

## Film Reviews

### Rebecca Yates' and Glen Salzman's **Milk and Honey**

**M**ilk and Honey, which opened the Perspective Canada program of the Festival of Festivals, is a laudable attempt to make drama out of that most contentious of issues, immigrant domestic work in Canada.

Commentators have called domestic work a kind of indenture in which the participants, usually Third World women, are at the mercy of their employers regardless of policy and the rules laid out by Immigration and Manpower Canada. These women are supposed to be having an opportunity to upgrade themselves and become landed immigrants. Some do. Many don't.

*Milk and Honey* is an earnest look at the domestic situation as experienced by one young Jamaican woman, but for all the earnestness of the attempt, *Milk and Honey* fails as a film. It fails because the film's dramatic canvas seems to be barely stretched out, and in the final version the directors did not present a coherent dramatic vision on the screen.

It is important to state here that the directors have publicly dissociated themselves from the final version of the film. But regardless of the structure of the final cut the directors are responsible for the characterization of actors, camera movement, the look and shape of scenes, composition, and the scenes that make up the script. It may be difficult to apportion blame when a film runs into trouble, but it is quite possible to see what works and does not work scene by scene on the screen and to form a judgement on the whole at the end of the process.

The story itself is simple. *Milk and Honey's* main character, Joanna Bell, arrives in Toronto to work as a domestic for a professional couple, the Winebergs. Joanna wants a better life, and while working as a nanny and domestic she attends night school and meets a school principal who is going through a midlife crisis.

Joanna has left her eight-year-old son David in Jamaica, and as months go by begins to miss him terribly. She brings him to Toronto for Christmas and realizes that the child has grown. He is jealous of the Winebergs' children and is at loose ends when Joanna leaves him in an empty apartment to go to work. After the holidays she keeps him in Toronto, thereby setting off the subterfuges and complications that entangle Joanna, the school principal, and David with Canadian Immigration.

The main problem is that the script, as we see it on the screen, is inconsistent and flawed. There are a number of story lines that are not integrated in the film. Ostensibly it is Joanna Bell's story, the "domestic with the illegal child" story, but the script tries to touch on everything—



Leonie Forbes, Richard Mills and Josette Simon in the land of *Milk and Honey*

than affects domestics and illegal immigrants—exploitative employers, exploitative countrymen, loneliness, inter-racial sex, and family separation.

These (undeniably real) issues crowd out Joanna's story, and what *Milk and Honey* gives us is a guided tour of a domestic's situation, all seen from the window of a moving bus. We get a sociological look at the problems of domestics but we never get a look at Joanna, the specific story.

This is a pity, because Josette Simon as Joanna is a luminous presence in the film. (I have heard complaints that Josette Simon does not look like a "typical domestic"—but what does a "typical domestic" look like?)

Simon takes every dramatic scene in which she appears come alive, although the critic wants to ask where her character gets the motivation to be the strong, positive character she is. She is, after all, a naive girl barely out of her teens from a remote country village and new to Canada. No matter. Josette Simon sets off sparks. She does wonders with the character she has. A stronger or more plausible script would have allowed her to fully extend herself. The scenes between Simon and Fiona Reid, who plays her young professional employer in the film, had interest and sparkle. Every time they were on screen together, there was dramatic tension and excitement.

Fiona Reid is too excellent an actress to end up with the limited screentime she has in this film. She could have been a greater asset, and is wasted in *Milk and Honey*.

At least Simon and Reid seem to have found enough in their characters to find the centre of the characters. D'Janet Sears and Errol Slue appeared to be playing without real direction. There seemed to be unmotivated character

changes in their roles that left both performers adrift in implausible characterization.

In particular, D'Janet Sears' character moves precipitously from complaining domestic to stereotypical goodtime girl and all-purpose villainess. We are given no substantial hint or warning that this will be so—except maybe that she always carried a hip flask when she was a domestic. Maybe that is motivation enough for her character. Somehow I don't think so. And Sears' character is essential to a believable plot.

Both Sears and Slue have done fine work in the past and both are veteran performers. The problem here is inadequate character development and inadequate direction.

This seems also to be true for Lyman Ward, who plays the high school principal Adam, Joanna's love interest and white knight in shining armour, who is going through a middle-age crisis and has had a marital breakup. Lyman Ward plays most of the role in a very low-key fashion, as if he isn't sure what he should be doing and so does as little as possible. He is so low-key that his TV-movie heroics to save Joanna from the immigration police seem quixotic and implausible.

(C'mon, fellas, this guy is a nice Canadian high school principal—he's gonna risk his pension for a black domestic with an illegal child and no hope of getting away?)

It's a pity *Milk and Honey* isn't a better film. Heaven knows black stories rarely get onto large or small screens. And Peter O'Brian of Independent Pictures must be complimented on taking a chance with Yates and Salzman.

But frankly, *Milk and Honey* is an opportunity missed. Good intentions are not good enough.  
Roger McTair •

**MILK AND HONEY** exec. p. Peter O'Brian p. l.d. Rebecca Yates, Glen Salzman sc. Glen Salzman, Trevor Rhone line p. Gabriella Martinelli d. o. p. Guy Dufaux art. d. François Seguin ed. Bruce Nyznik mus. Micky Erbe, Maribeth Solomon cons. Ralph Rosenblum p. man. Mary Kahn a. d. Mac Bradden cast. Maria Armstrong, Ross Clydesdale U. K. casting Leo Davis, Just Casting ward. Delphine White sd. des. Bruce Nyznik asst. ed. Anna Pafomow loc. man. Howard Rothschild 2nd. a. d. Felix Gray 3rd. a. d. Richard Todd trainee a. d. Christopher Ball asst. loc. man. Robin Rockett, Gordon Yang p. coord. Sandie Pereira p. a. s. Bruce Robb, Julian Chapman unit pub. Janice Kaye cont. Kathryn Buck 1st. asst. cam. Donna Mobbs 2nd. asst. cam. Charlotte Dasilva cam. trainee Joe Dasilva still photo Michaelin McDermott key grip Mark Manchester grip Hugh Brule dolly grip David Hynes electric Andris Matiss gaffers Mairs Jansons, Christopher Porter best boys Cactus Simser, Ian Bibby genny op. Eldie Benson, Duane Gullison loc. sd. mix John Megill boom op. Jack Buchanan 1st. asst. art. d. Nancey Pankiw set dec. Kimothy Steede set dec. trainee Brooke Lovell prop master Vic Rigler set/props buyer Greg Pelchat props assistant Juanita Holden ward. Maggie Thomas assts. Isabel de Biasio, Silvio Berti makeup Sandra Duncan asst. Karol Jersak hair Reginald LeBlanc p. prod. sup. Gabriella Martinelli sup. sd. ed. Bruce Nyznik sd. re-rec. Paul Massey sd. ed. Alison Clark, Marta Nielsen Sternberg, Nick Rotundo asst. sd. ed. Paul Durand, Leon Wood, Anthony d'Andrea p. prod. asst. Julian Chapman jolcy Terry Burke transportation Jeff Steinberg, Richard Spiegelman, Jamie Weyman, Edward Bowman craft Emmanuel Taylor In Jamaica: p. man. Natalie Thompson, asst. art. d. Jennifer Chang loc. man. Peter Packer 2nd. a. d. Jeremy Francis 2nd. asst. cam. Christopher Browne ward. Cyprian Thomas props Michael London gaffer Keith Wheeler grips Linford Royce, Roderick Levy, Winston Hall drivers Oscar Lawson, Sonny Taylor, Albert Thompson p. sec. Totlyn Oliver p. a. s. Cecile Burrowes, Elizabeth Hall l. p. Josette Simon, Lyman Ward, Richard Mills, D'Janet Sears, Leonie Forbes, Jane Dingle, Errol Slue, Fiona Reid, Tom Butler, Tyler Oxenholm, Brandon Botham, Christopher Doherty, Jackie Richardson, David Ferry, Lubomir Mykytiuk, Robert Wisden, Diane d'Aquila, Irene Pauzer, Lucy Filippone, Richardo Keens-Douglas, Gerry Mendicino, David Smith, Christopher Benson, Charles Hyatt, Dorothy Cunningham, Ann-Marie Fuller, Marjorie Whyllie, Grace McGhie, Yero Magnus, Volier Johnson, Kevin Wynter. Post production services by Soundscore Ltd. Sound re-recording by Master's Workshop Corp. Produced by J. A. Film Company Inc. in association with Zenith Productions Ltd., with the participation of Telefilm Canada, OFDC, and First Choice.

## Ken Pittman's Finding Mary March

Ken Pittman, in a CBC radio interview, talks about probing history in an urgent need to include on screen those images that are ours, not necessarily what is on screen otherwise. Well, probing leads to knowledge and the result for Pittman is *Finding Mary March*, his first feature film. His own quest for a certain knowledge, the history of the Beothuks, a long extinct race of Newfoundland Indians, began several years ago when he directed a documentary on this aboriginal group for the National Film Board. *Finding Mary March* is a film which has grown out of the work done for this documentary, which was completed in 1980. Pittman's 1988 feature film is a dramatic narrative, situated in the present. However, the past holds a primary and fascinating place in the film, both within the narrative and the style. The actual Beothuk burial sites and artifacts are used in a present-day, gripping tale which concerns the extinct race's history. Moreover, a constant duplicity of themes, themes seemingly attached to the Beothuks' haunting past, yet belonging also to the present story, create a sense of time which resists clear delineation. Here, parallel stories go beyond flashback to create a style where past and present intermingle and we read across the lines in order to reflect on the issues the film brings out.

Pittman chose a present-day story about a few individuals to examine how people relate, coexist, love and hate. By including important history in the way he has, Pittman pushes questions to their limits. What emerges are the limits to which man will go in his interactions with other, nature or humanity. The story is about a young archeological photographer from Montreal whose job is to photograph the Beothuk burial grounds. She arrives in Newfoundland dependent on trapper Ted Cormack to guide her down the river and show her the sites. Ted and his daughter Bernadette know every inch of this territory as they have spent a year searching for the body of Monica, his wife, her mother, who drowned in these waters. Ironically, in their search they unearthed the body of Mary March, or Demasduit, the last princess of the Beothuk people. In desperate need to pay a court fine caused by a dispute with a visiting collector, Ted grudgingly accepts to show photographer Nancy George the graves.

The four-day journey begins. A simple, exquisite long take in long shot exposes the relationship of the three travellers. Ted and Nancy kneel in a canoe, slowly they move downwater, while Bernadette, unhappy about



The funeral of Mary March

the trip (she guards the land's secrets suspiciously from intruders) speeds by in a motorboat, angrily exiting the frame, while the trapper and the archeologist continue together in awkward silence. Michael Jones' cinematography coheres with Pittman's idea that a physical reality leads to an understanding or knowledge reality. Jones shows us, through the long take, nature and humanity. If here the green trees, dark water and blue sky seem to compliantly let the travellers pass through into their journey, it is only a quiet beginning. As the film progresses, we come to understand through sight, sound and story how nature never acquiesces. On the journey nature is in constant play with the characters' actions. Pittman uses this interaction to create tension and the narrative carries with it a series of events that inspire both fear and curiosity.

Unlike a traditional narrative, where a reconciliation of nature with the hero comes after a number of challenges, where evil is brought to resolution, here a spiralling of conflicts moves through the story. Nancy, in her eagerness for information rushes into the graves, taking no time to acknowledge the dead there. As she reaches for an engraved bone pendant, rocks fall and crush her hand. She makes off, despite this accident, with carvings which might be a key to the Beothuk language. Cormack is furious with her greed and disrespect but listens as she defends herself. For Nancy George, "it is always better to know", and these acquisitions may lead to knowledge. Cormack, too, believes in striving for knowledge. His wife Monica was a Micmac who had worked hard on finding links between different aboriginal groups, she was respected by many for the wisdom of the spirits she was believed to possess.

Unable to contain his anger though, Ted

leaves in the canoe to find Bernadette who has gone off on her own to replace the bone pendant in its proper grave. Ted encounters a raging storm that night while Bernadette confronts her absolute fury for the photographer, robber of the grave. Amidst these conflicts, a young Indian shows Ted where Monica's body is and Nancy is left alone to deal with the unknown and a terrible host of bugs. The film's focus moves smoothly from one character to the next, each plight is equally important. Our sympathies are never locked in one direction as each character changes, along with our feelings for them. It is not as if a right path has been designed for each; they move around one another, bumping and gliding, surprising us with their turns.

Performances by Rick Boland (Cormack) and Andrée Pelletier (George) are solid. Boland manoeuvres through the land and waterscapes with the ease of one truly akin to his surroundings. His display of Ted's vulnerability comes when Cormack loses his emotional footing upon the discovery of his wife's body. A year's worth of uncertainty and pain surface; Boland convincingly cries Ted's tears which are met by Nancy's embrace in a tender scene that, like many others in the film, get at Pittman's wish to explore the ways in which we coexist with one another. In this scene, Cormack and George's differences, which earlier in the film are the source of inflammation, are accepted now and do not interfere with their interdependence. Nancy is able to pull Ted out of the stormy water when his canoe is lost and support him in his time of grief.

Pelletier was given an interesting and challenging role as the photographer who at first appears enterprising in a self-centered way, ignoring those around her. As her character develops we warm up to Nancy, not so much because she sees her evil ways but because she is

responsible for her actions, finally, and has faith in herself. George arrives, from the city, at a remote village in the interior of Newfoundland, to find nature and people hostile to her. In the wilderness, the wind blows her records and notes away; as she tries to retrieve them a wonderful moving camera shot in closeup traces her action. Her guide leaves her, somebody tampers with her journal, but the woman does not falter. She spits into the water washing herself; at night when the bugs threaten to eat her alive, she applies a mud mask to protect herself. Her face, covered in the reddish clay, recalls the opening of the film when Indian women perform a ritual to bury Mary March: they are covered and cover the dead princess' face with the earth, an action which has meaning for the spirit moving into the next life. Nancy's large brown eyes, so full of life, resemble those eyes of the Indian women. In fact, George's own heritage, her origins possibly being tribal, is another element within the film's narrative. Bernadette, in her most assured way, tells George that from the photograph she has seen of Nancy's father he is certainly Indian.

Tara Manuel makes her screen acting debut in *Finding Mary March*. She plays a memorable Bernadette, a proud and defiant young woman whose close ties to nature allow her to live through life's pain and injustices. She finds solace and meaning in the wilderness whether returning a stray pup to a pack of wild dogs or a special amulet to its proper buried owner. She is at home with rocks, using them to vent her anger or meditate, at home in the trees which offer her the best vantage points, and on the water, the source of life and death, Bernadette is free.

Again, the film's complexity of relationships allows for intimate moments between Nancy and Bernadette while the violence between them continues throughout the story until their ultimate confrontation at the end of the film. During their journey Bernadette begins to menstruate. Flustered, not knowing what is happening, she is helpfully initiated into this new phase of life by Nancy who washes Bernadette's bloody jeans in the river and gives her a brightly colored wrap-skirt to wear.

Earth, air, water and fire are as important to *Finding Mary March* as is the well-constructed narrative. The elements of nature we see and hear so exceptionally in the film are no mere back, fore or midground in which the characters play out their parts: color, shapes and sounds signify on their own. The actual killing of Mary March is only one scene where nature is used in a far-reaching way. Set in the cold, white, barren winter, this carefully done scene has been partially shot in slow motion as have three other significant points in the film. Each time, this cinematic device adds subtle emphasis. Unlike the familiar use of slow motion as flourish, here it is part of the film's weave. The violation of the Beothuks is exemplified through images and sounds that push for inquiry and thought. If the

spiritual has to do with the production of knowledge as a response to the demands one encounters in life, if this knowledge is gathered as lore, that is through study, experience, tradition and intuition, then *Finding Mary March* is a spiritual film. Pittman's attempts to answer compelling questions about how we act integrate many ways of knowing and we can't help but know a little more after watching and listening to *Finding Mary March*.

Patricia Kearns •

**FINDING MARY MARCH** co-exec. p. Stirling Norris p./prod. man. Rob Iveson d./sc. Ken Pittman d.o.p. Michael Jones 1st. a.d. Paul Pope 2nd a.d. Barbara Doran 1st. asst. cam. Dominique Gusset 2nd asst. cam. Jamie Lewis gaffer Bob Petrie key grip Nigel Markham genny op. Robert McDonald cont. Barbara Gordon asst. p. man. Janice Ripley p. sec. Susan McGrath bookkeeper Eleanor Merrigan art d. Pam Hall asst. art. d. Peter Walker set dec. Francine Fleming prop master Dave Roe cost. des. Peggy Hogan hair/makeup Paulette Cable sd. rec. Jim Rillie boom op. Alex Salter p.a.'s Barry Nichols, Bill Dancey, Sharon Halfyard, Erika Pittman pub. Kevin Pittman ed. Derek Norman asst. ed. Antonia McGrath sd. ed. Les Hallman l.p. Andree Pelletier, Rick Boland, Tara Manuel, Des Walsh, Austin Davis, Paul Rome, Mary Lewis. A Red Ochre Production. dist. Malofilm Group.



Simon Esterez in *The Box of Sun*

Jean Pierre Lefebvre's  
**La boîte à soleil/  
The Box of Sun**

Part experimental feature, part children's film, part formal essay and part pure whimsy, *The Box of Sun* presents us with all sorts of problems. The first is that there is no dialogue. The second is that the sombre, primitivist soundtrack seems to repeat the same endless interval. The third is the uneasy animation that interrupts the shots of post-industrial urban decay. The fourth and most important, is the splintered dramatic sequences consisting of a group of children wandering through grey forests attempting to capture, and then unleash upon the world, the box of sun of the title.

Lefebvre, whose importance to the Canadian cinema cannot be underestimated (the 1981 Critic's Award at Cannes for *Les Fleurs Sauvages* amongst others), has presented us with a challenge with his latest film: changing and/or ignoring the accepted notions of film grammar. The necessary accelerated plot development of the last few years, so essential for the wide audience that Canadian film has been reaching lately, is nowhere to be found in *The Box of Sun*. Instead, Lefebvre gives us Arsinee Khanjian (*Family Viewing*) wandering around concrete highway interchanges in a blond wig like Monica Vitti in Antonioni's *The Red Desert*. Bushes have been painted onto the concrete supports like spindly ghosts of the ones that

might have been there before; roaring motorcycle point-of-view shots suddenly appear and disappear. The sun stays behind a lushly overcast cover. A sensuously logical array of pipes, steam and tanks ominously belches life, the sea heaves with dark promise.

This montage, running through the film until the brighter resolution at the end brought on by the children, is no ironic commentary. Rather it brings a pulverizing context for the dramatic sequences to overcome. Lefebvre has kept the irony for the animation, which begins innocently enough with the group of children cutting consumer images from domestic magazines. In a blast of whimsy, a gust of wind blows the images from the children's room into a world of their own. The irony is, of course, that the images of lips, household appliances and consumer items have an animate life of their own already. Lefebvre's sometimes crude and quite delightful animations also break the dank and threatening landscapes of what's left of the natural world into digestible bits. They also serve to reinforce our sense of distance by interrupting the flow; it's a technique often used by Godard to remind us that we are watching a movie rather than participating in the story itself.

The manipulation of images in *The Box of Sun* is very plain and yet manages to steer clear of triteness. The group of children who provide the main dramatic interest in the film are never reduced to cuteness. Rather they are utilized in the film to help restore life to the world with their boxes of sunlight. Their mythic overtones are held in check, however, by their very unassuming winter clothing and the modestness of their silhouettes against the snowbound winter forest. The box of sun that finally is opened, after a strange and inconclusive

journey, brings the sun out from behind the clouds and returns the world to an unsettled normalcy complete with joyous shards of rainbows flitting over Atom Egoyan and Arsinee Khanjian, while cluttered sidewalk traffic replaces the solitary roaring motorcycles.

The fairytale-like quality of *The Box of Sun* does not bear much relation to the *Tales for All* series. Indeed, the indefinite narrative defies the simplicity inherent in a linear narrative. It is through a different approach, a richly associative and aesthetic approach, that *Box of Sun* starts to resemble the urgent simplicity of a folk-tale.

Jean Pierre Lefebvre's *The Box of Sun* is almost an exercise in the nature of the purity of cinema itself, devoid of the distractions of conventional word-driven drama. Its formal aspects, however, are always tempered with a playful, self-referential sensibility. We are never allowed to forget that we are watching a film, not disappearing into one. And a challenging, provocative, plaintive and finally deeply profound film it is.

Ronald Foley Macdonald •

**LA BOITE A SOLEIL / THE BOX OF SUN** a film by Jean Pierre Lefebvre d.o.p. Lionel Simmons asst. cam. Dominique Gusset grip Raymond Lemy asst. grip Jerome Sabourin loc. man. Louis Ricard sd. mix Michel Charron ed. Barbara Easto titles Simon Esterez soundtrack Jean Pierre Lefebvre lab. Bellevue Pathe Quebec timing Pierre Campeaux neg. edit NegBec p. asst. Halifax Terry Greenlaw 2nd p. asst. Halifax David Middleton l.p. Joseph Champagne, Arsinee Khanjian, Simon Esterez, Barbara Easto, Atom Egoyan, Jerome Sabourin, Simon Easto Lefebvre, Herman Hamilton Colyer, Timothy Heyligen, Scott Menard, Karen Mae Simms, Jerry Bannister, Mark Burgess, Trevor Cohen, Heather Davis, Roger Honeywell, Lisa Robertson. A Cinak Ltd. production with a grant from the Canada Council. 16 mm, colour running time 73 minutes.

Graeme Campbell's  
**Blood Relations**

One of the safest bets in the film industry is the "genre" movie. That is to say, the audience knows exactly what to expect once the lights grow dim, be it Stallone in an action picture, Pee Wee Herman in a comedy, or any number of pubescent nonentities in teen adventure flicks.

*Blood Relations*, directed by Graeme Campbell, falls into the thriller/suspense category. At times, however, it also lapses into that of a comedy and/or horror movie, but unfortunately without the desired results. It is this basic ineffectiveness of deciding what emotion to elicit from the viewer that mars its potential strength. Because the formula for a suspense film is so well known to the audience, with its cliché characterizations, hackneyed settings and plot twists, one often speculates as to whether the filmmaker falls into self-parody on purpose or by accident.

Certainly *Blood Relations* contains an abundance of familiar motifs in the thriller vein. The characters are instantly recognizable: Jan Rubes playing Vincent Price as the mad scientist, Kevin Hicks, a young Mel Gibson, as his son, and Lydie Denier as his fiancée, reminiscent of the late Romy Schneider. The story is a loose hodge-podge of *The Bride of Frankenstein* and *Oedipus Rex*, where both father and son, Andrew and Thomas Wells, do battle for Thomas's fiancée, Marie, who ironically of course resembles Andrew's late wife.

In true Agatha Christie tradition, there are a lot of unanswered questions and holes to be filled in right off the bat, keeping the audience on their toes. Apparently both Thomas and Marie have plans to knock off Andrew in order to inherit the fortune left by Andrew's ailing father-in-law (played by your favourite Martian, Ray Walston). The problem, of course, is that no one is quite sure whether Gramps will leave the money to Andrew, already a wealthy neurosurgeon, or to Thomas, the gallivanting playboy grandson.

And so the manipulation commences, with Marie being alternately attracted by both father and son's displays of virility, and repulsed by their warped sense of humour.

However, there is a singular flaw in the pacing of the script, as there is little time allowed for building suspense. Andrew and Thomas throw sexual puns back and forth at one another with the regularity of a Mae West, so that once a frightening effect is finally presented, its impact is, shall we say, somewhat subdued. For a good portion of the film, there is a deliberate ambiguity as to the intentions and integrity of the characters involved. Now if only we can be allowed to empathize with them a bit, we will accordingly be expected to believe in and



Kevin Hicks and Jan Rubes share a warped sense of humour (among other things) in *Blood Relations*

identify with their ensuing course of action. But after listening to the continual drivel coming out of their mouths, this seldom happens.

It is no surprise, then, that the most effective segments of *Blood Relations* are Marie's dream sequences of Andrew and Thomas lusting after her. They are skilfully directed with an effective distortion of both the voices and motions of the actors. Towards the end of the film, when Marie is running down a corridor into Andrew's secret operating room, you are genuinely startled to find out that this is no dream sequence. At this point, the film finally delivers the goods, only to end in a madcap, free-reined barrage of lurid and grisly twists and counter-twists, which conveniently tie all the loose ends together, and leave the audience chuckling merrily along. Which left me with the thought that making a horror film without scaring anyone, is like making a porn film where everyone keeps their clothes on.

Suffice to say, Campbell & Co. could conceivably have had a cult classic on their hands if they had done the whole thing in the same manner the dream sequences were shot; i.e. with a deliberate distortion of both the actors' movement and dialogue, which would then only enhance the sense of discomposure. One ultimately has to break away from safe territory in order to establish a unique approach to a particular format. Although clichéd, the actors are well cast and Dr. Wells' sprawling mansion makes a suitable neogothic locale.

So, if you're in the mood for a quasi-thriller/comedy/suspense/horror experience, be sure to have all your appropriate emotional responses kept on hold. And don't worry about not getting too excited. You're not expected to.

J.D. Stewart •

**BLOOD RELATIONS** *exec. p.* Syd Cappe *p.* Nicolas Stiliadis *assoc. p.* George Flak *d.* Graeme Campbell *d.o.p.* Rھےft Morita *sc.* Stephen Saylor *ed.* Michael McMahon *mus.* Mychael Dana *art d.* Gina Hamilton *cast* Anne Sketchly *p. min.* Paco Alvarez *1st. a.d.* John Bradshaw *1st. asst. cam.*

Mark Hoffman *2nd asst. cam.* Patrick Williams *3rd. asst. cam.* Cathy McDonald *addn. cam.* Paul Mitchnick, Stephen Gelder *key grip* Cynthia Barlow *best boy* John Wilcox *grip* Dave Martin *gaffer* John Biggar *best boy* Chris Little *3rd gaffer* Mark Currie *sd. rec.* Ao Loo boom Kevin Galbraith *asst. art d.* Mary Noble *set dresser* Theresa Buckley-Ayrea *props* Jeff Mawle *loc. /unit man.* Doug Brisebois *ward.* Sharon Fedoruk, Michael Austin *hair* Debra Johnson, Elizabeth Engel *makeup* Lisa Rankine *sp. fx. makeup* Gianico Pretto *sp. fx.* Brock Jolliffe *cont.* Stephanie Rossel *2nd. a.d.* Bruce Speyer *3rd. a.d.* Rob Costigan *prod. coord.* Alice O'Neil *prod. sec.* Deborah Leblanc *stunts* TJ Scott *stunts team craft service* Jim Murrin *transport* Jackson C. Boyd *p.a.* /*s/drivers* Mike Dryden, Geoff Murrin, Caroline Gee, *p.a.* Jackie Lee *art dept. p.a.* Angela Thomas *cat wrangler* Jane Conway *stills photo* Robert Stamenov *post-p. sup.* George Vukojevic *1st. asst. ed.* Ellen Heine *asst. eds.* Marvin Lawrence, Dean Richards *wiancko*, Fiona Patterson, Benny Van Velsen, Craig Baril *sup. sd. ed.* Stephen Withrow *dialogue eds.* Gregory Glynn, Michael Werth, Josephine Massarella, Arnie Stewart *sd. fx. ed.* Timothy Nolan Roberts, Marvin Lawrence *asst.* Dean Richards *wiancko 1st. asst. sd. ed.* Benny Van Velsen, Shan Barr *asst. sd. ed.* Fiona Patterson, Paul Douglas *trainee* Gary Fluxgold  *Foley ed.* Andy Malcolm *rerecording* Film House *mixer* Tony Van Den Akker, Marvin Burns. *l.p.* Jan Rubes, Lydie Denier, Kevin Hicks, Lynne Adams, Stephen Saylor, Sam Malkin, Ray Walston, Joe Rahonick, David Mackay, Marilyn Haskell. Produced by SC Entertainment Corporation.

## Martyn Burke's Witnesses

"Oh Gods, from the venom of the cobra, the teeth of the tiger, and the vengeance of the Afghan, deliver us."

— Old Hindu saying

In 1980, Canadian journalist Arthur Kent wondered if the Soviets were at a loss to crush the Afghan resistance from the rough mountain slopes and valleys, despite their superior firepower and trained military personnel. Kent's film, *Afghanistan Spring (Fighting With Faith)*, ended with the Mujahideen (the resistance) saying, "We are patient. We must fight and trust that our holy war will be

won." After the Soviet invasion in 1979, Afghans mounted a guerrilla war, which, contrary to all expectations, culminated in the eventual withdrawal of Russian troops nearly nine years later. Unlike Vietnam, the  *Jihad*, or holy war, remained largely uncovered by the press.

Martyn Burke's *Witnesses* attempts to rectify these gaps in information. What emerges is a portrait of a country and its people as seen through the eyes of various French, British, and American volunteers and correspondents. As well, deserters from the Soviet army tell of their mounting disillusionment and horror when faced with atrocities perpetrated by their own troops upon the Afghans. The top leaders of the Mujahideen speak of the tactical maneuvers used to gain advantage over Soviet strongholds. In most cases, the interviews are intercut with footage showing the speakers' involvement in the Afghan struggle, whether it be giving medical aid, teaching, or preparing to go into battle.

One of the most well-known Mujahideen commanders, Ahmad Shah Massoud, known as the "Lion of the Panjshir", prepares his men in one sequence to capture the depot of Narin near

the capital of Kabul. The tactics he used in 1986, marked a change in fighting strategy. Until then, the typical methods used were quick ambushes. Massoud now decided to launch a large-scale attack against this key position. The ultimately successful battle plan is outlined with the aid of graphics. Combat footage combined with the dispassionate narration doesn't minimize the impact of seeing the tape distort suddenly, as a voice relates that the Afghan cameraman, who filmed the sequence, was at that moment killed instantly as "a bullet went into the camera, a videotape, and into his head..."

Director Burke places his "witnesses" against a simple background in the interview sequences. Their Western clothing in this staging contrasts sharply with their physical presence in the Afghan landscape where they wear the clothing of the country. These are individuals who have placed their lives at the service of the Afghan people in their war of liberation. Afghanistan is a hard country without an overabundance of amenities emanating from its village economy. Michael Barry, a former Princeton scholar, who became involved in Afghanistan says, "The most



Director Martyn Burke in Peshawar on the Afghan/Pakistan border

striking thing about being in this country is not just the physical hardship of it, but the fact the physical hardship is not a question of choice, it has to be endured."

This war, in which donkeys carry weapons to be used against tanks, where highly trained Soviet forces battle against rebel factions, is a war which evolved from a civil contest into a fight against domination by foreign invaders. The Soviets did not bargain on the traditional Mujahideen commitment to *jihad* or *badal* (blood for blood). *Witnesses* explores the idea of commitment to a concept, an individual, a people, and an ideology. In days of facile political correctness and limousine liberalism it is difficult to come across genuine examples of courage which aren't bludgeoned by media sensationalism. Of course, the situation in Afghanistan was markedly different by the very dearth of any major media coverage. This lack makes *Witnesses* all the more startling. Burke's sensitive treatment of the position of both the Afghans and the outsiders.

The Soviet troops were plagued by widespread drug addiction and alcoholism which contributed to the low morale. A Russian mother tells of the guilt she feels at having written letters to her son inciting him to fight in the spirit of patriotism. Were it not for her words, she feels, perhaps he would still be alive. She joins the group of "cemetery mothers" in Russia who gather to mourn over the graves of their sons who were killed in Afghanistan. Several Soviet defectors tell of their breaking points as the killing becomes personalized to them over time. One of them composes a poem about a young girl he saw murdered during the feast of Ramadan. Ludmilla Thorne, an American woman, fought the reluctance of several governments in order to aid Red Army defectors, being held in Afghanistan, obtain asylum in the West.

Often, the words of the witnesses carry an impact beyond the graphic images. A verbal description of a phosphorus attack by Soviet helicopters refers to heat so tremendous that the very rock ignited. Another tells of a massacre where the Soviets threw gasoline with chemical additives into irrigation ditches which were shielding villagers fearing conscription. One hundred and five men and boys were burned alive. Juliette Fournot, a French doctor, provides a haunting description of a helicopter gunship circling but not firing. When asked what the helicopter was doing, a village woman replied that it was choosing which village it would attack later that day. Why then did the villagers keep going on about their business instead of evacuating? The practical reasons of everyday living prevented them from going. There were crops to tend, foods to be prepared. Yes, one village would be bombed, but people still had to live.

Independent filmmakers and journalists were often the only ones covering the war. The use of

8mm video equipment allowed for greater mobility especially in those areas not readily accessible to conventional filmmaking. Along with the assault rifles and the mountain howitzers, video equipment was hauled to the battlesites, frequently by mule. The Afghan Media Center trained Afghans to cover the war themselves by working in compact three-man crews. Their cameras were invaluable for recording the final months and providing the world with a record of an unseen war.

Teresa Tarasewicz •

**WITNESSES** *exec. p.* Kitson Vincent *p.* Martyn Burke, David M. Ostriker *CSC d./sc.* Martyn Burke *ed.* Darla Milne *d.o.p.* David M. Ostriker *CSC narr.* Martyn Burke *cam.* Francis Granger, Pascal Manoukian *2nd unit cam.* Francois Darquennes, Christophe de Ponfilly, Juliette Fournot, Bruce "Pancho" Lane, John McGill, Winston Upshall *sd.* Chris Armstrong, Chris Barton *p. man.* Adrian Sheepers *unit. man.* Julie Martin *p. asst.* Vicky Fusca *p. sec.* Elena Campisi, Pat Turner *researchers* Victor Loupon, Terese Nehrbauer, Johanne Samuel, Bob Summers, Claire Weissman, Bernard Wolfrom *p. off-line* Avalon Classics *on-line ed.* Bernie Clayton, PFA labs, Toronto *mus.* Carlos Lopes, Aidan Mason *mix.* George Novotny *graphic design* Nina Bevendge *foley artist* Terry Burke *sd ed.* Gary Vaughan *trainees* Shannon Terletski, Sheila Rogerson *consultant* Rosañe Klass *ed. sup.* Richard Neilsen *dir. of research* Robert Roy *co-p.* Martha Fusca *cameraman killed in action* Kabir Ahmed. Produced by Stormway Productions Inc.

## Sandy Wilson's Mama's Going To Buy You A Mockingbird

As far as disease-of-the-week movies go, *Mama's Going To Buy You A Mockingbird* is pretty standard fare. One of only a handful of features produced by the CBC each year, the film clocks in tear-jerker mileage quite handily (it's cancer), pulling the same emotional threads of family melodrama – the loss of domestic space and the family unit, an uncertain future – and lumping those themes (with equally clunky and overwrought symbolism) with a boy's coming of age. Foolproof and a little lacklustre.

Directed by Sandy Wilson, *Mockingbird* (like Wilson's *My American Cousin*) coasts on a historically pregnant era, the pre-'60s, before the fall from innocence. Life is unblemished. The parents are groovy (they dance to Fats Domino), the daughter cherubic and the son, well, he's just at the awkward stage. The Talbots are a model of hygienic happiness. So when Pop gets cancer, Wilson plugs the tear-jerker into overdrive. While wane, bruised smiles measure fatherly fortitude, the family deals with all the "signals" that tell us the jig's up. Cherished



Marsha Moreau, Linda Griffiths and Louis Tripp

possessions are given away, dad extracts promises from son to "remember this moment," they pull out the super-8 camera just one more time to record (i. e., preserve) the family portrait intact.

Using mock super-8 footage of backyard tomfoolery, the film opens with the same studied effort of portraying casual family life – transient, small but happy incidents in the comfortable domestic sphere. Set against, later in the film, the spectacle of cancer, these tiny, "meaningless" moments are given privilege in *Mockingbird*. Cracks about Aunt Marjorie (marvellously underplayed by Martha Gibson) and her lousy cooking, an owl-watching episode and squabbles among siblings are studiously offered as signs of intimacy – to count us "in" as part of the family. So that we'll share the drama of John Talbot's cancer and the process of the family's rehabilitation into "normality" (the son's tacit position as the new "head of the family"), we're obliged to also share in Jeremy's growing pains.

Tess Medford, played to be the loser at school, is actually a very attractive and interesting young woman. You can't imagine what she'd want to do with Jeremy, the real geek. But she's the "love interest" and Jeremy finally softens up; she likes the Brontës but isn't so bad. For Wilson, puberty is poignance and that's the biggest untruth of all. Tess, a realist, is cast as a romantic in Jeremy's moist-eyed discovery of her abandonment as a child. Parental absenteeism, the most heinous crime for the relatively pampered Jeremy, earns his

sympathy, overturns his reluctance. So when the adult love of John and Kate Talbot is severed, Wilson compensates with pube attractions – and all the hopes that their adolescent urges ripen into a mature and loving relationship.

From its core of puberty, death and the family, *Mockingbird* extrudes this kind of sentimentality and condescension and expects us to bond emotionally with the film – if you can identify with a white, middle-class 12-year-old. Unremarkable as it is unadventurous, it is also no surprise – the CBC affirms and entrenches a particular view of the politics of family life into a televised, consumable form that rarely gets beyond the white, middle-class family (like that's all Canadians are) and expects that is what we want and need to see. When things get complicated, cut to a father/son rendition of *Blueberry Hill* or the recurring *Mockingbird* theme. Or a commercial. By design, the film plots out its unambitious motives and, textbook style, executes the story quite economically, neatly avoiding all the bumps and crevices that flaw but make better films more convincing.

Helen Lee •

**MAMA'S GOING TO BUY YOU A MOCKINGBIRD** *p.* Bill Gough *line p.* Joe Partington *d.* Sandy Wilson *sc.* Anna Sandor *story cons.* Jim Osborne *1st. a. d.* David Webb *unit man.* Bing Kwan *des.* Milt Pacher *set dec.* Al Laurie *cost.* Ada Kangyal *makeup* Mario Cacioppo *graphics* Bert Gordon *des. coord.* Steve Cudmore *ed.* Bruce Annis *d.o.p.* Ken Gregg *lighting* Ian Gibson *sd.* Dave Brown *cast.* Linda Russell *cont.* Mark Corbeil *prod. sec.* Twila Linden *l.p.* Linda Griffiths, Geoff Bowes, Louis Tripp, Marsha Moreau, Rosa Barker-Anderson, Martha Gibson. A CBC production. *running time* 97 minutes.

Paul Donovan's

## The Squamish Five

In the spring of 1981, a Vancouver punk named Julie Belmas met Brent Taylor and Ann Hansen, two left-wing activists who had become increasingly convinced that only direct action could help realize their political goals. The most prominent of these actions took place more than a year later on Oct. 14, 1982 when the three activists detonated a bomb outside the Litton Systems plant in Rexdale, Ontario. The three later rejoined Gerry Hannah and Doug Stewart on the west coast where all five were subsequently arrested and brought to trial to face a variety of charges.

This, in its simplest form, is the story of the Squamish Five, the subject of a new CBC movie written by Ken Gass and Terence McKenna and directed by Paul Donovan.

What is most surprising about *The Squamish Five* is that it avoids the two types of characterization one would have expected from this sort of film. The Five are portrayed neither as martyrs of the radical left nor as a threat to decency and democracy that more right-wing elements would have us to believe. Instead, the film opts for a third kind of stereotype by using the Five as the basis for a comedy of (mostly bad) manners in which our bumbling terrorists become some sort of anarchist reincarnation of the Keystone Cops. The results, predictably, are not very funny, nor are they terribly insightful.

A much more successful example of this sort of black comedy was made by Rainer Werner Fassbinder in 1979 under the title of *The Third Generation*. Fassbinder's dark and satirical look at bourgeois terrorists in post Baader-Meinhoff Germany was everything that *The Squamish Five* is not. Fassbinder's view of things was at once wickedly funny and morbidly chilling. More importantly, his film proved to be extremely insightful by being both a comment on and a product of the political climate in West Germany during the mid and late 1970s.



Robyn Stevan as Julie Belmas, one of the Squamish Five

The world of the terrorist may be hermetically sealed, as the makers of *The Squamish Five* seem to insist, but it is a world which is somehow fueled and formed by the events and the politics of everyday life. Terrorism, like all political acts, exists in some sort of context. As far as this film is concerned, the only context for the acts of the five terrorists are to be found in their isolated and paranoid delusions.

The biggest problem with the film, however, is that because it is a docu-drama, the producers must have, on some level, felt obliged to portray events as they actually happened. Yet the only scenes that seem to ring true are the ones which have since become part of the public record: the Litton bombing itself, the acts of vandalism directed at a Vancouver porn video chain, and the Five's subsequent arrest. The remainder of the movie, the dramatic scenes which link these pivotal events, is far too wooden to be believed. The film as a whole is unconvincing as both drama and a document of what these people must really have been like.

When Julie Belmas (Robyn Stevan), the innocent, though disillusioned teenager through whose eyes the story is seen (and, incidentally, the only member of the Five to have spoken to the producers) is first introduced to the others, all the characters are presented as cardboard cut-outs: Brent Taylor is the fed-up radical with delusions of grandeur; Gerry Hannah is the wound-up rocker who seems more interested in exotic weapons than in the causes that he's fighting for; Doug Stewart is the vegetarian and militant conservationist who believes that acts of terrorism represent the only means to save the environment; and Ann Hansen is Brent's butch girlfriend who is equally committed to the causes of anarchism and feminism. For the rest of the movie, these windup dolls (one hesitates to call them characters) stay in a holding pattern, acting and reacting exactly as one would have expected them to at the beginning of the film. Terrorists could be, and indeed have been, portrayed in a variety of ways over the years, but the comatose

zombie-like portrayal of these five radicals must surely be a first.

The five terrorists, however, are not the only people who are subjected to the examination of these filmmakers. At one point in the film, a group of feminists discuss ways to curb pornography in Vancouver and decide to step up their direct action campaign by bombing several outlets of the Red Hot video chain. In the filmmakers' view of things, the most important thing about this meeting of radical dykes (the film's emphasis, not mine) is that their talk of militant feminist analysis and tactics of resistance are so far removed from the middle of the road that the women are nothing but the subject of derision. It might almost be funny if weren't for the distinct possibility that this four-minute scene represents about all the time that CBC drama is likely to devote to non-mainstream feminism and feminist issues during the current season.

At the film's premiere screening during Toronto's Festival of Festivals, an angry protester stormed out saying "the left deserves better than this." The sad fact of the matter is that the Canadian television audience, for which this film is ultimately destined, deserves far more. Whether or not one agrees with the actions of the Squamish Five and their subsequent treatment at the hands of the court (an aspect of the whole affair which is not dealt with at all by the film), an attempt should have been made, at the very least, to show what motivated the Five to act the way they did. To do any less, as this film does, only angers any possible sympathizers while at the same time lulling the rest of us into bored complacency.

Greg Clarke •

**THE SQUAMISH FIVE** *p.* Bernard Zukerman *d.* Paul Donovan *assoc. p.* Gail Carr *co-p.* Harris Verge *sc.* Ken Gass, Terence McKenna *d.o.p.* Richard Leiterman, CSC *ed.* Gordon McClellan *orig. mus.* Marty Simon *cast. d.* Doug Barnes *art d.* Marion Wihak *cost. des.* Pam Woodward *sd. ed.* Kevin Townshend *a. d.* Phil Mead *sd. rec.* Gerry King *lighting d.* Erik Kristensen *pub.* David McCaughna *l. p.* Robyn Stevan, Michael McManus, Nicky Guadagni, David McLeod, Albert Schultz, Kim Renders, Trisha Lamie, Patrusha Sarakula, Eileen Ford, Pat Hamilton, Frank Adamson, Peter Krantz, Robert Morelli. A CBC production.

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