

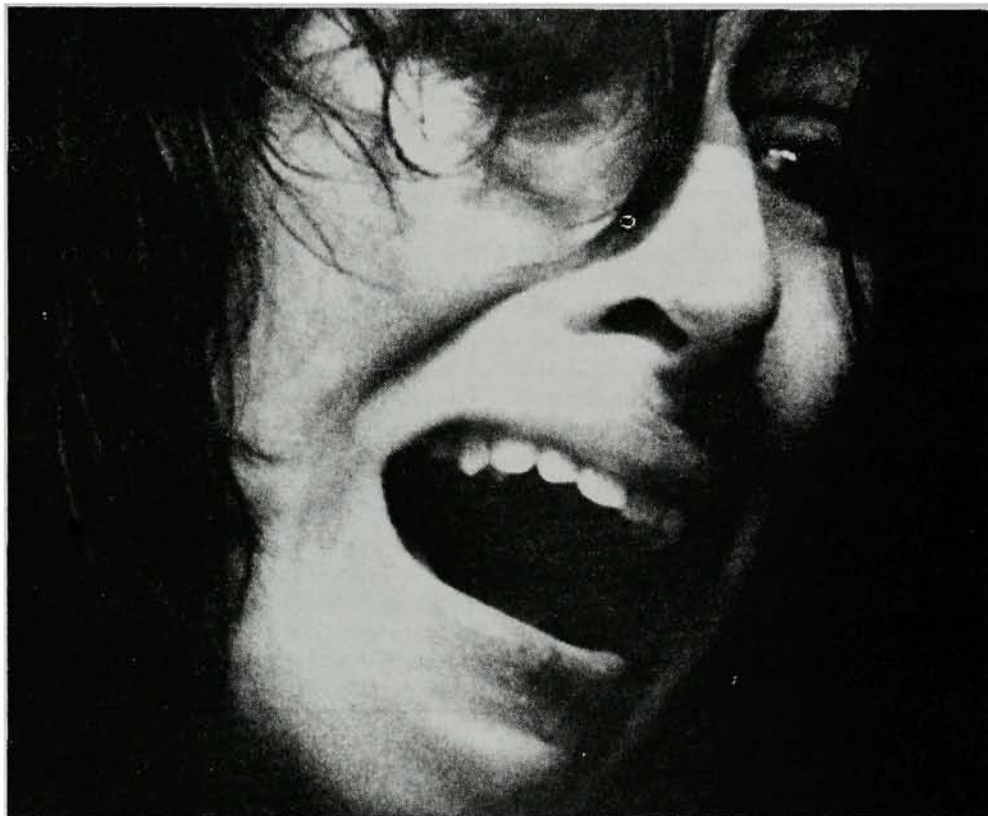
FILM REVIEWS

Anne Claire Poirier's *Mourir à tue-tête*

p.c. National Film Board of Canada exec. p. Laurence Paré p. Jacques Gagné, Anne Claire Poirier d. Anne Claire Poirier sc. Marthe Blackburn, Anne Claire Poirier art. d. Denis Boucher d.o.p. Michel Brault sd. Joseph Champagne, Roger Lamoureux, Jacques Drouin aud. ed. Claude Langlois m. & sd. effects Maurice Blackburn ed. André Corriveau l.p. Julie Vincent, Germain Houde, Paul Savoie, Monique Miller, Micheline Lanctôt col. 16 mm length 95 min. 55 sec. French with English sub-titles year 1978 dist. New World Mutual (English Canada) Films Mutuel (Quebec).

Going to see *Mourir à tue-tête* is not like going to see any other feature film. As a woman, one approaches it reluctantly, more as a potential ordeal rather than a pleasurable experience; for most women harbour deep-seated and primitive emotions of fear and anger towards rapists and the violation of rape. It is a subject about which everyone, male or female, has an emotional reaction. I did not look forward to having my anger and fear reawakened. (And I was not alone — the audience before the film was very quiet, and no-one was eating popcorn.) It is a testament to Anne Claire Poirier's lucid, understated and sympathetic approach to the subject, that when I left the theatre an hour-and-a-half later, it was more in sadness and pity than in anger.

Without histrionics and lamentations, the film gives us a thorough examination of every aspect of a problem that is not only social and personal, but political. It opens with the face of a man, the same man, in many guises — as husband, lover, employer, teacher, labourer, professional, boss. The freeze frame of each face is marked by the voices of women identifying each man as the one who raped her; so that when the film cuts to the start of the dramatic action we recognize, with foreboding, the ordinary-looking face of the guy driving the van. The script does not waste time introducing us to the victim before she is attacked. We see her first as the rapist does, an anonymous young woman in a white nurse's uniform and coat, leaving a hospital late at night and walking along a deserted street. The recreation of the rape is taken from a real



The rape victim's silent scream in *Mourir à tue-tête*: Julie Vincent plays Suzanne

case history. It is both terrifying and rivetting, and brilliantly done. (Even the often, artistically dense Ontario Censor Board was moved to leave it intact, despite explicit nudity and violence.) The rapist, played with frightening authenticity by Quebec actor Germain Houde, is almost entirely seen through the eyes of his victim, Suzanne. She is the camera. We never see them together in the same shot — as a character points out later, "rape forms no couple," since it is the very antithesis of loving sexuality. The sudden viciousness of his attack, as he drags her at knife-point into the back of a parked van, cuts off her clothes, ties her arms and legs and beats her, reduces his victim to such helpless terror that she can say or do nothing except whimper. This is a common fear reaction described by many rape victims; a reaction that the authorities she later encounters — the policemen, doctors and lawyers — find hard to comprehend. "You mean you did nothing to defend yourself?" a police interrogator insultingly

asks her in the film. It is important that we must sit through these painful scenes in order to feel in our gut some of the victim's terror when confronted with an armed, obscenity-spouting, violent psychotic, who may kill her if driven to it.

What little dialogue we hear from the man as he circles his victim, sits and drinks beer while she is tied up, and works himself up to the rape, cleverly reveals his motivations and psychological history. He alternates wildly between self-pity, contempt for all women, and macho bravado. The scene goes on and on until we are squirming in our seats. The final act of penetration itself is almost anticlimactic after the brutality that precedes it.

The scene ably accomplishes what it set out to do, which is to plunge us as strongly as possible into the pain and horror. What immediately follows also accomplishes its purpose, as the film dissolves to an editing room where the 'Director' (Monique Miller) and the 'Editor' (Micheline Lanctôt) coolly

and rationally discuss what we have just witnessed, as they stare at a freeze frame of the rapist's face during the actual act. Now, distanced from the emotion, we are brought abruptly into an analysis of the questions that must be asked.

We then follow the victim Suzanne, played with superb understatement and vulnerability by newcomer Julie Vincent, through the next few weeks of her life: the night of the rape as she is helped by her gentle and loving friend Philippe (Paul Savoie), the further humiliations of the medical examination and police questioning, and then her almost catatonic depression in the weeks to follow. Although these scenes are to be expected, they are intercut with unexpected sequences which place rape in its global, political and historic context. Black-and-white news footage shows us the female victims of war: bombed-out women and children in Vietnam, "sexual traitors" of World War II having their heads shaved in public, smiling women greeting soldier "liberators" in a European city. One horrifying film clip documents "ritual rape" in Africa — the clitoridectomy (removal of the clitoris) of a young girl child. The director and editor provide an overview as they screen their film and raise crucial questions. Do men find the rape scene erotic? Are women simply biological victims and always will

be? Why do women feel such overwhelming shame, as if they were responsible? How does our society deal with rape? All the female victims of the various men we see at the beginning of the film are assembled in a courtroom to state their cases as if they were on trial, before a faceless male judge who in his heavy voice raises the traditional objections and misunderstandings of legal society. Their case, which is after all only a plea for understanding and justice, seems eloquently won when they fill the courtroom with young children who have been raped, many by their fathers and uncles. Cutting back to Suzanne and Philippe in their apartment, we witness his ineffectual attempts to deal with her depression, and the moving scene in which he tries to make love to her only to be rejected. (Suzanne: "It's like something's broken inside me — as if I've lost love inside.") He leaves, hurt and angry, yet another innocent victim of the same rapist. The transitions between each of these sequences, from drama to documentary and back again, work well in this relatively new format of docu-drama, which in the past has often proved to be very unsatisfactory. It works best in the scene when we dissolve from the director looking at Suzanne's face on the editing machine screen into the actual interview between the two,

which is at the heart of the film.

There is, however, one real danger in all this, which ironically springs from the very intelligence that makes the film such a valuable statement. In showing us all the far-reaching, historical and political ramifications of the violent male domination of women, a feeling of resigned helplessness in the face of such global dehumanization is engendered in the female audience. Suzanne's ultimate fate is a profound shock because it seems to deny all hope. We can and must push for changes in our legal system that will remove the burden of shame and humiliation from rape victims who prosecute. We can insist that convicted rapists be punished according to the enormity of their crime, and not released in one or two years to victimize other women. But can this ever be enough? How can we really change basic, ancient, primitive attitudes? Something of this helplessness is reflected by the bitterly ironic ending to the film, which ridicules one of society's feeble answers to the problem — a police whistle for women to "shrill out their distress" when attacked.

Mourir à tue-tête was one of three Canadian features invited to the Cannes Film Festival in 1979. It has also been selected as the official Canadian entry for possible nomination in the upcoming American Academy Awards. And actress

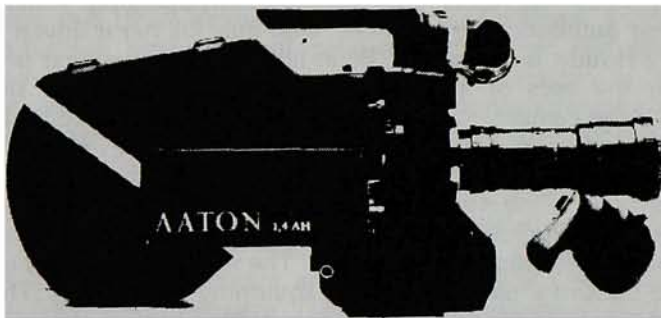
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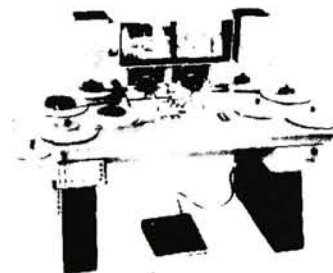
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Julie Vincent was a co-winner of the best actress award at the Chicago Film Festival. One can't help but agree with the words of a Toronto educator quoted in a press release: "I wish the film were compulsory for all policemen, all lawyers, all judges. Mandatory, before they could pick up their first pay cheque."

Penelope Hynam

Harvey Frost's Something's Rotten

d. F. Harvey Frost asst. d. Bill Corcoran, Libby Bowden sc. Norman Fox cont. Nancy Eagles ph. Brian R.R. Hebb asst. cam. Dennis Rindsem boom op. Michael Morningstar clapper/loader John Hobson gaffer Frank Singers best boy Frieder Hochheim grips Jim Craig, Carlo Campana, Bill Heintz electrician Ken Smale gen. ops. Richard Allen, Greg Daniels, Peter Dawes stunt co-ord. Dwayne McLean ed. Brian Ravok asst. ed. Jeremy MacLavery sd. rec. Peter Shewchuk re. rec. Joe Grimaldi p. designer Edwin Watkins p. asst. Lee Knippelberg a.d. asst. Daniel Bradette set dec. Jack Bradette m. John Kuipers make-up Shonagh Jabour ward. Julie Ganton hair James Brown l.p. Charlotte Blunt, Geoffrey Bowes, Trudy Weiss, Christopher Barry, Cec Linder, Irene Hogan, Harvey Sokolov, William Osler, Charles Joliffe, Adam McCoy, John-Peter Linton p. David F. Eustace assoc. p. Nancy E. Stewart p. sec./account. Dorothy Precious p. manager Barbara Laffey.

If justice were to be done and Sweet Reason (to whose light all good reviewers aspire) were to be served, this review would be a full book — a primer on filmmaking filled with examples, most of them bad, all from **Something's Rotten**. Nothing less could hope to bring order and understanding to so chaotic a mess. But, as there isn't space, justice and Sweet Reason down the tube: instead, this series of assertions, more or less unsupported and unconnected, but pardonable, if only because I refrain from making jokes about the title; though, if ever a title begged and film deserved...

First, the plot summary: in a castle in a modern-day, unnamed European country lives the Queen (also unnamed, despite her central position) and her two sons, George, who will be king, and Calvin, who limps and practises ventriloquism to cure his stutter. There is also a Midnight Skulker who kills some bees. George's tutor lectures him on the likelihood of assas-



Charlotte Blunt and company in **Something's Rotten** — left-hand corner on the floor!

sination by members of his immediate family. The Prime Minister asks the Queen to step down, saying the people will be happier if a man is on the throne, to deal with the Americans and Arabs. The Queen refuses. The Prime Minister threatens her with budget cutbacks. The Skulker kills the castle cat. The Queen dreams that the sun is falling on her. The Skulker kills George's tutor. Calvin practises ventriloquism: when the dummy talks, his stutter disappears. The Skulker digs up the tutor and places him under the Queen's bed. The Queen begins to suspect her sons and has them examined by a psychiatrist who declares Calvin to be sound and George to be deeply disturbed. The Queen confronts George and tells him that he isn't in line for the throne, after all. Calvin is really the elder brother and will take George's place. George attacks the Queen, but Calvin kills him. The Queen goes to address Parliament, confident that, without a ready prince, she will face neither forced abdication nor cutbacks. Calvin retires to his study to gloat over the death of George, his successes as a Skulker and to plot the Queen's future doom. He leaves the room and the dummy's mouth drops open. The End.

The astute reader will already have noticed a lack of the connectives 'because' and 'but.' This is only because precious little happens 'because' of, or in spite of, anything else. As those words are the essence of tight plotting (try summarizing **The Maltese Falcon** without them), and since this is, according to the press release and most of the dialogue, a story about power, one might think a tight plot would be appropriate.

But the 'power' theme is largely unrelated to the plot (substitute 'heir to millions' for 'prince') and is handled with a degree of naïveté that far surpasses Joe Clark's bid to move our embassy in Israel.

The characters are even thinner than the plot. We learn nothing of their recreational habits, save that George likes falcons. The Queen's interaction with George consists of nagging him to do his studies and, while we do learn that she likes Calvin better, we never learn why. We see the Queen playing chess, too distracted to think. Suddenly, she pulls a last-minute victory. Is she a good chess player, or did her aide let her win?

When the Prime Minister asks the Queen to step down, she's more like a bitchy