

# FILM REVIEWS

## Why Rock The Boat?

An exciting film in a quiet and unpretentious way, *Why Rock the Boat?* intrigues you, charms you and makes you laugh without ever feeling it is cheap laughter easily earned.

Comedy is a delicate art – the less apparent the effort, the more effective and funny it will appear and the more spontaneous and pleasurable the resulting laughter. So easy to misfire, film comedy is a delight when skillfully scripted, directed and performed – all with a degree of good-natured restraint. And *Why Rock the Boat?* is indeed a delight!

This feature belies the popular view that a film lacks true excitement unless it jolts you out of your seat, induces you to laugh or sob uncontrollably, or drives you out of the theatre with a sudden attack of nausea. Here, you remain seated – calm, dry-eyed and smiling. In complete control of your faculties, you are able to appreciate the pleasure of smiling and laughing *with* a film instead of *at* it. This is indeed exciting: to laugh instinctively without feeling manipulated or conned; to respond with genuine delight instead of derision.

Directed by John Howe, *Why Rock the Boat?* is a National Film Board production, written and produced by William Weintraub who based his screenplay on his 1961 satiric novel. Both book and film trace the early days in the career of a young aspiring reporter named Harry Barnes.

It is the winter of 1947 and the engagingly naive but ever-eager Harry (Stuart Gillard) is fresh from his studies at McGill University. Armed with a scrapbook of his writings for the university paper and with even less experience in the ways of the world, our hero bravely sets out to make his mark on life. Or, more precisely, he sets out to make his mark in the exciting and glamorous world of "JOURNALISM".

Cold reality dictates the first rung in Harry's climb up the ladder to success: he is hired as an \$18-a-week cub reporter for Canada's dullest newspaper, the fictitious *Montreal Daily Witness*. Informed by veteran *Witness* reporters not to "rock the boat" with any fancy ideals or else face immediate unemployment, Harry is no fool and opts for survival as he sets out to keep the boat as steady as possible.

Managing editor of the *Witness* is a hard-nosed, hard-hearted taskmaster with the charmingly appropriate name of Philip L. Butcher (Henry Beckman). Under his strong, misguided leadership the paper is undyingly dedicated to stepping on the toes of absolutely no one, especially those toes belonging to advertisers and politicians. Try as he may, Harry is unable to hide an innate tendency to chafe against the often absurd restrictions placed on *Witness* employees. Not long after being hired (to replace a young man fired for the cardinal sin of mis-spelling the name of an important advertiser) Harry finds his own status clearly defined by an irate P.L. Butcher who announces he will give him a chance but only because Harry has the least important and lowest paying position on the paper – "I can't say goodbye to anyone as refreshingly inexpensive as you."

But in spite of his conformist intentions, poor Harry is constantly tripped up by his own sublimated inclination to rebel. He is genuinely horrified when his whimsical but scathing practice stories inexplicably begin appearing on the front page of the *Daily Witness*. Stolen from Harry's desk, the unsigned stories cause a furor and provoke an unsettling search for the "phantom" writer. Unedited, screamingly funny, but far from flattering to their common subject – P.L. Butcher – the stories are definitely not in keeping with the paper's obsessive conservatism. Harry watches helplessly as his "little" indiscretion mushrooms wildly and threatens to undo all his well-meaning attempts to become as acceptably innocuous as possible.

This is only a portion of Harry's painful yet comic struggle to discover and balance what he really is with what he thinks he should be in order to succeed in life. For the remainder of the film's 112 minutes we are treated to a succession of witty and quietly hilarious misadventures made all the more amusing because of their low-key presentation and a certain unerring ring of truth. When Harry's increasing frustrations in both work and love ultimately converge and explode, understatement is set aside in favour of a marvelously raucous climatic scene. A fine blend of satire and slapstick, this scene has a drunken and love-sick Harry Barnes casting aside all caution as he staggers over the desk-tops in the *Witness* newsroom delivering a stirring

pro-union speech he's not absolutely certain he believes. In part a last ditch effort to win the love of Julia Martin, pro-union journalist from a rival paper, Harry's actions are also a final testimony to his true inability to conform to Butcher's unreasonable philosophies. Without the considerable skills of director Howe, writer Weintraub and the remarkably believable and agile performance of actor Gillard, the scene could have killed the film because of its introduction of a form of slapstick into a film otherwise low-key in its approach. But it works, precisely because its wild abandon is in perfect harmony with Harry's physical and emotional state.

Although William Weintraub has acknowledged toning down the biting satire of the original novel, the film's inventive satiric forays still hit their marks square on and may be all the more successful and scathing because of a delicious veneer of good-natured mischievous fun.

Particularly memorable, quite aside from the swipes at newspaper life, are two inspired send-ups. One deals with benevolent brotherhood associations: in this case it is the Bellringers Club, whose meetings consist of dull speeches greeted with catatonic "enthusiasm" by members who stand up and ring their little handbells on cue. The second target is the erotic love scene, and involves a delightful show-stealing cameo performance by Patricia Gage as Elizabeth Scannell, a predatory married woman (the city editor's wife, no less) who shares a quiet fireside moment popping popcorn with young Harry Barnes. Popping popcorn will never again seem an entirely innocent pastime after this classic scene which makes fun of excessively steamy love scenes while revelling gloriously in its own peculiar brand of eroticism.

John Howe's direction reveals exceptional feeling for understated comedy as well as a sensitive ability to recreate effectively the realities of a past era too often obscured by the excessive nostalgia of less capable directors. In *Why Rock the Boat?* with the talented contributions of cinematographer Savas Kalogeras, production designer Earl Preston and costume designer Philippa Wingfield – not only does the look and feel of the 1940's come alive through careful attention to physical and visual detail, but there is a real sense of what it must have been like to be a young

person starting a career in 1947.

The film could be stronger dramatically if the leisurely pace were tightened somewhat. No scenes need be excised, just trimmed slightly to make the overall production as compact and biting as its individual scenes, and yet retain enough of the leisurely pacing to preserve one of the most effective aspects of the film: the fact that we are permitted an experience of Montreal in the 40's which allows us to appreciate the era more completely, and to understand more fully the depicted experience of young Harry Barnes, cub reporter.

The supporting cast is uniformly impressive from the memorable appearance of Patricia Gage and Henry Beckman's suitably menacing P.L. Butcher, through Ken James's charmingly raffish Ronny Waldron (Witness photographer and Harry's confidant), to the solid performances of all members of the Witness staff including Sean Sullivan as city editor Herb Scannell, Budd Knapp as Fred O'Neill and Patricia Hamilton as Hilda.

Only Tiiu Leek's performance as love-interest Julia Martin is a disturbingly weak link in an otherwise strong chain. This is due primarily to an uncertainty, perhaps partly attributable to director Howe, of whether to portray Julia as a one-dimensional send-up or a more substantial and complex character. Leek's Julia is affable and somewhat amusing in her superficiality; and, in keeping with the style of the film, she is supposed to be rather unreal and larger than life. But then so is Harry Barnes, and actor Gillard *has* managed to balance caricature with human complexity. Thus, one can only assume that Leek's emerging talents are not as yet ready for such a challenge.

Stuart Gillard, whose portrayal of Harry could easily have been a boring one-dimensional cartoon of a naïve innocent, here establishes himself as one of Canada's finest actors because he has refused to depict Harry as anyone less than an interesting and complex human being. Neither a neurotic Duddy Kravitz obsessed with succeeding at any price, nor a spineless nobody, Gillard's Harry is a delightfully complex characterization, a lovingly detailed portrait of the kind of person national surveys delight in labelling "normal". We can identify with Harry Barnes out of instant self-recognition rather than out



Stuart Gillard and Ken James

Scene from "Why Rock The Boat?"



of a certain detached sympathy.

What a pleasure it is to watch Gillard, as Harry subtly yet perceptibly evolves during his newspaper apprenticeship and his excursion into the world of romance! It is a bravura performance of a different breed – instead of a series of clever and dazzling character revelations, Gillard's portrayal is impressive for its restrained and delicate internal quality. When the film is over, it is Stuart Gillard that looms in one's memory, his performance growing steadily in stature because it dominates the film through intelligent and controlled understatement.

Ultimately, although one or two elements are not entirely successful, **Why Rock the Boat?** is certainly a successful film. It is enormous fun because it is fun with perception and insight. That is one of the film's greatest attributes, one that should be applauded loudly and not undervalued.

– Laurinda Hartt

## Why Rock the Boat?

A person must be pretty big at the Board to get to be the producer of his own screenplay of his own novel. Or perhaps *A Matter of Fat* so impressed the NFB heavies that they decided to give William Weintraub the big chance, along with director John Howe, to fold, spindle, and mutilate a full-blown feature idea.

Yes, it's another Canadian screen comedy, in the grand tradition of *Foxy Lady*, *Another Smith for Paradise*, *Tobias Rouke*, *Following Through*, *Keep it in the Family*, and *Only God Knows*. Proceeding in the familiar somnambulistic stagger from one tired situation to another, uncorrupted by much in the way of verbal wit, **Why Rock the Boat?** concerns itself with the journalistic and sexual initiation of a cub reporter on the Montreal "Witness" in 1947. Weintraub, I gather, graduated from McGill in 1947, and joined the

Montreal *Gazette*, and it's strange to see how little imaginative use he is able to make of that experience.

The story is set in the middle of the struggle to establish the newspaper guild, against the unscrupulous opposition of owners and editors. Harry Barnes, our goofy, virginal anti-hero, has no political ideas to rub together, but the Girl he Loves is a guild organizer, and in order to win her esteem he reads a little Lenin. With this intellectual equipment, plus a few shots of rye, he surprises himself and everyone else by delivering a passionate speech to his colleagues, snubbing the apoplectic editor, and inspiring a confident solidarity. A union is born.

Rather a good moment. Makes you want to cheer, like those scenes in schoolboy movies when the timidest boy in the class finally leads an attack on the sadistic headmaster. But the script pushes the moment over the brink into farce, and the scene collapses into a silly rough-house, with people spraying the fire hose all over the office.

Harry hasn't "acted himself into a new way of thinking"; the film sticks to its comic premise that courageous radical action is the accidental by-product of male courtship rituals. Maybe that is essentially what Weintraub believes, in which case the film's vacuous nihilism has at least the virtue of sincerity. But if he doesn't believe that, and has adopted the idea simply in an effort to be funny, then it betrays a pathetic failure of the imagination.

And I'm not saying that everyone has to be solemn and respectful about radicalism. The theory and practice of radical activists cries out to be satirized, if only to 'expose the contradictions' of people whose vocation is exposing those of everyone else. But to satirize something you have to be interested in it; you have to know its real strengths and weaknesses. The authors of *Why Rock the Boat?* might just as well satirize the Catholic Church by implying that all nuns are sexually frustrated — which is possible, unlikely, and as an idea *trivial*.

Well, they will say, but the point was not to satirize anything, but to make a fun film with some honest-to-goodness laughs. So we have yet another film about a goofy guy's stumblebum attempts to get laid. Why do Canadian film-makers find this so funny? (It's the theme of *Foxy Lady*, *Rip-Off*, and the genuinely funny *Chester Angus Ramsgood*, while the type makes another appearance in Markson's *Monkeys*.) I suppose more men than would care to admit it find themselves identifying with the humiliating pangs of despised lust. But a film has to do something

inventive with this material. *Why Rock the Boat?* takes us through the familiar frustrations and longueurs, and eventually propels the voyaging prick into the welcoming harbour of Patricia Gage (the city-editor's wife), who has the dubious pleasure of taking that long-preserved virginity. The nicest moment in the movie occurs when Harry gigglingly admits this conquest to his friend Ronnie, photographer and stick-man. Stuart Gillard's acting sometimes has an engaging authenticity.

Not so Julia, the girl of his dreams. As played by Tiiu Leek she is singularly lacking in warmth or genuineness. In an interview in *Cinema Canada No. 15*, Weintraub declares that his screenplay is "more generous" than his 1961 novel, in that he now allows the guy to get the girl. If Julia were sexually attractive, personally likeable, or credibly admirable as a radical consciousness, there might be some generosity in matching her with our young reporter. As it is, the conclusion of the film looks like throwing a cub to the Christians.

— Robert Fothergill

## The Hard Part Begins

*Directed by Paul Lynch, with Donnelly Rhodes, Nancy Belle Fuller and Paul Bradley.*

If American hucksterism has accustom-ed us to the bloated claims of Hollywood, so Canadian hatred of hyperbole has encouraged the celebration of a tight-lipped quietism. We admire the small and true, praising those mirrors that reflect harmless angles of our society while forgetting that art is the things we do with gained reality not the capturing of its pale image. In many ways *The Hard Part Begins* is a fine directorial debut for Paul Lynch and a measure of its success is that the film makes one wish that it had risked more; aimed a little higher.

Set in southern Ontario the film follows a country singer, Jim King, back to his home town, now just another dismal stop in a career that lives on dreams of Nashville while facing indifferent beer-swilling faces in half-empty clubrooms. During a week of such outrageous fortune that John Hunter's script reads like a caricature of *The Great Canadian Losers* theme, King watches an old friend dying, has his dreams of a Toronto recording contract smashed, loses girlfriend and partner, becomes once more embroiled in the slings and arrows of old family responsibilities and, to round off the week, is beaten up. Jim King will go on, for pride and hopes leave no alternatives and the pleasures of the film particularly Donnelly Rhodes' fine and powerful

performance as King is that we come to care for this tired, battle-worn man. Surrounded but rarely supported by Nancy Belle Fuller as Jenny, the talented girlfriend, and Paul Bradley as the vulgar side-kick, Rhodes' performance shines with memorable truth. A truth gained despite a script that seldom allows the actor the luxury of creative invention, and a director who is clearly insecure with the more revealing moments of an actor's craft.

But Lynch has other skills to offer, especially a good understanding of action. All the musical sequences ring with quiet conviction. So also does a fight sequence that, leading from a fine exuberant solo by Paul Bradley, ends on a quiet note of reality that in a single shot rubs the excitement of the action with the taste of truth and place that is one of the small joys of the film. It is in the quieter scenes that Lynch seems unable to break from the banalities of the script and an obvious awareness of the material's triteness and his own limitations really doesn't help. In almost all the emotional scenes the direction fails to add that stamp of authority and intelligence that would take the viewer past the flat reality of the screen into the heady world of imagination and understanding. Occasionally this passiveness works, as in a harsh and bitter moment between King and his ex-wife where limited means and the viewers sympathy mesh, and the effort, like the words and gestures, lies helpless before the hurt of old wounds and rekindled pain. But by delivering so grudgingly in the scenes that work, false notes and small insecurities become all the more obvious in sections that don't, as in the next pivotal clash between King and his angry son. By couching the performances in the reticent language of master shots, conservative angles and taut editing Lynch draws undue attention to the structure and technique, which, spawned from television documentaries, too often mistakes tired generalities and hackneyed thinking for local colour. Away from the intelligence of Rhodes' face, parts break away from the fabric of the whole leaving "meaningful" pulled focus that arrive only to reveal other linking shots; overlapping scenes that add nothing to the story and cut-aways that prettify in order to look ugly.

Great film is the unity of thought and feeling through action and while one grows to respect the director's effort in this film he never manages to break away from the faulty looking-glass that is the camera lens. *The Hard Part Begins* is often an honest portrait of a sordid world and a fine frame for a moving performance by Donnelly

Rhodes. We can only hope that Paul Lynch's next film will come soon and stretch further.

—Alastair Brown

## Les Ordres

### The knock in the middle of the night

*Written and directed by Michel Brault, Edited by Yves Dion, Camerawork by Michel Brault and François Protat, with: Helene Loiselle, Jean Lapointe, Guy Provost, Claude Gauthier and Louise Forestier.*

At 5:17 a.m. on the morning of October 16, 1970, I was watching television. It was quite a funny program, a bit like Orson Welles radio program supposedly about the invasion of the Earth by Martians. This one was called "The War Measures Act," but unlike Welles' production of thirty years earlier, this one wasn't particularly believable — people en masse being arrested and held without trial; soldiers with sub-machine guns at the corner of Peel and St. Catherine. It was just a bit too far-fetched — this is Canada, after all, British system of justice, nice wide roads, street lamps, colour television, pizza parlors — I mean, I know it might sound a little trite, but surely "it can't happen here."

But for 450 other totally innocent people, the spectacle was a little more involving, because for them that famous knock in the middle of the night that's only supposed to happen in Russia and Nazi Germany, had already happened. One minute at home changing the baby's diapers, the next minute stripped

Scene from "Les Ordres"



naked, hands up against the wall of some anonymous garage, with someone looking up your ass with a flashlight.

Michel Brault's *Les Ordres* ("The Orders" as in "I was only following...") is a film that probably will not be shown commercially in Toronto or Edmonton or Vancouver. Maybe there will not even be an English version. Not that the film lacks drama and not that it is

not well made — it's easily one of the most subtle moving films that I have seen this year — but, you see, the story that this film relates could not really interest people in Toronto or Edmonton or Vancouver because, let's face it, it certainly couldn't happen there. Except for one small fact — it already did. For the law that (in gentle bureaucratise) "suspended" the rights of those 450 Quebecers also suspended the rights of all Canadians. The only difference was that it was they that were stripped, showered, shaven and fingerprinted and thrown into a cell without a word of explanation while you and I watched on television thinking, "well anyways, it has nothing to do with me."

Michel Brault's film, however, provides no such emotional loopholes, so perhaps it's lucky that you probably will never get to see it. The film isn't out to prove anything beyond what the events themselves proved. It is the story of five individuals culled from verbatim interviews with over forty people who, like the rest, had been imprisoned and held without being formally charged. At the beginning of the film the well known Quebec actors give their real names and describe who they are representing in the film — a social worker, union organizer, a doctor and a housewife. This is done not through any Godardian razz mataz, but simply because they are telling the truth. And the stories that follow are not souped up to be any sort of epic tragedy because the simple fact was, that for most of the people arrested, the experience was no more than a minor nuisance (especially when put beside what's happening to other people in other countries.)

Nobody was tortured particularly, and in general everything operated with exemplary efficiency — oh ya well there was this unemployed guy, married with two small children and the prison guards jokingly told him that he would be shot in three days (you know boys will be boys) and he believed them! Isn't that a scream! But maybe after five days locked up in a cell with no explanation, when the worst thing that you had ever done in your life was to drink a few too many beers — maybe even someone from Winnipeg might start to believe that anything is possible. And the fact that he had to enter a mental hospital after he was released — well who knows, maybe he would have gone a little looney anyways sitting at home watching television. You see, there are no real horror stories coming out of this particular reign of terror — a few husbands separated from pregnant wives, mothers separated from their children and people arrested through clerical error. Much worse things have happened.

Look at films like *Battle of Algiers* or *Burn*; now here are injustices that we can really get our political teeth into! But strangely enough, Michel Brault's was much more effective because there is something packaged about a drama, and something packaged about your response to it that makes the experience artificial. For in these dramatic films, with everything sewed up and nothing left dangling, we can all smugly retire to our coffee houses with a comfortable feeling of enagement. *Les Ordres* is different. It is haunting like no other political film partly because it's so close to home and partly because it's so understatedly real. When no one gets killed or tortured we are reduced to mild words like humiliation and injustice. But anyone who has read the history books knows that this is how it happens — Nazi Berlin wasn't built in a day. One of the big things in Canadian law is precedent, and because it could happen so effortlessly four years ago, ("Daddy, what were you doing during the War Measures Act?") it could happen again. Brault's subtle camera and his portrayal of these five ordinary John Smiths makes it bloody difficult to feel smug about anything.

—Ronald Blumer

## The Lost Tribe

*On his last day of work as early morning film reviewer with the CBC in Montreal, Associate Editor Ronald Blumer decided to try out a little test — to give a review of a phony film with an absurd plot and see if anyone would react. The thesis was that if the cadence of the voice is right, and the whole packaged in the right style, any imaginable absurdity could get by. The following review was broadcast Friday August 30, 1974 at 8:15 a.m. So far as we know the only question asked was, how can we see this movie? Mr. Blumer is currently on Baffin Island scouting locations.*

The second film I saw this week, *The Lost Tribe*, is a first feature film by the young Vancouver director John Schouten. The film is worth seeing if only for its rather unusual script because the story presents the astounding thesis that the Eskimos of Northern Canada are in fact one of the lost tribes of Israel — presumably they strayed a little North on their way out of Egypt. The amazing thing is that *this* unlikely story comes across totally convincingly with Murry Westgate giving a powerfully moving performance as the village leader; a sort of Moses in seal skins, who has led his people out of the desert into the barren frozen tundra. But the real star of this film is the special effects man, who has turned this vast biblical metaphor into something very believable on the screen. There is, of course, no parting of the Red Sea in the Arctic Ocean,

but the splitting of the glaciers and the blinding, white on white snow storms raise this modest, low budget film to epic proportions.

The film is chock full of biblical references converted into Eskimo folklore. There are the non-believers praying to the golden walrus calf and the eating of unleavened whale blubber during the pilgrimage to the promised land in mukluks. But this *Exodus* of the North really exists on the level of personal human drama with Alexandra Stewart playing a moving Ruth, and John Vernon as the fiercely credible Johocifat. Intriguing as the idea is though, I'm not sure that this film will convince very many people that the Eskimos are really Jewish; but as the sun sets on the five month long sabbath and you see their ghostly silhouettes against the oil lamps, you get the spooky feeling that the great Canadian North has many secrets still to be told.

— Ron Blumer

## Black Christmas

*Directed by Bob Clark, Produced by Gerry Arheid, script by Roy Moore from "Stop Me...", photography by Reginald Morris (of the Paper Chase), music by Carl Zitrer.*

I was relieved when I noticed the small U.S. flag sitting on the detective's desk at Police Headquarters. It made *Black Christmas* look like an American movie. Also, the kind of crowd that would go to it always bolt abruptly once the film ends; they'd never notice the combined financial credit after the titles to Famous Players and the Canadian Film Development Corporation, or that in fact this was a typical sell-out Canadian film. And they wouldn't need a U.S. flag to identify its national character either.

Robert Fulford tells us that in Barry Lord's Maoist criticism of Canadian art Lord identifies works that colonized people create to buy status and profit for themselves by helping the imperial power exploit their fellow colonialists, as "comprador" art.

That's *Black Christmas*. Politically, it's a browner's sycophantic effort to sidle up to lower U.S. taste for cheap thrills and fast cash.

As Jean Paul Belmondo said to Jean Seberg at the end of *Breathless*: "C'est vraiment dégueulasse."

The strangest thing about seeing this anti-female stock horror caper at the Imperial in Toronto was the incredible juxtapositioning of it with a reasonably clever, highly female-oriented 1972 NFB short, *L'oeuf* by Clorinda Warny, full of surreal effects and montages relating to eggs and life. Someone must



Margot Kidder in "Black Christmas"

have noticed they both dealt with the female.

The combination was about as sensitive as that ad in which a chicken encourages you to eat at Colonel Sanders.

*Black Christmas* is well located and photographed. It features a sorority house where, one by one, accompanied by what women prefer to think of as harmless though sick-minded obscene phone calls, all the little ladies get their comeuppance for being lovely, young, well-to-do and/or liberated. And the most suspicious male is of course artistic. A pianist.

The satisfactions of a film in which upper middle-class females, sharp and sexy, are terrorized and brutally or gruesomely destroyed can be easily seen to appeal to all misogynists, insecure and frustrated men, and a thwarted and denied working class who resent college kids, liberated women, intellectual and particularly artistic males, and, quite possibly, the expense of Christmas.

The performers came in for a shaking from Toronto critics, but actually they were quite acceptable in their roles. Abandoning any social, sexual, moral or political critical attitudes, toward the movie, the females had the edge in performance. Margot Kidder particularly gave life and vivacity to her characterization of the cynical sorority sister, while Andrea Martin (super in *Cannibal Girls*) was humorous, touching, warm, silly and sympathetic to a fault. Even Marian Waldman's guzzling sewer-mouthed house mother, wildly overdone, and American Olivia Hussey as an affected snob-sister, worked hard to try to capture both the silliness and scariness of the plot.

Canadian males shouldn't go unnoticed either. I found it sad, life does

go by so fast, to see Doug McGrath, a male who can literally reek sex, relegated to a sexless stereotyped boob-cop role. But he made it a pleasure anyhow, and with James Edmond, as a father who acts somewhat more bewildered than quite necessary (was he ever told the plot?) and Art Hindle and Les Carlson, the Canadian contingent did what they could, which was basically, lie low.

Keir Dullea played the paperback pianist with anguished sensitivity rather suitably, but finally the only performer came out on top was the heavy breathing garbled telephone voice(s), which gives you some idea of whose alter ego invented the script.

— Natalie Edwards

## Child Under a Leaf

That glossy world pictured in consumer magazines and in sunny Sunday Supplements, with the fur throws, white deep pile rugs, forever green plants, and wide glass walls leading into flagged gardens; that wonder-world of buxom healthy women in impeccable white caftans sprawled contentedly among the cushions, with handsome sensitive males standing nearby holding a Chivas Regal, and maybe a baby or a cat or dog cunningly settled by the latest in porcelain fireplaces; well, that world of fad and fashion and fancy comes to a sort of life in *Child Under a Leaf*, a new semi-Canadian film by George Bloomfield.

Photographed with centre-spread skill by Don Wilder (*Paperback Hero*) the woman is Dyan Cannon (*Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice*), the lover, Donald Pilon (*The Pyx*, *True Nature of Bernadette*, etc.), the baby Julie Bullock and the husband Joseph Campanella. The emotion-nudging music is by Francis Lai, known primarily here for his work for *Love Story* rather than his many Claude Lelouch scores.

This is another CFDC backed film made blatantly for the U.S. market, calculated with such care that commercial slots and easily cut censorable scenes are practically marked with dotted lines, ready to be clipped out for TV. Unlike *Black Christmas*, it doesn't place an American flag in sight, and in fact, to satisfy nationalists, perhaps, an Information Canada sign can be briefly glimpsed in one street scene.

Other than that there is nothing to offend the American TV viewer with a sense of the foreign, especially once Micheline Lanctôt's French Canadian accent has been removed, and another

voice dubbed in.

Bloomfield, five years ago produced works like *Eloise* and *Abelard*, and Pinter's *The Basement* for CBC-TV, works that demanded the creation of a highly romantic, dramatic or logically illogical world. Here he once again attempts to construct an unreal dramatic world, but unfortunately his writing doesn't provide him as director with sufficient dramatic strength or logical coherence to carry his moralistic tragedy.

The story of the eternal triangle plus baby-makes-four seems designed as a luscious slick sad story in the women's weepy vein, but lacks the detail, honesty of perception, and style that made most of those underrated forties' films so successful.

Dyan Cannon, used, tanned, practically a personification of California, is the woman who has everything: husband, home, dream cottage, artistic lover, little dog and, best of all, a pretty baby. The moralistic message of the movie suggests she can't keep it all: the burden of mother love requires some sacrifices and decisions.

The potential subjects here are exciting and relevant. How much do children restrict sexual adventure? What duties and responsibilities are essential? Greed, and possessiveness for objects, creatures and loved ones can indeed lead to disaster, and a contemplation of the interlocking uses people make of each other under the banner of love could provide the film with a fascinating examination of contemporary means and morals.

Unfortunately the characterizations are as superficial as the décor. We seem to be watching made-up people in a made-up place, and the surface gloss is so hard we cannot feel the pulse or smell reality anywhere. As a result it is difficult to care what happens to these people, and even the death of a puppy dog or a baby is as uninvolved as a newspaper item. This fictitious world with its unbelievable romanticism, is, in fact, unbelievable.

Don Wilder's photography reveals to us a world that is glossy, commercially pretty and totally false. No amount of subtle acting, plot repair or charged direction can dispel the influence of the visuals as designed and photographed, unless they are calculated for ironic contrast. And when the characters are as glossy and unreal as the environment, there is no contrast. Thus the design of the film, the conflicting art styles purported to be by artist Pilon for instance, the meaningless photography, and the motivational holes in the story (big healthy babies that age don't die instantly from a bit of cotton in their mouths for example) weaken the film drastically.



Dyan Cannon

There is always, however, a favorite scene for me in every film I see. In this it is Al Waxman's hilarious gunshop proprietor leafing through a magazine of sexy pictures, expressing disbelief, amazement and delight in turn. At least the voyeurism and eroticism are frankly enjoyed for what they are and not hypocritically delivered as art. It's a refreshing moment.

The second funniest scene was unintentional, and involves Pilon and Cannon driving their white sports car to their special field to make love. She jumps out and in one swift gesture disrobes and flings her arms up in a gay mother earth come-and-get-it pose. Inspired, he whisks off his shirt (no buttons) but then suddenly sits back down in his car. To take off his shoes and socks? To hide his genitals? No. To drive the thirty feet or so over to her.

Now how much more California can you get?

— Natalie Edwards

### Child Under a Leaf

It's all very tragic. The old Greeks would have loved *Child Under a Leaf* with its grand and noble passions and classic themes of Life, Death and Retribution. Of course, the details of *Child Under a Leaf* are long removed from antiquity, although the story has a certain timelessness. It's a tale of two lovers, their affair and the man who comes between them. In years past, it might have been written in rhyming couplets: For never was a story of more woe. . . . Than this of Joseph and his Domino.

She's married. He's not. Together they have a child, a baby girl. The problem is her husband. Who else. He's

in the way, he's suspicious and he's making threats. He has already killed her French poodle, simply because "he knew that (she) loved it". For the same reason, Joseph is in danger. Perhaps the child is too. They discuss murder: "Maybe I should kill him. . . . But what if you miss? I'll practice. . . ." Joseph buys a gun, but they do nothing.

It's a promising conflict of tensions. And the child's presence provides the film with an interesting structural twist on the usual lover, wife, husband triangle. But writer-director George Bloomfield has left his characters high, though not always dry, uninteresting and very much unmotivated. They are, in fact, people with no past, and of

Scene from "Child Under A Leaf"



course a questionable future. Domino and Joseph are in love and that apparently is explanation enough. At least Domino, with a child to love and a husband to hate, is emotionally fulfilled, even if she's not at all happy. Dyan Cannon, in a fiery and provocative performance, captures both the passion and despondence of this woman torn between the child and Joseph. (That sounds significantly Christian, doesn't it?) Unable to have both, she will have neither. The film's development is predicated on her indecision and its resolution on her presumably symbolic talent for unveiling death. It's all very tragic indeed.

It might also be very touching . . . if it wasn't so damned serious. The affair is such a joyless, desperate matter. In the Grand Tradition of love stories, it's an intensely intimate relationship, an all-consuming passion with its own personal humour and rituals. For Domino and Joseph, everything else is unimportant. Its effect on their lives is profound. Played by Donald Pilon, he of the love-lorn stare, Joseph is a painter. And what does he paint? Pictures of the old deserted farmhouses and barns which identify the many countryside locations of their secret rendezvous. His masterpiece is something called *Child Under a Leaf*, a private joke that only he and Domino would understand.

How remote and all-exclusive! And how very typical. It's easy to watch them from a distance, but rarely do they offer an invitation to come closer, to become emotionally involved. They act as if the world were theirs and theirs alone. No one could conceivably be interested in their ritualistic intimacies, complete with wine, grapes, flowing gowns and the occasional Dionysian open-air setting. Could they? Although Euripides would probably be pleased with it, an affair on-screen as off, demands a little more discretion.

— Mark Miller

### Three short films on old people

Why are we reviewing shorts — is this a new policy? Yes.

Were You There When — the president of one of (Canada's) foreign-owned theatre chains publicly maintained that his houses couldn't run Canadian shorts because they were not told about them? Cinema Canada is trying to ease this situation by periodically covering short films which could beautifully precede features in theatres from coast to coast. (Who ever said we weren't willing to cooperate with Big Business, anyway?)

Here's hoping you will soon see such lovely documentaries in our theatres.

All three of these films reflect the phenomenon of increasing fascination with the aged, and are probably a healthy reaction to the youth-cult of the 1960's.

### Granny's Quilts

*Directed by Zale Dalen, produced by Laara Dalen. (Full crew list slipped us by folks, sorry . . .) Highlight Productions, 24220-112th Avenue, R.R.no.1, Maple Ridge, British Columbia.*

A lovely documentary besides a step-by-step illustration of how to make quilts, *Granny Quilts* captures the mood of long quiet hours spent meticulously producing folk-crafts. The "Granny" of the title lives on a farm in B.C. and still uses the frame her grandfather constructed out of hand-hewn wood. Last year, she made a dozen quilts — over her lifetime, hundreds. However, the art of making quilts might not survive her generation since machines can now produce them so much quicker and cheaper. Even if it can't spur a quilting movement, *Granny's Quilts* has captured the beauty of this lady and her quilts in a warm and lyrical film.

*Louise Tandy Murch*



### At 99 — A Portrait of Louise Tandy Murch

*Produced and directed by Deepa Saltzman, cinematography by Hideaki Kobayashi, sound by Koji Ota, edited by Lorne Gould. Sunrise Films, 344 Walmer Road, Toronto, Ontario.*

Shot mainly in the house this amazing lady has lived in for 61 years, *At 99* is a strong yet gentle film about being in love with life. We follow Louise Tandy Murch through her daily activities, at her 99th birthday party, performing for a group of senior citizens, and simply being wonderful. She radiates enthusiasm while singing her favourite songs (You've got to accentuate the positive, Eliminate the negative . . .) and accompanying herself on piano. Her joy is so contagious, she even managed to get the film crew into a singalong of "The Sound of Music" during shooting! Music is her main passion, ". . . because it's invisible". She took up yoga at age 90, which she happily demonstrates while exclaiming, "Breath is life itself! Oh! That feels good!" In answer to whether she enjoys being old, she smiles, pours a

cup of tea, and says, "Yes I do, and if I weren't 99 years old you wouldn't be here — would you? So you see, it has its advantages." Deepa Saltzman has been so inspired by getting to know this remarkable lady, she plans to make a series of films about active old people. Her next film will probably be about a blind 104-year-old Sufi doctor in Delhi, India. It's definitely worth waiting for ...

## Lyle Leffler — Last of the Medicine Men

*Produced, directed and edited by Michael Hirsh, cinematography by Jock Brandis, sound by Elaine Waese and Charles Bagnall, production assistant Elaine Waese, graphic montage by Peter Dewdney, illustrations by Rowesa Gordon, Nelvana Ltd., 525 King Street West, Toronto, Ontario.*

There most definitely is a Lyle Leffler — he's the proprietor of the Valley City Herb Distributors in Rockton, Ontario after having made and sold tonics and teas all his life. The film highlights Mr. Leffler and his family with such ironic humour and gentle objectivity that the audience never quite knows whether to laugh or take it all seriously (and the filmmakers were too smart to destroy this subtle undercurrent). After all, who could avoid being fascinated by a traveling medicine man whose wife, Baby, wrestled their dancing bear while he played accordion and sold snake oil? Shot in southern Ontario, footage covers the family's manufacturing plant, old photographs of the Leffler traveling van, the collecting of herbs and teas in the fields, and Mr. Leffler's 84th birthday party. Definitely an entertaining and unusual documentary on a living folk hero.

—A. Ibrányi-Kiss

## REUNION

*Script, Direction and Editing: Murray Battle, Performers: Karyn Morris, Jack Zimmerman, Pauline Hebb, Zanna Ellis, Lighting/Cameraman: Mark Irwin, Sound Engineer: Fraser Smith, Assistant Director: Anthony Azzopardi, Assistant Cameraman: Paul Dunlop, Set Designer: Elizabeth Ascott, Costume Designer: Ruth Hope, Laboratory: Bellevue Pathé Ltd., Sound Mixer: Ian Jacobsen (Film House), Produced by: Murray Battle and Mark Irwin at York University, 28 min. 16mm, colour.*

An interesting and unusual film turned up at the October showing of six student films at York University, Ontario. It was *Reunion*, a first fiction film by Murray Battle, and the 1973 first prize winner in the Student Film Festival in Montreal that year. (see *Cinema Canada* coverage issue No. 10-11).

In the film we observe the illusionary aspects of appearances through the tale of a man who has been a soldier, has later been imprisoned, and is making a belated return visit to what was once his home and family.

Nothing is what it seems. The man appears to mistake his grown daughter Margie for the young woman his wife was twenty years earlier. And the young woman, apparently trying to make some contact with him through this time and memory lapse, and perhaps also in order to reconstitute her own past through her mother's and the role of this strange, tight, singular man in it, effects a peculiar, eerie transition.

Dressed and made up in late forties' style, she presents herself to her father, and numbly dances with him to the seductive tones of *Serenade in Blue*.

Freudian comments need hardly be specified as daughter and father dance in an uneasy simulation of a past that existed only for one of them. And in spite of the fact the plot seems as full of holes as a lace dress, and the rescue of the daughter from the uncomfortable dilemma of bedtime is coincidentally convenient rather than a structured element of the plot, and the mysteries of why the father was jailed and for what, and why the mother died and of what are never solved, still the film maintains a solid level of its own existence on its own terms. And this is a remarkable achievement in a first fiction film.

It is permeated with a sense of loss and of unhealed wounds that are partly created by the skilled use of exaggerated disorienting sound, coupled with slow, deliberate visual pacing, and mirrored in the stately careful acting presentations by Jack Zimmerman and Karyn Morris, both very fine.

The underlying comment in the film implies that a sentimental attitude to the past cannot bridge the distance no matter how keen the intentions, and in the story the hurt feelings and misunderstandings of twenty years earlier are not cleared away, and the man leaves at the end still determined to maintain his illusions and his pain, leaving his daughter unable to mend or alter the past he lives in.

The chief assets of the film however are not just in the complications of the story line or the psychological hints of the relationships, but in the control director Murray Battle and photographer Mark Irwin have achieved over their material.

In one sequence, the father sits nervously in a chair in his old apartment. We are led into this scene by the daughter's monologue, in which she asserts she always knew he'd come back. A close-

up of his eyes is accompanied by a ringing sound as his finger circles the top of his wine glass. We flash into some brief shots of soldiers, a sense of terror and brutality, and a scream. The sound of the scream wavers, trembles, and turns into the siren of an ambulance outside the apartment. This transition in and out of his thoughts is created with a remarkable fluidity, cleverly controlled by sound.

While we watch these two strange remote characters, their separation through time and memory as clear as their obvious physical presence together, we are in the power of a young filmmaker who knows how to create his own particular world, one where his own myths, dreams and realities can exist.

This is the kind of power that excites. With this it is possible that writer-director-editor Battle, whose first film with Mark Irwin was a striking impressionistic documentary called *Union Station*, can produce some fine future Canadian films.

The York University program also included three capable documentary films, a proportion justified by the high interest in this genre in the department, and its undeniable practicality. *Being First* by Ruth Hope (who created the successful costumes for Battle's film) is a study of the training of an athlete for competition. *Jon Higgins*, examines the musician and teacher and, made by York students with the aid of Terry Filgate, uses Indian music to fine advantage in a well produced work; and *Press Porcepic*, a rough but informative short on this out-of-the-way publishing house made by Paul Caulfield.

The only abstract film was an impressionistic melange on *Highway 400 North* and the one humorous film was a tongue-in-cheek treatment of a modern problem in an old style, a silent and titled presentation of *Her Decision* backed by the incomparable piano accompaniment of Charles Hoffman.

Not all of these films are ready for commercial distribution, but it seems to me that any distributor ready to prove a sincere interest in Canadian filmmakers could easily tuck one of these shorts into a bill in place of those sunfish and sailing-in-Bermuda shorts. Without a doubt the reactions of a regular movie audience would do much to creating a professional attitude in the film makers. For jeers or cheers, what is needed is an audience.

— Natalie Edwards

*Note: Reunion, Her Decision and Press Porcepic are distributed by the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre.* □



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Page 4 – from top: Susan Schouten, Baltazar, Mary Leslie and Laurinda Hartt

Page 6 – Baltazar

Page 10 – (Spring) Raphael Bendahan (Acoma) Baltazar (Sparling) Courtesy Canadian Film Archives

Page 13 – Tom Urquhart

Page 26 – Art McKay

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Page 28 – Art McKay

Page 28-29 – Chuck Lapp

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Pages 44-47 – Baltazar

Page 62 – Photos 1 through 7, and 9 by Natalie Edwards

Page 62 – Photo 8 by Gunter Ott

Page 64 – Tom Urquhart

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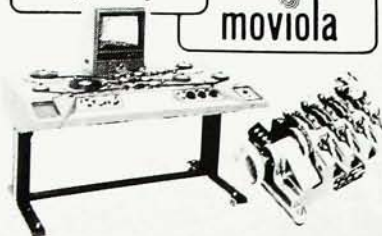
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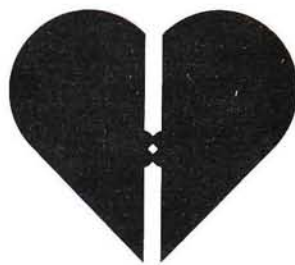
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