

Claude Jutra's By Design

Inevitably one comes to realize that the vacuous nature of Jutra's newest film, *By Design*, must also reflect his emotional and artistic alienation in English Canada. The film exhibits a faint imprint of his earlier work, but his use of the medium clearly indicates that the shift which has occurred in his own mind, and in cinematic terms, is leading to the Waterloo of a creative artist. There are few moments where Jutra succeeds in transforming an otherwise unsuccessful venture into a meaningful, touching film.

If we remember that Jutra once said, in 1973, speaking of his and others' decision to boycott the Canadian Film Awards: "We are intent on asserting there are two cultures. We have not the same goals, styles, techniques or spirit. You cannot put these two under one roof," we can also better understand what keeps Jutra in Toronto and points west (quoted in Martin Knelman, "Claude Jutra in Exile," *Saturday Night*, March 1977). With the scripts and offers that float about in Toronto, Jutra can keep working (something he can't do in Montreal, due to the industry's stagnation in Quebec), and jump into the North American mainstream. Culture, though, goes deeper than language.

Skill and dedication to his work – whether the acclaimed *Ada*, *Dreamspeaker* or the ill-fated *Surfacing* – are, I'm sure, his utmost concern. However, his motivation for working with an issues as mental health (as explored in *Ada* and *Dreamspeaker*) is very different from what, according to Knelman, people like Jutra and Geneviève Bujold were doing a decade ago in *Kamouraska*, "dramatizing things they knew in their bones – the exciting intensity is lost when talented people are forced to

work on subjects more remote from their own lives."

Understandably *Surfacing* did not work out simply because Jutra had little control over the script, and finally the music and editing work were redone by the producer. But the whole question of his work, in English Canada or anywhere, is a gnawing one.

In another interview, he stated he dreams to make one film a year in Quebec. For now, he has work in English Canada – such as *By Design*.

In the film's opening minutes one senses that Jutra's approach is ill-conceived and badly executed. In the lead scene, he awkwardly introduces his main characters in a sequence which is disturbing in its juxtapositioning of sharp, upbeat titles – bright orange, and electric blue – pulsating title song, and water-front setting. The camera moves, capturing birds on a pier. It follows two women walking through this setting. Then it cuts to a different locale, a static warehouse interior.

As the film evolves it becomes obvious that *By Design* is lacking in vibrance and clarity. It never picks up a stride, and its ambivalence in direction, where Jutra wants it to go, is the film's most serious problem. The film cannot be appreciated as a whole. For instance, the punk titles and raucous soundtrack of the opening do not mix with a later scene in which the camera moves aimlessly in the darkness, finally entering a cabin bathed in golden light, where the two lovers talk about conceiving a baby.

Any attentiveness to character or subject is spare. Rapid shifts in mood, the contrast between soft visuals and hard

– where faces and bodies are set against cold, stark, environments – drain the film of any cohesiveness. Any intelligent development in the storyline is often overrun by an insensitive scene which follows, or the introduction of a character who appears for one brief scene, never to be seen on screen again. It is impossible to discern the filmmaker's intent – as if Jutra himself was unsure of what he wanted to fashion with this film. Nor does he seem to recognize his own uncertainty of vision. He has been interviewed saying that his movie expressed something deep within his soul. But the film's postures and mannerism (with one exception) exhibit a style so devoid of soul that one is left saddened by the empty promise implicit in his remark.

The film focusses on two women – fashion designers, lovers – who choose to have a child. The director has chosen to emphasize none of these issues directly. Rather, one speculates, he has padded the film to reach a larger audience. For example, the essence of femininity is seen as a wall of blown-up photos of breasts, expressed as "a breast, rhythmic – give it a name... TITS TRANSCENDENT." This line drew a chuckle and a snort from the audience. But why resort to such cheap exploitation when, in other sections, the actors seriously suggest that they are on the threshold of pain and pleasure? Could Jutra not have extended the possibilities of one or the other to create a more intensive argument?

Other shots relay chronic, overbearing stiltedness which further cloud the film's vision. As the fashion models appear,

the camera goes 'to the crotch, and closes in from below. The world of high fashion, we are lead to believe, portrays women without feeling. This is reinforced in that even the designers' creations which the models are exhibiting have no flair, no meaning.

The man viewing the fashion parade has a tired expression on his face. The 'look' which is repeated many times over in the film is best termed exhausted. The dialogue is banal. The words, which seem to spring from situation comedy, fall flat.

These tatters – movement and sound – appear strung together. Perhaps Jutra felt that to counterpoise these images would strengthen his central idea, but, ultimately, the movie's images say nothing startling, expressive, or even progressive.

At his best, Jutra is capable of sensitively integrating his characters within their settings and circumstances. But in *By Design* only a single, brief close-up of the two lead actors conveys their sense of love for each other. Instead, the film is saturated with vulgar, inconsequential details, lacks good pacing, and serves more to mock his actors than present them effectively.

If the film was to have been a bold, inventive, humorous and touching tale, it is instead a completely forgettable experience. Lacking a coherent structure and tone, the film only serves up a mish-mash of moral overtones and misgivings.

Philip Szporer ●

● Mixing controversial designs in a controversial movie, Patty Duke Astin sits and listens as Sara Botsford plots the course.



Robert Ménard's

Une journée en taxi

Chalk up some points for dramatic irony. Just as the Applebert report set off another round of collective hand-wringing, an honest-to-God case in point for the viability of Canadian culture, *Une journée en taxi* (A Day in a Taxi), tiptoed sideways into Montreal theatres, did lousy at the box office and disappeared – all this within a scant three weeks and despite the warm critical embrace offered the film by the French press. Fairness or lack of it is quite beside the point: the fact is that Robert Ménard delivered the goods, and that hardly anyone here bothered to pick them up. Score zip for the home team.

This delicate, positively luminous little movie belies Ménard's status as a neophyte feature director because it flows with the graceful self-assurance you'd attribute to a seasoned filmmaker. And in a way, that's precisely what he is. Several years as a feature producer and a ten-year wait before his first shot at directing seem to have primed him for a glowing debut. *Une journée en taxi* serves up the special blend of emotional resonance and stylistic clarity that characterizes our best films, and then goes one better: this Franco Canadian co-production is at once so very Quebecois and so blissfully international that it slides into that special 'movie-movie' category, the kind of film that fills a particular cultural 'context' chock full of universal touchstones. It's open to anyone who wants to take a look.

This is a 'road movie' in a small-scale, very literal way, and it's faithful to the genre. The unlikely fellow-travellers

BY DESIGN d. Claude Jutra p. man. Hugh Spencer-Phillips a.d. Don Granbery (1st), Derek Gardner (2nd), Scott Mathers (3rd) p.a. Catherine Leiterman loc. man. Fitch Cady cont. Monique Champagne p. sec. Anne Mathisen (Vancouver), Yvette Cutrara (Toronto) p. acct. Bernard Ross, Sandra Palmer (asst.) d.o.p. Jean Boffetty cam. op. Peter McLennan asst. cam. Tim Sale (1st), Phil Linzey (2nd) stills Alan Zenuk art d. Reuben Freed, Graeme Murray (asst.), Jim Erickson (asst.) art dept. trainee Lorrie Russell props Wayne McLaughlin set dress. Kimberley Richardson (dept. hd.), Sandy Arthur (best boy), Annamarie Corbett, Sean Kirby, Jennifer Hinde (trainee) painter-trainee Sandra Fox ward. Trish Keating (head), Linda Langdon (asst.), Tiah Monaghan (asst.), Phillip Clarkson (asst.) make-up Phyllis Newman hair Salli Bailey gaffer Don Saari best boy Leonard Wolfe elec. David Grinstead gen. op. Barrett J. Reid, Ray McCurrach key grip Roger Cadieux, Thomas (Paddy) Holleywell (asst.) dolly grip Dave Gordon grip Alan Campbell, Jim Hurford craft service Maureen Young sd. Larry Sutton boom Graham Crowell transp. co-ord. Brian Boyer drivers George Grieve (capt.), David Bowe (co-capt.), Bill McCurrach, Jan Boyer, Peter Lassen, Andrew Neville, Scott Irvine, Danny Johnson construc. man. Barry Brolly scenic artist Floyd Gillis d.o.p. (2nd unit) John Seale cam. op. (2nd unit) Rod Parkhurst cont. (2nd unit) Pattie Robertson gaf. (2nd unit) John Barley p.a. (2nd unit) Tom Braidwood casting Clare Walker/Walker Bowen, Bette Chadwick/The Other Agency Casting Ltd., Lyonne Carrow ed. Toni Myers, Steve Withrow (asst.) pub. Glenda Roy, Les Wedman C.F.D.C. observer Gail Singer l.p. Patty Duke Astin, Sara Botsford, Saul Rubinek, Robert Benson, Clare Coulter, Alan Duruisseau, Jeannine Elias, Jan Filipis, Joseph Flaherty, Jim Hibbard, Mina Mina, Sonia Zimmer p.c. B.D.F. Productions Ltd. exec. p. Douglas Leiterman, Louis Silverstein p. Werner Aellen, Beryl Fox assoc. p. James R. Westwell running time: 93 min., colour, 35min. dist. Astral.

photo: Alan Zenuk