

FILM REVIEWS

Leonard Yakir's

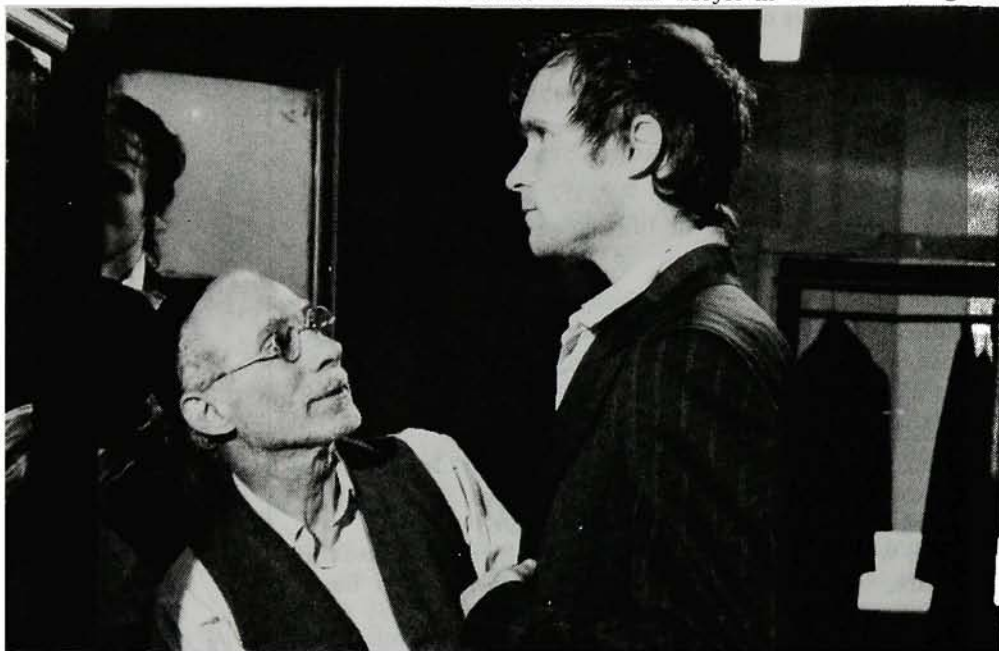
The Mourning Suit

A film by Leonard Yakir. **Screenplay:** Joe Wiesenfeld. **Cinematography:** Henry Fiks. **Music:** Don Gillis. **Sound:** Doug Ganton. **Editing:** Honor Griffith. **Performers:** Allan Moyle, Norman Taviss, Brenda Donohue, Henry Gamer, Marcia Diamond, Helen Cooperstein. **Producer:** Leonard Yakir. **Produced in** 1974 by March Films Ltd. **Colour;** 16mm. **Running time:** 90 min.

Leonard Yakir's first feature film, **The Mourning Suit**, takes us back to a literary convention that can be applied to film only on a low-budget basis: the 'apprenticeship' creation. That doesn't mean serving one's time as an assistant, but, like Henry Fielding's Tom Jones, the main character learns to become a man and cope with the adult world. It also implies the preliminary artistic solo, probing one's roots to find oneself, before the move on to mature, outside efforts. It's a type of work that rarely occurs in film simply because of cost; unlike the writer or playwright who only needs paper, pen and enough bread and water, the filmmaker requires human and financial resources on a large scale.

Even the CFDC low-budget programme has seen little of such efforts, possibly because so few filmmakers have the conflict with a rich ethnic background that forces one to come to terms with it; first works are, if nothing else, full of passion. And herein lies the strengths and the weaknesses of Yakir's film. Whether the lead, played reasonably successfully by Allan Moyle, is Yakir himself is not the point; he does embody the conflicts that Yakir is interested in: a desire to escape his illegitimate mixed racial background, a failure as a cellist because he is empty so his art lacks conviction, separating himself from his somewhat overbearing Jewish mother, reaching an understanding with and obtaining forgiveness from his own former love and his own illegitimate child, and so on.

Norman Taviss and Allan Moyle in *The Mourning Suit*



The opportunities for the novelist are vast: create a rich physical milieu populated with unique characters, set your young man amongst them and watch him change and grow. The filmmaker can do the same, and Yakir's warehouse-suit factory, with the old tailor, the good-hearted landlord, the surly janitor, and the machines and cloth offer great visual delight, almost. The antiseptic high-rise-mother and the lower class existence of Moyle's lover contrast well with the fabric of the factory where Moyle and the old man live, almost.

What's missing is a full exploitation of the physical milieu. The film could have been made for television, such is the reliance on close-ups. Never do we get a sensuous feeling of the surroundings, so it's up to the actors to convey what Yakir wants to communicate. Allan Moyle, Norman Taviss as the old man, Brenda Donohue as the lover, Marcia Diamond as the mother, Henry Gamer as the landlord, and even Helen Cooperstein as the girl Moyle left in Toronto in a cameo role, struggle valiantly to give some depth and breadth to their characters, but they don't make it, mainly because they have too little support from the physical settings and from Joe Wiesenfeld's script.

The reasons, context, and components of the various personalities and relationships suffer from such little expansion. Why did Moyle and Donahue break up; surely there was more

to it than his inability to love. Why were they attracted to each other in the first place? The most successful scene is a practice on the cello by Moyle, where he sits in his loft, alone, with just his instrument. The haunting cello on the soundtrack, Henry Fiks' camera alternately pulling back for a long shot, indicating his solitude, then moving in to show Moyle's face to the rhythm of the music all of it works and fits. Or the climactic scene, shot in medium and close-up, when Moyle dons the Jewish religious garb and prays over the body of the old man, wearing the suit he made for him before he died, and the audience can feel Moyle make his connection and reach an understanding; here the elements come together.

The times of audience satisfaction may be few, but, to return to my analogy, what the 'apprenticeship' work should indicate, above all, is promise. Yakir has that promise. His visual sense and actor sense need developing, and should be given the opportunity. What should be done now with this film is a drastic editing job to tighten it up for a one-hour TV slot; the long parts could be cut out and a fine drama might result. But that's another danger in examining a first work: the temptation to re-do it. Instead I'll just sit back and wait for Yakir's next film. It should be worth it.

Stephen Chesley

Dennis Wheeler's

Potlatch

A film by Dennis Wheeler. **Screenplay:** Dennis Wheeler, Brian Shein. Assistant: Fred Easton. **Cinematography:** Tony Westman. **Music:** Joe Mock, and Albert Bay. **Sound:** Richard Patton, Zale Dalen. **Editing:** Sally Paterson. **Costumes:** Enda Bratt. **Performers:** John York, Ted Stitter, Tom Shandel. **Producer:** Tom Shandel. **Production:** U'mista Cultural Society, 1975. **16mm, Colour, Running time:** 55 min. **Distribution in Canada:** Pacific Cinematheque.

The Potlatch was a custom of the Kwakiutl Indians of coastal British Columbia. The ceremony involved the giving away of surplus wealth, with the giver receiving status in exchange. Although anthropologists later gave significance to gift giving in primitive societies, and recognized its importance in terms of social structure and social cohesion, the early white communities found the Potlatch contradictory to their own values, and therefore dangerous. It was after all quite different from the greedy acquisitiveness of early capitalist society, and hence "the work of the devil."

The whiteman made the Potlatch illegal with a series of repressive laws. It was a 'strict law' among the native people to obey the Potlatch customs. It was the white man's law



Kwakiutl Chief with 'copper'. 1914.

forbidding it. By obeying their own laws natives broke the law and were sentenced to imprisonment. As a chief said: "the Indians do not tell the whites how to live, why do the whites tell the Indians how to live?"

But tell them they did, and using the courts and the system they enforced what they told. The prosecutor during the Potlatch trials was also the magistrate. Later the same magistrate offered reduced sentences providing the Indians give up their blankets, masks, copper money, and other Native wealth. The fact that the law had never had this kind of provision made no difference. (Can you see a judge offering a bank robber reduced charges in exchange for some of the loot today?)

Later many of the artifacts found their way into the hands of the prosecutors. Duncan Cambell Scott, the Indian Affairs official that put the repressive laws on the books, ended up with quite a collection.

The Potlatch laws were only part of the larceny and repression inflicted upon native peoples. In the Native culture the land was not just something you lived on, but the basis of culture, economics, and religion. To the white man land was "real estate" and was taken from the Indians time and time again.

When smallpox decimated native peoples in the thirties the reserve lands were diminished accordingly, but although the native population has increased rapidly in the last few decades, the reserve space has remained the same.

Dennis Wheeler's **Potlatch** film documents all this and more. Using documentary footage, old film clips and stills, and dramatic reconstruction, the film takes the one example of repression, the Potlatch laws, and examines the historical evidence in great depth.

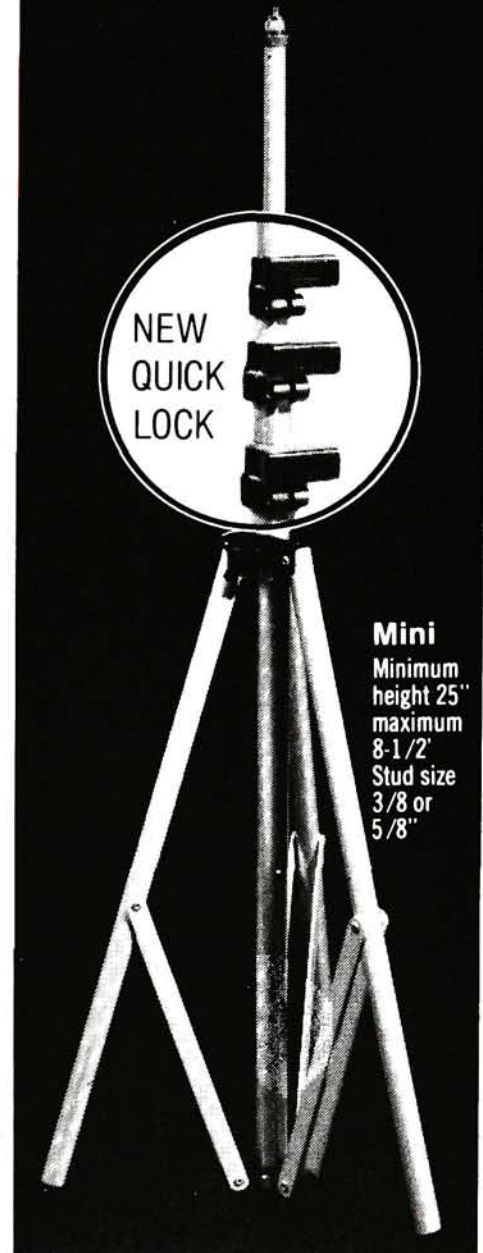
Indian rights is a sympathetic issue, however Wheeler presents the evidence and facts, so that the audience can understand this particular issue clearly.

Dennis Wheeler was co-writer and associate producer on the NET film, **Shadowcatcher**, a film on Edward Curtis, the still photographer and writer whose "North American Indians" is a classic. Like **Shadowcatcher**, the **Potlatch** film is made strong by the solidity of research behind it.

Peter Bryant

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