever-so-sympathetic eye.

Petrie has elicited some fine performances from a cast of distinguished veterans and young newcomers. Deservedly, Kiefer Sutherland has won universal praise in the central role. But another young actor, Peter Spence, does an amazingly convincing and moving job in the minor role of Joe, the Sutherland character's incapacitated brother. Petrie's plot aims his characters toward key emotional moments – and the film delivers on these peaks, particularly in its conclusion. No small achievement, all of this.

And yet, in spite of its real merits, of its essential likableness, *The Bay Boy* does not have that special quality that makes film lovers reach for superlatives. It is as if Petrie's own laudable attitude inhibited the film from exploding with any kind of extravagance of magic. *The Bay Boy's* treatment of 16-year-old Donald Campbell's family, his town, his Catholic background, his stumbling emotional

and sexual gropings – and his eventual leaving all of this behind – is at once reverential, caricatural, fair, sympathetic, funny, critical, nostalgic. Add to this a praiseworthy attempt at poetic documentary of Glace Bay as it was back then.

And (maybe) here's the rub: it is quite possible that the film director's very honesty, his being true to so many ambivalent strands in his own sensibility in this very personal film, may well have prevented *The Bay Boy* from going all the way in *any* direction.

Petrie adopts a picaresque plot structure, with the entire film firmly centred on young Donald at a particular time and place in his life's journey – but all of this seen many years later, via voice-over. Which would seem to point to an essentially poetic memory trip. Petrie, however, keeps the poetry to a minimum. The camerawork is good, but it fails to exploit what is, after all, a land- and sea-scape almost never seen in the cinema, or at least in feature movies. In its effort at realistically recapturing Glace Bay of the '30s, the camera seems inhibited, constrained (as Canadian cameras in similar situations are most always constrained), in order to avoid the icons and daily sights of Glace Bay today.

The story unfolds at its leisurely pace, as boy Donald encounters one thing after another. But commercial cinema plotting demands more: melodrama is lurking in the wings. Example One: there are two girls living next door, one of them more than available, and the other, her lovely sister (played by Leah Pinsent, Gordon's daughter) whom Donald *really* loves. Complication: Donald witnesses their psychopathic police Sergeant father murder an elderly couple. Example Two: Donald's backwoods superstitious Catholicism has him headed for the priesthood. But Donald rejects both priesthood and Catholicism because of the sexual advances of a visiting, soulful, love-starved priest. Heavy waters, these; and it is to Petrie's immense credit that these incidents are

always treated with sympathy and understanding.

The situations, however, are symptomatic of a more generalized malaise. Ultimately, every character in *The Bay Boy* except, to be sure, the boy himself is a one-dimensional creation, playing a one-note tune. Too many scenes and situations (the Sergeant and his two daughters, so essential to the story) are deprived of nuance, mystery, complexity – and artistic credibility. The reduction is too drastic; and there is no compensatory explosion in drama or lyricism or comedy or wit to propel the viewer into Petrie's creative world.

Even *The Bay Boy's* more sociological level, for all the film's considerable success in re-creating Glace Bay, fails to sustain weighty exploration. One does get a vague feeling of the poverty of Donald's parents; the stifling narrow-mindedness of the Catholic ambience (not one iota of religious feeling here, strictly caricatural) is strongly communicated; and the town life, policemen and all, does peep out modestly in the background. But the social reality, like the nuances of social relationships, eludes us. The life of the people – mining? fishing? unions? – exists in one-note references.

To put it another way. At its most basic level, *The Bay Boy* takes no chances. The very *film language* at the level of scripting, of choice of sights and sounds, camerawork and editing, – consistently avoids the personal touch, the personal statement that this film demands, that is at the very heart of the enterprise. And so, ultimately, the factor of commercial viability militates against the intensity of the film, though it may help guarantee a certain mass-accessibility.

And so, *The Bay Boy* is no film masterpiece. This judgement, however, in no way invalidates recognition of the film's real merits – and, maybe more importantly, the fact that this viewer enjoyed it, was touched by it.

While *The Bay Boy* may not succeed at the level, say, of John Ford's popular masterpieces, it nonetheless stands as a fine example of those films of slightly lesser quality which form the backbone of any viable film industry. It witnesses to the mature capabilities of today's Canadian feature film industry.

*The Bay Boy* is solid popular entertainment, it reveals the Canadian entity, and it touches universal themes. As such, it strenghtens a tenuous, often maligned, always threatened tradition in Canadian film life. It points to what can be done today, and to future possibilities.

Marc Gervais ●

● Kiefer Sutherland as *The Bay Boy*: solid popular entertainment



**THE BAY BOY** d./sc. Daniel Petrie exec. p. Susan Cavan, Frank Jacobs co-p. Rene Cleitman p. John Kemeny & Denis Heroux assoc. p. Paulo de Oliveira p. man. Stephane Reichel d.o.p. Claude Agostini mus. Claude Bolling ed. Susan Shanks cost. des. Renee April p. des. Wolf Kroeger p.c. Bay Boy Productions (Canada) and Hachette-Fox Productions (France), with production financing provided in part by Telefilm Canada and Home Box Office dist. Pan-Canadian Lp. Kiefer Sutherland, Liv Ullmann, Peter Donat, Alan Scarfe, Mathieu Carriere, Chris Wiggins, Thomas Peacocke, Isabelle Meijas, Jane McKinnon, Leah Pinsent, Peter Spence, Josephine Chaplin, Pauline Laffont, Roy McMullin, Kathy McGuire, Robbie Gallivan, Robert Rose, Darren Arsenaault, David Ferrey, Betty MacDonald, Fannie Shore, Sander Zilbert, Tom Rack, Robert Taylor, Joe MacPherson, Kevin McKenzie, Iris Currie, Francis MacNeil, Michael Egyes.