



Monkeys in the Attic

Monkeys in the Attic – A Tale of Exploding Dreams – Produced, Directed and Edited by Morley Markson; Script by John Palmer and Morley Markson; Associate Producer and Assistant Director – John Board; Camera – Henri Fiks; Assistant Cameraman – Fred Goute; Sound – Billy Nobels; Second Assistant Director – Phil McPhedran; Assistant Editor – Eric Johannessen; Sound Editor – Al Streeter; Production Secretary – Lorna Foreman; Continuity – Penny Hynam; Sets and Design – Tony Hall, Arnaud Maggs; Assistant Designer – Patricia Gruben; Costumes – Vinetta Strombergs; Grip – Louis Graydon; Gaffer – Peter Dawes and Doug Beube; Mixer – Paddy Cunningham; Fight Scene Co-ordinator – Bob Orrey; Music by John Wyer and Nexus. Cast – Jackie Burroughs, Victor Garber, Louis del Grande, Jim Henshaw and Jess Walton. Labwork by Quinn Laboratories and Mirrophonics. Produced with the assistance of the Canadian Film Development Corporation. Feature-length, colour, 35mm. Distributed by Ambassador Films. Best Foreign Film – Toulon Film Festival 1974.

Traditionally, clowns were the consciences in the courts of kings and the centres of empires –

A. Ibrányi-Kiss

The first time I met Morley Markson, he was screening **Breathing Together – The Revolution of the Electric Family** at the Toronto Filmmakers Co-op. The Co-op was then in Rochdale. Markson was then into the smile of the Immune.

After the showing, a young actor asked him, "Who was that guy who could only play one chord?" Referring to Allen Ginsberg . . . Markson smiled his smile, and started to explain that all chords were in that chord and what Ginsberg was trying to achieve through mantras. . . .

Breathing Together was already a classic. Shown at the Semaine de la Critique at Cannes, it had also won First Prize at

Scenes from "Monkeys in the Attic"



Monkeys...

the Ann Arbor Film Festival in 1971. That feature-length documentary focused on the media heroes of the 60's — Allen Ginsberg, Buckminster Fuller, Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Fred Hampton, John Sinclair, William Kunstler, Don Cox, Claes Oldenberg, John Lennon and Timothy Leary.

"Making that film was probably the equivalent of doing a post-doctoral thesis in college. I shot something like 65,000 feet of all those people at the peaks of their careers distilling their peak thoughts. I looked at the film God knows how many times on a Steenbeck, over and over again, absorbing everything that was going on. That film can be seen as being self-contradictory, and it is, and that's part of it. It was an incredible part of my education — I learned a lot."

Morley Markson's previous education included studying at the Institute of Design in Chicago. "The New Bauhaus" founded by Moholy-Nagy. He studied two and three-dimensional design as well as photography, art, architecture, technology, mathematics, physics, calculus — "... a very broad spectrum. I ended up being a designer of objects and products. I designed geodesic domes for Kaiser Aluminum. Then it was industrial design in Toronto, with a lot of photography."

The break came when he was commissioned to design Kaleidoscope for Expo '67. "I developed a series of mirrored theatres and made the movies for them, I loved making movies so much that I didn't want to do any more designing. Besides, I saw the writing on the wall. I realised we were moving more into communications and less into the creation of objects. Also, the attitude of people towards objects was becoming more and more destructive. Objects were losing their meaning. People, including myself, were looking for more meaning in other things. Perhaps in our lives."

"So I closed my design office, retired to the top floor of my house and started making a bunch of experiments in film. The whole thing developed very gradually, making films economically and simply and slowly working towards a more

complicated and expensive thing."

One of Markson's short films developed into *The Tragic Diary of Zero the Fool* — his first feature film. Although it was refused entry to the Canadian Film Awards (in fact, the Festival Committee refused to show it to the judges), it won First Prize at the Ann Arbor Film Festival of 1970 as well as at six other American film festivals.

Then came *Breathing Together*, followed by a period of "Reading, doing a lot of reading. Doing a lot of thinking. Writing a few scripts. Traveling." As well as designing two Kaleidoscopic Theatres for Ontario Place and making films for them.

Nonetheless, there were two long years in between films. A frustrated and bitter version of Markson cropped up at film gatherings while trying to raise money for another feature. Now, that's behind him. Originally titled "Killing Time", then "Saviours Are Hard to Find", and finally *Monkeys In the Attic — A Tale of Exploding Dreams* — this is Markson's third feature film. Shot last summer in 35mm as a CFDC low-budget feature, the film has already won the prize of Best Foreign Film at this year's Toulon Film Festival.

What did he learn from making this film? "I learned 'craft' making this one."

It shows. The production value is extremely high, Henri Fiks' camerawork is magnificent, the acting is excellent. Over-all the 'craft' is beautiful.

One of the most fascinating elements of the film is the soundtrack by John Wyer and his group — Nexus. "They improvised as we projected the film on the screen, reel by reel. The first time you see it, you don't know what's going to happen next. They got a kick out of it."

This sound improvisational technique was originally an experiment Markson had tried in a short film, *Our Trip to Miami Beach to Visit Bubie Etta*, which has to be the Ultimate Home Movie. Photographed through a fish-eye lens, the film

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1 *Louis del Grande*

2 *Victor Garber and Jim Henshaw*

3 *Jackie Burroughs and Victor Garber*

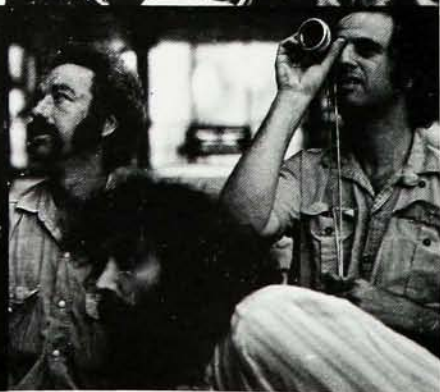
4 *Henri Fiks, John Board and Morley Markson*

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stars his two young daughters playing on the beach. Markson's daughters, Joanna 6 and Selena 4, sing-song a narration of what was happening as the film was projected for them. The feeling is spontaneous and intimate and worked equally well in the feature.

Was there a lot of improvisation in the acting as well? "No. The film was pretty tightly done. The dances and motions were improvisations – not the script. That's where Jackie Burroughs really shines! She's very creative. She really contributes. She's a very powerful force. She's got it, no doubt about that."

And what about moving away from the improvisational? "My previous films had to do with ideas and thoughts, not so much stories. Now, I'd like to move into a story that is a simulation of an event. Purely and totally, and every detail helps create the strength of that event. So I'm looking for a story that's valuable enough and beautiful enough and fine enough so that it can come to life in as many details as possible. A tight script. I'm looking for something like that, and if I write it myself, I don't learn as much. Stories are like pretend – right? Stories are all about the art of pretending. The real challenge now is to make a film so powerful, relating directly to the emotions, so the thoughts or ideas you might develop are secondary to the experience. *Monkeys* does get into some of those experiences. A bit . . ."

Monkeys in the Attic was co-written with John Palmer, but Markson developed the basic theme, "The idea of four people living in a house, and one commits suicide or appears to, over a short period of time. It went through a lot of transformations. It was originally about a house where people go to die. It was into limbo and fantasy but gradually it became more and more settled into things which could almost be real. Not dealing with the motivations of suicide but with the absurdity of situations people might find themselves in. So we sat down and created five characters we thought might be interesting

and proceeded to create a lot of events that might happen in such a house on such a night. John would write out huge sections and I would write out a lot of stuff and we made a lot of changes. We created Frederick and Elaine and Eric. Wanda we didn't quite create. That character was inspired to some extent by Jackie Burroughs in her more comic moments. I had really wanted to work with her. So the film starts at one point and ends very definitely at another point, and everything that comes in between we wrote. But whatever you may think of what I'm saying – you must see the film in order to know what I'm talking about."

Definitely. *Monkeys* is almost impossible to describe without going into vagueness about surrealism and sub-conscious fantasies, and all that. One section in the film seems to reflect a lot of what it's about. One of the characters delivers a chilling monologue in a black void about having gone through LSD and group therapy and Scientology and Liberation and even having asked God the Ultimate Question – but what was the question?

That is a key to the film. "Yeah . . . That section sums up the passion of someone involved in all kinds of head trips ultimately reduced to the ultimate question and the ultimate answer – which might have been God. And then the question is still not answered. Finally, he forgets about the ultimate question and finds himself nowhere – which is where he began anyhow, in such an absurd way. That, for me, is the focus of that film. I love that part – I just can't wait until that happens!"

How autobiographical is that? "What's that film got to do with my feelings? I can't integrate every aspect of that film into what I feel or want for myself. I find it very difficult to talk about motivations and meanings, and you really are on dangerous grounds talking about those things. Sometimes films have a certain quality of mystery and can mean so many different things to different people."

Victor Garber



"I'm not interested in spiritual explanations. I'm interested in football games and hockey games, money, movies, women, sex, war, economics, politics . . . Publish all this!"

So be it. But there is a definite theme running through Markson's films. "I like to use camouflage. It's not so much that I identify with a particular character but I've really been interested in fools. People who come on in a way that is absurd but serious. Like in *Zero the Fool*; and in *Breathing Together* – even Abbie Hoffman, John Sinclair, Jerry Rubin, in a sense. All those characters. It's just a continuation of my interest in people living on the edge of reason and absurdity. It's fascinating for me. I'd like to become a fool myself. I was thinking of studying to be a clown. That would be a lot of fun."

But right now, filmmaking is fun enough. Markson not only co-wrote *Monkeys in the Attic*, he also produced, directed and edited it. "The thing is, when I'm editing all of my films, I think of all the possible questions people are going to ask and I think of all the possible criticisms. Every one. I could write any type of critique for any of my films, and so far I haven't been surprised by anyone. But I like surprises. When I was finishing *Monkeys in the Attic*, I wrote four pages of critiques. I could show them to you – I might publish them."

Could he give a sample? Sure – "Who are these people and why do they do such silly things? How can a film be so utterly absurd? How can he expect people to watch this? What does it mean?" □

Jackie Burroughs