

film, and in its way, a courageous film. Rubbo, by poking his camera into the entrails of contemporary political thought, de-mythologizes the canonized experiments in Communism. Whether they be Leninists or Maoists. Does that mean that Rubbo implies advocacy of Democracy? Does it mean that there are limits to the potential of Government involvement in the private life? Or is he asking the question, "Can we live with the anxiety democracy promotes in individuals?" His own behavior in the film suggests the latter is a possibility. Certainly the figure of Solzhenitsyn, what he stands for, is the only positive element in the film.

Which brings me back to Michael Rubbo, the National Film Board and the Canadian audience. This film was produced in Canada, and one can be very proud that such a film could be made in this country. The film is mature, probing and satisfying on an intellectual as well as aesthetic level. And yet there is a question about the life of this film here in Canada.

It is appalling to learn that this film has already been sold to PBS in the

United States and shown at the Film Forum in New York. It has yet to be shown here except for screenings at universities and at the Grierson Seminar in Orillia. They love Mike Rubbo in the U.S. and embrace his work. Apparently we don't. One doesn't know who we are, but we exist, because Rubbo's films have met a lot of resistance here in Canada. He sent the film to the U.S. first because he's had too much non-response to his films at the CBC and because his films are only routinely distributed via district offices of the NFB. Apparently the CBC is not alone. The film was raked over the coals at this year's Grierson Seminar.

This is very sad given the filmmaker and his work. Rubbo is a major artist. Perhaps the reason, to harken back to the beginning of this review, is his interest in international subject matter, lack of overt Canadian content. If this is so, the loss is ours. Next year Michael Rubbo will be filmmaker in residence at Harvard University in Boston.

Kenneth Dancyger

Diane Létourneau's Les Servantes du Bon Dieu

d. Diane Létourneau with the collaboration of the Petites Soeurs de la Sainte-Famille; resch. Diane Létourneau, sc. Louise Carrier, ph. Jean-Charles Tremblay, asst. ph. Pierre Duceppe, ed. Josée Beaudet, sd. Serge Beauchemin, lighting Jacques Paquet, lighting asst. Denis Hamel, p. Claude Godbout, Marcia Couëlle, p.c. Les Productions Prisma with la SDICC, Radio-Québec, and L'OTEO, col. 16mm, (year) 1978, running time 90.

In art, death is rarely represented as a peaceful closing of the eyes.

Diane Létourneau's 90 min. documentary *Les Servantes Du Bon Dieu* (The Handmaidens of God), filmed among the nuns of the convent of Saint-Famille in Sherbrooke, Québec, is above all a film about passing on. It is about a dying order of women. Their convent, established in the 1890s, now faces closure because the sisterhood cannot attract youthful recruits. The average age of the sisters of Saint-Famille is 60.

The film reveals the tranquility of their aging. No words, written or spok-



Two "petites" sisters of the Sainte-Famille
photo: Yves Ste-Marie

en, can transmit the humility and serenity we witness in the eyes and faces of the nuns whom we meet in this film. In

our jagged age, it is a provocative confrontation.

The sisters of Saint-Famille were organized and still function primarily as a domestic service organization for the priesthood. In the film we see them at their daily duties and dedications, laundering, cooking, cleaning. Theirs are simple lives, lived with deliberation and a good deal of humor.

No one could fail to be captivated by some of the spunky, guileless old ladies who make their debut in *Les Servantes du Bon Dieu*. One feisty octogenerian tells us that she adopted a black habit, when most of the others wear white, because she likes black, always has, then gets up and shuffles off camera. There is zest also to the two nuns who live in the garage, to be closer to the automobiles for which they are responsible, who we find in serious discussion about the relative merits of the Pontiac and Chevrolet!

The nuns are curiously natural, though sometimes shy in front of the camera. But it is the qualities we least expect to find among such women, namely their independence of mind and firm pride of vocation, that make them so attractive.

One senses that Létourneau was herself surprised by the personalities she encountered. Through a series of interviews, which we soon realize are of the same format (why did she join the convent, at what age, is her work satisfying?) we discover the wealth of character among the women living in this religious collectivity. The interviews also reveal something about conditions for Québec women early in the century when the choice of a religious vocation often meant the only access to a career and life outside the home. (Until the Quiet Revolution, religious societies had responsibility for education and health care in Quebec, and many women made prestigious careers in these areas.)

In the end, however, the repetition in the interviews becomes tedious, and works against the tension of discovery. The director's zealotry in one area underlines a curious gap in another.

On one level, Létourneau is fascinated by the simple satisfaction with which all the work in the convent is done. There are languid shots of hands meticulously folding linens and ladling soup, silent views of women at work dusting some part of the sanctuary. Yet when the cardinal, speaking for the priests to whom the service is rendered, says with uneasy dignity, that the first quality of the nuns is their faithfulness

in service, we sense feminist indignation. The paradox comes when the director uncovers nothing but expressions of contentment among the nuns as labourers. If Létourneau meant to comment on church hierarchy and politics then it would have been more appropriate to treat the question of hierarchy within the convent itself. In fact, the day to day running of the convent, the people behind its apparently smooth operation, are never seen.

It is a priest, whose habit it is to ring for the dinner that the good nuns have prepared for him, who makes one of the telling comments on the experience Létourneau documents. Gently, he reminds us that these women face death without fear.

The final images of the film show the preparation of and closing of a coffin, and the procession of the sisterhood that accompanies it to the grave. It is rare footage, not only because cameras are usually foreign to even semi-cloistered convents, but because the audience

shares in the intimacy of the ritual.

A word should be said about the cinematography by Jean-Charles Tremblay, who has approached his task with the same thoughtful concern for detail that he found among those he was photographing. He understood the quality of silence in the vaulted architecture, in the swaying habits of the nuns, in their work, and, at his best, toned his lighting and movement to those elements.

Most of us adopt a certain reverence of perception to the religious sisters we encounter in life, and perhaps the mystique exists nowhere stronger than in Quebec where, at one time, almost every family sent one of its daughters into religious life.

Change in Quebec means that convents such as the home of the sisters of Saint-Famille will possibly disappear. This film helps us to understand the attraction and the reality of the choices *les servantes du bon dieu* have made.

Joan Irving

even more strikingly, the film itself reiterates Shilling's style through its similar use of color, texture, and faces. Vivid and colorful settings for his on-camera interviews often repeat the tones and hues just previously seen in a Shilling portrait. The words of the narration are as direct as the honest expressions captured in the painted portraits. As well, the film incorporates bold contrasts of texture and tone to highlight special moments.

As documented in this film, Shilling's life as an Indian artist has been one of continuing struggle, reaching its lowest point in 1975 when he faced death from heart disease at age 34. A series of self-portraits made over several years clearly reveals a young man struggling with inner and outer conflict. Facing death was a turning point for Shilling. The filmmakers, having shown us the vitality in his work and surroundings, at this point in the film include a sequence utterly drained of colour, a bleak wintry drive through barren landscape that works effectively as metaphor. Following successful heart surgery, Shilling's life and the screen itself become infused with a resurgence of color and activity. We see Shilling surrounded by family and friends, building a home, studio and art gallery on the Rama reserve. Final shots of the artist and his wife Millie with their first baby convey a wonderful feeling of harmony. Photographed inside the home they have built, this closing sequence of family portraits provides a simple and poignant finish to a film about cycles of life.

The Beauty of My People has won the awards for Best Direction and Best Scriptwriting in the American Indian Film Festival held in San Francisco, 1979. It is Alan Collins' directorial debut, though he is known for his editing expertise on such features as *The Brood*, *Love at First Sight*, *The Clown Murders*, *I Escaped from Devil's Island*, *Von Richthofen and Brown* and television work including *The Newcomers '1911'* (directed by Eric Till), *We've Come a Long Way Together* (Don Shebib), and *Backlot Canadiana* (Peter Rowe).

The experience of viewing *The Beauty of my People* is an inspiring one. Devoid of sentimentality and cliché, the film simply and powerfully shows us one man in the process of transcending limitations. In a remarkable way, *The Beauty of My People* urges each one of us to become who

SHORT FILM REVIEWS

The Beauty of My People

d. Alan Collins, sc. Gary George, narr. Sherman Maness, ph. Dennis Miller, Robert New, ed. Alan Collins, sd. David Lee, Terry Cooke, m. Court Stone, p. Alan Collins, p.c. Nova Picture Productions (Toronto), col. 16mm, (year) 1978, running time 30 minutes, dist. National Film Board of Canada.

"I paint because there is no other way to express the beauty of my people," says Arthur Shilling, the Ojibway artist who is the subject of this award-winning documentary. Similarly, filmmaker Alan Collins expresses the powerful beauty of his subject by structuring the film along a narrative line of personal, human struggle, and by meticulously attending to stylistic elements that coincide with Shilling's own visual work. The result is a film that achieves harmonious unity with its subject.

As a painter, Arthur Shilling's work is characterized by a bold use of color and broad brush strokes which critic Peter White has called "reminiscent of Van Gogh." He is primarily a portrait

artist, using his relatives and friends on the Rama reserve as subjects. Collins' film shows us dozens of these portraits, along with the people and landscape which inspired them. But



Arthur Shilling, an Ojibway artist who faced death at 34 photo: Rudi Bies