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 Festival of Festivals from a spirited month-long journey into the Gaels 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 cinematographer. (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 supinely 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-visions, 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 ultimately 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 Tilley), fine structure (MacGillivray's editing), naturalistic acting, (Jacinta Cormier, Leon Dubinsky, Francis Knickle, Mary Izzard, Evelyn Garbary, Leo James, and Jill Chitt with fine supporting ensemble cast), and liquid camerawork. (D.O.P. Lionel Simmons).

I can assure you the treatment of these subjects and issues is done with much grace and understatement, with much left to you. Like most good art, the mystery in Life Classes is made in this country. 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 transformation and 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 something with a sensibility. About the memory of a forgetting culture where prescient satellites replace the days when our collective songs were not stillborn but born on the solar wind.

Life Classes is a film that rejects paint-by-number simplification 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 waves 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 as 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 the 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 impact of television and subsumes it. We have learned filmmically 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 satellites of a McLuhanian world where we are not stillborn but borne on the solar wind.

We have changed. A perfection completes its perfect circle, nothing 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 replace 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 your (our) film all the best."
Patricia Rozema’s
The Mermaids Singing

H yperbolic in its complete information, Rozema was more hopeful about her own experience with 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 the artworld, it’s a much more of fun than a pleasant surprise. The sound of fans squeezing praises loud enough for the buyers to hear, the press of clear-eyed appraisal can begin. And though the film is not likely to garner scores of starring offers, neither is it nearly so trivial as some have claimed.

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 acrobatic nature; it’s not as if this entire 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’ve got an appetite for bite you’ll never be disappointed.

Sheila McCarthy (looking a lot like Shirley MacLaine before she discovered the cosmos) plays Polly Vandersma. She wants to be, in the cute and unthreatening way, a “human being.” When she’s placed 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 shaves things up merely with the power of her innocence.

Polly’s sensitive nature is forced to come to grips with both the mundane world and the mercenary cult of contemporary art. The two worlds eventually inevitably collide.

Mermaids blends satire and fantasy in a film, some elements in the cute and unthreatening world, the film, but not so 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 becoming a bore.

And of course there’s always McCarthy’s performance to watch. She has it all down — the tics, the ever-ready embrace, the look, the hair. She’s also 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 navigated, a walking signifier of sincere ignorance. And when sophistication wears the face of the urban art world, pawnee 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 as charming as Pee Wee. She actually wants it to be, to be thought competent.

For most of its 81 minutes the film is a delight to watch, though there are a few stilted, awkward moments. It’s a Japanese restaurant where Polly makes the mistake of ordering octopus, is particularly uncomfortable to watch, not just because it doesn’t work dramatistically, but because it seems to us to laugh at the fact that anyone could eat such a thing. And Polo’s crush on the lesbian curator of the gallery (Paula Baill) is somehow unresolved. 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 verigo and the bliss of the outsider in Mermaids. Polly Vandersma, no one in particular (and hence everyone), stands outside the artwork, owns 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 glibolary solitude — at its best, Mermaids makes you see the secret power of the blank.

Now that the noise from Cannes has subsided, Mermaids should be able to ride the shelf of Telfilm’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 slander at — beauty and truth, for example — should be 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

—from the article by Cameron Bailey of Film Comment, November 1987