

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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