

Directed by Morrie Ruvinsky; with Jace Vander Veene, Pia Shandel, Cece Grandbois, Morrie Ruvinsky and Sylvia Spring.

The action of this Vancouver-made film covers a few weeks in the life of Mark Van Troyan, a young film director, during which time his success and coherence as artist and as human being are seen to disintegrate. He is starting on a feature movie, and trying to make it with his leading actress, Krista (Pia Shandel). His wife, Shirley (strongly acted by Cece Grandbois), apparently to recapture his waning attention, takes the radical step of neglecting The Pill; when she announces the ensuing pregnancy to Mark, he throws her out in a frightful tantrum. Shirley goes to their wise, kind friend, Owen (Morrie Ruvinsky himself), and Mark takes up with Krista. Things go badly. He is tyrannical and arbitrary on set, and it becomes increasingly clear, to us and to his actors, that he has lost all grasp of his script-idea. Shirley sues for divorce – jolly cameo-role for Sylvia Spring as the prostitute hired to appear in the adulterous snapshots – but shortly thereafter Mark finds himself unable to get it up for Krista. In a furious and degrading incident in the studio, he brings her off by hand in front of the camera, to get a shot of her face expressing authentic sexual surrender. The film ends with an obscure suggestion that he has reached the point of suicide.

Its appearance at Ottawa's Filmexpo in July was the first view I've had of this much-travelled film. Not having seen it as either *The Plastic Mile* or as *She's A Woman*, I can deal only with this presumably final version. In some ways this is proper; the artist should be judged on the finished state of his work. On the other hand, a study of the rough drafts and earlier versions through which a work has evolved adds greatly to one's understanding of the artist's conceptions. And the conception behind *The Finishing Touch* could use a little clarification.

Mind you, it's a film worth considering seriously. It's an ambitious work – a term of more respect than 'pretentious' – whose director has striven towards a difficult achievement. Nonetheless, serious consideration of the film amounts eventually to formulating one's dissatisfaction. The major objections can be reduced to two: first, the film generates insufficient involvement and belief in Mark to sustain our concern for what is intended to be his 'tragedy': secondly, the film has no stylistic integrity.

It is notoriously hard, in movies, to establish a creative artist as a person who really works at his imaginative conceptions and his craft, rather than as an ill-tempered eccentric. It would altogether change our response to the stormy, selfish, mean-spirited Mark if we could also see the signs of genuinely creative intelligence or application. The excuse may be offered that Mark is the portrayal of a *failing* artist. But he seems to have been materially quite successful up to now, and we can hardly be moved by his failure to realise his vision (in that nice French sense, director as 'réalisateur') if there is no sign of his ever having been capable of vision to begin with.

The question of stylistic integrity is not simply the cavil of a purist or a pedant. In dramatising Mark's break-up, *The Finishing Touch* scuttles restlessly from one cinematic convention to another, continually agitating the viewer with busily intrusive editing, trying anything in the effort to bring us into immediate touch with the turmoil of Mark's interior life. So we go from straightforward realism (often low-keyed and

truthful) to nightmare to fantasy to quick memory flashbacks to replays-with-variations to expressionistic lap-dissolve sequences – and back again.

A film can arguably give us a more vivid knowledge of another person than we usually have in actual life – but it remains the same *kind* of knowledge, derived from what we see and hear and intuit and presume from that person's perceptible existence as an Other. We cannot experience, we can only guess and imagine what another person perceives, dreams, remembers. We, in fact, identify with a screen character far more strongly when we are led to *imagine* what must be going on inside his head, than when we are shown explicitly. What we imagine for him we inevitably identify with, since we are investing him in experience of our own; on the other hand, what is directly shown to us can only alienate, because it is not a product of our own sensibility, but an artificial concoction.

Moreover, a film almost never synthesises 'mental events' in anything remotely like their real form. As a rule in movies, the momentary recollection, the picture in the mind's eye, the hallucinatory effect, are only dismal approximations of the way these things really pass through the field of consciousness. The viewer is asked to take the will for the deed, to say to himself, 'O.K., he's supposed to be remembering so-and-so, O.K., he's having a fantasy. . . .'

Some examples in *The Finishing Touch*: Mark thrusts his hand into a flame, is rushed to hospital, and there, under sedation, has a nightmare. All the other characters close round him in medical costumes to perform a bizarre operation that seems to combine parturition and castration. It's not a bad movie-nightmare, as such things go, but I didn't *share* it, I merely watched, trying not to miss the point. In another sequence Mark is interviewed for CBC Vancouver. The interviewers are mannequins and the dialogue is a nonsensical barrage of irrelevant questions. The sequence is either a caricature of the CBC or a projection of Mark's subjective experience of the situation – or both. In any case, the shift of convention is false and awkward.

A third example: throughout the film a peculiar young Englishman cavorts around on the fringes of the action. There is no doubt that he 'really exists' – all the characters interact with him. But sometimes he is dressed in a kind of Pierrot costume, for reasons apparently unconnected with the requirements of the film-within-a-film. Is this merely his eccentric taste in clothes? Or does the costume express his symbolic role in the proceedings, or the way he appears to Mark?

Occasionally the succession of supposedly mental events becomes so bewildering that we are actually as disoriented as the protagonist is supposed to be – with this important difference, that we're not sharing *his* disorientation, but stumbling about in our own. Which is like saying 'If you want to experience my acid trip, get stoned yourself'.

Godard's *Weekend* is a film which scrambles together the various cinematic conventions by which we usually come to terms with the events on the screen. But the difference is that, whereas Godard lifts us right into a world where the conventions about what can and cannot be expected are in suspension, Ruvinsky shunts us uneasily between a recognizably 'normal' world and a set of local disturbances, intended to be his protagonist's anguish. ●

Bob Fothergill

Written and Directed by Barrie Angus McLean and Kristin Weingartner. Photography: Roger Moride CSC. Sound: Hans Oomes and Claude Hazanavicius. Music: Galt MacDermot. With Percy Harkness and Elizabeth Suzuki. Produced by Robert Lawrence Productions; distributed by Astral Films.

Ever After All was originally entitled **Golden Apples of the Sun**; the phrase is from Yeats' poem "Song of the Wandering Aengus", a palely beautiful gleam of Celtic twilight lately set to music by Galt MacDermot, and supposedly having some thematic connection to the events of Barrie Angus (Aengus?) McLean's first feature. A white folk-singer named Troubadour ("Troub" for short) and his black friend Jarvis (a Viet Nam veteran) sing the entire song to Janet and Richard, the leading and only other characters, and Troub sings it a second time during the ordeal to which Richard is later subjected by Jarvis. When the song tells of hooking a berry to a thread and catching a little silver trout, we are reminded by flashbacks that we have seen Richard performing these very actions. All very meaningful, but does it *mean* anything.

The events of **Ever After All** last a day and a night, in backwoods country, agreeably photographed. Richard (graceless, quirkish, peculiar) takes Janet (clear-eyed and candid) to the woods. Watched by the sinister and apparently menacing songsters, they frolic, shoot a rabbit, play in the water, and at last fall to copulation – an act which Richard rather spoils by the disconcerting trick of smearing Janet with rabbit's blood in a ceremonial sort of way. Anyway, off they go to a little cabin where they propose to sleep. While they are exploring it, Jarvis prowls around, unbeknown to them, in a manner that suggests we are all in for a fright night.

Janet and Richard prepare dinner – little silver trout –

in the course of which Jarvis and Troubadour appear and sing their song, very pleasantly. Richard is unfriendly; Janet offers pomegranate. Later that night, the strangers are seen sporting in the moonlight. Richard shoots at them and they determine to 'teach him a lesson'. This entails a process of humiliation which reduces him to a howling child, tied up in a cage and watching Jarvis make love to Janet, tenderly and with her apparent consent. Actually it's rather unclear what happens at this point, as the film resorts to a dreamy montage of non-sequential shots, at the end of which Janet is saying goodbye to the intruders and returning to Richard – still tied up and twitching disconsolately in the dawn sunlight.

"What I have cannot be taken, only given", says Janet over dinner. She and Richard go on to speak of "acts which give us grace". (The dialogue is like that.) What Richard has to learn from his ordeal apparently is something about natural openness, as opposed to his own uptight, alienating manner. More likely it will intensify his paranoia about folk-singers and blacks. As for us in the audience, if we responded to Troub and Jarv with hostility and suspicion, that's because the film deliberately led us to do so. Jarvis is shown to be full of rage about the killing he has seen, while Troub displays an obscene interest in the details. The film doesn't so much complicate our moral responses, as arbitrarily invert the impressions it has given us.

Ever After All doesn't quite know what sort of film it's supposed to be. There is something oddly disproportioned about its development, as a seemingly endless foreplay precedes an almost cursory climax. Psyche scare-flick? melodrama? character study? (rather woodenly acted, if so); or visionary allegory? (to borrow a phrase from Paul Almond). Barrie Angus is still wandering. ●

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