

FILM REVIEWS

Jean Beaudin's

J.A. Martin photographe

d. Jean Beaudin, asst. d. Michel Gauthier, sc. Marcel Sabourin, Jean Beaudin, dial. Marcel Sabourin, Jean Beaudin, ph. Pierre Mignot, ed. Jean Beaudin, Hélène Girard, sd. Jacques Blain, set dec. Vianney Gauthier, m. Maurice Blackburn, lighting. Kevin O'Connell, cost. Vianney Gauthier, l.p. Monique Mercure, Marcel Sabourin, Luce Guilbault, Denis Drouin, Denise Proulx, Jean Lapointe, Yvon Canuel, Guy L'Ecuyer, Paul Berval, Mariette Duval, Pierre Gobeil, Ernest Guimond, Yvon Leroux, Henry Ramer, p. Jean-Marc Garand, p.c. National Film Board (Mtl), 1975, col. 35mm, running time 101 minutes, 13 seconds, dist. NFB.

A while ago, I had the opportunity to see an exhibit of photographs by Louis and Auguste Lumière in stunning pastel color taken around the turn of the century. The Lumière brothers were not only technical innovators, but also pioneers in the idea of using film to document the real world. Like their films, these early color photographs evocatively present a world that is no more — a peasant girl carrying water, a family out for a drive in the country, an old man smoking a pipe. I thought of these old photographs while watching **J.A. Martin Photographe** a film which in many ways, works on our emotions like an old photograph album.

J.A. Martin, a country photographer in nineteenth century rural Quebec, covers the usual events of family life: the births, marriages and group portraits, etching them for all time on little pieces of mirrored glass. His apparatus is clumsily pre-Kodak with a huge wooden camera and plates that had to be chemically sen-



sitized in a darkroom immediately before exposure. The lens is uncapped for fifteen seconds with a warning to hold very still, giving that stern rigid look to our ancestors of the last century.

Once a year, Monsieur Martin packs his apparatus into a rickety wagon and heads down the narrow country paths to his more remote customers. Even though the trip is extremely difficult, it represents an annual escape from wife and large family. This year, however, strong willed wife (Monique Mercure) decides to leave home and kids and go along with hubby, and the trouble starts there. He does not like it, and neighbours and family are scandalized; a nineteenth century rural Quebec woman just does not do these things. But Mme. Martin is no ordinary woman and off they go together. The saga is both scenic and emotional for the trip pulls them together and helps them revive a stale fifteen year old marriage. As they travel, we relive the old farm houses, the country weddings, the small town hotels and lumber mills of another world and another time.

This film is obviously a cameraman's dream, for its strength lies not in a riveting plot, but rather in the mood set by the extraordinary visuals. And this is, indeed, a moody film, Scandinavian realism at its most painful; the shots are long, the compositions are static and the dialogue and dramatic action are caught almost in passing in brief snatches generally out of sight and out of mike. All is well if you are predisposed to be with the film; the physical beauty

of the sets and photography can certainly waft you away in a nostalgic euphoria. The trouble comes if you start fighting the film, for then the extreme stylization becomes as jarring as overloud muzak. Why does absolutely every sequence have to finish with a fade to black? Why are most of the shots so murky that you are straining to see what is going on? (Even the outside shots manage to be continuously grey and overcast as if the nineteenth century never saw the sun.) and finally, why must all the dialogue be muttered off mike as if we are listening to the proceedings through a keyhole? Of course the extreme stylization is deliberate, for in a cinematic form the film is imitating the spirit of still photography. We do not see a scene from beginning to end; we have a snapshot of it. We are faded into it, after it has started, and faded out of it, before it ends. The shadowy lighting, makes this color film almost black and white, and again we have this snatched quality as the camera captures the subject momentarily passing through the light. These visuals are made all the more relentless because there is almost no music in the film, in fact almost no sound at all except for the ticking of clocks and the squeaking of wheels. The unkind would describe this movie as a two hour long title sequence, or a lugubrious imitation of Bergman without any of Bergman's redeeming mysticism.

As I watched the film, I wondered how the filmmakers were going to insert the anti-English scene which is now obligatory in all film produced

Film Credit Abbreviations: d.: Director. asst. d.: Assistant Director. sc.: Script. adapt.: Adaptation. dial.: Dialogue. ph.: Photography. sp. ph. eff.: Special Photographic Effects. ed.: Editor. sup. ed.: Supervising Editor. sd.: Sound. sd. ed.: Sound Editor. sd. rec.: Sound Recording. p. des.: Production Designer. a.d.: Art Director. set dec.: Set Decorator. m.: Music. m.d.: Music Director. cost.: Costumes. choreo.: Choreography. l.p.: Leading Players. exec. p.: Executive Producer. p.: Producer. assoc. p.: Associate Producer. p. sup.: Production Supervisor. p. man.: Production Manager. p.c.: Production Company. col.: Colour Process. dist.: Distributors. narr.: Narration.

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in Quebec. After all, here was a photographer wandering through the back woods of Quebec - so where are the bad guys? *Les maudits Anglais* in this film are the Wilsons, owners of the sawmill, uptight, nasty and of course, filthy rich. In photographing the workers at the mill, M. Martin finds child labour and exploited workers and he has a fight with the English foreman. Presumably, everyone can now leave the theatre suitably purged and with all stereotypes comfortably reinforced.

But the core of this film is not political, and even the evocative scenes of rural life are captured almost *en passant*. If the film is about anything it is about Mme. Martin: her coming out after fifteen years of marriage, and her quiet yet forceful search for an identity. "Do you still find me physically attractive," she timidly asks her deadpan husband, and then yells at him for not having paid enough attention to the children. Monique Mercure, in the title role, is alive, fiery and vividly sympathetic. Her performance is easily the best thing in this film. Its power is in little touches, brief moments of truth which resonate with a woman's experience in any age. Her face can switch from emotion to emotion, often counterpointing, two conflicting feelings at the same time, and she alone makes the irritatingly thin plot at all convincing. Her recent prize at the Cannes Film Festival is well deserved.

It is easy to see why this film has received so much critical attention. Its stylistic consistency and lugubrious relentlessness makes it both unusual, and in many ways, a refreshing, change from the pabulum which passes for movies these days. What is more puzzling is the fact that this film has been an enormous success in Quebec. It has been playing to large Montreal audiences for over three months, and ranks with the most popular feature films ever to have been produced by the National Film Board. Despite its obvious artistic qualities, its bleakness and slow pace make it a difficult film to sit through. Whereas the outside may find it inward-looking and stylistically indulgent, it is obvious that this film has touched its Québécois audience deeply and personally. It really is like an old photograph album whose faded pictures are of passionate interest: but only to friends and the immediate family.

Ronald Blumer



Living the high life in *Ragtime Summer*

Alan Bridges'

Ragtime Summer

d. Alan Bridges. **sc.** Ratch Wallace. **ph.** Brian West. **ed.** Kirk Jones. **a.d.** Ted Watkins. **o. des.** Natasha Kroll. **m.** Lucio Agostino. **sd.** David Bowen. **l.p.** David Warner (Henry Buchanan), Honor Blackman (Mrs. Broswell), Trudy Young (Clarissa), Cec Linder (Dr. Hogarth), Tim Henry (Ralph), Robert Hawkins (Lloyd), Joey Davidson (San Carter), Jon Granik (Mr. Carter), Lois Maxwell (Mrs. Hogarth). **p.** Deanne Judson & George Willoughby, **p.c.** Judson Pictures Inc., 1977, **color**, 35mm., **running time** 104 mins. **dist.** Danton Films, **première** Odeon, Peterborough, Apr. 28, 1977.

Ragtime Summer is a rather hard film to review fairly. It has qualities of tenderness, literacy and even elegance that set it apart from the average. In fact, I find it the most sheerly likeable Canadian feature since Don Shebib's *Second Wind* last year. At the same time, the new film is clearly so much less effective than it ought to be that it has to be accounted at least a partial failure.

The main problem is that none of the strands from a multi-faceted situation becomes a main theme. The story of a teacher who has come from England to teach at an "exclusive" Ontario boys' school in the 1920s touches on such issues as the young man's pacifism, his befriending of a shy boy, his involvement with two women and his guarded welcome by a somewhat stuffy and insular com-

munity. All of this is mildly interesting but everything remains mild through lack of a forward thrust or sense of strong momentum. I would rather not blame Ratch Wallace's script, which seems very sincere and which contains some excellent dialogue, but he hasn't really provided enough to back up Alan Bridges' sensitive direction, or some very willing actors, or the first-rate period reconstruction and color photography. Sorry to say it, Ratch, but you didn't quite bring it off this time.

The title *Ragtime Summer* (adopted at a late stage of the project) is perhaps misleading; there's not much blazing or "hot" about the season shown. *Summer Rain* (the original label) comes closer to suggesting the moody, muted emotions of the story. Rain itself doesn't feature in the drama, however, so it's remarkable how well the shooting covers up the teeming sheets of precipitation which really did fall on the Lakefield area during production in the summer of '76.

As suggested, the players do well by the picture, the less experienced as much as David Warner, playing an Englishman - or Honor Blackman, as a Canadian - in the slightly shadowy leading roles. In particular, Tim Henry makes a strong impression in admittedly the most interesting role, that of a young man poised uncertainly between loutishness and likeability and coming down, through his very "ordinariness", on the debit side. Mr. Henry joins Kenneth Welsh (from *Brethren*) at the head of my personal list of Canadian actors who should star, not just appear occasionally, in Canadian films.

Clive Denton