

Christian Bruyère's
Shelley

Prostitution, especially juvenile prostitution, continues to be a hot topic. It is one of those social issues which is guaranteed to incite heated discussion — informed or otherwise.

The last three years have seen no shortage of films and television programs on the subject: **Street Wise**, an American production, springs to mind as does **Street Kids** and **Close to Home**, two local films produced by the National Film Board and Hy-Perspectives Media Group, respectively.

The latest entry into the kiddie hooker debate is **Shelley**, a low-budget feature from Vancouver filmmaker Chris Bruyère. Originally entitled **Turned Out**, Bruyère's film was produced by his own company, Face to Face Films, and Cineworks Independent Filmmakers Co-Operative for a minuscule \$200,000.

Shelley is not Bruyère's first work. He has made three previous films, all of which deal with controversial social issues. His first, **Rape: Face to Face**, documented the confrontation between four female rape victims and a group of convicted rapists who were participants in an experimental rehabilitation program for sexual offenders in Washington state. Co-produced by and broadcast on KCTS, an American PBS station, **Face to Face** was reportedly one of its most-watched programs.

Bruyère's next film, **Walls**, was a feature length docu-drama adapted from the stage play which he had written. **Walls** detailed the hostage-taking of social worker Mary Steinhauer at B.C. Penitentiary, an event which resulted in her death when she was shot by a prison guard during the storming of the hostage area. Although written by Bruyère, the film version of **Walls** was directed by Tom Shandel in order to conform with Telefilm demands.

Bruyère had more success with his third project: a half-hour documentary about single fathers. **Dads and Kids** won awards at the American Film Festival and at Yorkton and this year won a Genie for best documentary.

In spite of the fact that not every production was both a critical and commercial success, Bruyère had already established an impressive track record before he tackled **Shelley**.

On the surface, he appears to be ideally suited for such a film. Bruyère is well respected as a writer, he has a background in social work and he is not a newcomer to the intricacies and capriciousness of filmmaking in this country.

It is difficult then to understand some of the inadequacies which undermine the credibility of this film, inadequacies which cannot be blamed solely on budget limitations.

Shelley is a puzzling combination of fiction with a strong documentary feel but somehow it does not fall within the genre of docu-drama. The film presents us with the dilemma of Shelley, a teenage girl who runs away from home after



• Shelley looks for warmth in kiddie hooker pic

being sexually abused by her mother's live-in boyfriend. Befriended by a soft-spoken hustler called Gord and Kim, one of his 'ladies', Shelley is inexorably drawn into the world of the street. Conflict arises when Shelley is forced to choose between returning home, where her mother does not believe her daughter's accusations, or remaining on the street with its illusion of familial closeness. Betrayed by her mother's boyfriend, Shelley is desperate for a father figure to replace her missing dad and the film strongly implies that she finds that substitute in Gord.

For the most part, the performances in the film hold firm. Robyn Stevan, who plays Shelley, is believable as the vulnerable, confused runaway. But the film really belongs to Ian Tracey as Gord and Ramona Klein who is cast as Rachel, another of Gord's ladies. Klein is chilling as the teenaged hooker who has been swallowed by the street and her unaffected hostility is a welcome relief to the doe-eyed passivity of Shelley. They are ably supported by Christianne Hirt who plays the more sympathetic character of Kim. The strongest moments in the film occur in the scenes between these actors. To his credit, Bruyère has allowed the flavor of the street to permeated their speech. His skill with dialogue is particularly evident in this instance since he is able to create language which is at once abrasive, colorful and believable without resorting to the use of 'fuck' as a noun, verb, adjective and adverb.

Unfortunately the adult characters in **Shelley** do not fare as well. Overall they tend to suffer from an extremely limited emotional range and complexity which probably has more to do with a lack of character development than with a lack of actual acting ability. Diana Stevan, who is Robyn's mother off-screen and plays Shelley's mom, bounces like a pinball between tears and outrage throughout the film. Elli Halcrow, as the social

worker, seems to have her face permanently fixed in an expression of solicitude. Everyone else is lost in the shuffle, including Allen Lysell who is cast as the boyfriend with a taste for young girls. It was probably intentional on Bruyère's part to make the boyfriend ordinary but he has missed the mark in this case. Lysell's character is so bland and unthreatening, one almost ends up feeling sorry for the poor guy.

Character development aside, there are also problems with the content of the film. Because Bruyère is a skilled writer he does a good job of showing how kids can be attracted by and then drawn into life on the street. Shelley is invited by Kim into the apartment she shares with Gord and Rachel. Kim turns Shelley onto drugs and she is seduced by Gord who seems to offer warmth and comfort. Before long, Shelley is pressured into turning her first trick and she reluctantly complies out of a misguided sense of loyalty to her new 'family'. What becomes problematic, however, is the fact that Shelley is continually rescued from herself and the situations she finds herself in.

When she is frightened by her first trick, Gord breaks in with a knife and scares off the man. When Shelley is wandering the streets, she is always found by the nice social worker and her cop partner. When Shelley is about to be assaulted by the nasty drug dealer and his partner, the social worker and the cop arrive in the nick of time. This device is carried right on through to the final few minutes of the film. In a melodramatic about-face, Shelley's mom produces the girl's diary which apparently details the abuse Shelley has suffered. Dissolving once more into tears, Shelley's mother claims that "girls don't lie to their diaries" and that the diary contains details that only the boyfriend could have known. She now knows that Shelley has been telling the truth all along. The diary

is immediately entered into evidence and, in the fastest decision ever rendered, the judge flips through a few pages of the incriminating document and finds the defendant guilty on the spot. Presto, Shelley and her mom are reunited and the credits roll.

What is disturbing about this kind of presentation is that it is essentially misleading. The film strongly implies that the system works for kids like Shelley when in fact there is daily evidence that the number of children in crisis is growing while social services for them are rapidly declining. One has to wonder, then, at the point the filmmaker is attempting to make. Dramatic license cannot be used to explain away the 'happily ever after' tone of this film since the circumstances surrounding the character of Shelley are presented in a style which infers factuality. For instance, we are asked to believe that social workers can arrange immediate court hearings for juveniles believed to be in jeopardy. This is what happens to Shelley in spite of the fact that she never actually tells the social worker that her mother's boyfriend has been molesting her. The social worker apparently construes Shelley's silence when she is asked the question, "What did he do to you?" as answer enough. Apparently on the basis of the expression on Shelley's face, a hearing with a family court judge is arranged for the next morning.

The upshot of these weaknesses is that although **Shelley** is a film which is technically adept, well-constructed in terms of plot and pacing and sometimes peopled by characters we can care about (a minor miracle given the final price tag), ultimately it does not add to either our insight or our knowledge about a pressing social issue. We are unfortunately left with the impression that the film is saying had Shelley's mom not ditched her husband for that slimy boyfriend, none of this would have happened — a point which will not endear **Shelley** to feminists.

Since Chris Bruyère is obviously a gifted writer and shows potential to become a competent filmmaker it is to be hoped that his next project will demonstrate more thoughtfulness in terms of his subject matter. In spite of its weaknesses, the apparent success of **Shelley** in the marketplace indicates Bruyère will be around for quite some time.

Julie Warren •

SHELLEY p./d./sc. Christian Bruyère 1st a.d. Bob Akester 2nd a.d. Tom Crowe prod. man. Jim Hamm prod. co-ord Sally Thompson d.o.p. Tom Turnbull cam. asst. Gary Viola lighting John Houtman asst. gaffer Noel Archambault grip Peter Reynolds sd. rec. Peg Campbell sound asst. Marianne Kaplan cont. Shelly Crawford art d. Pamela Hallis ward. Toni Rutter make-up Connie Parker catering Evonne Karie prod. asst. Rhona MacInnes, Mark Lane, Franco Ponte, Davey Longworth, Hill Morton eds Jane Morrison, Doris Dyck asst eds. Brad Hines, Debbie Rurak, Shannon Mitchell graphics Kim Steer neg. cutter Daniele Defoy. With assistance from, The Canada Council — Media Arts Program, Chris Spencer Foundation, The Hospital for Sick Children Foundation, National Film Board of Canada — Pacific Regional Studio, Panavision (Canada) Ltd., Rent-a-wreck, Tahoe Motor Home Rentals, United Church of Canada. I.p. Robyn Stevan, Diana Stevan, Ian Tracey, Christianne Hirt, Elli Halcrow, Allan Lysell, Ramona Klein, Richard Jackson, Lee Jameson, Tuck Reid, Everton Christian, Doug Newell, Andrew Snyder, David Menzies, Craig Delahunt, Phillip Childs, Evonne Karie, Toni Rutter, Becci James, Fraser Duke, Sally Thompson, Shelly Crawford, Yarrow Bruyère, Grant Bray, Paul Stafford, Hessica Quail, Michael Tierman. A Cineworks Production. With the participation of Telefilm Canada. running time 80 min. 16mm color.