

FILM REVIEWS

125 Rooms of Comfort

A long review of a film you'll probably never get to see.

In Canada we probably see a far larger number of First Features than do the devotees of cinema in other countries. There are relatively few established directors, and, given the scarcity of work being produced, we take more notice of first efforts than might otherwise be the case. This situation has its positive side: we have the opportunity to watch a film-maker's career from its very outset, often from his or her earliest shorts. But it may also mean that we bring our heaviest critical guns to bear on quite tentative works. Few directors launch themselves into features with a major achievement. Those who do – Jutra, Almond, Shebib – usually have a lot of experience in non-feature work, although occasionally a virtual beginner will undertake a manageable story and make a sturdy, sensitive work out of it, as witness **The Hard Part Begins**, directed by Paul Lynch.

But Patrick Loubert has bitten off rather more than he can chew. Only a very experienced director could realize a successful film out of the raw material behind **125 Rooms of Comfort**, and watching Loubert's effort one recognizes again how terribly hard it is to make a movie. Not that he has anything to be ashamed of; **125 Rooms** is serious, honest, difficult, and has some fine things in it. Its shortcomings are not those sins of vulgarity, stupidity, and pretentiousness that have earned years of purgatory for the makers of some much more expensive projects (supply appropriate titles for yourself).

Aware of its weaknesses, the film comes equipped with a defensive rationalization, viz. that the script was sent back two or three times by the C.F.D.C. for re-working, and that its final state represents the uneasily combined work of several hands. The original story, we are told, focussed upon Leo Basho (played by, and to some extent based upon, Toronto performer Les Barker), a night-club comedian who visits the Grand Hotel in St. Thomas, Ontario for a professional engagement which turns out to be the job of hosting a stag

evening for the guys from a nearby factory. In the finished film, Basho's role is secondary to that of Billy Joyce, a burned-out ex-rock-singer whose father, recently dead, used to own the Grand Hotel. An aggressive, young, self-made American, Oscar Kidd, is negotiating with the manager and part-owner, McKeaghan, to buy the hotel, and Billy has been summoned from the Mental hospital to sign the necessary papers. Wrought up to a highly excitable state, Billy resorts again to the drag-queen costume in which (as flashbacks show) he had scandalized everyone at his father's funeral, and is brutally attacked by patrons of the stag evening. Finding the young man in a side alley, Oscar Kidd deliberately lets him die, in order to simplify his business deal. In recognition of the fact that these two stories don't have much organic connection, the film-makers are now tending to emphasize as protagonist the hotel itself – hence the latest of several titles – and to suggest that the action is a metaphorical rendering of U.S. Imperialism in Canada.

Now it must be extremely irksome to have a government agency ordering artistic changes as a precondition for funding, and its right to this kind of intervention is certainly debatable. But I will suggest the possibility that in this case the C.F.D.C. was *justified* in demanding re-writes, and should be condemned not for deflowering the original script, but for failing to insist upon its further development. (Slogan: Otto Lang for Sec. of State; prevent cinematic abortions!) **125 Rooms of Comfort** may well have been finalized at a really inopportune moment. It has been pulled from the shape of its original, but perhaps rather thin and undramatic conception, and never organically recreated around a new centre.

It is because the film has come adrift in this way, that it lacks a sure principle of coherence. It is structurally unsound, as any construct must be when its engineers cannot locate the centre of gravity. Lacking such coherence, it is difficult (pursuing the mechanical metaphor) to decide where the stresses should fall, what parts of the structure are load-bearing, and how they are to be connected.

Essentially there is no positive reason for combining Leo Basho and Billy Joyce into the same action – hence the rather desperate ruse of hiding the stories behind the facade of the hotel itself. As for the notion that the film works as a metaphor of American domination – that is surely wishful thinking. True, there are some suggestive possibilities: the Canadian characters are all, in their various ways, crippled by the strains of trying to ward off hostility and win approval. The tired comedian, the conciliatory hotel manager, and the freaked-out singer all go to pieces in the face of the hard American buyer. And is Billy's transvestism an image of the total "feminization" of the son and heir of the Canadian mansion, an expression of an unconscious desire to be raped? This might be very challenging stuff, and it points towards a daring and sophisticated work. But without asking that the film become either a symbol-equation or a political thesis (depending on the direction of development), one must insist that clearer analysis would have made this element of the script more potent, and would have distinguished the dialectically relevant images from the trivially distracting. In this way, **125 Rooms** could have been like some of those Quebec films in which the condition and behaviour of the leading female character stand in a real sense for La Belle Province in her dealings with the men who variously exploit and liberate "her".

Given this confusion in the script, it must have been difficult for the actors to understand their roles. Les Barker evinces an intelligent awareness of the pathos of his type, and gives a performance with real inwardness. But Tim Henry seemed not to have had the internal coherence of his role as the transvestite explained to him – probably because the writer-director was none too clear about it either. A rather perfunctory flashback hints that Billy's father, who looks like an amalgam of Burl Ives and Col. Sanders, implanted in the boy a sex-role identification with his dead mother. But for the most part Tim Henry clumps around in a long dress, without knowing or feeling why.

Almost inevitably, the not-fully-

realized quality of the screenplay is reflected in the film's visual style. Henry Fiks' photography is often, in individual shots and sequences, dramatically expressive. The hotel milieu provides natural visual images which are employed to advantage: the stairwells, the empty foyer, the corridors and the frosted-glass fire doors. For a low-budget movie it's often pretty good-looking. But there's a tendency to resort fitfully to various contradictory cinematic modes: heightening effects without point, using dramatic angles on insignificant events, and, paradoxically, failing to handle effectively scenes which call for visual excitement. Examples of this latter weakness are the hide-and-seek sequence in the hotel basement, the scenes of Billy's female impersonation (he wears a blond wig about as indifferently as he might borrow an old hat), and the culminating frenzy of the gang-assault. Apparently some scenes so completely failed to come off that they were cut from the final version, notably a scene of Billy's sensational appearance in drag in the St. Thomas carnival parade.

By contrast, or perhaps by necessity, the editing of *125 Rooms* is consistently crisp and professional, a credit to Tom Berner and Gordon McClellan. The opening sequences and a very classy title-montage deserve special mention. When you have a low budget, limited experience, scanty resources, and no opportunity to extend the shoot, stop and rethink, or take whole sequences over again — a resourceful editor, who can take what you came back with and make it work, is your most valuable asset.

This was my 100th Canadian feature film. I'm grateful to the producer, Don Haig, for arranging a screening for me, and must say that he seemed like a wonderfully humane and realistic person for a young director to be managed by. Despite the generally critical tone of my remarks, I believe that the film deserves exhibition and the attention of Canadian audiences. The future of a worthwhile Canadian film culture remains with the Patrick Louberts and the *125 Rooms*, rather than with any number of *Rocking Boats*, *Children under Leaves*, and *Black Christmasses*.

Robert Fothergill

*This review first appeared in Canadian Forum

Will the Real Johnny Canuck please stand up?

When does the hard part begin? When an empty dream and a few bruises are all that's left to show for forty years of a man's life. When he must face the truth and live with it.

Jim King once had a dream. Like so many others before him and so many more to come, he saw fame and fortune in the world of Country and Western music. Goodbye West Eden, Ontario. Lookout Nashville, Tennessee. And now, years later, he is a singer, the King of "King and Country, the Best in Country and Western". But Nashville is still looking. King hasn't made it yet. This week he's playing West Eden. It's a return engagement.

The Hard Part Begins is something of a road film. And true to that tradition, King indeed finds you can't go back. He takes the gig with some understandable reluctance, knowing that he's due midweek in Toronto to talk contract with Hurricane sound, the most important recording company in the country, and knowing too that it could be both his first and final big chance. And yet here he is, after all of these years, heading right back where he started as if nothing had ever happened. Not an encouraging sign.

He has paid his dues, living the sad little life that he sings of in his sad little songs. Country and Western music has always had an acute, if somewhat sentimental sense of the harder realities, a sense which is clearly reflected in Paul Lynch's direction of *The Hard Part Begins*. It's blue-collar existence. Of necessity, he has become a bit of a con-artist. And taken by his personable charm and persuasive optimism, others have been quick to tie their dreams to his star.

There are the women. Jenny Frame, for one, is his girl-friend and King and Country's "other" singer. She's not just some chick that he picked up on a whim, inevitably to be kicked out of his life on the road between one gig and the next. She is, if he only knew how to accept it, their ticket to Nashville. Ironically, she doesn't share his passion for singing; she's happy just to be a part of his life, hoping someday that they might settle

down together. Someday when he has finally made it. For a long time she wants to believe that he will.

There are the men. Duane Eccles is King and Country's steel guitarist and although he's too busy enjoying himself to be much of a musician, he faithfully believes that King will take him along when the time comes. Together with the band's dope smoking drummer, Roxon, the hard drinking Eccles personifies the conflict between Country culture and the Rock culture which is gradually replacing it on the beer hall circuit and dooming Jim King to obscurity should he fail to leave it behind.

There are others too, old friends and enemies from West Eden who view his return with some, if only passing interest. A bitter ex-wife, a troubled son, a dying friend: all have shared King's dream of success at one time or another. And optimist that he is, King doesn't hesitate to let them all know that his time has come. Nashville, by way of Toronto, awaits. . . . It simply remains for him to learn the truth, that it is Jenny Frame who has caught the ear of Hurricane Sound. Young, pretty and vulnerable girl singers are popular these days. Has-beens, so they say, are not. For a moment, King handles the truth badly, the old charm suddenly wears a little thin, the confidence has been shaken. He still has his pride though, as much in his music as in himself. And there will always be other dreamers who are eager to jump on his bandwagon in pursuit of their own fame and fortune. The show will go on.

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So, what in the name of John A. Macdonald are we going to do with all of these Johnny Canucks, so often and so conveniently thought to be "losers"?

Enjoy them perhaps. And forget this business about losers. It's an easy label and says as much for the Canadian sense of individualism as it does for the Canadian hero. Irrepressible and irresponsible, Jim King and others like him, *The Rowdyman* Will Cole and a *Paperback Hero* Rick Dillon, to name but two who are remarkably similar, are some of the very few truly colourful characters that this country