

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