

John Smith's  
**Sitting  
in Limbo**

The reggae/rap score in John Smith's **Sitting in Limbo**, a new National Film Board docudrama about teenagers in Montreal's Caribbean community, is the rawest element in an otherwise slick concoction. Jimmy Cliff's music communicates with such depth and passion that his pain, loneliness and struggles become ours. His classic songs from the early seventies, ('Struggling Man,' 'Sitting in Limbo,' 'Many Rivers to Cross' and others) are meant to set the mood and highlight the protagonists' emotions. Instead, they beg comparison with the film. For all of John N. Smith's considerable skill, the songs have a greater scope and are more understanding of what being black is like than **Limbo**.

The **Masculine Mystique**, which Smith co-directed with Giles Walker, was a discussion of sexism. In **Limbo**, he tries to explore relations among black teenagers. Smith begins by introducing us to three young black women, Pat (Pat Dillon), Debbie (Debbie Grant) and Sylvie (Sylvie Clarke) who live together in a cramped apartment. Sylvie and Debbie are single mothers on welfare. A third of the way into the film, Pat, the heroine of **Limbo**, is a third of the way into welfare motherhood.

The three room-mates had difficult relationships with men: "Don't 'our son' me." Sylvie tells her baby's father, "The only thing you did was put it there. Typical!" In another scene, Pat, complaining about her boyfriend (Fabian Gibbs) neglecting her, sarcastically tells Sylvie that, "Fabian and his tape deck have a great future together." Fabian's attempts to take on the responsibilities of fatherhood are, however, at the center of **Limbo's** dramatic action.

Smith's screenplay, co-written with David Wilson, is based on interviews they conducted with the actors/subjects and other members of Montreal's Caribbean community. This may be why the slangy dialogue, as familiar to anyone who's ever walked through the West-end of Montreal as it has been rare on our screens, is so authentic and sharp. ("I wanted to give my body a rest," says Pat explaining why she hasn't been taking the pill. "A nine month rest?" retorts Fabian.) It may also be why the problems experienced by the people in **Limbo** seem so realistic - The critical but supportive inter-relationships between the three women are a good example. Their comments about families, money and men, seemingly off-the-cuff but cutting in their perspicacity, are very funny.

**Limbo** has wit, a fast, episodic structure and smart, cocky characters (The very cinematic Pat Dillon is especially likeable). All these characteristics usually appeal to teen audiences. But I bet **Limbo** won't. As in an after-school TV special, every problem raised is transformed into a cautionary tale: Pat gets pregnant so we may be warned about teenage pregnancy; Fabian drops out so we can be told not to; They get their



• Pat (Pat Dillon) and Fabian (Fabian Gibbs)

furniture repossessed to teach us the value of a budget. Smith's reduction of his protagonists to role-models-in-reverse is patronizing not only to the characters, whom the actors succeed in making us like, but also to many teenagers experiencing similar difficulties. This becomes particularly unpleasant with the realisation that, because some of the shots are documentary footage of people speaking about themselves, they may have unwittingly lent their lives to a comedy of errors.

Being seduced into an emotional involvement with the heroes only so that we can be lectured to is experienced as a rip-off. This is aggravated by Smith's skipping over the big emotional scenes just as they reach a crescendo. In Pat's revelation of her pregnancy to Fabian and her talk with her mother over how she's going to take care of her child, for example, we are set up for an emotional confrontation. But, before the characters have fully unburdened themselves, before feelings are fully articulated, the director has already cut to the next scene.

Smith depicts and denounces racism. In one scene, a job posted outside a grocery store is immediately made unavailable to Fabian. In another we are shown Sylvie's boyfriend, his broken body covered with blood, after being brutalized by racist policemen. In spite of this, and in spite of the fact that such characters and situations undoubtedly exist in real life, **Limbo** leaves itself perilously open to charges of racism.

Take Fabian, for example. He is depicted as a well-meaning but bored, lazy and irresponsible child. In his introductory scene his teacher details how he is chronically late for class. The principal then 'kindly' expels him from school. We are shown that Fabian wants an instant home and a car he can't afford but he can't maintain a relationship or keep a job. His is the only major male role in **Limbo**.

I find it disturbing that in a film which aims to describe the life of a young black couple, whites should be depicted with greater variety. In small roles, white people are seen as janitors, teachers, principals, employment counsellors, pharmacists, small business

owners and workers. Some of them, like the janitor are seen as racist. Others like the teacher, principal, and boss are shown to be justifiably stretched to the limits of their patience by Fabian's behaviour. There is no doubt that the scenario of blacks surrounded by white figures of authority is a reflection of reality but this is no excuse for the narrow range of black roles.

All the black characters in **Limbo**, except possibly a minister (literally a two-line part) share a similar socio/economic background. The blacks' personality traits are distinguishable mainly along gender lines. Men are well meaning but ultimately irresponsible. Women are matriarchal figures who'll somehow not only survive but get to the church on time. The major difference between Fabian and Sylvie's boyfriend is that the former has a larger role and the latter is taller. Pat, Debbie and Sylvie are easier to distinguish but that is due more to the different external events they come in contact with (and the personalities of the actresses) than to differences of ethics, morals or psychological make-up between roles.

**Limbo** describes events within the community without contextualizing them. John Smith shows us that Fabian has trouble getting up in the morning without really making us understand why. The director also chooses to depict all the women in the film as having had children as teenagers (Pat is the exception only because she miscarries.) Is it that black teenagers are sexually irresponsible or is it that more young black women decide to have and keep their babies? Is Fabian lazy or is it that the world is unbearable if you're a poor, unskilled, young father-to-be waking up to a long day at the textile factory and have to deal with racism on top of that. Since we are given no direction, audiences will draw conclusions mostly on the basis of their own predispositions.

**Limbo's** polish, swiftness and wit, gives a lot of pleasure. However, the verisimilitude of its characters and the lack of contextualization may reinforce negative stereotypes of a minority seldom portrayed in Canadian film and already very vulnerable to bigots. **Sitting in Limbo** has won awards at the Montreal and Toronto festivals and I'm glad the NFB's Alternative Drama Program and its low-budget features are receiving all this attention. All the same, **Sitting in Limbo** is one after-school special children shouldn't watch without adult supervision.

**José Arroyo •**

**SITTING IN LIMBO** d. John Smith p. David Wilson, John N. Smith sc. David Wilson, John N. Smith assoc. p. Elizabeth Klinck d.o.p. Barry Perles, Andreas Poulsson loc. sd. Richard Nichol, Hans Oomes ed. David Wilson research/cast. Elizabeth Klinck prod. man. Carol Jarry gaffer Arshd Shah, Denis Baril, Kevin O'Connell addt. photo Andrew Kitzanuk, Kent Nason, David de Volpr asst. cam. Al Morgan, Stefan Nitolski grip Michael Thomaseck, Esther Valiquette addt. sd. John Martin post prod. coord. Grace Avrith unit admin. Marie Tonto-Donati asst. prod. Ian Stewart sd. ed. Michel Bordeleau asst. sd. ed. Lise Wedlock music ed. Julian Olson music cons. Richard Gresko recording Louis Hone mix Jean-Pierre Joutel, Shelley Craig thanks to Milton Funwear Inc., Lasalle High School, Unity Boys and Girls Club, Kane's Super Drugmart, Trinity Memorial Anglican Church, Catherine Booth Hospital, Harold Cummings Ltd., Montréal Department Stores Ltd., Harvey's Restaurants, O & S Bronze and Metal Fabrications, A & S Home Furniture and Appliances Ltd., Lois Siegel, Hanna Acemian l.p. Pat Dillon, Fabian Gibbs, Sylvie Clarke, Debbie Grant p.c. National Film Board of Canada Colour, 35mm running time: 95 mins

photo: Ron S. Diamond