

Ira Levy's The Breakthrough

Right from the opening shot, *The Breakthrough* grips the viewer and does not let go for the next forty minutes. At the same time, the compassion in this compelling Canadian documentary makes the experience of viewing it so profound that one can't help but come away from it changed. No wonder the film has already won five awards. No wonder the United Nations premiered *The Breakthrough*. And no wonder that wherever the film is shown, it changes people and induces them to change their communities.

In large part, the power of *The Breakthrough* arises from its narrator, Nabil Shaban - a young man with a congenital bone disease which has left him with the appearance of half a body. But he can speak. And it is the heartfelt brilliance of his words that open us to seeing him as a whole person. He speaks for those who can't: people with cerebral palsy who cannot form words to say what is inside. What he and the film tell us is that now there has come a breakthrough: a system of visual communications called Blissymbols by which the cerebral palsy disabled can communicate and find their voice.

Throughout the film, we see how the pictographic symbol language has changed the lives of three people: a child, a teenager, and an adult. We see the child, Wendy, using her Blissymbol board to express her love and joy for living. Wendy, once thought to be mentally retarded until taught how to use Blissymbols, is shown in the loving surrounding of her family.

The second section of the film, concerning the teenager Paul, is almost an answer to the question of what may happen to Wendy. Paul has decided to attend the local high school. We see him on opening day, boarding the school bus, attending his first "normal" classes. The filmmakers have captured the painful atmosphere in the classroom, where the other students are reluctant to interact with Paul, the teacher is uptight and awkward about how to deal with his new student, and Paul is clearly frustrated. But we see Paul's courage and dignity, his patience in this most painful of situations. Having seen Paul's prowess and interactions at home, where he skillfully drives a tractor and communicates well with his family, we as viewers are in the position of seeing that it is the larger society that is now limiting Paul.

This is even more clear in the third section of the film devoted to an adult, Susan Odell. Having been institutionalized since she was five, she has nevertheless struggled long and hard to live as fully as possible. We see wedding photos of her and her husband (now deceased) which capture the joy of love and intimacy. We see her now fighting for her rights to live outside the institu-



● "... struggling long and hard to live as fully as possible": Susan Odell

tion. Its rather barren interiors contrast starkly with the lush outdoor shots in the section about Paul. Through Blissymbols, Mrs. Susan Odell expresses her desire to become a Blissymbolic teacher, to live in her own apartment. She tells us that she sees herself as a necessary, feeling and attractive person; what we have seen of her convinces us that she is right.

Ultimately, this is a film about the process of communication. That process always involves three key elements: a sender, a medium, and a receiver. Before Blissymbols, the cerebral palsy handicapped had no medium for effective communication. Now that the sender has a medium, the rest of the communication breakthrough depends on the receiver. Filmmakers Ira Levy and Peter Williamson have here ably prepared the larger society to open hearts and minds to receive the communications.

Joyce Nelson ●

Francine Langlois's Désiré

Social behavior has been examined from every conceivable angle. And no aspect of the subject has aroused more curiosity than that of taboos. In novels, newspapers and films, what is 'behind closed doors' often sends people scurrying to pry those doors open. The topic of homosexuality rates high on the scale of controversy - making it susceptible to sensationalism and cheap exploitation. As reflected in the success of *Cruisin'*, *La cage aux folles*, and the recently released *Making Love* and *Personal Best*, gay stories make for good box office. Unfortunately, this does not guarantee that the subject will be treated in an intelli-

gent or original fashion. Whether homosexuality goes 'legit' and appears on the big screen, or remains wrapped in plain brown paper, a risk is inevitably involved. Given the nature of the subject, there is a tendency to produce a voyeuristic vision of gay life that masquerades as a serious effort to spark new insights. The question then, is how to make a film that avoids the pitfalls that inevitably go hand in hand with provocative issues.

Francine Langlois' half-hour film *Désiré* (one of nine half-hour films to be produced through the Institut québécois du cinéma under its 'Plan quinquennal') offers one answer. The film examines a sensitive situation: a gay couple decides that the time has come for an addition to the 'family'. Josette (Josée Labossière) and Michelle (Johanne Seymour) are obviously comfortable living together, and like other 'normal' couples have reached a point in their lives where they want to have a baby. Michelle, however, delicate-

ly leaves the actual 'experience' of motherhood to a hesitant Josette.

The first candidate Jean Bernier (Jean Lafontaine), a rather bland, well-meaning fellow, is drawn into the arrangement unaware of the role he is to play. When he threatens to become more than just a temporary presence in the household he is swiftly replaced. Josette and Michelle then decide to change their tack. They inform the new prospect of his status in their plan. Gilbert (Marcel Gauthier) is hardly put off, and this second attempt is successful - except that Michelle is the one who finds herself pregnant.

Although the events in *Désiré* seem to fall into place almost too easily, what the film successfully emphasizes is that being gay does not necessarily have to conjure up images of people living on a razor's edge, unable to integrate themselves into society on their own terms. From the beginning, when we see Michelle picking up Josée at the adoption agency, we know these women are obviously comfortable with their lifestyle. And no attempt is made to disclose some defect that might confirm the usual suspicions. Being homosexual, in their case, is not a handicap.

The film sticks to the problem at hand - two women who want to raise a child outside the normally accepted conventions. The conflicts that ensue are dealt with in a gentle, humorous fashion. Both the men and the women have their share of problems.

What is missing perhaps is intimacy between the women. Although they are not asexual, at times they seem to be just good friends rather than a couple in love. But *Désiré* never falters in its initial intention - to portray two homosexual women who have accepted their choice of lifestyle, and who have not allowed their desires to be limited.

Pia Maris ●

DÉSIRÉ d./sc. Francine Langlois p. Jan Mark Lapointe d.o.p. Louis DeErnst ed. Babalou Hamelin asst. d. René Pothier sets Vianney Gauthier ed. Alain Corneau costumes Gaudeline Sauriol make-up Diane Simard asst. cam. Daniel Jobin cont. Brigitte Germain props Pierre Fournier elec. Marc DeErnsted grip Jean-Maurice DeErnsted boom Yvon Benoit unit man. Claude Cartier asst. ed. Angèle Bourgault p. sec. Louisa Lafleur original mus. Jacques Noël musicians Jacques Noël, Pascal Mailloux, Paul Grondin, Louise Babin, Serge Gratton l.p. Josée Labossière, Johanne Seymour, Jean Lafontaine, Marcel Gauthier p.c. Les Productions Et Caetera Inc. (1981) running time 27 min.



● "women obviously comfortable with their lifestyle": *Désiré*'s Johanne Seymour and Josée Labossière

THE BREAKTHROUGH d. Ira Levy p. Ira Levy Peter Williamson exec. p. Ronald Lillie, William Johnston d.o.p. Peter Williamson ed. Cathy Blow narrator Nabil Shaban research consult. Beth Bradshaw story consult. Lois Upper script consult. Siobhan Flanagan sd. ed. Louis Campese cam. asst. Clark Johnson, Robin Miller Winston Upshall p. man. Dee Simpson sd. rec. Peter Battistone Steve Jones Ed Smith Aerlyn Weissman color 16mm running time 40 min p.c. Lauron Productions Ltd., 1981 dist. Cinema Concepts International

John Kent Harrison's
The Way of the Willow

It was in 1979 that the south-east Asians were adrift, destination unknown. The news media did its best to illustrate the horrors of the condition of these "boat people." Civilized nations had no choice but to open their doors and accept their allotment of refugees. The Canadian government adopted a refugee sponsorship program which encouraged private individuals and groups to assume responsibility for helping these refugees to integrate into a new environment. The task was monumental and deeply touched the lives of the many people across Canada who responded to the call.

One of these sponsors, screenwriter John Kent Harrison, then a teacher in Concordia University's film program, turned the experience into a film project for himself and his students. With the help of other faculty members they produced a professionally competent film called *The Way of the Willow*.

The film is superb. It captures the very essence of the refugees' experience of their first few days in Canada. *The Way of the Willow* is a half-hour dramatic film which shows how difficult it is for the refugees "to learn how to bend like the willow in a storm" - which is the only way they can survive in their new surroundings. Harrison's film shows both the strength required and the pain involved in adapting to this alien Canadian culture with an elegance that moved me even more than did my own six weeks of intensive research into the refugee sponsorship program. And in the course of that research I heard it all - the loss of friends and family in transit, the psychological problems, the fears, the uncertainty, the bad teeth, the language problems, and the enormous difficulty of having to learn an entirely different basis for survival - the Canadian lifestyle. But it was while watching the film that, for the first time, tears of emotion wet my face as I actually felt some of their agony.

We share the experience of the Tran family: Hung the father, Anh the mother and Huw the three-year-old son. Having survived the horrendous ordeal of the boats, the pirate, the refugee camps and the loss of their second young son, the family arrives at Canadian Immigration



• A quiet pause between 'takes' for Lan and little Huw

to have their fate sealed as permanent residents of Canada. They spend their first night in an army barracks and as they get up in the morning Anh asks Hung if they are free. Hung doesn't know, but the audience knows enough about their own culture to understand that while they are legally free it may be a long time before they will feel really free, if ever.

Hung's need to keep one foot planted firmly on his belongings as he takes the mandatory morning shower, despite his natural inhibitions, is a perfect illustration of the suspicion he necessarily feels as a result of his sleepless nightmare.

Having been warned by the immigration official - a sympathetic and kindly woman who recognizes the tremendous need of these people but is powerless to do much about it - of Anh's psychological problems because of the loss of her son, the Renshaws (the Canadian sponsors), take the Tran's to their new apartment.

We see Anh locked in an incomprehensible world, failing repeatedly to find her way. All the plastic bowls in the apartment are lined up neatly on the counter filled with the precious water she is saving from the incessantly dripping faucet in the kitchen sink. The beautiful mural of a Vietnamese village which she paints on the wall of the apartment brings down the wrath of an angry landlord. Her efforts to buy shrimp to feed her family only confirm her inability to understand how the Canadians use money. In the climax of the story she comes face to face with her ultimate failure - an inability to secure the well-being of her only remaining son.

Her desperation is crystalized as she wanders hopelessly out of the Montreal General Hospital totally oblivious to the snow on her icy bare feet. Our hearts go out to her as we too understand that she can never go back to where her heart is, and that she has a long row to hoe before life will be bearable here.

One of the striking things about this film is its distinctively Canadian flavour. The profound influence of our documentary tradition makes this drama seem like cinema vérité. The acting is so good that we seem to be watching life itself unfold. The only problem that I experienced with the film was that the Canadian sponsors, the Renshaws, are so Canadian as to be almost clichéd - well meaning, empathic, practical, but somehow ineffective and strangely inappropriate.

George Renshaw's clown act in the hospital scene as he tries to make Huw laugh seems pathetic in its lack of sensitivity to the needs of the situation and yet characterizes the relationship between refugee and sponsor.

I can only assume that it was Harrison's innate Canadian modesty which

prevented him from touting the Canadian sponsor's horn just a little. While I am sure of the truth of his portrayal of the Renshaws I would also maintain that it isn't the only truth.

Last summer I was involved in a research project which evaluated the refugee sponsorship program across Canada. I found it remarkable how much these sponsors gave of themselves in terms of time, money and love to assist their refugee family. Somehow I believe that the film was remiss by blearily hinting at the fact that the Canadian sponsors played an effective role in helping the refugee families to weather this storm by teaching them which way to bend.

Despite this, the cast and crew of *The Way of the Willow* have created a sensitive, memorable and worthwhile film which accurately portrays the refugees' first experience of Canada - their home, but non-native land.

Kate Jansen •

Tony Snowstill's
Our Children Are Our Future

An alarming proportion of native children in Canada end up in the care of the state; many of them are adopted by white families and sent to schools where there are no other native children. When they reach adolescence, a sense of rootlessness and despair pushes them into a self-destructive life style.

The story of the breakdown of native culture in the wake of industrial society is a familiar one. This documentary by independent filmmaker Tony Snowstill (whose previous work includes *The Man, The Snake and the Fox* - an Indian legend, and *To Talk With Dignity* in which native actors portray white reactionaries) is more carefully researched and sensitively directed than most CBC and NFB productions on the subject. Instead of making generalizations and quoting statistics, the film deals in depth with two individuals caught in the system.

Michael, 20 years old, is a Cree from Northern Saskatchewan, serving a two-year sentence for armed robbery. In their comfortable suburban home his adopted family treated him as though he were their own son. Against the stark background of his jail cell he speaks of his confusion and shows the marks of his attempts at suicide. His story is contrasted with that of Chip, a Blackfoot child from Southern Alberta who was adopted by a family on the reserve. He is shown in his new home where they

speak the native language and he is taught the folklore and dancing at an early age. He is being brought up in an extended-family situation where the old people are teachers who pass on the traditions of the past to the young.

A sequence shot on a reserve shows why cases like Chip are rare. The government built housing is so inadequate that most families could not fulfill the minimum requirements of Children's Aid. The houses are already over-crowded and there are few employment opportunities for the parents, leading to many of the same social problems encountered by unemployed people in the city.

In the powerful opening sequence a speaker at an Indian Child Caravan rally in Vancouver points an accusing finger at the camera protesting the loss of their children to a child welfare system which denies them their heritage. The two stories are dramatically interwoven without the use of any moralizing narration. The dilemma of the white family is presented sympathetically and the audience is left to draw its own conclusions. The process by which justice often contributes to the problem rather than relieving it is shown in a re-creation of a court case in which a native social worker argues unsuccessfully against a Children's Aid representative that an Indian mother should be allowed to keep her family together.



The film presents clear evidence of the need for more Indian social workers and better child care facilities on the reserve. There is also a need for more films showing modern Indians coping with social change instead of being the victims of it. A growing number of Indians are finding jobs in the city and bringing up their children in an urban environment without giving up their traditional values. The Wandering Spirit School, Anduhyaun House and the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto are examples of the changing role of Indians in Canada life. This urban-based Indian community was present in large numbers to support the opening of *Our Children Are Our Future* at Harbourfront with an Honour drum song. The film shows the ability of native people to confront social problems through their own initiative.

Alan Collins •

OUR CHILDREN ARE OUR FUTURE p./d. Tony Snowstill a.s.o.c. p. Christine Welsh d.o.p. Mark Irwin e.s.c. Robert Nichol ad. rec. Ian Hendry, Martin Fossum pic. ed./ad. ed. Christine Welsh cam. asst. Carl Harvey Pamela Nichol orig. mus. Al Soberman Ben Mink re-rec. Soundmix Ltd. stills Christine Welsh p.c. Direction Films running time 53 min. col. 16mm dia. Canadian Learning Co. Direction Films

THE WAY OF THE WILLOW p./d./sc. John Harrison p./d.o.p. Bob Miller a.d. Val Nathan (1st), Rudy Barichello (2nd), Avra Goldenblatt (3rd) p. man. André Leuzon unit man. Richard Carriere. Nicole Joron (1st asst.), Carol-Lynn Meland (2nd asst.), Céline Pelletier (3rd asst.) gal./cam. op. Dave Young asst. cam. Marc Landau (1st), Helen Yee (2nd) key grip François Garcia grips Neil Woolward, Paul Van Emmerick best boy James Peto art d. Allison Burns ed. Alfonso Peccia, Arto Tavukciyan (1st asst.), Maureen Alliman (2nd asst.) sd. Delano Jureidini boom Alex Vachon ad. ed. Lisa Frankfort cont. Loreen Pindera loc. scouting Trish Irwin, James Peto, Lisa Frankfort, Alex Vachon props Marc Lalonde ward. Maureen Alliman, Barbara Victor (1st asst.), Camille Gueymard (2nd asst.), Rita Vani (3rd asst.) p. sec. Diane Lavore, Gwen Campbell make-up Fernanda Tavares p.a. Shimon Greenbaum consultants Ding Ngoc Mo, Stephan Wodolawsky (NFB), Monica Armour pub. Marc Lalonde (Engl.), Céline Pelletier (Fr.) Lp. Huynh Thi Mai Lan, Ding Ngoc Mo, La Tung Huw, Nancy Allison, Ralph Allison, Kate Williams, Grace Findley, Jane Hackett, David Mills, John Bourgeois, Scotty Hannah, Corporal Murray Helm, Alan Glazer stills Peter Budden p.c. KentCom Productions in cooperation with Concordia University, 1980.