Christian Bruyère’s
Shelley

Prostitution, especially juvenile prostitution, continues to be a hot topic. It is one of those social issues which is guaranteed to incite heated discussion—indeed, controversy.

The last three years have seen no shortage of films and television programs on the subject: Street Wise, an American production, springs to mind as does Street Kids and Close to Home, two of the subject: Street Wise, an American Film Board and Hy-Perspectives Media Group, respectively.

The latest entry into the kiddie hooker debate is Shelley, a low-budget feature from Vancouver filmmaker Christian Bruyère. Originally entitled Turned Out, Bruyère’s film was produced by his own company, Face to Face Films, and Cineworks Independent Filmmakers Co-Operative for a minuscule $20,000.

Shelley is not Bruyère’s first work. He has made three previous films, all of which deal with controversial social issues. His second film, Face to Face, was directed by Tom Shandel in order to conform with Telefilm demands.

Bruyère had more success with his third project: a half-hour documentary, Shelley, which the Public Welfare Committee of the B.C. Penitentiary, an event which resulted in her death when she was shot by a prison guard during the storming of the hostage area. Although written by Bruyère, the film version of Shelley was directed by Ramona Klein who is cast as Rachel, the girl’s mother’s boy friend, Shelley is desperate for a father figure to replace her missing dad and the film strongly implies that she finds that substitute in Gordon.

For the most part, the performances in the film hold firm. Robyn Stevan, who plays Shelley, is believable as the vulnerable, confused runaway. But the film really belongs to Jan Tracey as Gordon and Ramona Klein who is cast as Rachel, another of Gordon’s ladies. Klein is chilling as the more sympathetic character of Kim. The strongest moments in the film occur in the scenes between these actors. To his credit, Bruyère has allowed the flavor of the street to permeate their speech. His skill with dialogue is particularly evident in this instance since he is able to create language which is at once abrasive, colorful and believable without resorting to the use of “fuck” as a noun, verb, adjective and adverb.

Unfortunately, the adult characters in Shelley do not fare as well. Overall they tend to suffer from an extremely limited emotional range and complexity which probably has more to do with a lack of character development than with a lack of actual acting ability. Diana Stevan, who is Robyn’s mother off-screen and plays Shelley’s mom, bounces like a pinball between tears and outrage throughout the film. Eil Halcrow, as the social worker, seems to have her face permanently fixed in an expression of solicitude. Everyone else is lost in the shuffle. Shelley is inexorably drawn into the world of the street. Conflict arises when Shelley is forced to choose between returning home, where her mother does not believe her daughter’s accusations, or remaining on the street with its illusion of familial closeness. Betrayed by her mother’s boyfriend, Shelley is desperate for a father figure to replace her missing dad and the film strongly implies that she finds that substitute in Gordon.

Character development aside, there are also problems with the content of the film. Because Bruyère is a skilled writer he does a good job of showing how kids can be attracted by and then drawn into life on the street. Shelley is invited by Kim into the apartment she shares with Gordon and Rachel. Kim turns Shelley onto drugs and she is seduced by Gordon who seems to offer warmth and comfort. Before long, Shelley is pressured into turning her first trick and she reluctantly complies out of a misguided sense of loyalty to her new family. What becomes problematic, however, is the fact that Shelley is continually rescued from herself and the situations she finds herself in.

When she is frightened by her first trick, Gordon breaks in with a knife and scares off the man. When Shelley is wandering the streets, she is always found by the nice social worker and her cop partner. When Shelley is about to be assaulted by the nasty drug dealer and his partner, the social worker and the cop turn up. Shelley to receive a2

Julie Warren

Shelley

Shelley is immediately entered into evidence and, in the fastest decision ever rendered, the judge flips through a few pages of the incriminating document and finds the defendant guilty on the spot. Presto, Shelley and her mom are reunited and the credits roll.

What is disturbing about this kind of presentation is that it is essentially misleading. The film strongly implies that the system works for kids like Shelley in that in fact there is daily evidence that the number of children in crisis is growing while social services for them are declining. One has to wonder, then, at the point the filmmaker is attempting to make. Dramatic license cannot be used to explain away the “happy ever after” tone of this film since the circumstances surrounding the character of Shelley are presented in a style whichs infers falsity. For instance, we are asked to believe that social workers can arrange immediate court hearings for juveniles believed to be in jeopardy. This is what happens to Shelley in spite of the fact that she never actually tells the social worker that her mother’s boyfriend has been molesting her. The social worker apparently construes Shelley’s silence when she is asked the question, “What did he do to you?” as answer enough. Apparently on the basis of the expression on Shelley’s face, a hearing with a family court judge is arranged for the next morning.

The upshot of these weaknesses is that although Shelley is a film which is technically adept, well-constructed in terms of plot and pacing and sometimes peppered by characters we can care about (a minor miracle given the final price tag of $20,000) it does not add to either our insight or our knowledge about a pressing social issue. We are unfortunately left with the impression that the film is saying had Shelley’s mom not ditched her husband for that slimy boyfriend, none of this would have happened—a point which will not endear Shelley to feminists.

Shelley is obviously a gifted writer and shows potential to become a competent filmmaker it is to be hoped that his next project will demonstrate more thoughtfulness in terms of the portrayal of its weaknesses, the apparent success of Shelley in the marketplace indicates Bruyère will be around for quite some time.