

William D. MacGillivray's
Life Classes

"To get a film made in this country is a political statement if it is not American commercial garbage."

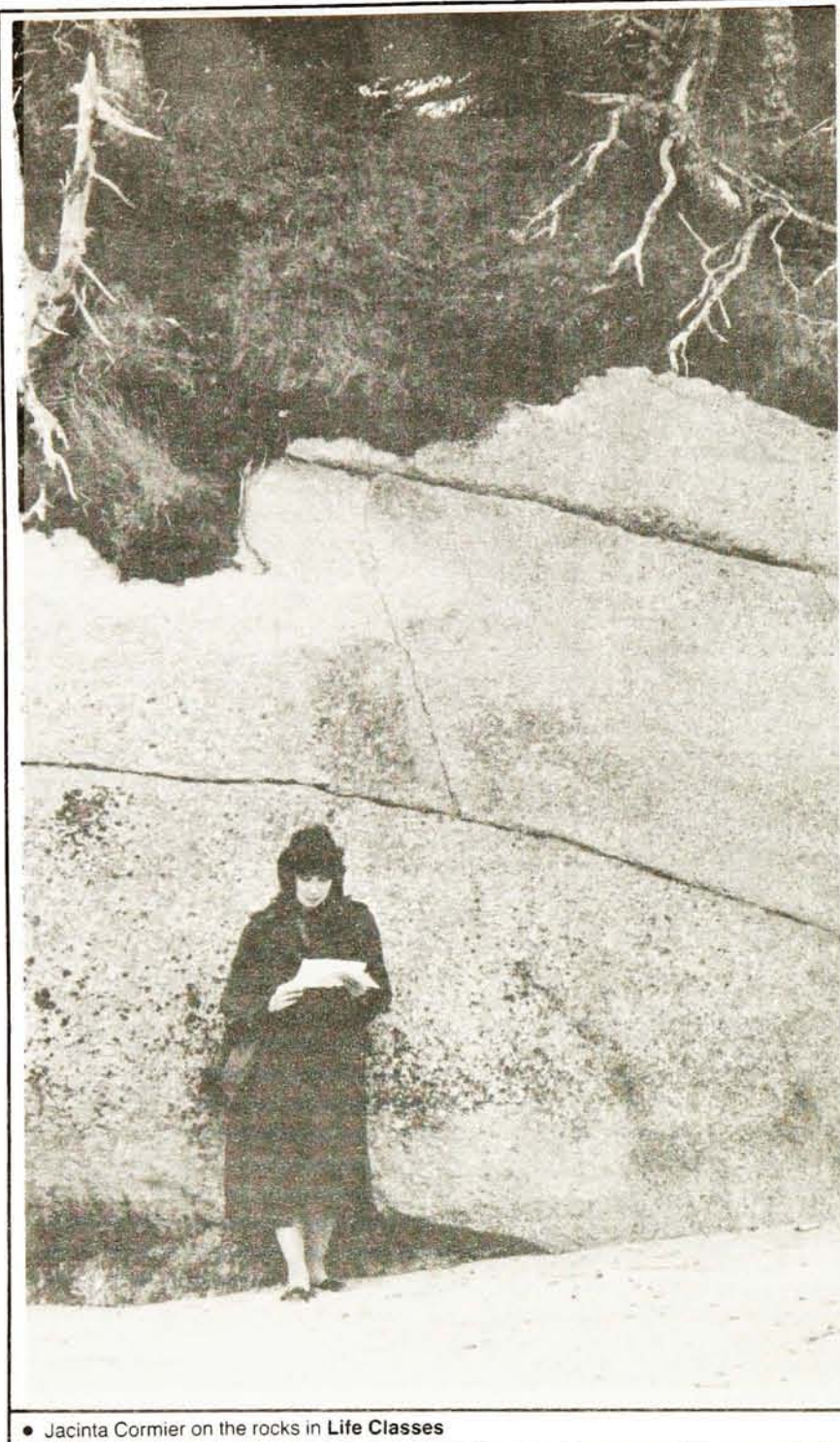
— Bill MacGillivray, *Halifax Mailstar*, Oct. 25, 1986

Let me tell you of a film that moved. A film that moved me. A film that, with proper national distribution, should move through our collective culture. Let me share with you a slice of my life, my craziness, and how I came to discover William D. MacGillivray's **Life Classes**.

I came careening into Toronto's Festafull of FestiveFools from a spirited month-long journey into the Gaelic ways of Scotland and the Irish west coast. I had been looking for the ghosts of dead poets, celtic Queens, relatives, druids, golfers, graveyards, burial mounds, James Joyce's first cinematographe. (He started it in 1909 in Dublin. It now is a bank.) I had been looking to lay old visions to rest and for inspiration for a future film. In Europe I found it all and found nothing. Returning to Canada somewhat disappointed and parachuting into Toronto's cinema circus, I found here, in my own county, what I had not found elsewhere. I found it incarnated in the form of a sensitive film from Atlantic Canada. Yes, there are places in the world that you can only go to in a film festival. Places to think. To escape cinematically the automatic rush of daily life. Japan is one of them, Africa another. And now Nova Scotia.

Let's review the circumstances. I tried to see **Life Classes** in one of several public screenings at the festival but each time it was sold out. Even press credentials couldn't buy me love in supremely democratic Toronto. This was the case for most of the films presented in the Canadian Perspectives section of the festival. This is a good sign. I decided to fight my better judgement and screen the film privately, individually, and on video, in a hotel room converted into a screening room. Although I love the collective screen-audience experience, knowing that a thousand breathing people are there watching with you, I realized that each person in a large audience experiences a film individually.

Life Classes, more than most other films, is about an individual's struggle with the changing self, with re-view, with re-vision, with the re-framing of the circumstances that control one's life. It is about taking control. I liked what I saw. And what I felt. And what I learned. And while the group affirmation of the cinema experience was missing for me, I was later pleased and surprised to learn that everyone I talked to who had seen the film was as expressively impressed as I was. The word-of-mouth on the film was very positive. I figured this was ulti-



• Jacinta Cormier on the rocks in **Life Classes**

mately the best comment about a film which owes much to the oral tradition of storytelling. Meanwhile, back in the hotel room an ocean of sound from Toronto's Avenue Road roared in through the window. I shut it out, sat down and turned on the VCR to watch **Life Classes**.

The opening frames consist of a slow-motion still-life dolly down an interior shopping mall plaza into a video monitor which is playing what appears to be a retrospective fictional news interview with the lead actress (Jacinta Cormier who plays Mary Cameron). Jacinta Mary has stepped out of character to reveal some of her thoughts and feelings about the character she plays. She is both a product and a victim of changes in culture. In a frank and honest statement, an honesty which lies at the heart of **Life Classes**, she admits that the questions arising out of the film experience are complex and not yet fully understandable.

Life Classes is framed around Mary's movement through physical and psychic

space. She moves from Cape Breton to Halifax; from being an imitator to being a creator; from dependency to self-affirmation; away from old relationships into metamorphosed encounters with father, grandmother, family, lover, daughter, friends, the art-world. The film is a beautifully woven collage/comment of sound and impression. An integration of a wonderful Gaelic score (Alexander Tiley), fine structure (MacGillivray's editing), naturalistic acting, (Jacinta Cormier, Leon Dubinsky, Francis Knickle, Mary Izzard, Evelyn Garbary, Leo Jessome, and Jill Chatt with fine supporting ensemble cast), and liquid camerawork. (D.O.P. Lionel Simmons).

I can assure you the treatment of these subjects and ideas is done with much grace and understatement, with much left to you. Like most good art, the mystery and the mystic in **Life Classes** speak more than a thousand words. The film is an intense and uplifting tale of personal reclamation, a reflective self-reflexion. It is about memory and family and photo-

genic reality, about a woman's transformative self-actualization. The film is about patience, about time, about emptiness, about the waiting that we are all waiting for; the liberation of a life. It is about life and class and art. About the development of an artistic vision, a sensibility. About the memory of a forgetting culture where prescient satellites replace the days when our collective songs were not stillborn but borne on the solar wind.

Life Classes is a film that rejects paint-by-number simplemindedness and replaces it with elegant simplicity. A film which finds and celebrates in the commonplace, a common place. It is at once a touching and funny and accessible film which makes the ordinary extraordinary. **Life Classes** makes you think about your own life which is the only purpose of good cinema. The silent power of the film reveals director MacGillivray's own process of self-discovery in uncovering one part of our tri-coastal mythology. It parallels the encouraging and steady ascension of a number of emergent tidal wave of director-creators from the East. All is not quiet on the Eastern Front.

There seem to be linkages in **Life Classes** with other new Canadian films. It is partially and subtextually informed by, and formally concerned with, technology. It specifically uses video as a part of its language and also uses the idea of electronic memory. In the capitalized intensive Telecommunication Capital of the World that Canada is, or will become, this may be natural. But in a reversal of a McLuhanian world where the most recent art form uses the last one as its content, the rebirth and resurrection of the New Tsunami Wave of Canadian cinema dares to investigate the video language, and the meaning and impact of television and subsumes it. We have learned filmically how to use television to our advantage.

Just let me mention an image and a series of shots. Mary is standing alone on a beach reading a letter, long shot, her back up against a wall of sandstone. Above her head in this shot are the exposed roots of ancient and living trees; texture, subtext, integration, symbolism. A mutation into a panorama shot: a rock, a landscape, music, a slowness, seagulls, an ocean, a revelation of the intervention of technology, a front-end loader, feeling and image fade out simultaneously. There seems to be a perfect and Jungian integration of the feeling of the time, the feeling of the spectator and the film's progression. A walk in the house of memory, through the wail, the veil; a walk through the house of song, of light and dust and sweet, sweet voices breathing lace and love.

As the film perfectly completes its perfect circle, something has changed. We have changed. Mary has a successful showing of her original and striking art in a gallery. She begins to assert herself into the world and to take control of her own life relationships. She begins to restore her grandmother's summer home. She works to open up its overview of the ocean. Our view of the ocean. We return to the dolly shot in the shopping mall plaza. The video reality. "We wish you and y(our) film all the best."

A song is heard:
*My child is my mother returning.
 Her mother my daughter same.
 She carries a soul in her yearning
 Of sorrow, of peace and of pain.*

As salt tears welled up in solidarity, my sympathetic heart started to beat sideways. I switched off the video, took a shower and dressed quickly. I left the screening room-hotel suite just in time to greet a smiling friend floating out of an elevator. I started to share the film with her. You would do the same.

Peter Wintonick •

LIFE CLASSES prod. man. Terry Greenlaw asst d. Gordon Parsons loc. man. Gary Swin cont. Ken Pittman cast d. Nicola Lipman 2nd asst. d. Paula Mustal 3rd a.d. Leslie Jones prod. off. coord David Craig books Bonnie Baker unit pub. Eric Walker stills David Middleton. Eric Walker art d. Mary Steckle set dress. Angela Murphy key props Monique Desnoyers asst. set dress props David Coole ward Janice Rogers d.o.p. Lionel Simmons 1st asst cam. Dominique Gusset 2nd asst cam. David Middleton gaffer Charles Lapp key grip No Fooling Emery grip Alan P. Macleod best boy (Halifax) Michael Ruggles best boy (Cape Breton) Gary Whitehouse sd. rec. Jim Rillie boom Alex Salter sc. consult Jean Pierre Lefebvre ed. William D. MacGillivray asst ed. Terry Greenlaw neg. cutter Erika Wolff sup. sd. ed. Les Halman chief sd. ed. Angela Baker dialogue ed. Alex Salter add. dialogue eds. Jane Porter, Eric Emery sd. fx. ed. Alex Salter m. ed. William D. MacGillivray asst. m. ed. Dominique Gusset add. m. ed. Claire Henry post sync. fx Art McKay re-rec Film House Group mix Mike Hoogenboom. Marvin Bern. Brent Macleod m. rec. Solar Audio and Rec. Ltd video coord. Tim Reed prod. assts Robin Sarafinchan, Carla Densmore. Jess MacGillivray projectionists David Middleton, Alex Busby, Dan Gowan crafts Lorette Leblanc loc. catering Kabuki Catering paramedic Dave Smith chaperones Bernice and Amare Chatt. Mira Chatt. Myrna Yazer gaelic coach Tina Morrison german trans Christiana Graham trans. of "Mary's Lament" Norman Macdonald Miss Lipmann's hair Jacques of "Blades". Halifax. N S "Life Classes" score composed by Alexander Tilley. based on a theme by William D. MacGillivray m. oboe Suzanne Lemieux violin Anne Rapson. Burth Wath cello Shimon Watt voices Kim Bishop. Karen Conrad. Doris Mason. Jennifer Quinn "Who Was the One" by Marty Reno and William D. MacGillivray. performed by Marty Reno. special thanks to Audrey Cole, Cordell Wynne, Wayne Cormier, Les Halman, Ron Keough, The People of Ingonish, Cape Breton, Atlantic Filmmakers' Cooperative, Africville Genealogical Society, Toshiba of Canada Limited, Oland Breweries Limited, Nova Scotia Department of Education Media Services, C.B.C. Television, Halifax, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and its Faculty, Staff and Students add. Thanks to Gordon and Stella Hardy, Keith Roper, Murray Stockley, Dr. & Mrs Paul Ecker, Claude MacInnis, Dorothy Jackson, Susan McIntyre, Jim Dunphy, Mr & Mrs Allan Henderson, Dean Brosseau, Camille's Fish and Chips, John Benalands, Peter Macdonald, Irvine Carvery, Chuck Clark, Claire Henry, Paul Mitchellree, Dorothy Reynolds, Mary Reynolds, Marie Jamison Fitzgerald, Phillip Walling, John Silver, Cilla Rickard, St. Joseph's Daycare, The Cohn, Dalhousie Arts Centre, Dalhousie Theatre Department, Canada Employment Centre, Images East, Parks Canada, Cape Breton Baddeck Satellite Systems, Metropolitan Transit Commission, Grand Pre Wines, Millie's Chips, Nova Scotia Oilers, United Book Store Limited Lab Film House Group, opticals Film Effects titles Meta Media d./sc./exec. p. William D. MacGillivray p. Stephen Reynolds J.p. Trudi Peterson, Jane Purves, Jacinta Cormier, Leon Dubinsky, Marty Reno, Evelyn Garbary, Monique Blais, Anne Marie MacDougall, Karen Shea, Steve Szewczok, Kelly Edwards, Derek Briand, Shane Briand, Sharnus Cox, Leo Jessome, Paul Ratchford, Jill Chatt, Mary Izzard, Caitlyn Colquhoun, Ruth Owen, Sigrun Zibara, Marc St Pierre, Eleanor Dorrington, Frances Knickle, Ron Gerald, Susan Saunders, Miriam MacMaster, Julie MacMaster, Jeremy Ackerman, Charlotte W. Hammond, Sandra Millott, Elizabeth Berlasso, Kathi Thimpson, Mark Cowden, Ann Seymour, Jennifer Tilley, Suzanne McCarthy, Christopher Joyce, Mark Richards, Bonnie Baker, Ken Robinson, Thea Wilson Hammond, Louise Holloway, Steven Arnold, Ron Wakary, Angela Aole, Brian Clements, Glen Gibson, Charlotte Hunt, Andrea Jackson, Astrid Brunner, Barbara Nicholson, Paul Greywall, Troy McCann, Kim McCarthy, Aletha Mantley, Ida Donovan, Kent Stetson, Nicola Lipman, Steve Miller, Geoff Harrington, Dave MacIsaac, Don Palmer, Bruce Jacobs, Pauls Simons, Terry Greenlaw, James Nicolson, Carol Millett, Tim Reed, Paula Mustal, Angela Murphy, Monique Desnoyers, Jeff Semple, Barry Fraser, Rachel Brodie, John Stevenson, Holly Rowland, James Paul, Charles Crocher, Eric Walker, Rachel Linely, Tina Morrison **Mary Cameron's drawings** by Charlotte Wilson Hammond p. William MacGillivray. Picture Plant dist Cinephile Ltd coul. 16 mm. running time 117 min.

Patricia Rozema's
**I've Heard
 The
 Mermaids
 Singing**

Hype thrives on incomplete information; we were all more excited, more hopeful about *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* when none of us had seen it. Now that it's opened in parts of Canada, away from the giddy atmosphere of any festival, away from the sound of fans screaming praises loud enough for the buyers to hear, the process of clear-eyed appraisal can begin. And though the film is not likely to garner scores of standing ovations here, neither is it nearly so trivial as some have begun to claim. *Mermaids* (the title is from T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*) is urban fantasy with a light touch, more significant for its presence and its success that important in itself. It's a nice film.

Which is not to disparage Rozema's accomplishment. "Nice" is what the film wants to be, and gentle and whimsical and quirky and the rest of it. As such, *Mermaids* is a gem. It may sometimes leave you wishing it had more bite, but if you're not looking for bite you'll never be disappointed.

Sheila McCarthy (looking a lot like Shirley MacLaine before she discovered the cosmos) plays Polly Vandersma. Polly is a wideeyed, scattered "person friday" who receives a placement as an assistant to the curator of a small gallery and (prat) falls into the hard-edged, downtown art scene. There she discovers both the magic and duplicity of the art industry; in the end she shakes things up merely with the power of her innocence. Polly's sensitive nature is forced to commute between her private dream world and the mercenary cult of contemporary art. The two worlds eventually, inevitably collide.

Rozema blends satire and fantasy in the film, sometimes sending up the orthodoxies of organized art, sometimes leaping into Polly's black and white daydreams — the only place where a hapless "temp" can conquer her environment (and defy a few laws of physics). Never mind that the satire is rather tame and the fantasy sometimes excessive. Never mind that its art as religion subtext is neither original nor profound — at least it's never ponderous. *Mermaids* is a film that succeeds on its charm; when it makes a false move you tend to give it the benefit of the doubt. It's at once clever and sincere, two things that keep it from getting mired in the cute. And of course there's always McCarthy's performance to watch. She has it all down — the ties, the ever-ready embarrassed look, the hair.

Somewhere between J. Alfred Prufrock and Pee Wee Herman lies Polly Vandersma. "Vandersma," incidentally, is perhaps the first Dutch in-joke in a Canadian feature film: it yokes together a common Dutch prefix and suffix with nothing in between — something like McSon. And so it seems Polly is intended as an everywoman character. She is naive-



• Sheila McCarthy doing "loveable" in *Mermaids*

ete embodied, a walking signifier of sincere ignorance. And when sophistication wears the face of the urban art world, naivete can be counted a virtue. But although she shares Pee Wee's childlike self-absorption (and a scaled-down version of his bicycle), Polly is not nearly so anarchic, nor so annoying as Pee Wee. She actually wants to fit in, to be thought competent.

For most of its 81 minutes the film is a delight to watch, though there are some glaring problems. One scene, set in a Japanese restaurant where Polly makes the mistake of ordering octopus, is particularly uncomfortable to watch, not just because it doesn't work dramatically, but because it seems to ask us to laugh at the fact that anyone could eat such a thing. And Polly's crush on the lesbian curator of the gallery (Paule Baillargeon) seems somehow unresolved. "I know love is a pretty strong word when you're talking about another woman and she's not your mother," Polly admits. Then she just gets over it. But it's the ending of *Mermaids* that is most disappointing. The last few minutes completely upset the balance between fantasy and real-world concerns that had been so delicately negotiated throughout the film.

Mermaids does look beautiful, though, a credit to Rozema and cinematographer Douglas Koch. It comes as no surprise that Koch has shot a number of music videos — the fantasy sequences show all the hallmarks — but there's very little empty flash in *Mermaids*. The tinted black and white sequences in particular have a quality impressive for such a low-budget film.

Rozema has managed to capture the vertigo and the bliss of the outsider in *Mermaids*. Polly Vandersma, no one in particular (and hence everyone), stands outside the artworld, outside the very idea of lesbianism, outside the city she takes such joy in photographing. In her rare moments of repose, when she hasn't gone and messed something up again, she exists in a state of wry wonder. The constant comment, "Isn't life the strangest thing you've ever seen?" keeps her sane, or as sane as she chooses to be.

Rozema has a real sensitivity to Polly's glorious solitude — at its best, *Mermaids* makes you believe in the secret power of the unhip.

Now that the noise from Cannes has subsided, *Mermaids* should be able to shed the role of Telefilm's best billboard and bask in some real-world success. Somehow it's fitting that a film so willing to believe in those unfashionable ideals we all sneer at — beauty and truth, for example — should have been blessed with such a fairytale reception. Sometimes, even in the wicked, heartless film industry, the virtuous are rewarded. Strangest thing I've ever seen.

Cameron Bailey •

I'VE HEARD THE MERMAIDS SINGING d./orig. sc. Patricia Rozema p. Patricia Rozema. Alexandra Raffé exec. p. Don Haig 1st a.d. John Pace 2nd. ass. Arlene Hazzan 2nd. second Thomas Quinn cont. Louise Shekter gen. Wojtek Kozlinski Jolynn Somerville, Debbie Honsberger, Frank Foria d.o.p. Douglas Koch cam asst. Durv in Partridge. Gavin Coford Polly's photos and prod. stills Debra Friedman loc. sd. Gordon Thompson, Michele Moses gaffer David Owen best boy Edward Mikouc elec. Anthony Ramsey. Neil Stroud grips Blake Ballentine, Greg Palermo, Dennis Kane art d. Valanne Ridgeway asst. Jake Fry art consult Carla Garnet props Peter Miskimmin surveillance sculpt. Peter Dykhuis artists John Abrams, Michael Merrill, Dyan Marie make-up/ hair Stephen Lynch hair consult Lyle Issett orig. ward. des. Martine Matthews, Alexandra Z. ward co-ord Beth Pasternak ed. Patricia Rozema asst. Michael Weth consult ed. Ron Sanders Rushes sync. Lenka Holubec sd. ed. Steven Munro asst. Alexandra Raffé re-rec. mix. Egidio Coccimiglio Foley rec. James Musselman m. Mark Korven m. co-ord. John Switzer m. rec. and mix. Jeff Wolpert asst. David Stinson, Michael Haas fairlight programmer Rob Yale mermaids voices Rebecca Jenkins prod. man. Alexandra Raffé daily crew John Switzer, Ted Quinn, Andreas Trautsmansdorff, Victor Roberts, Theresa Burke, Kat Hellyer, Suzie Schlanger, loc. sc. Cellophane Idea, Michelle Pelchat stunts consult. Dwayne MacLean casting Mary Armstrong CSC, Ross Clysdale CSC extras casting Lewis Casting timer Chris Hinton sd. transfers Multitrack mix Film House opticals Film Optical neg. cut. Francont Film titles Meta Media. music "Open Window" by Mark Corven, courtesy of Duke Street Records, "Symphonie No. 5" by Ludwig Von Beethoven, courtesy of Chris Stone Audio, "Viens, Malike, les lianes en fleurs, from "Lakme" by Leo Delibes, courtesy of Pathe Marconi. Produced with the financial participation of Ontario Arts Council, Canada Council, National Film Board (PAFFPS), Ontario Film Development Corporation, Telefilm Canada dist. Cinephile Ltd Int. sales Films Transit Inc I.p. Sheila McCarthy, Paule Baillargeon, Ann-Marie McDonald, John Evans, Brenda Kamino, Richard Monette. colour 35mm running time 81 min.

Giles Walker's
The Last Straw

The trailer for **The Last Straw** ("A Comedy Beyond Conception") is composed of a cartoon drawing of a pink condom which expands to the size

of a dirigible and then bursts. If that doesn't meet your standard of hilarity, how about this for a plot: Alex Rossi (a.k.a. Sam Grana, a producer at the National Film Board) has been informed his sperm possesses the highest "motility rate" in recorded history. Seeking to cash in on this lucrative resource, Alex sells his soul lock and sperm to a fertility clinic. Chafing under the strict physical regime (two ejaculations per day, exercise, diet and no sex) and the decidedly conservative marketing strategies of the clinic, he escapes only to fall into the oily hands of a nicotine-stained agent whose showbiz elan includes schemes of displaying Alex atop a pink elephant in shopping malls.

If that doesn't have you rolling in the aisles, the plot takes one giant leap into farce with the abduction of Alex by members of the Australian rugby team who want Alex down under to help shore up a national masculinity sorely flagging in recent years under the slings and arrows of feminists. Personally, I have been to funnier dogfights.

I am, however, fascinated and repulsed by this film and its successors, **Masculine Mystique** and **Ninety Days**, all purportedly examples of a newly sensitized male consciousness. **Masculine Mystique**, you might remember, featured the conceit of the male consciousness-raising group which included various producers and directors at the National Film Board who principally bemoan their inability to get, keep or get along with women. Out of this crew emerged Blue (Stefan Wodolawsky - big, dumb and soulful) and Alex (short, Italian and horny) as the ascending stars of **Ninety Days** (that's where Blue orders and receives a Korean bride and Alex has his first sperm count) and now **The Last Straw**.

These films, part of the NFB's "innovative"... alternative drama series, are being flaunted as evidence of the Board's continued vitality, a role which, on the English side at least, has undisputedly been upheld by the committed work of Studio D. But, perhaps, there's the crunch. If the most powerful current work in cinema concerns groups which have been marginalized and disenfranchised within society, what do you do if you are: a) white; b) straight; c) middleclass; d) male and e) utterly impervious to contemporary currents and events? Answer: flaunt it.

How else can one explain **Ninety Days'** transformation of the politically and racially sensitive issue of arranged marriages into the slapstick stuff of situation comedy? Or **The Last Straw's** aggressively oblivious glorification of sperm, in the era of AIDS and of what

philosopher Arthur Kroker terms "panic bodies"? And we are treated to images of vats of it (bulls' that is) vials of it and the whole techno infrastructure of its bottling and storage.

Now, obviously, the film does work, at some levels as parody. Alex's refusal to sell out to the Yanks, and his defence of his sperm as a Canadian national resource provide a witty take on the ongoing Free Trade debates. Parody, however, classically operates to provide a critical distance from its object. The problem with **The Last Straw** is that it all too often treads a very fine line between critical exaggeration and wholehearted allegiance to the values and obsessions being parodied.

While Alex's adolescent preoccupation with the potency of his sexual organ comes in for a certain amount of ribbing, the film clearly does not endorse modified versions of masculinity. Househusbands and members of the Canadian Feminist Men organization, are dismissed as "wimps" whose sperm motility rate is embarrassingly flaccid. Blue's worries about his appearance and potential hair loss are "funny" because they are clearly coded as aberrant and feminine. And by the end of the film when all the characters are coupled up and pregnant, including Alex and the sexually repressed nurse who finally succumbs to the charm of Alex's sperm, one really has to wonder whose fantasy is this? On that note, whose fantasy is it that imagines hundreds of women just dying to get inseminated? Apart, that is, from Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority.

Brenda Longfellow •

THE LAST STRAW A National Film Board of Canada Production. d. Giles Walker d.o.p. Andrew Kitzanuk gaffer Roger Martin loc. sd. Yves Gendron orig. m. Robert Lauzon, Fernand Martel ed. David Wilson story by Giles Walker, David Wilson produced by David Wilson, Giles Walker assoc. p./asst. ed. Denise Beaudoin prod. man. Maurice Pilon props and cost. Janet Campbell asst. d. François Gingras asst. cam. focus Stefan Nitoslawski, René Daigle boom Aimée Leduc add. gaffer Guy Remillard elec Audrey Beuzet, Jean-Maurice D'Ernest stills Jacques Tougas 2nd asst d. Louis Bolduc add. cam. David de Volpi, Zoe Dirse add boom Claude Lahaye sd. ed. Abbey Neidik asst sd. ed. Jean-Pierre Viau m. ed. Julian Olson Foley artist Andy Malcolm asst. by Kathryn Crosthwait m. and Foley recs Louis Hone re-rec. mix Hans Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll slide show graphics Julie Stunfel TV Newscast d. Martine Bourdeau title design Val Teodori comp. des. Rod Thibeault res. Sally Bochner post. prod. co-ord Grace Avrith studio clerk Ida di Fruscia studio admin. Marie Tonto-Donati l.p. Yvan Huneault, Saverio Grana, Fernanda Tavares, Maurice Podbrey, Jim Rose, Hugo, Beverley Murray, Stefan Wodolawsky, Cristine Pak, Ken Roberts, Bronwyn Martel, Carol Shamy, Carol Ann Francis, Susan Vincelli, Wally Martin, Réal Charron, Cristobal, Paul Zakhab, Alexander Fantasy, Pauline Rathbone, John Drapery, Paul Somler, Ali Giron, Ron Lea, Pat Phillips, Bob Marler, Barry Sullivan, George Springate, Gwynne Dyer, John Jones, La Surêté du Québec. colour 35 mm running time 98 min. +2 secs

Jackie Burroughs, Louise Clark John Walker, Aerlyn Weissman and John Frizzell's

A Winter Tan

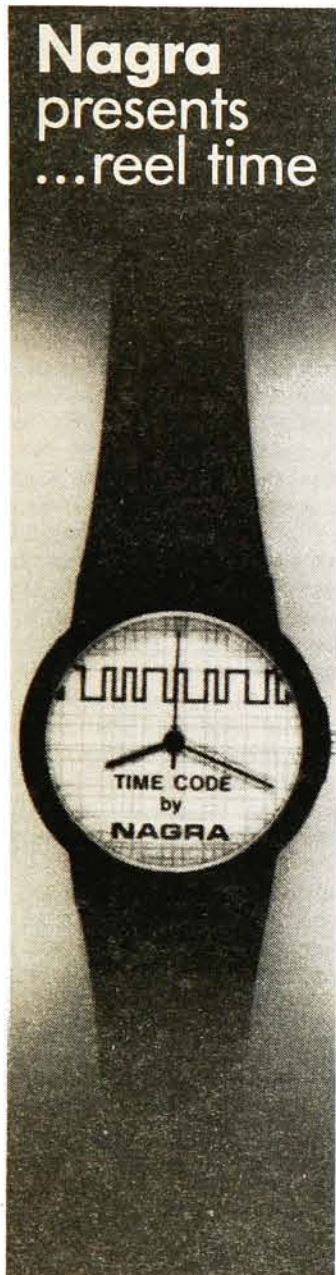
A Winter Tan, the collaborative effort that began sowing its notoriety at the Festival of Festivals last month, was greeted by many at the time with the sort of breathless reception the publicists love: "Isn't it wonderful to see a female character that..." "Isn't it fabulous to finally see an English-Canadian film where..." Gush upon gush until the salsa ran out.

What isn't so wonderful to see is the film itself. **A Winter Tan** may represent many things - English Canada's entry in the sextalk genre launched by **The Decline of the American Empire**, an alternative to the hegemony of the single director, a liberating swipe at the strictures of orthodox feminism, whatever - but it's also symptomatic of a significant blindspot in mainstream Canadian film. Despite all that it represents, **A Winter Tan** suffers from a profound, unthinking racism.

The work of five equally dedicated, talented people, the film stems from Jackie Burroughs' initial interest in the published letters of Maryse Holder, a New York professor whose compulsive sexual adventures in Mexico ended in her murder. The letters, written in a florid, self-consciously confessional style, describe Holder's rejection of academic sterility in favour of brief sexual encounters with young Mexican men.

Burroughs gives a *tour de force* performance as Maryse, all fireworks and bile. "Genie" written all over it. Maryse addresses the camera and tells her story directly to us (her friend Edith), so Burroughs is before us all the time; she *is* the film. With a central character so prominent and so obnoxiously destructive, there are only two ways the film can work for an audience: either she must be made sympathetic, or the actor's performance must be forceful enough to impress. **A Winter Tan** attempts both strategies, and with some success. Unfortunately success on that level means failure on another. The film asks us, in fact needs us, to identify on some level with an offensive, poisonous character - a racist, reactionary, irresponsible child of First World privilege. If we don't care about her there's nothing else in the film to hold our interest.

Maryse lays into feminism - "It was partly to curb my natural sluttishness I became a feminist in the first place." She widens her target - "It's too bad latin feminists are all Marxists and lesbians." She pauses for a glance back home - "How anyone who's born in our paradise of wealth (North America) is too dumb to profit by it. well, contempt my dear." And she never stops objectifying Mexican men - about one of her lovers she confides, "His cock, the usual *bug* Indian one, you know." She regularly conflates Mexico with the Mexican men she chases: she values the one as the other pleases her. "As I am for then some archetypal gringa," she explains: "they are for me a single figure of desire."



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• **The Last Straw** - Sam Grana prepares for work



Once you refuse to differentiate, you've decided to objectify.

All this shouldn't work, but this film *will* find an audience, particularly with intelligent, accomplished feminists such as the one Holder once was. I'm ready to stand corrected, but it seems that when feminists react positively to this film, it's with a sense of release, of freedom from some feminism's political correctness. But that freedom in *A Winter Tan* is at the expense of another group's oppression. Can we condone that? This film isn't just politically incorrect; it's politically dangerous. It's a bracing reminder that despite all the money being dumped into "multi-culturalism" in this country, there still remains a staggering insensitivity to issues of race. That it continues to exist at the supposedly informed, progressive level of Canadian culture should be a cause not just for concern or worry, but fear. This film is founded squarely upon the white rock of sexual imperialism, racism masquerading as the allure of the exotic. It doesn't 'deal' with this issue; it doesn't 'explore' it; it works by it.

There is no examination of tourism, especially sexual tourism in *A Winter Tan*. There is no analysis of the tacit assumption that warm-weather countries are more 'liberating' (and libidinal) than cold-weather 'civilized' countries. Nowhere does the film acknowledge that it is working from a model that exploits these countries under the banner of sensual pleasure. The economic foundations of sexual tourism, a form of prostitution really, are also left unexplored. Tourism is an economic exchange, an industry. And though prostitution is an *exchange* of power, it's pretty clear that the prostitute's power is always limited, secondary.

None of this does the film even seem to be aware of, much less explore. Following Maryse's bad girl lead, *A Winter Tan* is a deeply reactionary film. It even participates in the same old postcard cinematography of mainstream cinema, presenting us with a Mexico that is de-



• Jackie Burroughs gives a tour de force performance as Maryse Holder

liberately, oppressively picturesque. And far too often shots are arranged where Mexicans just sit or stand around in the frame waiting for Maryse to act upon them. This Mexico and these Mexicans exist solely for her; she is the agent, they the background — passive and mostly inert. From time to time the soundtrack's latin music pops up like in a cheap melodrama to signal one of two things — mystery or danger.

All of this might be lessened somewhat if the film were brilliantly executed. It's not, due mainly to the dialogue. Holder's prose is purple enough on paper; to hear Burroughs

speak it to the camera, or worse, to other characters, is to cringe. A line like "I am towed uphill by desire" just doesn't stand much of a chance. Occasionally a sequence will achieve some of the true tragic degradation the filmmakers may have intended, but it's not often and it never compensates.

It should have been obvious to the filmmakers that any film about such a thoroughly nasty person would be equally nasty unless you create some distance between film and character, something *A Winter Tan* seems determined not to do. This is not a documentary recording of a woman's death, it is a

re-creation, and as such bears the responsibility of analysis. Of course, it may be absurd to apply anything as outlandish as responsibility to this film. Maryse would think so.

Cameron Bailey •

A WINTER TAN sc. Jackie Burroughs p. Louise Clark d.o.p. John Walker loc. sd. Aerlyn Weissman co-d. Jackie Burroughs, Louise Clark, John Frizzell, John Walker, Aerlyn Weissman adapted from "Give Sorrow Words, Maryse Holder's Letters from Mexico", Grove Press, NY assoc. p. (Mexico) Servando Gaja gaffer/ grip Luis Lobato prod stills Anita Olanick loc. crew Maria Novaro, Jesus Anaya, Francisco Preciado add loc. sd. Bernadine Lighthart asst eds. Sarah Peddie, Leonard Farlinger sup. dialogue ed. Alison Grace dialogue ed. Greg Glynn asst. Alison Fisher sup. eff. ed. Denise McCormick fx ed. Alison Clark asst. Leon B. Wood fx rec. Gordon Thompson Foley artist Andrew Malcolm Foley asst. James Gore Foley rec. Jack Heeron sd. re-rec Don White, Michael Liota, Astral Bellevue Pathe comp. guarantor Don Haig. Film Arts lab Film House timer Chris Severn opticals Film Opticals/ effects add. new footage Courtesy Rudy Inc. sd. facilities Sound Technique prod. acc. Fischer Business Services Ltd. title and Poster Design Tim Forbes Thanks to Margara Millare, Jorge Sanchez, John Gundy, Julia Sereny, Renée Gluck, Pierre Ouellet/ Mars studio, Niv Fichman and Rhombus Media, Ada Swica, Peter Thillaye, John Pasmontier, Jorge G. Arenas Basurto, Jose Luis Cruz, Zafra Films, Tif Griffin, Ron Allen, Jesse Cook, Veronica Escobar, Chapelle Jaffee, Bruce Robb, Anna Pafomow, James Crowe, Rene Ohashi, Claudia Becker, Stephen Bush, Marcial Leal, Michael McLean, Midi Onodera, Michael O'Farrell, Douglas Barrett, Edith Hones, Lucero, Selma Yampolsky, Jean Pierre Petit, Mike Alyanak, Eric Cadesky, Zezi Tayeb, John Hunter, Lynn Parkin, Marta Sternberg, Allen Backeland and to the people of Mexico for their homes, cafes, beaches, clubs, interest, support, good humour and grace m. "Cold Song", H. Purcell. Performed by Klaus Nomi. Courtesy of RCA "Gracias a la Vida" Composed and Performed by Violeta Parra. Courtesy of RCA "Y Sin El" Las Diego Performed by Valeria Lynch Courtesy of RCA "Feliz Encuentro" Francisco Alvarado. Performed by Celia Cruz. Courtesy of Musica Latina International Inc. "Tiempos de Amistad" John Lang Performed by Zulema Clas. Courtesy of S.W.B. Music l.p. Jackie Burroughs, Erando Gonzalez, Javier Torres, Anita Olanick, Diane D'Aquila, Fernando Perez de Leon, Dulce Kuri, Ruber Dario Hernandez, Abraham Hernandez Castillo, Mari Carmen Dominguez, Reyna Lobato Mariche, John Frizzell, John Walker, Jorge Galcedo, Luis Lobato, Servando Gaja, Alverta Chalulas, Librado Jimenez, Rollo Jose Rodriguez, Bernadette Lighthart, Marie Novaro, Francisco Preciado, Guy Roset, Beatriz Novaro, Elizabetina Ruez. The fivers of Quebrada, the boys of Coyuca and the hands of Barbara O'Kelly. Produced with the participation of the Ontario Film Development Corporation, Telefilm Canada. And the assistance of the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council. colour 35mm running time. 91 min.

NO SCUM

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