



Being at home with Norman.

## Bob McKeown's Strangers in a Strange Land

On a muggy day at the beginning of June of last year, cinematographer Michael Boland arrived in the barren Chinese village of Yan'an, plunked his camera down on one of the most remote film sets in the world and immediately began filming. The scene that day on the set of *Bethune: the Making of a Hero* was a historical re-enactment of the meeting between a Canadian doctor by the name of Norman Bethune and the venerable leader of the Chinese revolution, Mao Tse-tung. What Boland and his director, Bob McKeown, would end up with in their film *Strangers in a Strange Land*, however, was Canadian film history in the making.

McKeown and Boland certainly didn't lack for subject matter. The story of the *Bethune* project over the last 40-odd years has assumed a life of its own - nothing, it seems, will kill this uniquely Canadian dream. On the set, though, the shoot turned into something of a nightmare. The food was at times so awful that the crew went on strike until the situation improved, the script was continually being revised to the point that production was often delayed for lack of a shooting script, and the Canadian and Chinese producers differed on so many points (both major and minor) that the shoot ended a month

behind schedule. McKeown does a good job chronicling all these events and placing them in a narrative which glides as effortlessly as the actual production was sluggish. The only real problem with the film is that it touches base with so many aspects of the production that some of the more contentious issues surrounding the shoot, such as the disagreements between screenwriter Ted Allan and the film's star and director (Donald Sutherland and Phillip Borsos), are only acknowledged, but never fully investigated.

Enough has already been written and printed about the making of the *Bethune* saga to destroy a reasonably sized forest. There are so many stories surrounding this picture that McKeown can easily be forgiven for the lack of focus in his film. McKeown, however, does manage to capture some moments of undeniable power. When boom operator Veronique Gabillaud talks of her friendship with a Chinese set decorator and of the crew's general unwillingness to get to know their Chinese co-workers, the documentary veers away from the logistical mechanics of making a movie and reveals the human face at the heart of the production. Likewise, a segment of the film devoted to Zhou Shu, an 85-year-old Buddhist monk living in the remote Wutai mountains who has never known electricity, let alone the marvels of movie magic, and whose home, an abandoned monastery, becomes the basecamp for the crew, does more than anything else in the film to illustrate the vast cultural gulf that exists between the Canadians and their Chinese hosts.

Films which document the making of movies hold a dubious position in the realm of cinema - their main function is to generate enough interest in a film so that people feel compelled to

shell out money to see it. But *Strangers in a Strange Land* is not a film which should be confused with the generic "making of" promotional fluff pieces to which we have become accustomed. While McKeown is careful not to take sides in the many arguments which arise during the shoot, he does little to hide the differences between the parties concerned.

In its advance publicity, *Strangers in a Strange Land* has been compared to Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams*, perhaps the most accomplished film of its kind. Blank's film, a chronicle of the trouble-plagued shoot of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* deep in the Amazonian jungle, manages to equate Herzog's artistic and emotional burden with that of the German director's central character. The two films, which both depict obsessed individuals attempting to move a boat over a mountain, are thematically identical, with Blank's documentary being arguably the stronger of the two by virtue of having real people as its protagonists. The stories of Dr. Bethune and the cinematic retelling of his life are similar in many ways, but they are not identical.

*Strangers in a Strange Land* goes to great, though not unreasonable, lengths to compare Bethune's pilgrimage to China in 1937 to last year's expedition by the Canadian film crew. To commit Bethune's life to celluloid, the production had to retrace the doctor's footsteps to remote locations throughout the country where the problems of food, hygiene and transportation are still in evidence. Whereas *Bethune* (the movie) tells a story of an individual's singleminded determination to help the cause of the revolution, the story of the film's production has much more to do with the incessant wrangling that was needed to achieve some sort of consensus that would allow the shoot to continue. Although McKeown alludes to this difference, the film fails to provide a clear connection between Bethune and his modern-day biographers.

*Strangers in a Strange Land* comes across more like a really good segment on the *Fifth Estate* rather than the chronicle of human emotions and character that it might have been. It is balanced, professional, and even insightful at times, but by adhering to a purely journalistic format, it is largely unable to shake off its dependence on the source material. There is, however, enough drama and tension contained within the film to give it a life of its own.

Greg Clarke •

**STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND** p./d. Bob McKeown assoc. d. Michael Boland assoc. prods. Don Haig, David W. G. Mackenzie, Shelagh D'Arcy McGee cam. Michael Boland ed. Michael Morningstar orig. mus. Terence McKeown sl. rec. Ao Loo, Terence McKeown research Tom Puchniak narr. Bob McKeown. A McKeown/McGee Films in association with Filmline International Inc., The August First Film Studio, Beijing, The China Film Coproduction Corporation, Belstar Productions, Eiffel Productions and the CBC. A Cinephile release. running time 83 minutes.

## Dying To Be Perfect/ Breaking The Chains: A Story of Recovery

There are probably as many ways of looking at unhealthy or dysfunctional human conduct as there are manifestations of such behaviour. What Eileen Hoeter's *Dying to be Perfect* shares with Teresa MacInnes and Alexis Macintosh's video production, *Breaking the Chains: A Story of Recovery*, is a desire to understand certain types of self-abuse. Both feature the accounting of experts - not clinicians or academics or social scientists, but people who have lived the disorders and speak from experience.

Hoeter's film (which she calls "an awareness film") deals with the eating disorder, anorexia nervosa. *Dying to be Perfect* proceeds through the histories of three women, two of whom (Erin and Molly) are survivors of the disease, and one (Audrey) whose daughter died from it.

Each of the three discusses her involvement with anorexia - from the initial stages through its development, to treatment and the disorder's consequences on their lives.

Their stories are grim testimonials to the power of this affliction. Erin describes how in the beginning losing weight gave her a feeling of control over her body, ironic in light of the lack of control she had over the disease. Even when she weighed less than 90 pounds (she's five feet, seven inches tall), she still felt she was overweight.

And as Molly explains, "This is damage for life." The repercussions of anorexia - kidney and heart damage, loss of menstrual period, etc. - do not disappear with recovery.

Audrey's attempt to understand the reasons for her daughter's death brings another perspective to the film - that of the third-person victim.

These women are remarkably articulate and insightful about their relationships to the disorder. The interviews with Molly and Erin move smoothly back and forth, and are interspersed with a dance sequence by C. Lee, a dancer outraged at the prevalence of eating disorders among her colleagues.

Spliced into the latter part of the film are stills of the three anorexic women in the advanced stages of their disorder, which reinforce their stories, especially juxtaposed with the not-unusual appearance of the women today.

Throughout the film the editing is tight and thoughtfully paced. The framing of the single camera is uncluttered, effectively simple.