

Harry Rasky's

Being Different

In the opening montage of Harry Rasky's exhilarating documentary feature, *Being Different*, all of the film's "different" characters are glimpsed in domestic and everyday surroundings. Then Christopher Plummer appears as on-camera narrator and invites the audience to embark on a strange journey. His face flattened in a funhouse mirror, he asks us to imagine being trapped in the dreams of Gulliver or Alice in Wonderland, suggesting that this is the way to begin to understand the alienation of the physically deformed. "If we were they," he asks, "what would our world look like? How would people look at us?"

Here Rasky invokes the spirits of Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll, not so much for their powers of satire as for their grasp of the potential for self-knowledge to be found in a distorting looking-glass. His subjects are decidedly not inferior, but they were in a sense born in a world like Alice's rabbit-hole or the island of Lilliput. The film insists upon the efficacy of that dream to teach, and encourages us to abandon the notion that it must surely be a nightmare which paralyzes.

The last time the subject of human deformity was dealt with in a North American feature film outside of the horror genre was 50 years ago. Tod Browning's *Freaks* engendered such public outrage that the film was banned by the church, and Browning, one of the most successful directors of the 1930s, became a pariah in Hollywood. His film depicted the lives of circus freaks from their point of view, and contained a savage indictment of the world around them.

Today, our culture has developed an ambiguous tolerance for the grotesque in all the visual and performing arts, including film. The remarkable acclaim for the stage play *The Elephant Man* and the subsequent success of David Lynch's film on the same subject, indicate the public's fascination with the story: a curiosity and a need for the emotional catharsis which both the play and the film, in different ways, provide. However, there were five failed attempts to adapt the tale of John Merrick's tragic life to the stage before the current success. The problem is how to present a human being "normally" observed in a sideshow without either losing the audience or allowing their response to degenerate.

In *The Elephant Man*, Victorian England serves as a mimetic mirror in which we see human ignorance and prejudice reflected through the gauze of history (it is a period drama, after all). The fine line between compassion and pity is dealt with in depth, and we are moved when Merrick cries out, "I am not an animal; I am a man!" Rasky, on the other hand, approaches all of this from another direction. He introduces us to a modern-day elephant man named Bob Melvin. He is a secure, happily married grandfather, astonishingly well integrated into the middle-American town of Lancaster, Missouri. Far from being an emotional cripple, Melvin is no more prone to self-pity than the rest of the residents of this Anytown, U.S.A. His wife, who grew up with him, comments that "he never made a handicap out of it,



● The film triumphs over physical deformities and society's "pervasive cult of the skin-deep"

so I guess that's the reason no one else ever did."

In a poem called *The Human Abstract*, William Blake wrote, "Pity would be no more/If we did not make somebody poor." Rasky's film addresses this problem repeatedly. Bill Cole, a black pencil-seller in Buffalo who lost his legs under the wheels of a train, puts it succinctly: "Pity - I can't live on pity. I depend on myself, and the Good Man." When Priscilla, the Monkey Woman, presents herself with her husband, the Alligator Man, she says, "We are called the *strangest married couple*." The mixture of amusement and irony in her voice is delightful, because she obviously couldn't care less what the audience calls them. Her reptile-skinned husband declares, "I love you as you are," and for Priscilla that's all that matters.

A partial limbed casualty of thalidomide who is skilled in karate and scuba diving, tells us that people are always under-estimating him. Paul Fish, the fattest man in the world (729 pounds), suggests laconically that "the main difficulties I have are caused by other people." The point is made several times, but rather than accusing, Rasky's people inspire us. Peter Strudwich, a man born without feet, is a visionary, marathon-running evangelist and pilot who defeats pain and fatigue by imagining that he's a cheetah running across the Serengeti plain. What's the main thing? "To realize your dreams, and not be buried 40 years before they put you under the ground."

In a remarkable sequence, the irreplaceable spirit of an armless woman named Louise Capp emerges as we see her paint, dance, shoot pool, ride a horse, and cut her son's hair wielding the scissors with her toes. When she grins, "Man, I've got it together," we are gently reminded that the odds against her come from others' assumptions about her misfortune.

Whereas in the past Rasky's films have explored the lives of cultural heroes - artists like Chagall, Tennessee Williams, and Leonard Cohen - *Being Dif-*

ferent deals with another kind of outsider, another kind of notoriety, the flip side of singular humanity. With artists, he knew pretty well what emotional territory he was treading on, but the production of *Being Different* inspired a new wonder and joy, and provoked a kind of anguish which Rasky could not have foreseen: the energy and resilience of an old, twisted midget woman; the implications of the fact that Siamese twins would actually have a fist fight; and the thought of a legless man going dancing with his paraplegic wife boggled his imagination. "Well, how do you do that?" asked Rasky, startled. "We just dance," was the patient reply. During the shooting of the film, Rasky became physically ill, feverish. He says that the cause was not the people - they were marvellous. But the agony of confronting the problem within himself. The immense burden of responsibility which he came to feel made it a personal ordeal.

In an elegy to the Spanish painter Maria Blanchard, who was a hunchback, Federico Garcia-Lorca wrote, "...poor Maria fell down the stairs, and her crooked shoulder became a target for...ridicule... Who pushed her? She was after all pushed, and *someone* was to blame - God, the devil, someone anxious to contemplate, through the poor windowpane of flesh, the perfection of a beautiful soul." This is the discovery which Rasky made, very painfully, in the course of creating *Being Different*.

The other problem, which became more acute in the editing room, was to make a film which people would want to look at. He remained so nervous about how his work would affect audiences that no answer prints were struck until Jay Scott of the *Globe and Mail* had screened it. Encouraged by Scott's favourable verdict, the film was released for the Montreal and Toronto festivals.

Rasky is a skillful director, and with a shooting ratio of 28.5 to one, every image in the film has been meticulously shot and selected. The pace is smooth and subtle, finely edited by Mavis Lyons

Small, a friend of Rasky's from his days in New York.

Produced by Harold Greenberg on a budget of \$1.5 million, the matter of theatrical distribution is still up in the air. Although it will certainly be seen on television, distributors are nervous about general public response. Rasky believes that people *will* pay to see it, and his conviction increases with every screening. Dozens of strangers embrace him; truck drivers shout encouragement to the screen. It is a very unusual movie.

Besides the on-camera narrator, Rasky introduces other devices to connect the wide spectrum of his subjects. Ward Hall is the impresario/manager of several of the unusual people in the film. He occasionally appears to describe what we are about to see, saying things like, "Let's go see what the world contains besides yourself." The technique works, only because we see Hall for exactly what he is - an unconventional, low-brow agent who offers his clients an income and their independence. "Why exhibit yourself?" Rasky asks the wizened midget, Dolly Reagan. She answers, "I don't want to be confined, I don't want to be put away."

The least successful element in *Being Different* is the music. Much of the instrumental material, composed by Paul Zaza, works well, ranging from pop to C&W, but Rasky's lyrics are sometimes embarrassing, and seem unnecessary if they are intended to make the film more accessible. While not exactly condescending, the sentiment seems wrong. One wonders how Rasky could so rigorously refrain from being patronizing in the commentary and interviews, and then insist in the "Little People Song" that "They may look small, but they think tall" - pretty tepid stuff, considering the unassailable integrity of the footage which it punctuates. Certainly, the songs are intended to sustain the warm, upbeat mood which Rasky achieves, but there is little in them that his people don't say better.

The extent to which society's norm not only tolerates, but is permeated by a 'fashionable' sense of the bizarre and grotesque is eloquently exposed in a scene shot in the Xenon disco in New York. Assorted punks and mannequins writhe within the ghastly pulsing lights to the aggressive intonation of a disco queen singing "Everybody got to boogie." The sinister root of the word "boogie" is revealed in this context, for it invokes the proverbial Boogie Man, the terrible "Boog" of Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* - the soul-devouring beast which can only be defeated by the power of Love. *Being Different* is about just that: the power of love, the love of others and the love of life to triumph over the obstacles of physical deformity and our pervasive cult of the skin-deep.

Christopher Lowry ●

BEING DIFFERENT d./p./sc. Harry Rasky exec. p. Harold Greenberg, Robert D. Kline p. exec. Don Carmody d.o.p. Hideaki Kobayashi. jsc p. man. David Earl Plummer narrator Christopher Plummer m.v. Paul Zaza ed. Mavis Lyons Small post p. superv. John McAulay contrib. ed. Ted Remorowski, Michael Dandy asst. ed. Kelly Hall stills Alan Carruthers cam. asst. Joan Hutton. Ed. Maurizio sd. rec. Mel Lovell p. sec. Luise Massari, Judy Watt p. acct. Rejane Boudreau advance loc. man. Ray Hylenski grip/gaffer Jim Wright cont. Penelope Hynam, Gillian Richardson, Chris Greco research co-ord. Dona Friedberg driver Luc Martineau re-rec. mixers Joe Grimaldi, Dino Pigat "Song of the Human Heart" sung by Michael John Rosenberg "Lookin' Around" sung by Eria Fachin lyrics by Harry Rasky mus. rec. Zaza Sound Productions Ltd. mus. rec. engr. Frank Morrone p.c. Double S Productions (Astral) Ltd. (1980) running time 111 min. dist. Astral Films Ltd.