

William D. MacGillivray's
Life Classes

"To get a film made in this country is a political statement if it is not American commercial garbage."

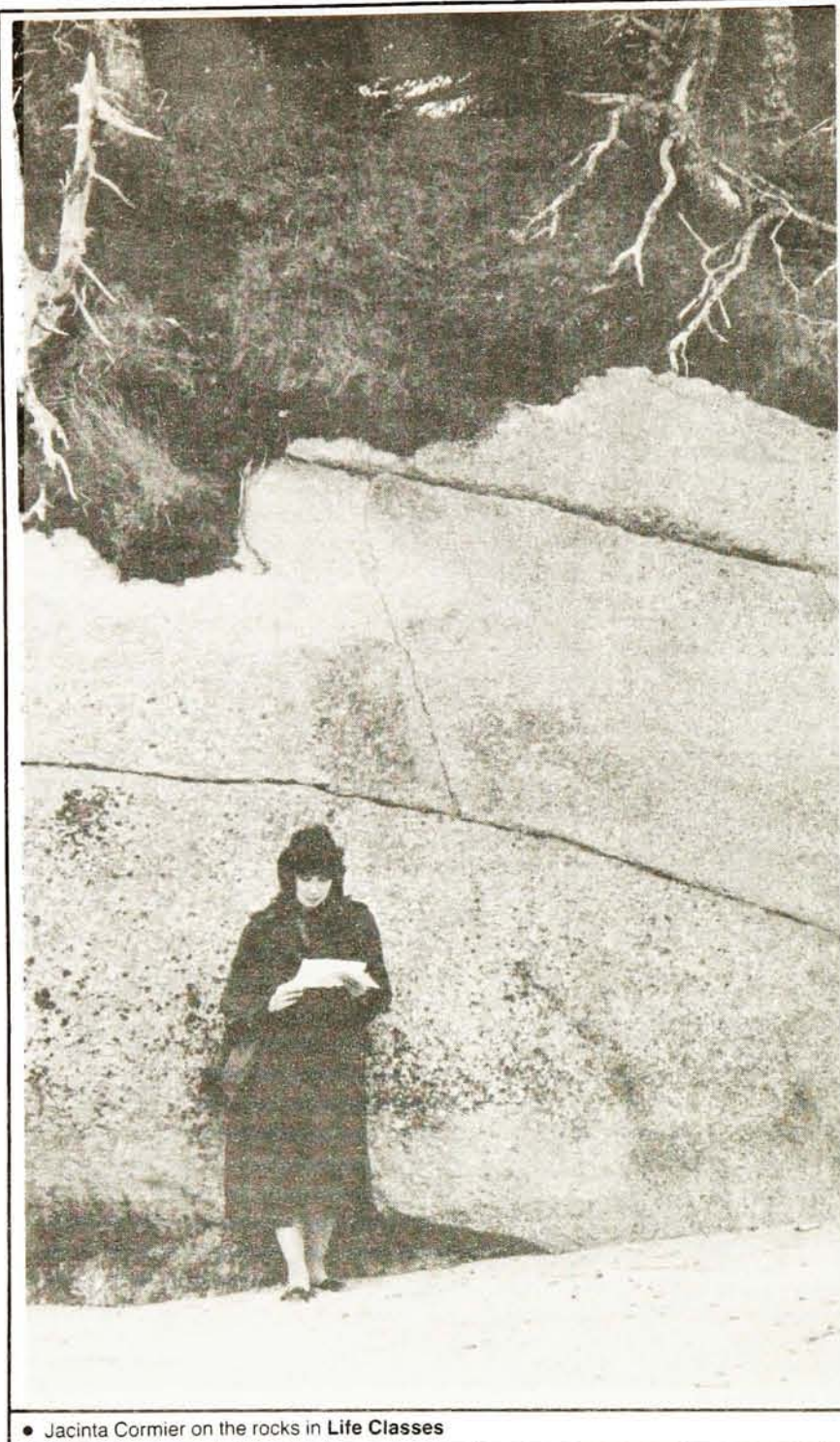
— Bill MacGillivray, *Halifax Mailstar*, Oct. 25, 1986

Let me tell you of a film that moved. A film that moved me. A film that, with proper national distribution, should move through our collective culture. Let me share with you a slice of my life, my craziness, and how I came to discover William D. MacGillivray's **Life Classes**.

I came careening into Toronto's Festafull of FestiveFools from a spirited month-long journey into the Gaelic ways of Scotland and the Irish west coast. I had been looking for the ghosts of dead poets, celtic Queens, relatives, druids, golfers, graveyards, burial mounds, James Joyce's first cinematographe. (He started it in 1909 in Dublin. It now is a bank.) I had been looking to lay old visions to rest and for inspiration for a future film. In Europe I found it all and found nothing. Returning to Canada somewhat disappointed and parachuting into Toronto's cinema circus, I found here, in my own county, what I had not found elsewhere. I found it incarnated in the form of a sensitive film from Atlantic Canada. Yes, there are places in the world that you can only go to in a film festival. Places to think. To escape cinematically the automatic rush of daily life. Japan is one of them, Africa another. And now Nova Scotia.

Let's review the circumstances. I tried to see **Life Classes** in one of several public screenings at the festival but each time it was sold out. Even press credentials couldn't buy me love in supremely democratic Toronto. This was the case for most of the films presented in the Canadian Perspectives section of the festival. This is a good sign. I decided to fight my better judgement and screen the film privately, individually, and on video, in a hotel room converted into a screening room. Although I love the collective screen-audience experience, knowing that a thousand breathing people are there watching with you, I realized that each person in a large audience experiences a film individually.

Life Classes, more than most other films, is about an individual's struggle with the changing self, with re-view, with re-vision, with the re-framing of the circumstances that control one's life. It is about taking control. I liked what I saw. And what I felt. And what I learned. And while the group affirmation of the cinema experience was missing for me, I was later pleased and surprised to learn that everyone I talked to who had seen the film was as expressively impressed as I was. The word-of-mouth on the film was very positive. I figured this was ulti-



• Jacinta Cormier on the rocks in **Life Classes**

mately the best comment about a film which owes much to the oral tradition of storytelling. Meanwhile, back in the hotel room an ocean of sound from Toronto's Avenue Road roared in through the window. I shut it out, sat down and turned on the VCR to watch **Life Classes**.

The opening frames consist of a slow-motion still-life dolly down an interior shopping mall plaza into a video monitor which is playing what appears to be a retrospective fictional news interview with the lead actress (Jacinta Cormier who plays Mary Cameron). Jacinta Mary has stepped out of character to reveal some of her thoughts and feelings about the character she plays. She is both a product and a victim of changes in culture. In a frank and honest statement, an honesty which lies at the heart of **Life Classes**, she admits that the questions arising out of the film experience are complex and not yet fully understandable.

Life Classes is framed around Mary's movement through physical and psychic

space. She moves from Cape Breton to Halifax; from being an imitator to being a creator; from dependency to self-affirmation; away from old relationships into metamorphosed encounters with father, grandmother, family, lover, daughter, friends, the art-world. The film is a beautifully woven collage/comment of sound and impression. An integration of a wonderful Gaelic score (Alexander Tiley), fine structure (MacGillivray's editing), naturalistic acting, (Jacinta Cormier, Leon Dubinsky, Francis Knickle, Mary Izzard, Evelyn Garbary, Leo Jessome, and Jill Chatt with fine supporting ensemble cast), and liquid camerawork. (D.O.P. Lionel Simmons).

I can assure you the treatment of these subjects and ideas is done with much grace and understatement, with much left to you. Like most good art, the mystery and the mystic in **Life Classes** speak more than a thousand words. The film is an intense and uplifting tale of personal reclamation, a reflective self-reflexion. It is about memory and family and photo-

genic reality, about a woman's transformative self-actualization. The film is about patience, about time, about emptiness, about the waiting that we are all waiting for; the liberation of a life. It is about life and class and art. About the development of an artistic vision, a sensibility. About the memory of a forgetting culture where prescient satellites replace the days when our collective songs were not stillborn but borne on the solar wind.

Life Classes is a film that rejects paint-by-number simplemindedness and replaces it with elegant simplicity. A film which finds and celebrates in the commonplace, a common place. It is at once a touching and funny and accessible film which makes the ordinary extraordinary. **Life Classes** makes you think about your own life which is the only purpose of good cinema. The silent power of the film reveals director MacGillivray's own process of self-discovery in uncovering one part of our tri-coastal mythology. It parallels the encouraging and steady ascension of a number of emergent tidal wave of director-creators from the East. All is not quiet on the Eastern Front.

There seem to be linkages in **Life Classes** with other new Canadian films. It is partially and subtextually informed by, and formally concerned with, technology. It specifically uses video as a part of its language and also uses the idea of electronic memory. In the capitalized intensive Telecommunication Capital of the World that Canada is, or will become, this may be natural. But in a reversal of a McLuhanian world where the most recent art form uses the last one as its content, the rebirth and resurrection of the New Tsunami Wave of Canadian cinema dares to investigate the video language, and the meaning and impact of television and subsumes it. We have learned filmically how to use television to our advantage.

Just let me mention an image and a series of shots. Mary is standing alone on a beach reading a letter, long shot, her back up against a wall of sandstone. Above her head in this shot are the exposed roots of ancient and living trees; texture, subtext, integration, symbolism. A mutation into a panorama shot: a rock, a landscape, music, a slowness, seagulls, an ocean, a revelation of the intervention of technology, a front-end loader, feeling and image fade out simultaneously. There seems to be a perfect and Jungian integration of the feeling of the time, the feeling of the spectator and the film's progression. A walk in the house of memory, through the wail, the veil; a walk through the house of song, of light and dust and sweet, sweet voices breathing lace and love.

As the film perfectly completes its perfect circle, something has changed. We have changed. Mary has a successful showing of her original and striking art in a gallery. She begins to assert herself into the world and to take control of her own life relationships. She begins to restore her grandmother's summer home. She works to open up its overview of the ocean. Our view of the ocean. We return to the dolly shot in the shopping mall plaza. The video reality. "We wish you and y(our) film all the best."

A song is heard:
*My child is my mother returning.
 Her mother my daughter same.
 She carries a soul in her yearning
 Of sorrow, of peace and of pain.*

As salt tears welled up in solidarity, my sympathetic heart started to beat sideways. I switched off the video, took a shower and dressed quickly. I left the screening room-hotel suite just in time to greet a smiling friend floating out of an elevator. I started to share the film with her. You would do the same.

Peter Wintonick •

LIFE CLASSES prod. man. Terry Greenlaw asst. d. Gordon Parsons loc. man. Gary Swin cont. Ken Pittman cast. d. Nicola Lipman 2nd asst. d. Paula Mustal 3rd a.d. Leslie Jones prod. off. coord David Craig books Bonnie Baker unit pub. Eric Walker stills David Middleton. Eric Walker art d. Mary Steckle set dress. Angela Murphy key props Monique Desnoyers asst. set dress props David Coole ward Janice Rogers d.o.p. Lionel Simmons 1st asst. cam. Dominique Gusset 2nd asst. cam. David Middleton gaffer Charles Lapp key grip No Fooling Emery grip Alan P. Macleod best boy (Halifax) Michael Ruggles best boy (Cape Breton) Gary Whitehouse sd. rec. Jim Rillie boom Alex Salter sc. consult Jean Pierre Lefebvre ed. William D. MacGillivray asst. ed. Terry Greenlaw neg. cutter Erika Wolff sup. sd. ed. Les Halman chief sd. ed. Angela Baker dialogue ed. Alex Salter add. dialogue eds. Jane Porter, Eric Emery sd. fx. ed. Alex Salter m. ed. William D. MacGillivray asst. m. ed. Dominique Gusset add. m. ed. Claire Henry post sync. fx Art McKay re-rec Film House Group mix Mike Hoogenboom. Marvin Bern. Brent Macleod m. rec. Solar Audio and Rec. Ltd. video coord. Tim Reed prod. assts Robin Sarafinchan, Carla Densmore. Jess MacGillivray projectionists David Middleton, Alex Busby, Dan Gowan crafts Lorette Leblanc loc. catering Kabuki Catering paramedic Dave Smith chaperones Bernice and Amare Chatt. Mira Chatt. Myrna Yazer gaelic coach Tina Morrison german trans Christiana Graham trans. of "Mary's Lament" Norman Macdonald Miss Lipmann's hair Jacques of "Blades". Halifax. N.S. "Life Classes" score composed by Alexander Tilley. based on a theme by William D. MacGillivray m. oboe Suzanne Lemieux violin Anne Rapson. Burth Wath cello Shimon Watt voices Kim Bishop. Karen Conrad. Doris Mason. Jennifer Quinn "Who Was the One" by Marty Reno and William D. MacGillivray. performed by Marty Reno. special thanks to Audrey Cole, Cordell Wynne, Wayne Cormier, Les Halman, Ron Keough, The People of Ingonish, Cape Breton, Atlantic Filmmakers' Cooperative, Africville Genealogical Society, Toshiba of Canada Limited, Oland Breweries Limited, Nova Scotia Department of Education Media Services, C.B.C. Television, Halifax, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and its Faculty, Staff and Students add. Thanks to Gordon and Stella Hardy, Keith Roper, Murray Stockley, Dr. & Mrs Paul Ecker, Claude MacInnis, Dorothy Jackson, Susan McIntyre, Jim Dunphy, Mr & Mrs Allan Henderson, Dean Brosseau, Camille's Fish and Chips, John Benalands, Peter Macdonald, Irvine Carvery, Chuck Clark, Claire Henry, Paul Mitchellree, Dorothy Reynolds, Mary Reynolds, Marie Jamison Fitzgerald, Phillip Walling, John Silver, Cilla Rickard, St. Joseph's Daycare, The Cohn, Dalhousie Arts Centre, Dalhousie Theatre Department, Canada Employment Centre, Images East, Parks Canada, Cape Breton Baddeck Satellite Systems, Metropolitan Transit Commission, Grand Pre Wines, Millie's Chips, Nova Scotia Oilers, United Book Store Limited Lab Film House Group, opticals Film Effects titles Meta Media d./sc./exec. p. William D. MacGillivray p. Stephen Reynolds J.p. Trudi Peterson, Jane Purves, Jacinta Cormier, Leon Dubinsky, Marty Reno, Evelyn Garbary, Monique Blais, Anne Marie MacDougall, Karen Shea, Steve Szewczok, Kelly Edwards, Derek Briand, Shane Briand, Sharnus Cox, Leo Jessome, Paul Ratchford, Jill Chatt, Mary Izzard, Caitlyn Colquhoun, Ruth Owen, Sigrun Zibara, Marc St Pierre, Eleanor Dorrington, Frances Knickle, Ron Gerald, Susan Saunders, Miriam MacMaster, Julie MacMaster, Jeremy Ackerman, Charlotte W. Hammond, Sandra Millott, Elizabeth Berlasso, Kathi Thimpson, Mark Cowden, Ann Seymour, Jennifer Tilley, Suzanne McCarthy, Christopher Joyce, Mark Richards, Bonnie Baker, Ken Robinson, Thea Wilson Hammond, Louise Holloway, Steven Arnold, Ron Wakary, Angela Sole, Brian Clements, Glen Gibson, Charlotte Hunt, Andrea Jackson, Astrid Brunner, Barbara Nicholson, Paul Greywall, Troy McCann, Kim McCarthy, Aletha Mantley, Ida Donovan, Kent Stetson, Nicola Lipman, Steve Miller, Geoff Harrington, Dave MacIsaac, Don Palmer, Bruce Jacobs, Pauls Simons, Terry Greenlaw, James Nicolson, Carol Millett, Tim Reed, Paula Mustal, Angela Murphy, Monique Desnoyers, Jeff Semple, Barry Fraser, Rachel Brodie, John Stevenson, Holly Rowland, James Paul, Charles Crocher, Eric Walker, Rachel Linely, Tina Morrison **Mary Cameron's drawings** by Charlotte Wilson Hammond p. William MacGillivray. Picture Plant dist. Cinephile Ltd. coul. 16 mm. running time 117 min.

Patricia Rozema's
**I've Heard
 The
 Mermaids
 Singing**

Hype thrives on incomplete information; we were all more excited, more hopeful about *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* when none of us had seen it. Now that it's opened in parts of Canada, away from the giddy atmosphere of any festival, away from the sound of fans screaming praises loud enough for the buyers to hear, the process of clear-eyed appraisal can begin. And though the film is not likely to garner scores of standing ovations here, neither is it nearly so trivial as some have begun to claim. *Mermaids* (the title is from T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*) is urban fantasy with a light touch, more significant for its presence and its success that important in itself. It's a nice film.

Which is not to disparage Rozema's accomplishment. "Nice" is what the film wants to be, and gentle and whimsical and quirky and the rest of it. As such, *Mermaids* is a gem. It may sometimes leave you wishing it had more bite, but if you're not looking for bite you'll never be disappointed.

Sheila McCarthy (looking a lot like Shirley MacLaine before she discovered the cosmos) plays Polly Vandersma. Polly is a wideeyed, scattered "person friday" who receives a placement as an assistant to the curator of a small gallery and (prat) falls into the hard-edged, downtown art scene. There she discovers both the magic and duplicity of the art industry; in the end she shakes things up merely with the power of her innocence. Polly's sensitive nature is forced to commute between her private dream world and the mercenary cult of contemporary art. The two worlds eventually, inevitably collide.

Rozema blends satire and fantasy in the film, sometimes sending up the orthodoxies of organized art, sometimes leaping into Polly's black and white daydreams — the only place where a hapless "temp" can conquer her environment (and defy a few laws of physics). Never mind that the satire is rather tame and the fantasy sometimes excessive. Never mind that its art as religion subtext is neither original nor profound — at least it's never ponderous. *Mermaids* is a film that succeeds on its charm; when it makes a false move you tend to give it the benefit of the doubt. It's at once clever and sincere, two things that keep it from getting mired in the cute. And of course there's always McCarthy's performance to watch. She has it all down — the ties, the ever-ready embarrassed look, the hair.

Somewhere between J. Alfred Prufrock and Pee Wee Herman lies Polly Vandersma. "Vandersma," incidentally, is perhaps the first Dutch in-joke in a Canadian feature film: it yokes together a common Dutch prefix and suffix with nothing in between — something like McSon. And so it seems Polly is intended as an everywoman character. She is naive-



• Sheila McCarthy doing "loveable" in *Mermaids*

ete embodied, a walking signifier of sincere ignorance. And when sophistication wears the face of the urban art world, naivete can be counted a virtue. But although she shares Pee Wee's childlike self-absorption (and a scaled-down version of his bicycle), Polly is not nearly so anarchic, nor so annoying as Pee Wee. She actually wants to fit in, to be thought competent.

For most of its 81 minutes the film is a delight to watch, though there are some glaring problems. One scene, set in a Japanese restaurant where Polly makes the mistake of ordering octopus, is particularly uncomfortable to watch, not just because it doesn't work dramatically, but because it seems to ask us to laugh at the fact that anyone could eat such a thing. And Polly's crush on the lesbian curator of the gallery (Paule Baillargeon) seems somehow unresolved. "I know love is a pretty strong word when you're talking about another woman and she's not your mother," Polly admits. Then she just gets over it. But it's the ending of *Mermaids* that is most disappointing. The last few minutes completely upset the balance between fantasy and real-world concerns that had been so delicately negotiated throughout the film.

Mermaids does look beautiful, though, a credit to Rozema and cinematographer Douglas Koch. It comes as no surprise that Koch has shot a number of music videos — the fantasy sequences show all the hallmarks — but there's very little empty flash in *Mermaids*. The tinted black and white sequences in particular have a quality impressive for such a low-budget film.

Rozema has managed to capture the vertigo and the bliss of the outsider in *Mermaids*. Polly Vandersma, no one in particular (and hence everyone), stands outside the artworld, outside the very idea of lesbianism, outside the city she takes such joy in photographing. In her rare moments of repose, when she hasn't gone and messed something up again, she exists in a state of wry wonder. The constant comment, "Isn't life the strangest thing you've ever seen?" keeps her sane, or as sane as she chooses to be.

Rozema has a real sensitivity to Polly's glorious solitude — at its best, *Mermaids* makes you believe in the secret power of the unhip.

Now that the noise from Cannes has subsided, *Mermaids* should be able to shed the role of Telefilm's best billboard and bask in some real-world success. Somehow it's fitting that a film so willing to believe in those unfashionable ideals we all sneer at — beauty and truth, for example — should have been blessed with such a fairytale reception. Sometimes, even in the wicked, heartless film industry, the virtuous are rewarded. Strangest thing I've ever seen.

Cameron Bailey •

I'VE HEARD THE MERMAIDS SINGING d./orig. sc. Patricia Rozema p. Patricia Rozema. Alexandra Raffé exec. p. Don Haig 1st a.d. John Pace 2nd. ass. Arlene Hazzan 2nd. second Thomas Quinn cont. Louise Shekter gen. Wojtek Kozlinski Jolynn Somerville, Debbie Honsberger, Frank Foria d.o.p. Douglas Koch cam asst. Durv in Partridge. Gavin Coford Polly's photos and prod. stills Debra Friedman loc. sd. Gordon Thompson. Michele Moses gaffer David Owen best boy Edward Mikouc elec. Anthony Ramsey. Neil Stroud grips Blake Ballentine, Greg Palermo, Dennis Kane art d. Valanne Ridgeway asst. Jake Fry art consult Carla Garnet props Peter Miskimmin surveillance sculpt. Peter Dykhuus artists John Abrams, Michael Merrill, Dyan Marie make-up/ hair Stephen Lynch hair consult Lyle Issett orig. ward. des. Martine Matthews, Alexandra Z. ward co-ord Beth Pasternak ed. Patricia Rozema asst. Michael Weth consult ed. Ron Sanders Rushes sync. Lenka Holubec sd. ed. Steven Munro asst. Alexandra Raffé re-rec. mix. Egidio Coccimiglio Foley rec. James Musselman m. Mark Korven m. co-ord. John Switzer m. rec. and mix. Jeff Wolpert asst. David Stinson, Michael Haas fairlight programmer Rob Yale mermaids voices Rebecca Jenkins prod. man. Alexandra Raffé daily crew John Switzer, Ted Quinn, Andreas Trautsmansdorff, Victor Roberts, Theresa Burke, Kat Hellyer, Suzie Schlanger, loc. sc. Cellophane Idea, Michelle Pelchat stunts consult. Dwayne MacLean casting Mary Armstrong CSC, Ross Clysdale CSC extras casting Lewis Casting timer Chris Hinton sd. transfers Multitrack mix Film House opticals Film Optical neg. cut. Francont Film titles Meta Media. music "Open Window" by Mark Corven, courtesy of Duke Street Records, "Symphonie No. 5" by Ludwig Von Beethoven, courtesy of Chris Stone Audio, "Viens, Malike, les lianes en fleurs, from "Lakme" by Leo Delibes, courtesy of Pathe Marconi. Produced with the financial participation of Ontario Arts Council, Canada Council, National Film Board (PAFFPS), Ontario Film Development Corporation, Telefilm Canada dist. Cinephile Ltd Int. sales Films Transit Inc I.p. Sheila McCarthy, Paule Baillargeon, Ann-Marie McDonald, John Evans, Brenda Kamino, Richard Monette. colour 35mm running time 81 min.