



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 McGehee 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.

Unfortunately, the dance sequence adds little to the film; it is less direct and immediate than the interviews.

*Dying to be Perfect* is a nicely-constructed presentation of the problem, the victims, consequences and insights into anorexia.

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MacInnes and Mackintosh's 45-minute-video, *Breaking the Chains*, is an examination of recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. It is composed of interviews with men and women who are in, or have been in, recovery houses which follow a 12-step program.

The major focus is on individuals in a men's house in Vancouver, and particularly on a step meeting there. These are tough individuals who generally have approached the problems of their lives with fists and *fuck yous*. The straight world might categorize them as bikers, greasers, punks, junkies, or just plain trouble. But what is outstanding is their ability to speak with intelligence and understanding about the struggle to overcome their problems.

The people interviewed in this film explain what it is like to be an addict. How your entire life comes to revolve around satisfying that addiction, which is, as one young man puts it, only a symptom of the disease. And as one woman says, "When you wake up you don't know who you are, where you are or where you've been."

But they are equally articulate about recovery. And it soon becomes obvious that a large part of the process is this ability to communicate honestly, learning to face life and not hide from it, even to be able to laugh about their struggles (one man jokes about hearing bottles of beer and syringes call to him, "Come on, let's go for a walk downtown").

*Breaking the Chains* is structured in a series of questions, such as "Why does a drug user enter a recovery program?" Each question is followed by sequences of interviews in response.

The first question, "What is the cause of drug addiction?", is answered by well-intentioned non-addicts who can only speculate. This contrasts with the subsequent approach of only interviewing people with direct experience of addiction.

This film is powered by a dynamic of possibility that is as charged as the people in it. It might be useful in encouraging others to break the chains of their addiction. As one fellow in the house described his experience there, "I feel I could help anybody, now."

Calvin Wharton •

**BREAKING THE CHAINS:** Co-produced and co-directed by Teresa and Alexis Macintosh; Assistant dir./Kathy Lake; Camera/Colin Gregory; on-line editing/Greg Vallieres and Brice Dowd. Prod. assistance from B.C.'s Knowledge Network and Pacific Region NFB.

### BREAKING THE CYCLE

This film is dedicated to "the silent victims" – the battered wives who look at the camera and say: "He cut me up with a carving knife. I stayed because I was so damned scared..." and "The children sat on the sofa and my husband beat me."

A chilling document, it probes many aspects of this appalling social problem—the shame, the fear, the inherited violence – and also touches upon the therapy, the role of the police and specific advice to the victims.

As the litany unfolds, both beaters and victims paint a sad, desperate picture. The women, youthful and mature, say "He saw his parents beat each other up..." "I was programmed to put up with it. You were married – you make your bed and you lie on it" and "...I woke every day with bruises." A young man: "I was my Daddy's pet... I saw him dragging my mother across the room by her hair" – it goes on and on. "My girl friend is like my mother and I hate her... I broke her ribs – I was so mad, it was anger." An older man who is receiving treatment, admits, "I always felt so bad afterwards – after I beat my wife..."

The police role in domestic situations is described by an officer as "very dangerous," but changes in attitude have occurred, and things have apparently come a long way in two years. If the police lay a charge, the woman is more likely to follow it through and, also, the courts take it more seriously.

The solutions include awareness and education. The best advice is to touch base with somebody – a teacher or a neighbor. A victim says that children in violent families should not blame themselves and pleads with fellow-victims, "Come out of the closet, come out of the house and say 'This is happening to me!'"

A straight-forward, feisty little documentary, where the strong content overcomes most of the warts. This is the film that had a Warhol-like fleeting moment of fame and glory at the 1988 Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival – the National Film Board/Kathleen Shannon Award for Documentary was torn from its grasp along with a \$1,000 cash prize (*Cinema Canada* #154).

P./d. Debbie Cartner. cam. Elias Petras/Doug Bailey/Tom Lee. ed. Greg M. Darling. mus. Bill Roberts. With the assistance of: Ontario's Women's Directorate, NFB Ontario Region, Employment and Immigration Canada, Dr Peter Jaffe, Ph.D. 25 mins. 16mm/tape. Availability: Esprit Films, P. O. Box, 2215, Stn. B, St. Catharines, Ont. L2M 6P6 (416) 685-8336.

### SHOOTING STARS

Allan Stein was luckier with his film at Yorkton '88, where it won the Award for Best Sports and Recreation...

The Grads (Edmonton Commercial Graduates Women's Basketball Team) was formed in 1915. Some of the graduating girls from the Commercial High School wanted to continue with the sport, and asked Percy Page to keep on

coaching them. They were called "Canada's Wonder Team," an amateur women's team and for almost two decades the unparalleled queens of basketball. The Grads made headlines throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and travelled widely. Early in 1925, when international championship basketball was prominent in conjunction with the Olympic Games, The Grads went to Europe, sponsored by the Government of Canada. They despatched their opponents with ease and won all of their games. The Grads remained the undisputed world champions for the next 16 years.

Memories of this unique sporting team are evoked through newspaper headlines, newsreels, home movies of The Grads and, especially, by interviews with some of the "old girls," while their final tense game and its dramatic highlight is recreated. Betty Bawden Bowen, Babe Belanger and Margaret MacBurney are some of The Grads who go to reunions and feel "one unit again." Their sprightly reminiscences cover the modernization of their playing kit – "We had knee-pads and bloomers and were all covered up" but, in the 20s, after playing a team from Cleveland which "had really modern costumes," the serge bloomers were thrown out! As amateurs, by night they were famous world-class athletes, but by day they worked as secretaries and in department stores and were glad to have a job in the Depression. They would play 10 games in 11 nights without pay, and no federal money to help. They idolized coach Percy Page who never missed a game and never raised his voice – "...he expected a lot but he was a gentleman."

By the 1930s the end was in sight. At the outbreak of World War II the arena was taken over by the military and the chain was broken. The Grads exciting game with the Tulsa Stenos is recreated – It's 39-39 and one minute to play, and the winning point is scored at the gun! Wildly cheering crowd scenes and freeze game... The end came on June 5, 1940. In 25 years The Grads played 522 games, won 502; were North American champions 1923-1940; attended four World Olympics and won all 27 exhibition games they played. Coach Percy Page died in 1973.

An interesting look at Canadian women's early sporting. The history, neatly resurrected and served up in modern style. The archival material, the reminiscences from the remaining Grads and the dramatization don't quite work together, and the flow does drag at times. But there's no denying that this is an engaging, heart-warming document that looks good, and a few nips of editing might remedy the rhythm.

dir. Allan Stein. sc. Mairi MacLean & Allan Stein. ed. Marke Slipp. cam. James Jeffrey. sd. Clancy Livingston/Michel Lalonde. mus. George Blondheim. 49 mins. 16mm/tape. With the assistance of: Alberta Motion Picture Development Corp./Telefilm/NFB North West Centre. Availability: Filmwest Associates (Edmonton) (403) 488-9182, and National Film Board.



The Edmonton Grads get a pep talk

### A GAME OF DEATH

A terse little experimental black comedy which evokes the atmosphere of wartime London in 1943 in a story of espionage and murder. Divided into segments by titles, and using the sights and sounds of the era – Churchill's voice, Pearl Harbor, newspaper headlines – the film wends its way to a laconic conclusion. Clyde is tracking Simon Marquette (a sinister double-agent who murdered his brother), while his lover, Charlotte, warns him of the danger. Tinkling piano music, a lamp, pages being turned, a table setting and some conversation over brandy. A telephone rings, "Taxi"; "Ah, Mr. Marquette", a moving wheel; shots! Footsteps... a door opens and woman's voice "Clyde! Come in. You have found him?" "Done, finished. Never knew who I was."

A really smart little epic, from its excellent titles on a mock-up of the front page of *The Times* newspaper to the succinct handling of the elements through voice-over and a first-rate sound track. A filmmaker to watch!

d./sec./ed. Jeff McKay. cam. Perry Stratyckuk/Frank Raven. sd. Michael Mirus. mus./guitar Ian Hodges. Voices: Ann Hodges (Charlotte), Christopher Sigurdson (Clyde), Darrell Baran (Simon Marquette). 5 mins. B&W. 16mm/tape. Availability: Winnipeg Film Group, 304-100 Arthur St., Winnipeg, Man. R3B 1H3 (204) 942-6795.