



Rich Alexandra (Judith Gault) and poor Crystal (Jane Gibson) meet and exchange lives in *Turnabout*

Don Owen's **Turnabout**

Here's a surprise, not a big one, but a nice one nonetheless. Don Owen, whose wonderful NFB docu-drama (before the term was coined and subsequently debased) of the 1960s set the tone for a generation of English-Canadian filmmaking, has returned again to his past. With *Unfinished Business* he updated *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, now with *Turnabout* he's done a kind of update of *Notes On A Film About Donna and Gail*. It's 20 years later, in Toronto this time, and Jackie Burroughs has turned into Judith Gault, but Owen manages to keep things moving along so that we don't notice these changes that much. It's more like an idea was updated as opposed to characters or settings.

Turnabout is an examination of friendship, desire and roleplaying disguised as a "sisters tell all" sociological exposé. In fact, Owen gently parodies the stylistic excesses of the NFB's Studio D while coming off with what amounts to a rich humanistic tract about women who want to be someone (where) else.

The playful tone is set right from the beginning with shots of Parliament Street in Toronto and then straight mid-shots of Gault followed by mid-shots of Jane Gibson talking directly to the camera: once upon a time there

were two women who once were friends and now are very unhappy... (big goofy frowns and cut to THE STORY).

The women's images merge back and forth indicating just what is going to happen in the narrative. The time is now. Gault is Alexandra, the childless matron of a big Rosedale brownstone and the unhappy lesser half of a sterile yuppie marriage. Crystal (Gibson) is the archetypal female loser: her child taken from her, a boyfriend she describes as a free-lover and free-loader and the possessor of a Regent Street address that to her means that she never has to visit the zoo as she lives in the middle of one.

Now this territory has been travelled before, particularly by Robert Altman in *Three Women*. But Altman's apocalyptic and hallucinatory vision and the remarkable overstylization of Shelly Duvall and Sissy Spacek are nowhere to be seen in *Turnabout*. Owen subtitles the film, *An Improvisation*, and credits the cast with dialogue. Hence there is a very easy feeling to the narrative, itself punctuated by Gault's and Gibson's frequent confessions to the camera. The actual scenes serve to flesh out the details of the women's points of view. Often they tell different versions of the same incidents, setting up a playful inquiry into the nature of truth in the narrative.

The camera is necessarily unobtrusive. The filmmaker has deliberately withdrawn from actively commenting in the way he did in *Notes On...* The dual points of view works to defuse

skepticism about the central plot point, Crystal and Alexandra exchanging lives. As well, their constant commentary on the action introduces a level of irony that would not be present in a straight dramatic presentation.

Gibson is very funny, a sort of Mission Street Flora MacDonald, in command of whatever portfolio she is given. Gault too does a wonderful job with the thankless task of playing someone who yearns to move into a public housing complex because it teems with life. But the unpleasant realities reveal themselves only too soon.

Crystal's new Rosedale life, which now includes her daughter complete with ballet classes, beaujolais and *Toronto Life* garden, also comes up short of expectations.

As the women move into their new identities, the film takes on a dreamier tone. The mid-shots are replaced by long shots and close ups. Crystal and Alexandra speak simultaneously quoting Oscar Wilde's famous saying: There are two tragedies in life: not getting all you want and getting all you want.

What is intriguing is how Owen, with Gault and Gibson, convinces us that the characters are motivated by the inevitability of desire and that this desire is the engine that drives all actions, even if those actions have no rational relationship to reality. The form of the film becomes a very strange kind of confessional that seems to imply much more than the narrative itself. Nothing is anchored in any kind of certainty except for the two women's fleeting friendship. Those moments are etched in a kind of emotional stone.

The real joy of *Turnabout* is watching Crystal and Alexandra discover each other. The real pain comes when they discover and covet each other's lives. The possibilities lie in their friendship and not the materialist manifestations that surround that friendship. The women's open admission at the end amounts to a quiet revelation, but a revelation nonetheless.

In the end, *Turnabout* is a playful essay into the nature of desire. The refrain of a hit of last summer went, "If you have everything your heart desires, how can you want more?" In our culture of satiation and saturation, this could be the secret agenda of most forthcoming North American art. It is a tribute to Don Owen that he has succeeded in making such a warm film out of what could have been an inhumane subject.

Ronald Foley Macdonald •

TURNABOUT, an improvisation by Don Owen, exec. p. Don Haig, p. Idir. Don Owen, d.o.p. John Hertzog with Douglas Koch sound Christopher Leech ed. Michael Todd snd. ed. Anita St. Denis snd. mix. George Novotny cam. assts. Glen Treilhard, Naomi Wise grip Michael Garstand clapper Laurel Pollack p. mgrs. Laura Battiston, Donna Dudinsky des. asst. Judith Pankewitz conspintor Ed Fitzgerald gophers Jessica Cohen, Sharon Foster, Tom Hochmann l.p. Jane Gibson, Judith Gault, Gordon Rayner, Reg Bobard, Judith Pankewitz. A Zebra Films production produced with the assistance of the Ontario Arts Council and the National Film Board of Canada.

Roger Cardinal's **Malarek**

MONTREAL - With this eight-letter placeline banged in, Victor Malarek wrote a newspaper article in 1971 that ultimately closed down the bane of his existence in this city - a juvenile detention centre.

Malarek's investigative story of systemic rot that spread through the police, through social workers, through the detention center administration and guards, launched a newspaper career that has led to a senior reporter's job with *The Toronto Globe and Mail*.

This paragon of reportorial doggedness did not attend journalism school. No, Victor Malarek went from the above mentioned juvenile detention centre straight into *The Montreal Star* (now defunct) newsroom where he wrote the story that set his career.

I am not suggesting that persons enrolled in J-School are in the wrong institution and should apply for a transfer. Rather, you have here a young man from a poor and broken family who is bullied by social workers and brutalized in homes and detention centres but who prevails upon that same system with self-determination, a sense of justice and a sensitivity that should, it would seem, have been beaten out of him years earlier.

This is the premise of a complex story clearly brought to light by director Roger Cardinal. *Malarek: "A Street Kid Who Made It"* is produced by Robin Spry and Jamie Brown of Telescene Production and adapted by Avrum Jacobson from Victor Malarek's autobiography, *Hey! Malarek*.

The story is told on several allegorical levels that are current and integral throughout the film and that tie together neatly at the end. At once, you have the making of a successful reporter and a dramatic exposé of a corrupt child welfare system.

But at the heart of this universal success story, Malarek scores a moral victory for himself and for "everyman" who may have at least sensed the dim contours of a prison cell closing in around him.

This \$4 million film has not been dressed-up to titillate paying customers; there are no great heroics here, no fanfare. True, Malarek gets his story but he does not ride off in a blaze of glory. Indeed, the story ends where Malarek's newspaper fame begins - with the award-winning headline spinning off the presses.

The gritty, sometimes vulgar, realism of Malarek indicates that Robin Spry, a documentary filmmaker and director of the award-winning slice-of-life drama *Obsessed*, had a firm hand in the production. The editing is unhalting, beginning with spectacular aerial shots of Montreal, continuing down through an open window with the use of a Steadicam that