

REVIEWS

Ron Mann's **Poetry in Motion**

Ron Mann's first feature documentary, *Imagine the Sound*, was a compelling look into the worlds and works of Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Bill Dixon and Paul Bley, four highly respected but little-documented figures in jazz music. Mann's second feature documentary, *Poetry in Motion*, is a spellbinding film of poets and poetry.

Individually and together, these two films reveal a filmmaker capable of making the seemingly inaccessible eminently accessible; a filmmaker capable of opening our eyes, ears and minds to worlds not universally known or appreciated. More important, Mann and his associates in both films, the artists in front of the camera and the craftsmen behind, achieve this with startling simplicity: they allow the considerable pleasures, power and resonance of each film to emanate from the documented art form itself and flow directly from artist to audience with a minimum of interference or "translation" for general public consumption. Thus Mann reveals a refreshing respect for the art, the artist, and the audience.

Clearly, Mann selects his subject based on a belief in its inherent expressive power; a power that, if allowed to connect with an audience with the same one-to-one immediacy of a live performance, will prove its own best spokesman. It is a power that underlines beliefs held by Mann and the artists documented in both films: that art is not separate from life; that all art forms share a common human base and are, at their best, living expressions, inherently accessible and intelligible to all, natural extensions of human existence and of each other. *Poetry in Motion* is Ron Mann's second successful attempt to capture and express no less than this.

Poetry in Motion celebrates the potency of the spoken word without sinking beneath the weight of the deadly TV-patented "talking heads" syndrome. This in itself is remarkable. But *Poetry in Motion* goes further. It is a film of electrifying energy – the art and artists pulse with a vitality so galvanizing that audiences viewing the film applaud and cheer spontaneously after almost every one of the "readings." The poets are working the film audience, and that audience is responding, as if the linking barrier-window of celluloid simply does not exist.

For these Canadian and American poets, a "reading" is a performance, a vital interaction between poet and audience, a life-giving act as important as the words it brings to life. And by performance I mean just that: not the lifeless, toneless, laboured readings of poets thrust into an unwanted spotlight, vocally transcribing their printed words, but 23 presentations that reveal the extraordinary diversity of expression, the passion, the creativity, the essential humanity possible in an art form that embraces principles of music and dance, as well as vocal interpretation.

As *Poetry in Motion* begins, the twenty-fourth participant, Charles Bukowski (whose books include "Burning in

Water," "Drowning in Flame" and "Notes of a Dirty Old Man") launches into a scathing assessment of poetry and poets, an interview-turned-monologue that Mann and editor Peter Wintonick have shaped into a deliciously ironic anti-narration that weaves in and out of the 23 presentations and interviews.

"Poetry hasn't shown any guts, any moxie," Bukowski tells us seconds into the film. "Poetry has the energy of a Hollywood movie or a Broadway play. All it needs are practitioners to bring it to life." On he goes, repeatedly decrying the lack of such practitioners as we meet more than 23 of them and sail through 23 performances that are the very embodiments of energy, guts and moxie.

Like a sober warning from an overly blunt friend, Bukowski's sombre and querulous monologue – as much a performance as any of the actual "readings" – periodically intrudes upon the flood of presentations, underlying their vibrancy by fearfully lamenting its general non-existence.

The performances unfold in rapid succession, 23 variations on certain basic themes, exploring the expressive range of the spoken word and of the human voice and body; the word as sound as well as symbol; the musicality of words – alone, in phrases and in sentences; the kinesthetic impact of words soaring out from a body that remains still, bends and sways, or contorts in response to the vocal expression.

Each of the poets is interested in different aspects of these basic concerns; each performance is a variation of these "themes," an echo to each other, as different from one another as they are essentially the same. Every one of the performances, including Bukowski's, is compelling in its own way; and each viewer will have his or her preferences.

But I particularly gloried in the variety. Amiri Baraka's voice becomes a sophisticated jazz instrument without singing a note, a verbal-percussive partner in an electrifying collaboration with David Murray (saxophone) and Steve McCall (drums). John Giorno's powerful unaccompanied voice rises, falls, and rises again with unbounded passion as it plays with different emphases, cadences and implications of words in sentences repeated as many as five times in quick succession with a different mean-

ing each time – the ultimate in exploration of the range and malleability of verbal language. The equally expressive voice of John Cage gains its power from a quiet passion; a calm, gentle voice rising and falling in subtly musical cadences, the sweet clear music of a poet aware of words as "bubbles of sound on the surface of silence, that burst."

For the Four Horsemen (Rafael Baretto-Rivera, b.p. Nichol, Paul Dutton and Steven McCaffery), a poem can be an adventure in abstract sound: an amazing and amusing blend of individual vocal performances that come together frequently in very loud unison 'AHHHHS!'

Ann Waldman moves like a dancer, responding to the music of her own vocal rhythms as she explores the attributes of "empty space." In Ntozake Shange's collaborative performance with dancers Fred Gary and Bernedene Jennings, and pianist Hank Johnson, she reads her work as the dancers' movements offer a parallel physical commentary. Diane di Prima creates delicate word-images of light, while in the background darkness, abstract slide-images of nature, visual manifestations of light, glow and dissolve into each other as pianist Peter Hartman plays an equally delicate and sensual musical composition.

Allen Ginsberg's voice becomes an urgent social-political commentator as Ginsberg bobs and weaves in response to his words and to the equally insistent rhythms of his collaborators, the Ceedees, a Toronto-based New Wave rock group.

The potency of the performances is so great that even when the crystal clarity of the film's soundtrack is compromised by a sound system as distorting as that used during the film's world premiere at the 1982 Festival of Festivals in Toronto, the audience still responds with amazing energy.

Although Mann has chosen to emphasize content over film style, he has not abdicated his rights as creative visual interpreter. In addition to on-location performances, Mann presents many of the poets performing in the same in-studio set: a white, wooden-slatted structure not unlike a stylized rendering of a forest lean-to or farm building; a stark blend of the natural and the abstract. The set is relit for each performance, creating a different mood,

in colour and texture, within an environment shared in succession by each of the artists. The result: a subtle yet eloquent visual statement of the diversity of expression offered within a shared context – the art of the poet.

Poetry in Motion is not perfect. While striving to eliminate barriers, Mann erects a few of his own, particularly in his frequent use of voice-over introductions. This attempt at informality and fluidity causes confusion when applause drowns out some of the poets' names. And, without the visual reinforcement of on-screen titles, it is very difficult for those of us not acquainted with many of the poets to remember a name called out once in the dark.

Nevertheless, *Poetry in Motion* fills an enormous void. "You're a poet," says John Giorno, "and there's an audience, and whatever happens in between is the poem. It takes place in performance, on the page, and in any other fashion that connects with an audience." And now, it takes place on film.

Laurinda Hartt ●

POETRY IN MOTION d./p. Ron Mann
assoc. p. John Giorno exec. p. Murray Sweigman
d.o.p. Robert Fresco ed. Peter Wintonick c.f.e. p.
sd. David Joliat asst. d./p. man. Ratch Wallace
asst. to d. Colin Brunton, David Segal lighting
Jock Brandis cam. operator Fred Guthe, Rene
Obashi cam. asst. Sharon Lee Chapelle, John
Hobson focus puller William Reeve 2nd. asst.
cam. Peter Metter, Helen Henshaw, Jeff Powers
add. cam. Marc Champion, Steven Deme, Bruce
MacDonald, Richard Camp, Peter Bellenger rec.
asst. Clark McCarron add. rec. Peter Miller, Gar
Smith re-rec. Eilius Caruso p. des. Sandra Kybartas
best boy David Willetts key grip Norman Smith
dolly grip Sean Ryerson art grip John Deagle
assoc. p. Peter Wintonick asst. ed. Greg Glynn
ed. Elaine Foreman asst. ed. Allan Lee
tech. advisor Gregory Mirand research David
Segal p. consult. Emile de Antonio asst. to p. John
Sullivan, Rick Preiskal concert p. Gary Topp, Gary
Cormier assoc. p. Sandra Kybartas pub. Elliott
Lefko atllis Sally Hutchinson, Peter L. Noble p. asst.
Vanessa Cox, Bruce MacDonald, Alex Currie, Yo-
landa Zarkel, Marvin Pludwinski, Gary Viola, Shelly
Storz, Dan Casse, Brian Harmes, James Manse, Mark
Gaudet, Chris Bolton, Lucy Tetrault, Camella Frie-
berg, Kevin Johnson legal Robi Blumenstein acct
Steve Rosen, Harley Mintz, Stan Spencer (Mintz &
Partners), Cindy Scott neg. cut. Dennis White p.p.
Sphinx Prod. in assoc. with Giorno Poetry Systems
poets: Charles Bukowski, Amiri Baraka, Anne
Waldman, Ted Berrigan, Kenward Elmslie, Ed
Sanders, Helen Adam, Tom Waits, William S. Bur-
roughs, Christopher Dewdney, Michael McClure,
Ted Milton, Robert Creeley, John Cage, Four Horse-
men, Michael Ondaatje, Jayne Cortez, Dianne Di
Prima, John Giorno, Ntozake Shange, Gary Snyder,
Allen Ginsberg, Jim Carroll, Miguel Algarin. colour
16mm running time: 90 min. dist. International
Tele-Film Ent.

● Poetry means performance to an old hand like Allen Ginsberg

