

REVIEWS

Don Owen's Unfinished Business

Don Owen is the Canadian Orson Welles in the sense that critics have never allowed him to live down not living up to his first feature, *Nobody Waved Goodbye*. Yet Owen's first decade as a feature director (1964-1975) coincided with the worst possible time for a filmmaker to attempt to come-of-age stylistically (the '60s and all that) and survive financially (the tax shelter and all that). Nevertheless, the fragmentary nature of Owen's production since *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, especially the decade of virtual silence since *Partners*, suggests that we might refer to his entire oeuvre by the title of his latest film, *Unfinished Business*.

A sequel/remake to/of *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, *Unfinished Business* traces the story of Izzy (Isabelle Mejjias) from disaffection with life at home with Mom to running away to Queen Street, involvement in the anti-nuke movement, the Litton bombing, discovering sex, and eventual reconciliation with her father.

The problem with *Unfinished Business* is, God help us, the generation gap. Not the one between Izzy and her parents (Peter Kastner and Julie Biggs, the original troubled teens of *Nobody Waved Goodbye*), but between Owen and his subject.

The problem is that while we tend to perceive a new generation every few years, there are actually about 20 years to a generation. Owen, born in 1935, is part of the generation of WWII (the '50s are the hangover of the '40s, just the way that the early '70s were a hangover of the '60s). Being a late WWIIer, he was capable of great empathy and identification with Peter and Julie, who were very early '60s. Izzy, however, is '80s, and Owen doesn't quite grasp the differences between the generations (I'm not sure I do, and I'm a late '60s person). One only has to look at films by some really young directors - John Gianvito's *Flowers of Pain*, or Leo Carax's extraordinary *Boy Meets Girl* - to know that people coming-of-age in the '80s express their angst in different ways than those of the '60s (catatonia seems a preferred model).

Izzy's rejection of her comfortable life in North Toronto, and the ensuing plot, are not merely expressions of adolescent angst expressed in terms of the wrong generation (not to mention details such as the kid who freaks out on what is supposed to be coke and acts like he's on a bad acid trip), but the impossibly compact time-structure simply makes the events wildly improbable. After all, Izzy is a supposedly intelligent late teenager at one of Toronto's better high schools. Is it conceivable that she has never heard about the anti-nuke movement, or seen a film about the effects of nuclear war? (She must watch television - didn't she see *The Day After*? It was probably assigned in class!).

Finally, there is Owen's selection of Queen St. West, the home of the hip in Toronto (insofar as anyone in Toronto is hip - with their slavish reliance on New York and London, the best most Toron-

tonians ever achieve is trendy). The desperate sincerity of anti-nuke politics is the opposite of the sort of drop-dead cool that hipness demands. The milieu is more Cabbagetown than Queen W. Owen himself is so unhip it's a wonder his ass doesn't fall off (this is a compliment, by the way - the merest manifestation of hip generally makes my skin crawl). This is why Parachute Club is such a perfect choice to give *Unfinished Business* the patina of hip, even if they are seen rehearsing with uncommon enthusiasm in the middle of the afternoon, though from the record-perfect sound one wonders why they rehearse at all.

That's the downside. The upside is that for every scene that makes you gasp with disbelief, there is one that demonstrates Owen's extraordinary touch with actors (he is the only director in history to get interesting, believable performances from Alexis Kanner and Hollis MacLaren) and ability to guide them to the emotional truth of a scene.

The early scenes between Izzy and her mother give a very precise sense of how the widespread dissemination of psychobabble has given the appearance of greater communication that are actually new ways not to communicate. Izzy's amiably teasing chatter is just a new version of Peter's sullen silence in *Nobody Waved Goodbye*: a little game called "How far can I push them this time?"

Peter Kastner brings a genuine rueful poignancy to his role: the young, inarticulate rebel without a cause may have become a commercial director, but he knows how events have a way of overwhelming adolescent inspiration.

Then there is Isabelle Mejjias. If this were a country with any sort of rational production/distribution/publicity system, a performance like this would mean that she would immediately be talked about in Hollywood - Mejjias has star quality like you wouldn't believe - bright, funny, unconventionally gorgeous. It is always difficult to tell with

new performers (she had done a couple of unreleased tax-shelter movies before this) how much of a performance is the actor's and how much the director's. But given that Mejjias is the only survivor of the dull grey pall that hangs over *The Bay Boy*, it is safe to say that her performance here is no fluke. She has two or three scenes (especially a farewell in a bus-station with Peter Spence) in *Unfinished Business* that are as good as anything I've seen in years.

What's unfortunate about *Unfinished Business* is that it is the germ of a great movie, but it decided to grow with its roots up. The commercial compromises made (when a director has been out of work this long, they are understandable) to turn the film into a movie about kids has destroyed the movie that Owen would have been the ideal director for - the one about old rebels becoming comfortable and not quite being able to figure out the dissatisfactions of their children.

John Harkness ●

UNFINISHED BUSINESS d./sc. Don Owen p. Annette Cohen, Owen d.o.p. Douglas Kiefer loc. man. Marc Dasso cast. d. Diedre Bowen extras Peter Lavender cont. Tannis Baker a.d. Martin Walters 2nd. a.d. Rocco Gismondi 3rd a.d. Howard Rothschild asst. to d. Patricia Rozema props. Enrico Campana make-up Ava Stone choreo. Johanna Householder sd. eds Peter Thil-laye, Michael O'Farrell re-rec. Hans Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll 2nd unit. cam. Anthony Bliss asst. art d. Andrew Owen ward. mist. Maureen Gurney const. man. Jon Bankson p. coord. Fran Solomon post. p. coord. Grace Avrieth p. assts. Arthur Reinstein, David Flaherty, Steven Fegelman lab. National Film Board of Canada acct. Judy Rosenberg admin. Marie Tonto-Donati, Sandie Pereira stunt. coord. Dwayne MacLean, Shane Cardwell stunts Peter Cox, John Stoneham, A. (Tye) Tyukodi, Brent Mayar, Leslie Munro p. man. Bob Wertheimer songs Parachute Club, Stand Film p.c. Zebra Films, Toronto l.p. Isabelle Mejjias, Peter Spence, Leslie Toth, Julie Biggs, Jane Foster, Melleny Brown, Chuck Shamata, Peter Kastner, Ann Marie Mac-Donald, Ann Medina, Marc Gomes, Maggie Huculak, Reg Dreger, Mark Dennis, Allegra Fulton, Skip Prokop, John Stoneham, Brent Meyer, Harry Mc-Williams, Kurt Freund, Irene Pauzer, Dora Dainton, Theresa Tova, Shane Cardwell, Bruce McFee, Gail Kerbel, Jim Bearden.

Edie Yolles and John Bradshaw's That's My Baby

Under a veneer of mildly inept comedy, *That's My Baby* is a mildly disgusting, reactionary tract that must have at some point looked as feminist and progressive and '80s-optimistic as all hell. I mean, what could be more Sunday-supplement upbeat than a young professional couple who break up over whether or not to have a baby, get together again, have the baby and triumph over the difficulties? The idea is a natural; things must have only turned vile when Edie Yolles and co-writer, co-director John Bradshaw, actually began to put it down on paper.

For starters, it's the husband who wants the baby and we're supposed to like him for that; he's the hero. Nothing wrong with that; only they've made him almost impossible to like. This is a man who, in 1984 when jobs are scarce, drops out to "find himself," who springs his desire for fatherhood on his unsuspecting wife loudly and in a public place, who gets resentful at his wife's career success, gets jealous at her mild (very mild) career-motivated flirtation with a co-worker and petulant at her sensible objections to parenthood.

This is an emotionally-retarded 19-year-old in a 30-year-old body and Timothy Webber plays it to the hilt, hard-selling the "boyish charm," hammering home the explicitly self-pitying lines and pulling Bill Murray-moves all over the place while trying to replace their essential sleaze with sincerity. It makes you wonder what his wife - Sonja Smits doing her not-bad best with lines like "I love him because... he skips stones and makes me laugh" - sees in him. More to the point, it makes you believe that there is no way on earth this man is fit to raise a child.

Yet that is exactly what he wants to do - full-time child-rearing for personal fulfillment and so the wife can continue her career - and Yolles and Bradshaw are determined that nothing shall stand in his way. So the wife's objection that there's no way she can be the sole support of two of them, let alone a third, in their sandblasted lifestyle, is swept aside with his, "We'll manage. I'll get a job I can take the baby to," and that's the end of it (yes, we then see him working in a daycare centre, but with his utter lack of skills and experience, there's no way he's anything but a volunteer). We never see any financial hardship arising from the baby. We don't even see him facing any hardship when his wife is gone and his money has run out; his house and lifestyle stay in place despite his inability to hold even a menial job. In fact, his wife's reasonable objections are never dealt with, though they are the whole basis for the conflict; what reunites them is simple marital lust and a little sweet talk.

When it's not dealing with the hero's conflicts - which is most of the time - *That's My Baby* deals with nothing in particular. The bulk of the movie is made up of not-particularly related incidents whose comic punches are vitiated by half-developed ideas, Webber's acting and the Valium-inspired

● Germ of a great movie: Isabelle Mejjias and Peter Spence in *Unfinished Business*

