

Chasing Rainbows

Once upon a time in Canada, everybody lived either on isolated, windswept farms, or in drab, cramped apartments. Canadians were grizzled, stoical people, caught in an endless struggle. They sat around kitchen tables on frigid winter nights, worrying about the dark clouds hanging over them, planning escapes to something better, or wondering about their collective identity.

All that has changed. Today, in Canadian movie-and-TV-land, we are coke-dealing hipsters, gourmet intellectuals, jet-setters, gangsters, and practitioners of sex as amusement. We live in highrises, mansions, huge lofts decorated with motorcycles and offering surrealistic views of the St. Lawrence River. We almost never sit around kitchen tables drinking squat-bottled beer like a bunch of losers. Fiddlers, country music, and all other such folklore are on another goddamn planet.

Our past has also changed. These days, it is no longer always somewhere in the countryside during the reign of Queen Victoria. Now the past is also the Big Town, when the 20th century was just beginning to roar. During the years following the 1918 Armistice, we – just like the rest of the western world – had bootleggers and gamblers, flappers and vamps, dance halls and bordellos. Above all, we had a young and restless generation, disillusioned by the ‘War to End All Wars’. Yes, we had our Lost Generation, complete with its cynical repartee, non-stop boozing, and all-night parties where beautiful girls shimmied, and black men blew hot trumpets. A drunk might have joked at the time, “In Canada, the fun also rises.”

In *Chasing Rainbows*, an \$11 million, 14-hour CBC mini-series, the place to be during the extravagance of the Jazz Age is Montreal – although to save money, the show was shot in Toronto. Produced by Mark Blandford and written by Douglas Bowie (collaborators on the 1983 mini-series, *Empire, Inc.*), *Rainbows* tells the parallel and intertwined stories of Jake Kincaid (Paul Gross) and Christopher Blaine (Michael Riley), who begin a rocky, love-hate relationship in the mud and blood of the First World War.

Jake, whose mother seems to have been a “fifty-cent whore” in the working-class district of Pointe St. Charles, is more inspired than intimidated by his humble origins. After he returns from the war, Jake’s lusty efforts to transcend the “Pointe” lead him to gambling, smuggling, and transforming a third-rate brothel into a first-class nightclub, where the Prince of Wales himself (Andrew Lewarne) plays roulette all night and picks up a jazz baby



Michael Riley at the end of *The Rainbow*

in one of the show’s more preposterous, and yet perversely amusing episodes.

Christopher Blaine is the more complex character – the Scott Fitzgeraldian neurotic posed against the Hemingwayesque Jake. Whereas Kincaid is robust, cocky, and always ready for action, Blaine – an upperclass “Sherbrooke Street boy” – is sensitive, self-questioning, and reticent (among other problems, he can’t make the earth move for the woman he loves). Christopher’s postwar activities include a forlorn attempt to save his father’s bank, a plunge into Jake’s underworld milieu, and eventually, alcoholism.

The woman Christopher loves is former debutante, presently Jazz Age Vamp, Paula Ashley (Julie A. Stewart). Paula, who is one jigger of Hemingway’s Lady Brett (*The Sun Also Rises*) and another of Fitzgerald’s Daisy Buchanan (*The Great Gatsby*) – with some Canadian content thrown in – comes close to marrying Christopher and has a fling with Jake. A playwright who makes it to Broadway, she is given to making such comments as “I’m not the girl you left behind, Chris... I’m such a shallow, selfish bitch.”

Like *Cotton Club*, Francis Coppola’s musically phantasmagoric evocation of the ‘20s, Blandford’s and Bowie’s *Chasing Rainbows* cross-cuts back and forth between echoing, or contrasting, events in the lives of its two male protagonists. Usually, this structure works smoothly, although in some sequences (for example, the night Chris almost marries Paula while Jake gets beaten up by hoods), it wobbles.

Fortunately, most of the performances in the show are solid. Paul Gross, reminiscent of Jack Nicholson when he bares his teeth or cocks his head, and Michael Riley, who makes Chris’s vulnerable personality tangible, have staked down their roles and climbed into them. Julie A. Stewart credibly projects alluring foxiness and intelligent bemusement in the scenes where she doesn’t have to express the character’s more soapy emotions.

Among the large supporting cast, Peter Boretski as Eckleberg, a ruthless and embittered Jewish don, is both scary and sympathetic – especially during his operatic “Do you think I’m a schmuck?” aria. Sophie Leger, who played a teenage whore in Mireille Dansereau’s *Le Sourd dans la ville*, is again disconcerting as the angelic and wasted Gaby, a 15-year-old Jake saves from prostitution. And Wayne Robson, (Sammy, Jake’s father-figure), continues to demonstrate a considerable ability to reveal the soulful humanity of scrunched-up men.

Chasing Rainbows is at its best when it breezes along, free of sentimentality and portentousness. There’s an entertaining kick to the gusto with which the show portrays the slaphappy amorality, the craftiness, or the wanton excessiveness in many of its characters. There’s a wonderful moment when Paula’s snob of a mother explains why Regency is a bad choice for silverware. “People will think I raised you in a barn. Regency is plate, dear.” Even the Prince of Wales’ retainer and advance man is a greedhead and something of a sleazeball. In fact, the Prince himself is not entirely kosher, a

development that must be titillating and scandalizing to the country’s last remaining monarchists.

Also entertaining is the show’s candy-coated vision of the ‘20s, a vision that could be called Retro-Video like the mise-en-scène of a Janet Jackson clip. Silky, velvety colors and textures glaze our eyes in the interiors of Westmount mansions and east-end whorehouses. The exteriors, even the dread streets of Pointe St. Charles, are just as pretty. To some extent, this is a costume designer’s (Suzanne Mess) and a set designer’s (Armando Sprignuoli) show. In exterior establishing shots, costumes and sets blend into perfectly artificial little tableaux that are as pleasing as the illustration on your favorite Kleenex box – and just as disposable.

However, when Blandford and Bowie want to give us more than rainbows – when they are out to portray the very particular horrors of World War I, (captured so powerfully in classic films like G. W. Pabst’s *Westfront, 1918* and Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory*), or the pain of disillusioned love, or *The Way Society Was Changing at That Time*, *Rainbow*’s candy often melts down into glop.

The show hits glop bottom when Jake says things like “We can pull ourselves out of the mud if we try. I have got to believe it!” or when he spends time with the grieving parents of a frightened, sensitive boy the army shot for desertion. Suddenly, we are back on that apparently inescapable, wind-swept Canadian farm. In a series of clumsy, absurd shots, Jake, harnessed to a team of horses, plows the good

earth with obscene enthusiasm, looking like a happy ox. The dead boy's father watches joyfully; the two men grin at each other under the pristine blue sky. We expect to hear a voice-off commissar exhorting a crowd to meet the quotas called for in the present five-year plan.

Chasing Rainbows has attracted a great deal of attention, not only because it is one of the most expensive, time-consuming television shows ever made in Canada, but also because it is – as all the entertainment media have trumpeted – the first TV series in the world shot with HDTV (High Definition Television) production equipment. (A recent American feature, *Julia and Julia* was made with HDTV and transferred to 35 mm.)

Even video haters, who have watched HDTV tape played back on big high-definition monitors, rave about the brilliance and resolution of the image. Naturally, the home audience that followed *Chasing Rainbows* wasn't seeing the show in HDTV, because a few years will pass before home equipment is available, and longer until networks like the CBC broadcast with the new technology.

The home audience saw a video production shot movie-style with \$5 million-worth of Sony equipment. The series (photographed by John Galt, sometimes directed by William Fruet, who made the legendary *Wedding in White*, is more fluid and cinematic than ordinary commercial video work. The camera moves and shifts into relatively interesting angles; the lighting isn't department store garish. At the same time, however, you often feel traces of the over-immediacy, the rawness characteristic of video – especially when real grass looks as if it's been painted with day-glo paint.

Chasing Rainbows is no masterpiece about the Jazz Age – like the long version of Sergio Leone's lyrical, brutal, haunting *Once Upon a Time in America* – but it was a smart idea to look back at that period while experimenting with a money-saving high technology that will be very important in the future.

Maurice Alioff ●

CHASING RAINBOWS *exec. p.* Mark Blandford *sc.* Douglas Bowie *p.* Louise Turcotte-Gerlache *co-p./d.o.p.* John Galt *prod. des.* David Moe *co-p.* HDTV Systems Charles Pantuso *d.* Mark Blandford, William Fruet, Susan Martin, Bruce Pittman *m. d. / comp.* Neil Chotem *casting* Dorothy Gardner, Claire Hewitt *art d.* Roy Kellar, Peter Baran *cost.* Suzanne Mess *set dec.* Armando Sgrignuoli *props master* Ron Ror *make-up* Daisy Bijac *hair* Anita Miles *assoc. p. / post-prod.* Brooks Field *sup. ed.* Tony Lower *l. p.* Paul Goss, Michael Riley, Julie A. Stewart, Booth Savage, Lewis Gordon, Louise Lapare, Sophie Leger, Andrew Lewarne, Hal Eisen, Peter Boretski, Lisa Bunting, Wayne Robson, Thomas Peacock, Jill Frappier, Tony Van Bridge, Maida Rogerson, Alison, MacLeod, Kim Cayer, Malika Mendez, Christopher Earle, Mark Cleverley, Barry Stevens, David Matheson, Joseph Shaw, Gillie Fenwick, Gene DiNovi, Lesleh Donaldson, Patricia Hamilton, Diane Gordon, Dan MacDonald. Produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in association with Northernlight and Picture Corporation. HDTV running time 14 hours.

Suzanne Guy's Les Bleus au coeur

Les *Bleus au coeur* is Suzanne Guy's latest feature-length documentary. Ostensibly it attempts an explanation of women and crime through interviews with several inmates of Tanguay, a prison for women on the northern outskirts of Montreal. To complete the picture, Guy also interviews one woman who is struggling to make it "on the outside," two children of two of the women, a guard, and some of the nurse / social workers employed at the prison.

The film left me with a lot of questions – not about women and how they arrive at a criminal lifestyle – but about the inherent honesty of the film. I was left wondering if Guy also wanted to get at a larger issue, and if the film was trying to say something about the prison that patriarchal society represents for women, how the male-determined definitions we live within become internalized so that women, in effect, become prisoners within those very definitions. This is a tall order, and if *Les Bleus au coeur* intended to fill it, it does not succeed. But I can find no other explanation for some of the elements Guy has incorporated into the film, and how she seems to try and translate the prisoner image into other situations.

Dramatized vignettes are intercut with the interviews and other scenes of various activities that comprise prison life. These vignettes seem to be included more to evoke certain emotions than to illustrate any specific point made in the women's narratives.

One particular sequence consists of a series of shots of a young girl, dressed in white, dreamily walking alone on a bridge in a country-like setting. The camera remains in a medium long shot then pulls away to an extreme long shot as the girl reaches the rail and peers through it. From this angle we see that the bridge crosses a body of turbulent water and a series of rapids.

These are traditional symbolic images that connote specific ideas, in filmic and literary terms. Female innocence is visually framed behind the bars that at the same time protect from the turbulence below (life?), and imprison her. Why is this sequence here, and what subliminal connections does Guy want us to make?

In addition, although a documentary, the film opens with a dramatized sequence. A young woman rides alone in the back of a police van to Tanguay, where we follow her through the various induction procedures: registration, stripping and showering while guards examine her clothing, and then the walk down a long hallway to the 'cell', which in this case is a small,

dormitory-like room. The sequence ends with a shot of the anonymous young woman as she sits on the edge of her bed and despondently lights a cigarette.

This is a clever way of getting us 'inside' so that we get a feel for what becoming a prisoner means, i. e. depersonalization, removal of privacy, etc. But then this woman disappears, and when the film closes with a woman leaving Tanguay, it is another woman, a real prisoner, who leaves. I can't but feel that *Les Bleus au coeur* would ultimately have been more convincing, and more honest, had it stayed on the fictional narrative track.

From this opening sequence we move to the

woman who provides the 'outside' perspective. She states her ideas about why women commit crimes and end up in prison. She says that in every case there is a man behind it; she doesn't know why, but it seems that a man is always the reason. What the women say prove this to be mostly true, whether he was a pimp, a pusher, a deserting husband, a boyfriend who turned rat fink, or whatever. It is a provocative statement, and a pivotal one, in unwittingly alluding to the idea that these women are victims. In the end, that is what Guy wants us to understand, and to feel sympathy for them. It is a strong thematic opener, however, the rest of the questions the women respond to, or the things they talk about

PRIX

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Un jury indépendant, formé de quatre membres, sélectionnera les lauréats. Le Prix Québec-Alberta (télévision) sera remis lors du Festival de télévision de Banff, en juin prochain. Quant au Prix Alberta-Québec (cinéma), il sera attribué dans le cadre du Festival des films du monde de Montréal, au mois d'août.

ADMISSIBILITÉ:

Toutes les personnes et les sociétés engagées dans la production d'oeuvres cinématographiques ou télévisuelles sont admissibles. Cependant, les oeuvres présentées doivent être destinées aux marchés des salles commerciales et de la télévision, et ne peuvent être d'ordre pédagogique, promotionnel ou industriel.

INSCRIPTION:

La date limite d'inscription est fixée au 30 avril 1988. Les personnes intéressées à soumettre des candidatures peuvent obtenir un formulaire d'inscription, ainsi que tous les détails nécessaires, en s'adressant à:

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