

INTER-VIEW

by Colin Henderson

Cinema Canada: *Where did you get the idea for Life Classes?*

Bill MacGillivray: I wanted to do a film about a female character. I went to art school and lived the life of somebody who goes to life-drawing classes two nights a week. I've always been fascinated by the human form and the whole idea of taking three-dimensional form and putting it in two-dimensional spaces. I've been an art teacher for many years and I have certain ideas about those kinds of things. But my continuing dialogue with myself has to do with loss of culture, exchanges of culture and how we give up our culture as we assume another culture. I think the whole film is really a kind of allegorical reference to that notion.

Cinema Canada: *Does the change that Mary goes through in Life Classes reflect a similar change in your work?*

Bill MacGillivray: Mary, the protagonist of *Life Classes*, paints-by-numbers in a naive sort of way. My films have always been calculated. They've never been naive. So I think the paint-by-numbers thing in *Life Classes* represents a kind of unquestioning acceptance of what's around you. It doesn't really matter what transition she went through, whether it was from paint-by-numbers to actual representational drawing. The point is that she came out of her past, in which she was a consumer of other people's ideas, and she became a producer of her own ideas. That's what's important.

Cinema Canada: *Were you pleased by the response that Life Classes received at the Festival of Festivals?*

Bill MacGillivray: Obviously. You like to see your work succeed. With *Life Classes*, I set out to do a specific thing and that was to deal with the issues that I feel are important in a way that a broader audience would appreciate. So it was very gratifying to know that you have done what you set out to do.

Cinema Canada: *You said at one point that Life Classes was a bit too conventional for your taste. Considering the response you've received from people who've seen the film, do you still feel that way?*

Bill MacGillivray: I think so. It's a very safe film in many ways. I think it does what we set out to do in that it tells a story in simple terms, and at the same time, it deals with some of the issues that I feel need dealing with. But for my taste, it's really too safe. *Life Classes* really is no big quantum leap in style. On the surface, it's just a little melodramatic story about a woman who gets pregnant, has a

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baby, and moves away. But hidden in that story are messages that I feel are important for us to consider. One of those is, "do we simply accept the dream as it's portrayed to us, or do we become active in the dream-making, in the reading of the dream."

Cinema Canada: *Did you disagree with any of the criticisms of the film that you heard at the Festival?*

Bill MacGillivray: A lot of people felt that the beginning was slow. Some people saw that as a negative thing and some people saw that as the way the film was meant to be. What we were trying to do is show 30 years of this woman's life in a Cape Breton village, 30 years of boredom. The thing that I find interesting is that the people who complain about this languid beginning are the same people who congratulate me on the culmination and the ending — and I don't think you can have one without the other. I think you have to come from somewhere to get somewhere.

Cinema Canada: *What was the public reaction like? Did it give you any new insight?*

Bill MacGillivray: It was more successful than I thought it would be. What that may do for me is give a certain latitude to try harder to do some of the things that I've maybe pulled back from in the past. I'm not one to do emotions. My films have always been sort of cool and there are some fairly emotional scenes in the film. I felt tentative when I was doing them, and yet seeing the response and understanding the way the audience appreciated the emotions they were going through, it makes me think that maybe I should go further. But for me there is always a very fine line between being suggestive and being fascist in your manipulation of the audience. I wouldn't want to go too far over the line.

Cinema Canada: *Life Classes is really a film within a film. In Aerial View and Stations you have the same kind of direct references to the process of making the film — what is it you're trying to do?*

Bill MacGillivray: In *Life Classes* I wanted people to be made aware that at any given moment they were not actually watching a kind of semi-real state which is what American films, or western culture films, try to have us believe. Like it's a dream, but it's a dream that you believe completely while you're there, and I don't like that idea. I think it's a kind of fascist way of going about representing ideas and I would prefer people to be aware as much as possible that "I am watching a film. I may be in a movie theatre but I can't lose contact with that notion. This is a kind of dialogue that I am party to. If I'm a rational human being, I must not allow myself to simply accept and then later on reflect. I should be a part of the dialogue as it's happen-

Within the current climate of academic film theory, with its dependency on French theoretical paradigms and with their claim to political radicalism, the films of Bill MacGillivray might not readily be considered either political or radical. Yet in a real way, in a way that is essential to the regional struggles within Canada, his films are both political and radical. They all spring from MacGillivray's regional roots. While they don't fit the academic models of radical political thinking, his films embody the political struggle of the regions against the centre and of the personalized cinematic utterance against the homogenized language of the cinematic machine: of the movie business, as one says — a business that generally either bypasses or co-opts the Canadian reality.

For instance, when MacGillivray returned to Canada after his training in Great Britain, he got involved in a regional movement that, supported by the Canada Council, resulted in the founding of a series of film co-operatives across Canada. Along with Lionel Simmons, MacGillivray's co-worker and cinematographer, and Gordon Parsons, often MacGillivray's producer, MacGillivray was directly involved in the founding of the Atlantic Filmmakers' Co-operative (AFCOOP) in Halifax, out of which, after *Aerial View*, his first film in Canada, he founded Picture Plant, his own production company.

Aerial View (1979), a 60-minute *moyen-métrage*, and *Stations* (1984), a full-scale feature film, constitute MacGillivray's dramatic work prior to *Life Classes*. He has made other films, of course, largely sponsored films — like the finely nuanced *The Author of These Words* (1980), a documentary on the Newfoundland writer, Harold Horwood, made for the National Film Board; an item called *Newfoundland at War*, made for Parks Canada; plus another item for TVOntario on Alistair McLeod. But it is through *Aerial View*, *Stations*, and *Life Classes* that his dramatic work can best be understood.

What are the elements that characterize this work, that make it political and that make it Canadian?

To begin with, it is regional. To make such a statement is inevitably to endorse the 'realist' dimension of cinema as well as to underline one of the confusions within the Canadian political situation.

Aerial View, *Stations*, and *Life Classes* are all rich in local landscape, in the sense of a particular region with its unique sense of scale. In *Aerial View*, it is the specific space of Halifax and its ambient coves; in *Stations*, it is the stretch and breadth of Canada as seen from a train; in *Life Classes*, it is the productive relationship that exists between the countryside of Cape Breton and the city streets of Halifax — a relationship that, during the film's most exciting, climactic moment, is mediated through

more. *Linda Joy* survives as the depiction of a struggle — a struggle universalized by the way that it has been presented. In its quiet way, *Linda Joy* is a 'perfect' film.

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Is it only a coincidence that *Linda Joy* bears a small stylistic resemblance to the first film that MacGillivray ever made — *7:30 A.M.* (1972)? His diploma film for the London School of Film Technique (now the London International Film School), *7:30 A.M.* is a simple exercise both in the handling of actors and in *mise-en-scène*.

A man enters a bathroom, showers, dries himself, trims his beard, deodorizes one armpit, sniffs at the other but leaves it dry, and exits from the room. Meanwhile, we see in the margins of the frame a woman also come in, sit on the toilet, have a pee, and exit from the room. There is not so much as an exchange of glances between them, and while the film does contain cuts, there is a strong feeling of an extended sequence — shot within this 10-minute film.

Shot in 35 mm, black-&-white, *7:30 A.M.* already declares some of MacGillivray's preoccupations. He is an assured stylist as a creator of images; he is at ease in working with actors; and he is capable of achieving maximum effect with minimal means. Furthermore — perhaps the limitation of his early work — MacGillivray's universe was, initially, very much centred on the male.

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If these homocentric preoccupations were shifted somewhat by the experience of making *Linda Joy*, they have been thoroughly overturned by the process of creating *Life Classes* — Bill MacGillivray's latest fiction feature (1987). This film tells the story of Mary Cameron, a young woman from Cape Breton, who moves from her "hinterland" on the island to her "metropole" on the mainland — which is to say, to Halifax. In the course of this journey, she moves as well from adolescence to adulthood, from a paint-by-numbers hobby to professional sketching, from social and sexual dependency to personal independence and self-realization.

While highly formal in its overall cinematic style and slowly paced as befits the seasonal rhythms of the Maritimes, *Life Classes* is the most accessible cinematic narrative that MacGillivray has so far devised. It tells an important story, a timely story, with the strong sense of place that has always characterized the work of Bill MacGillivray. Furthermore, judging from both the critical and the popular response to the film at this year's Festival of Festivals in Toronto, *Life Classes* should be the film that gains for MacGillivray the theatrical recognition he deserves.

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he explains at one time to a classroom of students.

In fact, this classroom scene allows Geoff to present his manifesto – a manifesto that might not be that far removed from the manifesto of Bill MacGillivray. We have to build something that is of some use to people, not just something that will close deals, create cash flow, and allow a lot of rich people to make yet more money and which will keep the politics of civic exploitation in place. As Geoff talks about building his own house in the country with his own hands, about discovering skills within the process of that building which he never knew he had, about the beautiful view that he has from his window, one young girl cackles when he says that he doesn't have a television, and one boy, who had been reading some kind of merchandising magazine throughout Geoff's discussion, finally asks the determining question: "How much money do you guys make?" Geoff has no answer. Fortunately, at the moment of this question, the loudspeaker system asks him to move his car. He accepts this command as an excuse to leave the classroom. While the image stays on the class, on the embarrassed teacher, we hear the car drive away from the school.

Because of its mixture of the old and the new, Halifax is rich in architectural signifiers. In *Aerial View*, MacGillivray uses the city as Antonioni used Milan in *La Notte* or the EUR section of Rome in *L'Eclisse*.

A couple of sequences in this film are particularly reminiscent of Antonioni. There is one moment towards the beginning of the film when Geoff and his partner Ross are off to close some important architectural deal. As they go up in an elevator in the Maritime Centre, one of the new bank-based highrises that have been erected in the south end of town, through the window in the elevator we can see the spire of St. Matthew's Anglican church being dwarfed and then lost as the elevator rises above it. Later, towards the end of the film, after Geoff has retired to the country and has lost both his wife and his job, Tom comes to visit, accompanied by a hitchhiker. "We met on the road and we're friends for life," says Tom, with his Newfoundlander's friendliness, when they arrive.

A marvellous scene follows – like 7:30 A.M. was intended to be, a sequence shot – in which the hitchhiker plays a harmonica and Tom and Geoff drink a bottle of Screech, talk about Mary, and share the primordial Newfy 'knock-knock' joke together.

It is the scene that follows, however, which is truly worthy of Antonioni. We see the three of them wandering about the rocky shore the morning after their evening together. As so often in the Maritimes, the space is thick with fog. Tom and Geoff wander out onto the deck of the marooned freighter that we had seen at the opening of the film. Then Tom offers his confession. "The older I get," says Tom, "the more I realize that you gotta tow the line... You gotta play

your part." Tom has joined the system. Through a friend of his father, he has become a civil servant. He has a nine-to-five job, pension benefits, the lot. He has bought in and sold out.

In close-up now, their faces wet with mist, Tom and Geoff exchange silent glances together. Then, for the end of the scene, MacGillivray cuts away to a long-shot of the two of them on the wreck, each posed at opposite ends of the deck, facing away from one another, each looking out through the mist at another section of the sea.

If *Aerial View* favours the idealism of a young male architect, it also critiques this way of thinking. Geoff's determination to be true to his own principles isolates him from his friends, alienates him from his wife, and leaves him alone in the country with the responsibility of looking after Sammy. By refusing the commercial world, he is also refusing what many people would call the real world.

The critique of Geoff's position is most strongly voiced by Mary, his wife. While arguably she is dramatically disfavoured by the film – she is constantly smoking, she doesn't like Geoff's Newfy friends, she doesn't want to move to the country, she wants to have more money, and she doesn't seem to care a lot about Sammy – it is her voice that articulates the critique which we can infer from other aspects of the film.

This voice begins during a luncheon meeting with a friend in the new fashionable Chateau Halifax restaurant that looks over the city. But we can hear it over a number of scenes in the film, again defying any sense of chronological order, as at one time, the luncheon with her friend becomes a discussion with her friends, including Geoff.³ While her character is unsympathetically presented in the film, Mary's voice describes quite sympathetically the total self-involvement that we see in Geoff.

Aerial View is a simple film in many ways. It tells a simple story, an old-fashioned story, a story of idealism and of defeat. In this way it might be related to *Linda Joy* that tells a similar kind of story. Yet in both films, as in *Stations* and as in another way in *Life Classes*, it is the structure that universalizes the particular situation, as the particularities of the specific locations give warmth and a sense of reality to the whole.

At a number of key points in the film, MacGillivray returns to the Super 8 footage, as if in moments of self-reflection, as if part of Geoff's awareness of what he has lost. So for the end of the film, he returns to his aerial view.

We see Geoff's partner, Ross, in a four-seater, single-engine private plane. He is surveying the terrain of the coast, obviously looking for sites on which to build, as in the second sequence of the film. In fact, this might be the second sequence of the film! Ross would appear to be looking down on Geoff's house. But finally, he grows impatient. "Come on," he says to his pilot, "Let's get outta here. This is costing me money."

As the voice of commerce ends the

ing." So to help people remember that, I have references to the fact that what the audience is watching is a film. It's easy to take people down the garden path in the movies because their defenses are down, and they'll accept just about anything if you put them in the right frame of mind. Whereas, if you remind them that they're part of this process, then they're more likely to find offense with it or to have questions. They're more likely to enter in some kind of real discussion which is ultimately healthier.

Cinema Canada: *In Stations, you have Robert Frank saying, "Stories are boring." Is that your own view?*

Bill MacGillivray: In a sense it is, although I should explain that Robert's lines, like so many in *Stations*, were ad-libbed. But I agree. Structured stories or stories that are telling you what to think are boring because they don't leave you any room to move. They don't give you any chance to discover for yourself what you might want to think. And in *Stations*, that's what the whole thing is about. We were trying to find a way of telling the story that would allow a person in the audience to interpret more freely than if we had been very specific.

Cinema Canada: *So it was an open-ended process?*

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah, sort of constructive playing with filmic elements to try to develop ways of having ideas shared instead of told. So we would allude to certain things and then leave them, and then maybe come back to them later, after you had had time to reflect on them, maybe subconsciously. Then, when we came back to it 20 minutes later, it might strike you. "Oh yeah, I remember that." Now that you have new associations, you can put that in a newer context with new meaning and then you drag all that to the next scene. And so there's a sort of gradual build-up of unrelated information that slowly starts to fall into place and make sense. By the time you reach the end of the film you have a kind of picture made up of separate parts rather than an absolute construct that has no room to move.

Cinema Canada: *Very non-linear.*

Bill MacGillivray: Well the joke in *Stations* was that we went on a single line from Vancouver to St. John's by rail, but the story goes all over the place.

Cinema Canada: *The endings to your films are always equivocal and unresolved. None of your characters ever wins big.*

Bill MacGillivray: No, "win big" is an American notion. "Win medium" is a Canadian notion, and "win small" is an Atlantic notion. So my films deal with winning small.

Cinema Canada: *Little victories?*

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah, little victories for little people, doing little things, for little reasons, for little reward... But

that's O.K. The struggle of a woman from Cape Breton and her bid to find self-identity and self-actualization and all those kinds of things, is important. She didn't go to the YMCA and take a class in it. She did it by dint of her own energies and her own convictions and her own need to find herself. Quite often it takes a death or some kind of trauma to make you start questioning yourself, and once you start questioning sometimes you wish you hadn't, but nonetheless you continue. And then you begin to have this dialogue, and I think she, perhaps, had been having this dialogue before she knew it. Gradually it became obvious to her that there were things she had to deal with. The birth of her child and the death of her grandmother were catalysts to help her talk to herself, so she began to talk to herself through her drawing.

Cinema Canada: *Do you talk to yourself through your films?*

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah, I think I do. The problem there is because of our institutionalized thought, nobody is particularly interested in hearing what I have to say.

Cinema Canada: *Critics say that your films deal with recognizably Canadian themes. It would seem to suggest that there are a lot of us out there talking to ourselves about the same things.*

Bill MacGillivray: Absolutely. I believe that really strongly. We are all more basically the same than we are different. No matter how different we appear, we all suffer the same things in one form or another.

Cinema Canada: *You admire the work of Jean Pierre Lefebvre. What is it about his films that appeals to you?*

Bill MacGillivray: Well, I haven't seen all of Jean Pierre's work, but I think *Les Fleurs sauvages* is one of the most perfect films I've ever seen. I don't go to a lot of films but I feel strongly about certain films that I've seen. What I like about Jean Pierre's work is its extreme simplicity and the subtlety of it, and the quietude of it. The other thing I like about his work is his view of the world. It's an unfashionable view of the world, it's a non-cynical view of the world, it's a loving view of the world, and those views are not popular these days.

Cinema Canada: *Is it because you share a similar view that you are sometimes criticized for sentimentality?*

Bill MacGillivray: I think people are afraid to look certain truths in the eye and deal with them. They would rather just push them aside and belittle them. I don't think my films are sentimental at all. I think what they are is quietly reflective, and people are embarrassed by that... very much so.

Cinema Canada: *Do you have an audience in mind when you're making a film?*

that either make it dependable or which allow it to be exciting. But like all the other characters in this film, he talks about a sense of home – something which, with all his travelling, Robert Frank has never had.

"So home is when you get on the boat," he says to Tom, who has left his 'human interest' film in Halifax and is now on his way to Newfoundland. With the idiomatic skills now of a true Maritimer, Frank can recognize that Tom is coming home "from away."

If *Stations* is more engaging through its number of little stories than through any dynamic plot, more through its sense of random encounters than through any compulsive narrative thrust, so these stories take place within the space of Canada but outside of time. The "present tense" of the film does not fully declare itself until two-thirds of the way through the film. The scenes that we witness, therefore – both the scenes on the train and the scenes at Tom's home on the West Coast with Holly, his wife, and Mark, his son – have neither a temporal nor a causal relationship to one another as the film unfolds in time. We can infer these relationships, of course – but after we have seen the film. In the films of Bill MacGillivray, at least until *Life Classes*, conventional narrative is always downplayed. What happens to the characters is always less important than what happens between them.

The end of *Stations* involves an abrupt change of style. If all the narrative and temporal dislocations both parallel and underline the dislocations of the characters – not only the severe disorientation of Harry and in another way of Tom, but also of all the characters travelling across Canada in the train – the film ends securely in the present tense with Tom back in Newfoundland. He is reunited with his family and reconciled with his father. And after all the stylistic formality and self-questioning nature of the process of image production, the last scenes are more in the style of *cinéma-vérité*.

With Mike Jones' real father present on the screen and with MacGillivray's real father singing a lovely song, this collapse into the merely representational and personal is arguably a weakness in the film, arguably an oversimplification of the issues that have been raised. At the same time, in a way that is consonant with MacGillivray's cinematic thinking, this ending does resolve, both in style and in theme, the problem set by the film.

With Tom, his father, and his son being photographed by the tower on Signal Hill by Tom's wife, Holly, *Stations* very much celebrates the unification of the male dynasty by the close of this film. At the same time, in the scenes that involve her, Holly is stronger than Mary in *Aerial View*. She is granted more independence of spirit. She has her own work, and in some key scenes, she conveys a sense of what she has had to endure in her marriage to Tom – a man equally as self-preoccupied as Geoff was

in *Aerial View*. Like Mary in this, however, she too doesn't seem to be too close to their son. At this stage of his career, MacGillivray's films enact the interests of a very male-centred world.

However, teased a little about this matter both by his admirers and his detractors, MacGillivray has taken these criticisms to heart. First came *Linda Joy* – a film that has already been discussed – and now *Life Classes*, MacGillivray's most accessible theatrical narrative to date. Although its organization is less intricate than the films that have preceded it, its concerns remain the same. It too records a journey – a search for a meaningful role within the landscape of the Maritimes; it too is concerned within generational continuity; and it too critiques its own process of cinematic representation.

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After the title sequence – itself (as we shall see) an important frame for the film – the first shot of the story shows us a reflection in the water of a green pickup truck transporting a huge, white, television satellite dish. It belongs to Earl (Leon Dubinsky), once the local bootlegger but who is now about to set himself up in a bootlegging business of another kind.

His is a man's world in this underdeveloped, backwoods society in Cape Breton. He and his mates never seem to work. They hang about with their girlfriends, drink beer, and – especially after Earl gets his dish installed – watch television.

There isn't much sense of a journey here. Earl's world is a poacher's world in which he and his friends live out their lives in a state of amiable stagnation. It might remind us of the social ambience of the Ottawa Valley created so forcefully so many years ago by Joan Finnigan and Peter Pearson in *The Best Damned Fiddler from Calabogie to Kaladar* (1968).

Mary Cameron (Jacinta Cormier) is also part of this world. She lives alone with her father and with her maternal grandmother – with her "Nan," as she calls her. Since finishing high school, she has been working for her father at the local drugstore. To amuse herself, she paints Maritime landscapes from paint-by-numbers kits.

As the film opens, Mary too is stagnating. But she is a woman, and she has been made pregnant by Earl. She has to make decisions. When she confronts Earl with her situation, she throws a package of condoms at him which she had picked up at the drugstore. If he had sealed himself off with a condom (this moment could imply), the two of them might have gone on stagnating together in this region of Cape Breton, as people do when they have no real sense of a dynamic future. As it is, she has to act.

Since she doesn't want to marry Earl, she moves to Halifax to disperse the

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah, me. If I'm here, there must be at least 100,000 like me, probably a million, maybe even two or three million like me who have the same basic sensibility that I have. If I make a film that's true to myself, then I'm going to reach ultimately, if I can, those people. The trouble is trying to convince the bureaucrats that there's a market out there. The bureaucrats who run our cultural agencies presume so much about their audiences. There's a censorship through presumption in our country. I think one of the problems with the CBC and with Telefilm is that quite often the decisions are being made by people with small minds, limited vision, who are looking for the quick fix, and who are looking for what they perceive to be the needs of the masses without ever making actual direct references to the masses to find out what they want. The history of our media culture and the history of our cinema is the history of people making decisions in isolation. And I don't care what Peter Pearson says, there's a whole mass of people out there who want to see the kind of films that we, and by we I mean the independents, are making when we make our small-budget, you know \$500,000-600,000 features. There is no need to spend millions of dollars to tell stories. The resistance that we feel to the kind of work that we're trying to do, is the resistance of people who are in love with something other than cinema. They're in love with deals or dealmaking, perhaps, and their tiny, small, little minds are impeding the progress of Canadian cinema. I've been making films for 10 years, or more, through the boom years and the bust years. Even when there was no money around, I still made films. The small independents who love cinema and love being able to express the things that we feel are important – we will still be making films long after Telefilm is gone, long after CBC is gone, because there's more to making films than dollars and cents. There has to be passion, and most of us who are making these kinds of films are passionate about what we do and we'll do it whether they help us or not. Hopefully they'll help us because it's in their own best interests and it's in the interest of the country. But if they don't, we'll continue.

Cinema Canada: Is that what you mean when you say that the real cinema in Canada is a hidden cinema?

Bill MacGillivray: I think there's not much doubt about that. The real cinema of Canada, which is the cinema of the independents, the cinema that grows out of need rather than out of dollars, is the cinema that Canadians never see. The CBC, in its infinite wisdom, has all sorts of reasons why it can't show that cinema. They make token attempts every now and then with a show like *Canadian Reflections*, which is the only venue where you're going to hear the independent voice in Canada. But basically the structures and strictures of our media society are such that the independent

voice is not allowed to be heard. The real cinema of Canada is a hidden cinema. Canadians don't see it. The unfortunate thing, of course, is that they then assume that there is no cinema in Canada. In the last two or three years there have been some Canadian films that have gained some fame, and perhaps now people will start to look more towards their own country for more cinema. Maybe it's simply a function of our youth and a function of having to crawl out from underneath the blanket of mass media from south of the border. As it stands now, there are so many really good films that have been in Canada over the last 20 years and maybe only two per cent of the population are aware of them. Hopefully that will change.

Cinema Canada: You've always worked with very limited budgets – is that going to change?

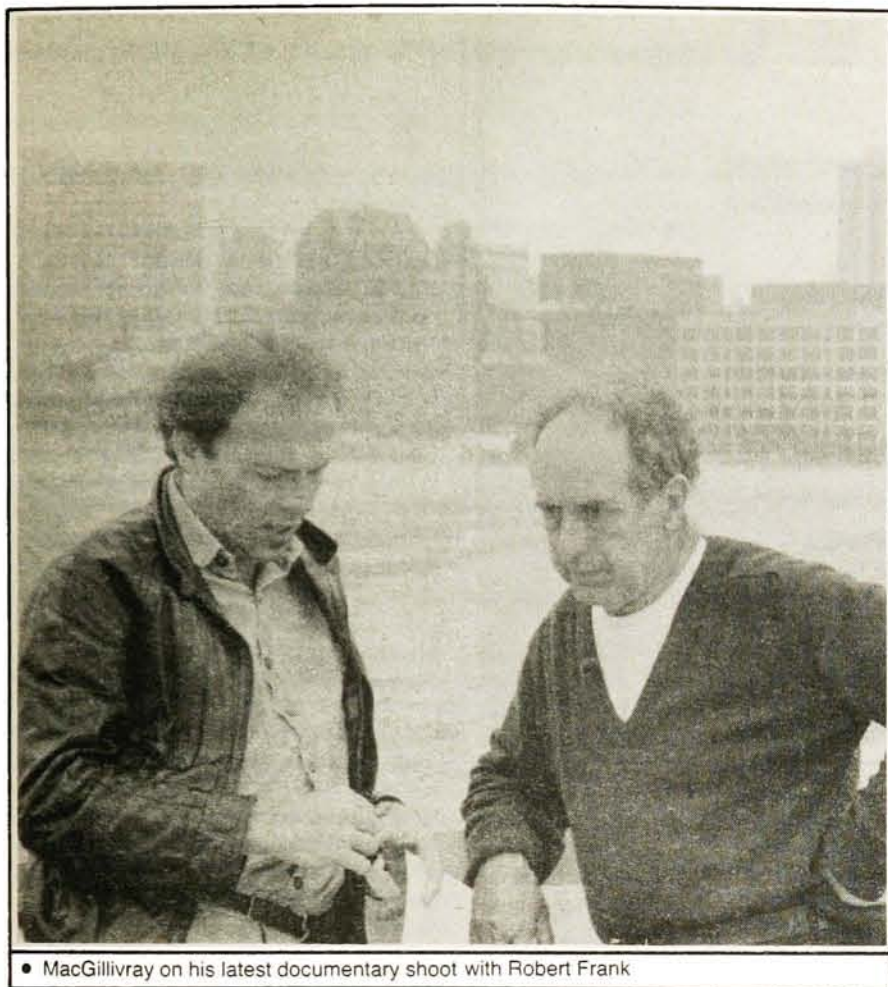
Bill MacGillivray: It would terrify me to make a large film because I think the battles to maintain control would be greater than the battles to get your ideas out. And I think that's an unfortunate imbalance, but it seems to be that that's what happens. Although they always say, "you know, why don't you go for a million dollars and then you'd have real control," but I don't think it's so much control as power and the two are different. I'm not particularly interested in power, but control, yes.

Cinema Canada: You mean that you'd have to sacrifice your independence to work on a big-budget commercial production?

Bill MacGillivray: Every dollar somebody puts into your film gives them a dollar's worth of control over the content. There was a point when the CBC was dickering with the idea of maybe investing in *Life Classes* which would probably have meant a quarter of a million dollars but then they would have had \$250,000 worth of control. Unfortunately, the CBC and I do not see eye-to-eye about what drama is. There would have been compromises all the way down the road. Now I can honestly say that *Life Classes* is very much what I wanted it to be. There are some scenes I had to remove because of length and some I had to remove because I wasn't satisfied with them and I couldn't repair them, but, in total, the sense that I get when I look at the film is the sense that I wanted to get and that, to me, makes it very successful. But I doubt if that would have been the case if CBC had owned a piece of it. Nobody told me what to do in that film and that's the way I like it.

Cinema Canada: Doesn't the CBC trust your judgment?

Bill MacGillivray: It's not a lack of trust. They can't help themselves because they are part of the institutional thought. They don't mean to be that way. If you took those individual people you wouldn't necessarily want to put them up in front of a brick wall and shoot



• MacGillivray on his latest documentary shoot with Robert Frank

Photo: David Craig

perial Bank of Commerce outlet over to a television shop which is in the process of being liquidated. Everything is on sale. Is this another suggestion that, in such a marketing environment, in which banks never fail but shops often do, local culture cannot be heard?

We also see Mary's face on a multiplicity of television screens in this shop, on television sets that are all on sale. Or is it Jacinta's face? Once again, we have the sense of the interdependence of the fictional and the actual. Whether Mary the character or Jacinta the actress, however, she is talking about the role she has played in a film that she has just made — a film called *Life Classes*! Then Mary/Jacinta talks about parallels between her real life and her fictional role in the film. She even wonders what happened to Mary?

We might wonder as well. Although *Life Classes* tells a story that moves in a linear fashion towards a narrative closure, a lot of emotional and psychological elements are left unresolved. Furthermore, this lack of resolution is arguably emphasized by two narrative moments that seem somewhat bracketed off from the dramatic momentum of the rest of the film. One might seem like an implausibility—a bracketing out; the other like a sentimentality—a bracketing in.

"My child is my mother returning,
Her mother, my daughter the same..."
So sings the song, in both Gaelic and English, that runs throughout this film. And yet, in a film that so celebrates the concept of generational continuity, it must seem implausible that, when Mary returns to Cape Breton to visit her grandmother before she dies, she fails to bring her daughter with her. I can imagine practical reasons which may have

dictated this decision (the child might not have been available); but psychologically, it seems oddly inconsistent nevertheless.

If, then, for whatever reasons, Marie is bracketed out from this sequence, so Mary's visit to the cottage after Nan's death feels bracketed in. Certainly, the scene is very moving as Mary roams around the cottage looking for traces of her mother's past, hearing ghostly sounds and echoes that create the sense of memory coming into consciousness; and yet, this scene exists slightly to one side of the active dramatic relationships at this moment in the film. Even Earl seems to feel this dramatic awkwardness. He decides to go outside, leaving Mary alone with the remnants of her past.

If, again arguably, these two narrative decisions might seem like errors of judgement, they are at the same time part of the fullness of the emotion of the film — part of the feeling of privacy about the story being told. Like the framing sequence, they suggest a charge of personal emotion somewhat in excess of the psychological implications of the story.

While the opening scenes of *Life Classes* involve problems of class and economics, the political implications of which are emphasized by the references to Africville, by the end of the film these problems are largely personal in their resolution. In this way, the ending of *Life Classes* is similar to the ending of *Stations* in which the social and the political elements are also collapsed into the personal.

In *Life Classes*, however, this collapse is more complicated. If the ending is affirmative on the level of character,

on the level of politics, it is fragile and frightening.

Consider once again the sequence that frames the film. Consider its implications not just for Mary/Jacinta but for MacGillivray as well.

As an independent filmmaker who wants to continue to work in the Maritimes, Bill MacGillivray recognizes that economic forces which are controlled from elsewhere will determine what he will be allowed to do within the world of film. In this way, if the final words of *Life Classes* allow Mary/Jacinta to wonder about the future of Mary, we might in turn wonder about the future of Bill MacGillivray.

Will *Life Classes* be "sold" to television and so be seen by millions? Or will it be like the young girl playing the violin in the mall and be scarcely attended to? If we listen carefully, we might notice that the Gaelic tune that she too is playing gains acoustic predominance only after the closing moments of the film.

An intrusion of personal anxiety on the part of the filmmaker into a dramatic fiction feature of this sort is certainly unconventional and may seem eccentric. Nevertheless, it is a most intimate way with which to end this film.⁵

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While still a modest achievement in terms of quantity, the films of Bill MacGillivray represent an enormous achievement in terms of quality. Living in a country that has a federal policy that still encourages the most exploitative of filmic enterprises — producing for the most part stuff to be placed between the ads on commercial television — we cannot help but admire films that employ local materials and local skills, that plant pictures in the mind of how we live.

We cannot help but admire the films of William D. MacGillivray. •

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this article appeared in *CineAction* No. 5 (May 1986)
2. This concern with the past, with in this case establishing continuity between an English-speaking present and an effaced Armenian inheritance, is one of the central preoccupations of another young, distinguished Canadian filmmaker—Atom Egoyan. Especially in *Family Viewing*, every element in the film's design connotes this need for establishing relationships with the past. Even the boy's name, Van, can be read as a preposition of inheritance. [See *Cinema Canada* No. 145 (October 1987), pp. 14-19.]
3. I happen to know that the film was not conceived in this way. Nevertheless, this device becomes part of the film's final structure.
4. This point was clarified for me by critic Geoff Pevere.
5. I want to emphasize that this interpretation is completely the result of my own speculation. It is in no sense informed by anything that MacGillivray himself has said.

them. I mean it's not their fault, but because they are part of that greater structure, they have so many pulls and tugs at them. They feel that they have to generate a certain amount of revenue from advertising. But advertisers feel that the only thing Canadians watch is American programming so they won't support Canadian. Thus the CBC is in the position of having to show a lot of American programs. It's the price you pay. If the government is not willing to put real cultural dollars into real cultural venues and events, then we can expect that that's the way it's going to be. So the only way to fight that, is, I feel, with a kind of guerrilla tactic of working on your own and generating your own projects, your own ideas, not with a market in mind, *per se*, but always making sure that the film is marketable relative to the budget. And that's what I've always done. I have always had trouble with institutionalized thought. I don't care who is the perpetrator of the thought or who originated the thought. I'm really angered by the whole notion that we have our culture dictated to us by an institutionalized thought process which is the government's view of what we should be thinking about ourselves. And whether it's the CBC or whether it's Telefilm or whether it's any of those other cultural agencies — you know they're all full of really nice people and God bless them — but nonetheless they are supporting the idea that there is an institutionalized thought that we should follow. More often than not, we are dealing with people in these cultural agencies who are probably thinking a little less than we are about these issues. When you run up against these people to get your work done, you realize that these are the people who control the way we think to a very large degree. And it's very subtle and it's very insidious and nobody is consciously sitting down and saying, "Today the Atlantic region will think this way." Nonetheless, through due process, as they execute their mandates as dictated by so and so and whoever, it all happens. I see it everyday that I work on my films and try to get them made and then try and get them out into the greater world.

Cinema Canada: You seem to get a lot of your energy from swimming against the stream.

Bill MacGillivray: Yeah. If I have one romantic vision of myself I think that's it. I delight in the battles. I really enjoy the battles, they are the meat for me. You meet such incredibly... I think 'stupid' is the word I'd have to use... people in your struggles to get your work done, and then every now and then you come across somebody whether it's in private industry or a bureaucrat, who is excitable. Someone who's seen the possibilities and will say, "This is fantastic, let's do it." And when you come across that person it's such a relief and such a joyous moment, that it's really worthwhile. •