

Johanne Prigent's **La Peau Et Les Os**

Johanne Prigent's well-intentioned and ambitious directorial debut has as its subjects two related psychological disorders that affect 23 per cent of adolescent girls between the ages of 12 and 20. The gallows humour of the title (*Skin And Bones*), is at odds with the earnest approach Prigent takes to the subjects of anorexia and bulimia.

La Peau Et Les Os is a docu-drama that incorporates two strands of fiction. As co-screenwriter and director, Prigent has set herself the daunting task of providing a historical context for the disorders, presenting a case study through the character of Andréanne and interviewing several women who suffer from anorexia, bulimia or both.

The film opens with a shot of a convent accompanied by organ music. At the nuns' communal supper, Soeur Marie-Jeanne (Sylvie Catherine Beaudoin) pretends to eat, but drops her food onto a napkin on her lap. The fiction sequences are full of these 'tricks' that anorexics perfect in order not to be detected. The napkin is later retrieved by a young girl outside the convent, who eats voraciously. In this neat exposition, Prigent introduces the atmosphere of privation and subjugation of self in which Soeur Marie-Jeanne lives. She believes that starving herself will bring her closer to God. Her obsession is imbued with religious fervour. Throughout the film, Prigent returns to Soeur Marie-Jeanne and the progress of her disorder. Unfortunately, these sequences are among the weakest in the film. They have the quality of unintentional parody. The link between the notion of self-sacrifice, Catholicism and its detrimental side effects rings true, but a shot of Soeur Marie-Jeanne kneeling, arms spread out, waiting for redemption, is almost laughable.

The other story concerns Andréanne (Hélène Bélanger), a 17-year-old who exercises compulsively. Confronted with the painful adolescent period, the reasons for her anorexia are expounded in none too subtle sequences throughout the film. Among the many possible causes for her disorder are a desire for the return to pre-adolescence, a need for control over her life and body and lack of understanding and support from her family. Andréanne is confronted with her reflection in mirrors and store windows. Prigent even includes a shot of her reflection blending with that of an ultra-thin, high-tech mannequin. When we are introduced to her, Andréanne is running up and down stairs on Mont Royal. After this punishment, there is a medium close shot of her gasping for breath behind a barbed wire fence. Later in the film, Soeur Marie-Jeanne is in a confessional, framed by the slats that separate her from a



Andréanne (Hélène Bélanger) and her mother (Louise Turcot) in *La peau et les os*

PHOTO: LYNE CHARLEBOIS

priest. The characters in the fiction sequences are trapped. Interviews with anorexics and bulimics are often done in medium shots, either outside or in front of windows that give on picturesque views. This 'freedom' is reserved for women who have, to some extent, come to terms with their disorder and demonstrate self-knowledge.

Among the women interviewed, Annie is the youngest. Prigent films her as the doctor in charge of her case explains the gravity of her problem and tells her that she requires hospitalization. Terrified, she begins to cry. In a tiny voice, her discussions of her feelings reveal that she hardly knows why she is doing this to herself. When Annie is asked to add calories to her daily menu, her suggestions to the nutritionist disclose the extent to which being thin is the ultimate goal.

The trump cards of the film are interviews with Hélène and Eisha, whose discussions are frank and display moments of self-deprecating humour. Hélène speaks about the physical damage that she has done to herself over the years. She has lost her voice twice, succeeded in breaking her vocal chords and has internal scars caused by self-induced vomiting.

Eisha, unlike Annie, knows very well why she almost succeeded in starving herself to death. In the most chilling moments of the film, Prigent includes video footage of an emaciated Eisha six months prior. In a long shot, she poses for a record of her own self-destruction. Wearing a bikini, she seems impossibly frail. Looking 30 years older than her actual age, she asks the

cameraman/interviewer if she is the skinniest girl he has ever seen. When he says "no, I have seen worse", she responds with "aw, shucks" and explains that she just doesn't care anymore. Her body is a grotesque sculpture, entirely her own creation.

The fiction sequences are something of a showcase for the extensive and meticulous research done by Prigent and her co-screenwriter, Monique Gignac, rather than plausible expositions of two complex disorders. Though not entirely successful, the sequences are chock-full of situations and experiences common to anorexics and bulimics. The major flaw of the film is that there is too much going on. The film would have benefitted from a pared-down structure. One powerful segment in Andréanne's story is a poignant sequence in which her father (Hubert Gagnon) comes into her bedroom and manages to make the situation worse by taking all the wrong approaches. In the contradictions that can define stages of anorexia, she has been trying to conceal her disorder while secretly hoping for attention. She is lying on her bed in the fetal position with a teddy bear nearby. The juxtaposition of her wish to be a child and his insistence that she requires everything necessary to be a happy adult, is effective. On the soundtrack, Andréanne asks him to tell her he loves her and take her in his arms. By turns cajoling and aggressive, he thinks he can simply talk her out of it.

As the film draws to an end, Prigent returns to the major threads of the film. Optimism is reserved for the three principal women who

were interviewed for the film. Annie is discharged from the hospital. Eisha and Hélène are coping well, but both know that the problem will haunt them all their lives. They have benefitted from therapy and group encounters with other women who have the disorder. Prigent is careful to show that there are available resources. The fiction sequences end on sadder notes. The last images we have of Andréanne are of her mechanical bingeing on endless junk food. She has begun the cycle of starvation and bingeing. The official ending of the film is the funeral for Soeur Marie-Jeanne.

A film currently making Festival rounds is Todd Haynes' *Superstar: The Story Of Karen Carpenter*. The '70s pop star with a squeaky clean image was anorexic and eventually died from it. *Superstar* is basically a one-joke film in which all the principals are played by Barbie dolls. If I mention it here, it is to underline the fact that there is a dearth of films on the subject. *La Peau Et Les Os* suffers from the attempt to touch on as many aspects of the disorders as possible, but it is a comprehensive study and a film that should be seen.

Anne Golden ●

LA PEAU ET LES OS p. Louise Gendron, Monique Letourneau d. Johanne Prigent sc. Johanne Prigent, Monique Gignac cam. Jacques Leduc sd. Richard Besse ed. Pierre Bernier mus. Ginette Bellavance, Daniel Toussaint art. d. Jocelyn Joly cost. Louise Jobin l. p. Helene Belanger, Sylvie-Catherine Beaudoin, Louise Turcot, Hubert Gagnon, Sophie Faucher. Produced by the National Film Board. dist. Aska Film. 35mm, colour, 88 minutes.