

circumstances, that Isaac suffers from identity problems – something that might also be said of the movie as a whole.

The important role of Abe is an index of the film's willingness to be content with off-the-rack characterization. As played in his familiar manner by Lou Jacobi, he is a cardboard figure of limitless affection, optimistic resilience and practical wisdom, punctuated by an ineffably Jewish sense of humour. Similarly, the Varcos are caricatures of rottenness, snarling and snivelling their way through every scene. And torn between so many different conceptions (a lot of them trite) of where the scenario might be heading or what his character might turn out to be, the hero himself fails to stay in focus for any length of time. At a number of different points, in fact, the film is hurt by its inability to reject any temptation whatever to be "effective" – dramatically, humourously, cinematically – despite the damage that is done to a unified direction and structure by the desire to exploit every conceivable aspect of the scenario for a quick emotional response.

But perhaps it is somewhat unfair to subject this modest, essentially TV movie to the kind of scrutiny usually reserved for theatrical features. Certainly it is not without its achievements, especially considering the budget. For the money it really looks very good, with a consistent gloss on the images and some genuinely lovely panoramic landscape shots from cinematographer Ed Higginson. At a few points the budget limitations peep through, and although the look is smooth it is also rather too bright and closeuppy for theatrical viewing (it will look right at home on television). And, for the most part, the details of period settings and location and the general sense of production values are quite acceptable.

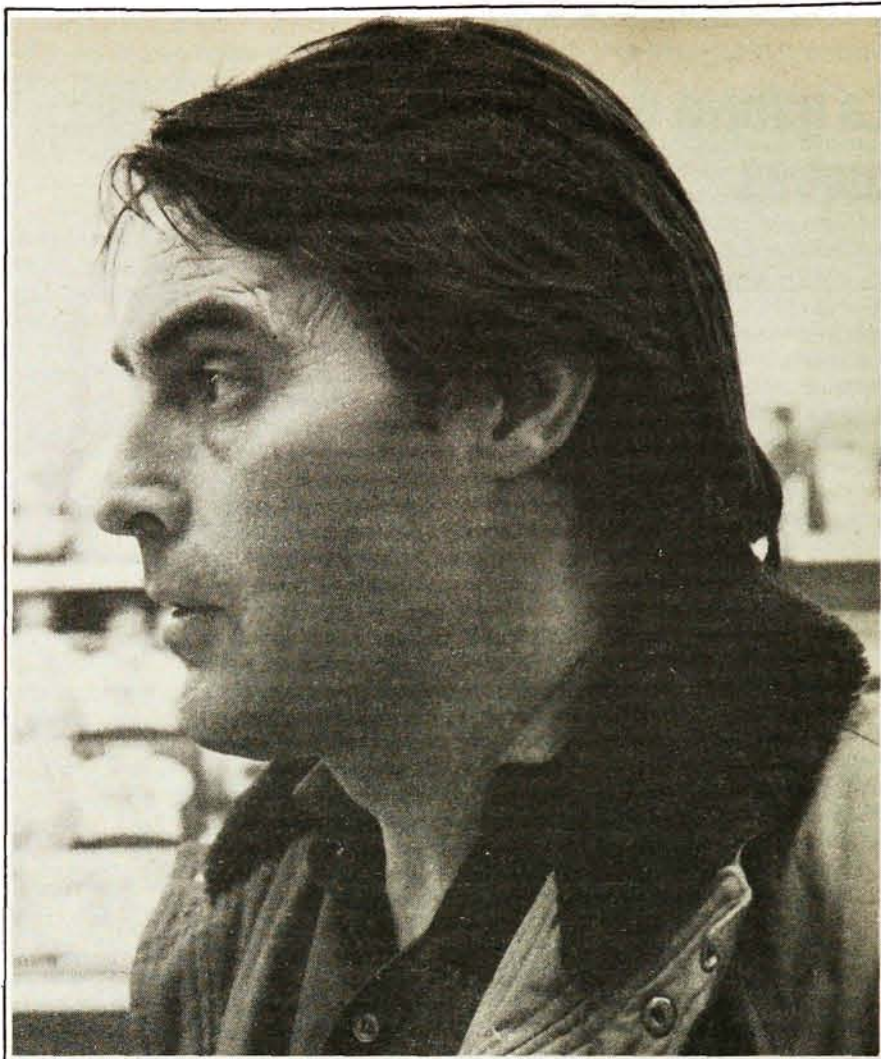
With a couple of exceptions, the performances aren't too bad either, again

particularly considering the lack of experience of some of the actors. In this context the central performance by novice Will Korbust must definitely be deemed a success. At 15 years of age and without the slightest previous dramatic experience, Korbust may not always be polished in his delivery of dialogue, but in every other respect he does a very creditable job. He does have screen presence and the producers are justified in having taken a chance on him. Most of the secondary roles are well taken, and one certainly doesn't have the sense that the film ran out of talent after the most important couple of parts.

Rose and Pearson – probably best known as the co-writers of *Paperback Hero*, and respectively the director and producer of CTV's interesting 1981 feature *The Life and Times of Alonzo Boyd* – have not perhaps done themselves full justice here. The movie will no doubt look somewhat better on TV, and also I should report that the audience I saw it with seemed to be enjoying it pretty well. At the least, *Isaac Littlefeathers* is a testament to the workability of current public mechanisms to aid feature production in this country.

William Beard ●

ISAAC LITTLEFEATHERS d. Les Rose sc. Rose, Barry Pearson p. Barry Pearson, William Johnston exec. p. Gerald M. Soloway, Ronald Lillie d.o.p. Ed Higginson, c.s.c. ed. Mairin Wilkinson mus. Paul Zaza art d. Richard Hudolin assoc. p. Douglas C. Hutton, Arvi Liimatainen p.c. Lauron International Inc., in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, with the participation of Telefilm Canada, Allarcom Ltd., and the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation l.p. Lou Jacobi, Scott Hylands, William Korbust Lynda Mason Green, Tom Heaton, George Clutesi, Lorraine Behnan, Robert Astle, Mark Schoenberg, Bryan Fustukian, Geoff Brumlik, Brent Allen, Eiko Waida, Marek Forsyński, Glenn Davidson, Darren Heaps, Vincent Gale, Michele Thrush, Christine Daniels, Larry Musser, Tommy Fletcher, Robert Koons, Fred Keating, Steve Blackman running time 95 min.



● Derek May: fellow travellers, take notice

Derek May's

Other Tongues

Derek May's new film, *Other Tongues*, begins and ends on a shot of a suitcase, a kind of metaphor for the immigrant experience. Later, in a Greek tavern, someone makes the point that emigrants are like suitcases. They arrive with a suitcase – in which there are only blank pages – and no money, and they leave with a suitcase full of money. Between these two framing shots, May gives us not so much a portrait of the immigrant experience, for he is no didacticist, as a picaresque insight into the multicultural neighbourhood of St-Louis in Montreal. Through the shifting fortunes and love affairs of six people who live there, he expands upon the meaning of this central image.

May's earlier work – *Angel*, *McBus*, *Niagara Falls* – was informed by an immigrant sensibility: an outsider who is looking for a way into the culture that he has adopted. These films are dissonant and fragmented and full of absences – of landscape, harmony, narrative logic – but his art films – *Sananguagat* and *Pictures From the 1930's* – suggested that it was possible to overcome this through the synthesis of experience that art provided. However, the key film in May's unique and distinguished output was *Mother Tongues*, where he confronted his, as well as his wife's past and roots, and their present reality. It was a portrait of a bilingual relationship, she Québécois, he English, which resonated with the problems of the country as a whole.

Other Tongues is an extension of the concerns present in *Mother Tongue*, as its title indicates. While the first film analysed a bilingual relationship, *Other Tongues* extends its dialectic to the multicultural experience where English, Québécois and Greeks intermingle. There are four couples in this film, although only six people (it makes for interesting mathematics): Sam and Anna, Sam and Lise, Anna and Yiannis and, finally, May himself and Suzanne. Each couple somehow defies definition – Sam and Anna having a living arrangement that is non-exclusive, and in the course of the film they both get involved with other people: Sam with the gentle, blonde Lise, and Anna dueling with the sensually temperamental Greek, Yiannis.

These couples live tenuous relationships, where slipping into bed with someone else cannot conceal the doubts and absences that flicker through their thoughts. Sam and Anna, in particular, are trying to define a new kind of living arrangement to suit their needs, because, as Sam puts it, "Couples slaughter each other and reduce the other person to something they can deal with." Yet, he is 35 and would like children. Anna, even though she needs the company of other men, thinks maybe it's time she got pregnant.

The equation becomes confused when a different value system enters to trouble these serene waters. The headstrong Yiannis, cannot accept the fact that Anna, even though she has slept with him, is not his alone. As the opening line intones, "In Paradise, everyone gets what they want. Locally, things are more complicated." In some of the more marvellous interchanges, often arguments, the tone and content descends to soap-opera, which nevertheless makes it no less insightful. While Sam, Anna, Lise and Yiannis negotiate



● Robert Astle, left, and Lou Jacobi prime young William Korbust in *Isaac Littlefeathers*

the various problems in their lives, Derek and Suzanne (she is learning English through tape-recorded lessons) live their relationship apart from the emotional chaos that the film describes. But the wild uncertainties that define the lifestyles of the more demonstrative couples, is here marked by a different kind of absence – Derek and Suzanne avoid domestic conflict, but also interchange with a social world as well.

The key to understanding *Other Tongues* is a piece of graffiti scrawled onto a wall, "We can't solve all our problems in the bedroom." If this is precisely what the film's couples are trying to do, it is delicately balanced by two encounters that point a way out of the introverted turmoil of the relationships in the film. Sam is a radio broadcaster and his work brings him into contact with a woman who has just written a history of the Communist movement in Canada during the inter-war period. Sam is amazed that many of the incidents described in the book took place in St-Louis, yet he knows nothing about this past.

This interview raises questions that are touched on again when Anna meets an ebullient, elderly woman who carries the spirit of life and knowledge in her eyes. She is a union organizer, referred to affectionately as "The Fireball." For her, sex is magnificent and indispensable, but it doesn't solve all our problems. As she puts it, if people don't work together, "It's just everything going down the drain."

Both of these encounters speak to a world that is nowhere visible in the rest of the film, another absence, but their force and impact is undeniable. Like the black-and-white archival footage of immigrants arriving and travelling on the train, a past has disappeared and people are groping for a pattern with which to live their lives. By the end of *Other Tongues*, little has changed in the lives of our couples. Yiannis and Sam have become friends, and they join Anna and Lise for a coffee on a sunlight verandah. Suzanne comes to the end of her English lessons and is told that she now knows something about the culture. But this ending is in reality only a continuation: the suitcase is picked up and carried off, starting on another journey that has no end.

There is a tentativeness to the final moments of *Other Tongues*, as there is to the rest of the film, that speaks to a fragile future. Yet, formally, the film has the precision and imagination of someone whose grip on the medium is becoming more assured with every film. Within its 50 minutes or so, May has sketched, in his own sophisticated visual manner, a warm, complex and occasionally touching tapestry encompassing past and present, male and female, Québécois and English, presence and absence, that synthesizes the immigrant experience and suggests that we are all outsiders, fellow travellers who could do well to take notice of our surroundings and our heritage.

Piers Handling ●

OTHER TONGUES d. Derek May d.o.p. David deVolpi ed. Derek May, Judith Merritt orig. sc. (conceived by) Derek May, (written by) Gerald Wexler mus. Zone Jaune song "There Is a War" by Leonard Cohen p.c. National Film Board of Canada running time 57 min. 23 sec. improv. Peter Bierman, Yiannis Roussis, Linda Lee Tracey, Sylvie Potvin, Suzanne Samson also appearing Merrily Weisbord, Lea Roback, Raphael Mungia and family.

Michael Rubbo's

Margaret Atwood: Once in August

If a Michael Rubbo documentary usually acknowledges its genesis in the NFB, Rubbo's personal presence and persona are, however, more prominent. In *Margaret Atwood: Once in August*, Rubbo declares that such contradictory alignments provide a working license to make personal cinema within the Film Board. As he types a letter to Atwood requesting permission to make a film about her for the Board's Canadian Writers' Series, Rubbo commits a felicitous typo. By transposing the letter "r" for the letter "t" in the surname, the film proves to be a collaboration between A and R – Atwood and Rubbo.

This film is more anthropological than institutional, in the modern tradition of visual anthropology, where the researcher is necessarily implicated in the documentary of the cultural human subject. Its theme is the art of life, with Atwood the found resource on her family's summer island. The island's location is never revealed. It looks northerly, like the landscape in Atwood's novel *Surfacing*, but the full Atwood family forms an energetic presence.

In Atwood, Rubbo finds a collaborator who extends his subject beyond portraiture. Atwood's known ability to control media interviews is evident in her first speech, camping instructions to Rubbo. Rubbo plays the would-be voyeur as a voyageur, ensconcing himself on the island's rim with his working collaborator, Merrily Weisbord, then edging defensively towards his subject. Weisbord gets closer to Atwood when she rebukes Rubbo's chauvinist persona. Rubbo's familiar go-between is redefined as an ironically feminist liaison, a co-between.

Rubbo bounces between his assump-

tions about Atwood and his inability to get at Atwood. He enters her literary territory as "a reader", not a critic, of Atwood's work. But he brings the fears and the fantasies of a male outsider. So he is more comfortable with Atwood's mother as she prepares a pie and recalls the child-writer.

Prosaic events assume a haze of profundity. Often, the artistry Rubbo imposes upon ordinary acts produces irony, especially when he is befuddled. The lake where Atwood canoes is still, so Rubbo's reading from *Surfacing* seems an attempt to fuse Atwood's life and literature. Periodically, Atwood is seen reading a barometer, as if controlling Rubbo's film and his illusions, as well as the elements.

In contrast, her discussions with Weisbord seem spontaneous, unrelated to time or temperature. By night, they chat in a tent aglow with light; on a rainy day, they huddle under an up-turned canoe. These scenes suggest that Rubbo is a lurking outsider. With Weisbord, Atwood's reflections on her life, on her work, and on male perspective (including Rubbo's), exclude the filmmaker who sees primarily through cinematic pretences and cultural filters, but wants to hang around their closeness.

The Atwood island, human as well as geographic, is a metaphor for an order based on mutual respect. Rubbo adopts the ruse of the critical "pattern" hunter. We learn that Atwood's literary sources are 19th century England and Dickens, but Atwood diminishes these discoveries. The real revelation is the complex of Atwoods as touching islands, one and all, untainted by external "realities."

In *Margaret Atwood: Once in August*, Rubbo appears as an outsider who admires his subject's interior stability. But the cynic in him doesn't quite believe it. Though he admits he doesn't solve the Atwood mystery, he is fascinated by her family's personal touching: the embraces between Atwood's daughter Jess and Atwood's parents; the child's resonant independence, humming and painting alone, after

Atwood tells Rubbo that her poetic muse is an old woman. These moments express more than the requisite documentary interviews, with their awkward politeness, props and impatience, or the pretence of Rubbo's portable Atwood library stacked neatly on logs.

In an equally amusing but central scene, Atwood and Rubbo paint together. Atwood sits high on the rocks effortlessly divining a landscape. Rubbo languishes below, in the foreground, labouring over a faceless portrait of Atwood: "I've chosen something incredibly difficult. I'm doing you and I can't see you." He concludes the film with a similar sense of her elusiveness.

In this key scene, Rubbo simultaneously sees Atwood up close and in relief. He drops his ruse, to reveal a prism of keenly felt perspectives – despite the "binoculars" he claims as his constrained vision at the film's conclusion. The epilogue's aerial stills of the island landscape, underlined by Rubbo's resignation, sustain the paradox of his control and his surrender of control.

Yet in counterpose to his previous film (*Daisy: The Story of a Facelift*, 1982), Rubbo here has lifted an ideal out of his subject: a natural woman who is a respected offspring, a committed parent, a fiercely protective writer and an autonomous mate with writer Graham Gibson. If in *Daisy*, Rubbo's subject flies away from him in pursuit of a popular romantic myth, *Margaret Atwood: Once in August* is about the opposite: internal values with a strong physical bearing. Rubbo, the anthropological adventurer, would, one feels like to spread – and to catch – such earth-bound strengths.

Joan Nicks ●

MARGARET ATWOOD: ONCE IN AUGUST d./sc./ed. Michael Rubbo co-sc. and research Merrily Weisbord d.o.p. Andreas Poulsson add. cam. Barry Perles loc. sd. Andy McBready add. sd. Ingrid Cusiel asst. res. Donna Dubinsky sd. ed. Stephan Steinhouse re-rec. Hans Peter Strobl unit admin. Bob Spence p. Michael Rubbo, Barrie Howells exec. p. Barrie Howells p.c. National Film Board of Canada running time: 57 mins.

● Michael Rubbo, the anthropological adventurer, finds himself a lurking outsider in *Margaret Atwood: Once in August*

