

Les Rose's

Gas

A calculator embedded in its belly, a dead stuffed beaver ornaments an executive desk in *Gas*. Intended as a joke, the shot lasts for only a few brief seconds, but it unwittingly provides a most telling image. If *Gas* is an example of a Canadian movie, the beaver probably died of embarrassment when he read the script. Given the crass intentions of the filmmakers (who, as the movie proves, are obviously not as easily embarrassed) they would use his corpse in such a practical manner - anything for a laugh. The juxtaposition of the two - our national symbol and the instrument of commerce - makes a perfect comment on this sorry product from our film industry. And just as this shot misfires as a joke when examined, so does *Gas*. To call it a travesty of comedy would be a compliment. Despite all efforts (and some strove mightily, especially the stunt drivers and special effects people), *Gas* is painful, a mess of miscalculations about the nature of mayhem comedy.

The central story-line in *Gas* concerns the stockpiling of gasoline by the megalomaniac oil tycoon Duke Stuyvesant (Sterling Hayden), who looks like a Hollywood version of Howard Hughes and acts toward his inane sons, Earl and Baron (Dustin Waln and Vlasta Vrana), like Pa Cartwright gone berserk. His actions create an artificial fuel shortage and endless lineups at his station, which is manned by Ira (Keith Knight in one of the better performances in the movie). Waiting in the crowd is Matt Lloyd, a salesman and one half of the sex-not-love-interest (a very innocuous Howie Mandel). On the fringes are those on the make: Rhonda, a hooker in a bordello-van (Helen Shaver in a role that wastes her talents); Jane Beardsley, a hard, ambitious TV interviewer looking for the big story (Susan Anspach); and a somewhat aimless, perhaps brainless, photojournalist who is the other half of the sex interest, Sarah Marshall (Sandeé Currie). Overhead in the WGAZ helicopter commenting on the scene is the Noz, the local rock DJ (Donald Sutherland, of whom it must be said that he doesn't walk, but sits through his part).

The main plot becomes complicated by the avarice of the silly nephews of the local Godfather, Leo Vespucci (Vincent Marino, nodding his head menacingly while wearing the requisite white suit and travelling in the usual black limousine). A pair of US Army motor pool MPs (Alf Humphries and Philip Akin), running their own scam, also become involved. The boy-meets-girl plot is complicated by Sarah's over-protective brother, Ed (Peter Aykroyd). But Ed isn't protecting his sister's honour; he's lusting after her himself, thus introducing the ugly, distasteful theme of incest. His destructive kung-fu mentality may be responsible for the big set scenes in *Gas* - the demolition of the restaurant, the explosion at the gas station and the spectacular climax of the car chase - yet his motivation is sick. Ed is mentally ill, not amusing.

Through Ed, however, comes some understanding of why *Gas* fails as a comedy, for his role makes it the most obvious that the movie is influenced by earlier models. That the similarities are

supposed to be noticed is stressed by an incident near the end, of a crew filming a James Cagney gangster scene. The scene echoes its various predecessors suggesting that films are made and then re-made - memories of the past enriching the present. Thus Ed's kung-fu tactics are reminders of Peter Sellers in the *Pink Panther* series. Moreover, Ed imitates Groucho Marx outright in the restaurant scene. A Lone Ranger (in black not white), driven by Tonto, takes his gas at gun-point. The Noz, while a pale creature, functions like the Wolfman of *American Graffiti*. Surely those dozens of firemen rescuing fat ladies from the spa are descendants of the Keystone Cops. Behind the Duke's sons, about to weld a gasoline storage tank with a blowtorch, or the Mafia nephews, dealing with broken waterpipes, lurk the quarrelsome comedy teams of Martin and Lewis, Abbott and Costello, and Laurel and Hardy, all inept and constantly on the verge of being blown to bits or washed away. What *Gas* could have been is a celebration of its antecedents. But it is not.

Essentially, *Gas* misuses its comic material. When Ed descends to slobbering over his sister, he can no longer effectively play his part as the wrong-headed guardian of family virtue who sets off devastating chain reactions for what are seen as the right reasons. Quite noticeably too, *Gas*, like the Marx brothers' movies, is conceived around "big" scenes of controlled mayhem. But unlike its ancestors, *Gas* does not entertain as it builds up to them. Groucho gets off one good line after another; *Gas* contains nary a single, solitary memorable line. The pairs here are ineffectual for similar reasons; they don't engage in comic banter, usually based on semantic misunderstanding, but simply make a lot of tedious noise. Furthermore, since each one is almost indistinguishable from his mate (even physically), the smart-stupid reverses that form the foundation for the comedy of the earlier teams cannot even exist. Imitation, as well as being the sincerest form of flattery, is also a dangerous game to play. By inviting comparison, *Gas* shows how far short of its model it falls.

Finally, comedy usually, almost formally, metes out justice in the end. The vicious, in this case the avaricious and corrupt, should stand revealed, stripped



• "Gas is painful".

of their pretensions and humbled, at least for the present. But in *Gas*, with Duke believing the fuel seeped into the ground and the others just standing around, none of the lines of the plot are tied off. The unresolved problems presumably just evaporate - like gas. The only good jokes in this movie are on its title.

Anna Carlsdottir •

GAS d. Les Rose p. Claude Héroux sc. Richard Wolf, based on orig. story by Richard Wolf and Susan Scranton exec. p. Victor Solnicki, Pierre David d.o.p./cam. op. René Verzier mus. Paul Zaza ed. Patrick Dodd p. des. Carol Spier p. man. Roger Héroux 1st a.d. John Fretz 2nd a.d. Mac Bradden 3rd a.d. Patrick Ferrero unit man. Jean Savard sc. girl France Boudreau p. coord. Daniele Rohrbach gaf. Kevin O'Connell elect. Richer Francoeur, Jean-François Pouliot, Alex Amyot, Gordon Cournoyer, Jacques Girard, Antoine Léger, Denis Ménard asst. art d. Rose Marie McSherry (1st). Barbara Dunphy (2nd) admin. art dept. Maurice Tremblay art dept. trainee Nikki Geoghegan set dress. Ronald Fauteux, Patrice Benge, Serge Bureau, Simon Labaye asst. set dress. Pierre de Grodailon prop. master Jean Bourret asst. prop. master François Beaugard props buyer Michel Comte des. Dominique Ricard spec. efx. coord. Gary Zeller spec. efx. assist. Peter Bodrowsky, Louis Craig, Peter Dowker, Pierre Davreux, Renée Rousseau action vehicles capt. Michael Saint-Laurent action vehicles driver Réal Baril cost. des. Gaudeline Sauriol, Paul-André Guérin (asst.) ward. asst. Mariane Carter ward. master Luc Le Flaguais asst. dresser Christine Gribbin make-up Louise Rundell, Katherine Casault (asst.) hair Constant Natale, Marcel Ouellette (asst.) foc. puller Denis Gingras loader Jean-Jacques Gervais key grip François Dupéré grips Michel Périard,

Paul Morin sd. Patrick Rousseau boom Thierry Hoffman assoc. ed. Monika Lightstone Dorfman asst. ed. Rit Wallis, Jean-Marc Magnan stills Pierre Dury, Denis Fugère sec. to p. Monique Legaré admin. Serge Major p. acct. Wayne Arron compt. Gilles Léonard p. sec. Penny French sc. coord. Denise Dinovici loc. man. Guy Trinque constr. sup. Claude Simard trans. capt. Charles Toupin helicopter man. Gilles Farand 2nd unit d./stunt sup. James Arnett 2nd unit stunt coord. Gaëtan La France 2nd unit prin. stuntman David Rigby 2nd unit 1st a.d. Michel Wachniuc 2nd unit man. Frank Ruszcynski 2nd unit cam. Torben Johnke, Peter Benison, Joël Bertomeu, Serge Ladouceur 2nd unit foc. pullers Luc Lussier, Larry Lynn, Glen MacPherson, Bert Tougas 2nd unit sc. girls Therese Bérubé, Claudette Messier 2nd unit sd. Rolling Jacob 2nd unit grips Marc de Ernsted, Normand Guy, Grégoire Schmist 2nd unit key rigger Peter MacMillan 2nd unit set dress. François Séguin 2nd unit props. Lewis J. Wolfe, Jean-François Roussel 2nd unit make-up/hair Camille Bélanger 2nd unit transp. capt. Blair Roth casting Dani Hausman (T.O.), Ginette D'Amico (Mt.) asst. casting Flo Gallant unit pub. Pierre Brousseau marketing Publifilms Ltd. worldwide pub. Paratel, David Novak Associates post-p. coord. Bill Wiggins sound d. Jay Wertz sd. ed. Eric Lindemann, Joe Melody asst. sound ed. Amable Aguiliez, Michael Rea mus. superv. David Franco, Pierre Brousseau mus. rec. engineer Frank Morrone mus. score Paul Zaza lp. Susan Anspach, Howie Mandel, Sterling Hayden, Helen Shaver, Sandee Currie, Peter Aykroyd, Keith Knight, Alf Humphries, Philip Akin, Michael Hogan, Paul Kelman, Donald Sutherland, Dustin Waln, Vlasta Vrana, Harvey Chao, Brian Nasimok, Violet Bussey, Vincent Marino, Carl Marotte, Bob Parson, Richard Donat, Domenico Fiore, Dino Tosques, Art Groszer, Dioto Kretschmar, Gershon Resnik, Walter Massey, Jeff Diamond, Mac Bradden, Terry Haig, Ralph Petteofrezzo, Joe Sanza, Joost Davidson p.c. Filmplan International (1980) col. 35mm running time 98 min. 51 sec. dist. Paramount Pictures.



• Cecil Taylor in *Imagine the Sound*.

Ron Mann's

Imagine the Sound

Imagine the Sound is less a film, than it is an art exposition brought to the screen. Music is the art form portrayed; more specifically, the music of jazz musicians Cecil Taylor, Bill Dixon, Archie Shepp and Paul Bley.

To best understand the music which they create and perform in the film, it is important to consider the historical context from which their sound has emerged. The reaction against the confines of late-forties/early-fifties jazz music ('Bebop') and the 'Cool Jazz' of the late fifties and early sixties, spawned a new breed of musician which sought the purity of sound itself.

The unspoken hope of every artist is that his work imitates, and thereby becomes life. Cecil Taylor expresses this desire in the opening sequence of the

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film, when he says, "Everything that you do is music." Director Ron Mann dramatically captures this belief, that music is everything and everywhere, as we see the musicians coaxing the music out of their instruments - Taylor on piano, Dixon on trumpet, Shepp on tenor and soprano saxophones, and Bley on piano. Bill Smith (co-producer with Mann) knowledgeably interviews the musicians, allowing each to speak about his music in a way which gives further credence to the basic idea.

Except for one scene, the film is shot in-studio. So as not to distract the viewer from the music, camera movement is kept to a minimum. The music is the figure, the film is the ground. Cinematographer Robert Fresco shows his understanding of this with an appropriate economy and restraint. Consequently, editor Sonya Polonsky is able to cut from interview to performance and back again in a very linear style, forcing the focus where it belongs - on the musician and his music. For each of the four performers the camera develops a different eye, the better to capture the nuances of each man creating his work.

It is Cecil Taylor who gives the camera the most to look at, what with the eccentricities and affectations of this man whom many consider to be a genius. Taylor is shot against a stark, white background devoid of everything but his black piano. The room is a tabula rasa waiting for Taylor to leave his im-

pression upon it. Both Dixon and Shepp, in their separate sequences, are seen in darker colours that generate a feeling of closeness by reducing the distance between the musician and the listener. Bley is filmed as if he is performing in a vacuum, suggesting that if music could be generated in a vacuum it would sound just like that which he plays.

In the course of the film, Taylor and Shepp both give readings of their poems in voices which substitute for their instruments. This interplay of art forms is hardly incidental. (On one of his recent visits to Montreal, Taylor performed at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.)

The music that these four musicians create has rid itself of melody and harmony, structures which often restrict the musician. *Imagine the Sound* successfully shows what results when a musician becomes unbound, just as the film itself stays out of the way. Mann makes no statements, nor does he attempt to convey his feelings about the music. Rather, he lets the music speak for itself, leaving the audience to imagine the sound long after the film is over.

Vadney S. Haynes ●

IMAGINE THE SOUND d. Ron Mann p. Ron Mann, Bill Smith art d. Sandy Kybartas d.o.p. Robert Fresco p. man. Salem Alaton creative consult. Emile DeAntonio gaf. Jock Brandis p.c. Onari Productions (1981) running time 90 min. dist. International Tele-Film Enterprises

ally to the horrific and macabre, several films, most notably the *Jaws* series have made the shark attacks seem even more hideous by casting these underwater predators as sinister villains, capable of plotting truly evil deeds on a scale almost human. At the height of this mania, many film-goers returned home much too frightened of the ocean to go swimming, and even nervous of freshwater ponds, populating them with imaginary, man-eating sharks.

John Stoneman, underwater filmmaker extraordinaire, knows real sharks. He must; they are a regular part of his filming environment. Like few other people, he sees them in their normal habitat, during literally every hour of the day and night. Unlike so many of the filmmakers before him, Stoneman is sensitive to the grace and beauty of these creatures. He knows they are not villains, but he also respects their power, and their mastery of that blue wilderness. It must, at least in part, have been a sense of outrage at the insult the early films flung at these majestic beasts that kept Stoneman at the task of creating what can only be described as a magnificent documentary film about real sharks.

That task was incredibly difficult, not only because it was exceptionally dangerous, not only because the animals are truly unpredictable, erratic, and positively frustrating in their behaviour, but also because to achieve the balance of accuracy and drama Stoneman has in *Shark!*, required blending a deftly honed encyclopedia of information, with what seems like an unending wealth of spectacular underwater footage of sharks and rays.

The film begins with a shark's-eye view of a bathing beach, and although no shark appears in this scene, the impending disaster is unmistakable. Symbolically setting the scene in the style of the "horror" films, Stoneman proceeds to destroy that image completely in the rest of the film, replacing this erroneous impression of the sea running red with the blood of innumerable shark-attack victims, with a picture of a group of

supremely successful aquatic animals. (Watch for a camp cameo appearance of Stoneman in the beach scene.)

Not that he avoids the subject of shark attacks; indeed he interviews several shark-attack victims, who surprisingly, bear no malice to their attackers, and in fact seem to feel they need to defend the shark as having made a mistake which was the fault of the victim! All of them are back to their respective hobbies which got them into trouble, such as surfing and spearfishing. They have, however, changed their styles to avoid making the same mistakes. Even Stoneman realized it would be a lie not to show what a shark can do to a person, but instead of dwelling on the wounds, he uses an effective technique of appearing to take a snapshot. In this way, the audience is forced to view the damage and realize that the shark can be a fatal attacker, but the images are fleeting and last no more than a few seconds in total on the screen. In various parts of the film, he returns to the subject, but now always from a positive point of view: What can the swimmer do to avoid a shark attack? What are the most effective measures that beach authorities have used to minimize attacks? In one scene, a shark that has attacked the divers while they were filming it during a feeding encounter is destroyed using a powerhead, demonstrating that in the rare instances when it is "you or the shark" it is possible for a cool diver to defend himself. Finally Stoneman attempts to put shark attacks into a true perspective. Over the last many years, on a worldwide scale, the number of attacks is fewer than one-hundred per year, and of these fewer than a third are fatal encounters. This means the shark is far less of a hazard than lightning, for instance.

The rest of the film is devoted to what the shark is. A narrator explains something of the amazingly accurate senses of sight, smell, and sound detection. He also explores briefly two senses which humans do not possess: electrical field disturbances, and a sense of "distant touch." Choosing the blue shark to illustrate the eye, he provides a close-up view, taken in the wild open ocean off California, which must have had the shark almost touching the camera. It is both a beautiful and heart-stopping image which he freezes on the screen. Then a picture, which to an experienced diver is frighteningly impressive, he follows a huge hammerhead shark as it slowly throws its head from side to side demonstrating both the weird adaptation for extreme binocular vision, and the technique it uses for increasing the range of its already remarkable sense of smell.

An experiment with Canadian marine biologist Dr. Richard Winterbottom illustrates the sense of hearing. Playing a pre-recorded, pulsing, low-frequency sound they draw sharks from the apparently empty ocean. With remarkable success, Dr. Winterbottom actually replicates a shark-calling instrument used by the natives of Polynesia, who worship the shark as a God, to call them to the side of a boat. During the experiment, the sharks are also fed chopped fish to keep them in the area. Hidden in one of the fish is a "bite meter" which demonstrates the power of the jaws, which can transmit forces of tons per square inch on the tips of the teeth. A hint of the shark's mounting excitement is seen when the scientists attempt to exit their protective underwater cages and suddenly a shark attacks the men.

SHORTS

John Stoneman's

Shark!

Some years ago, Dr. Perry Gilbert edited a book on a subject about which very little was known. "Sharks and Survival" attempted to summarize all of the little

knowledge in a way both scholarly, and yet understandable to any informed person. A veritable avalanche of books, articles and novels about sharks written by experts, non-experts and downright charlatans followed.

One horrifying aspect has transfixed the attention of everyone - sharks eat people! The attacks come slashing out of mysterious ocean depths and are terrifyingly gory. Capitalizing on the fact that people are drawn almost hypnotic-

● *Shark!* "... a wealth of underwater footage".

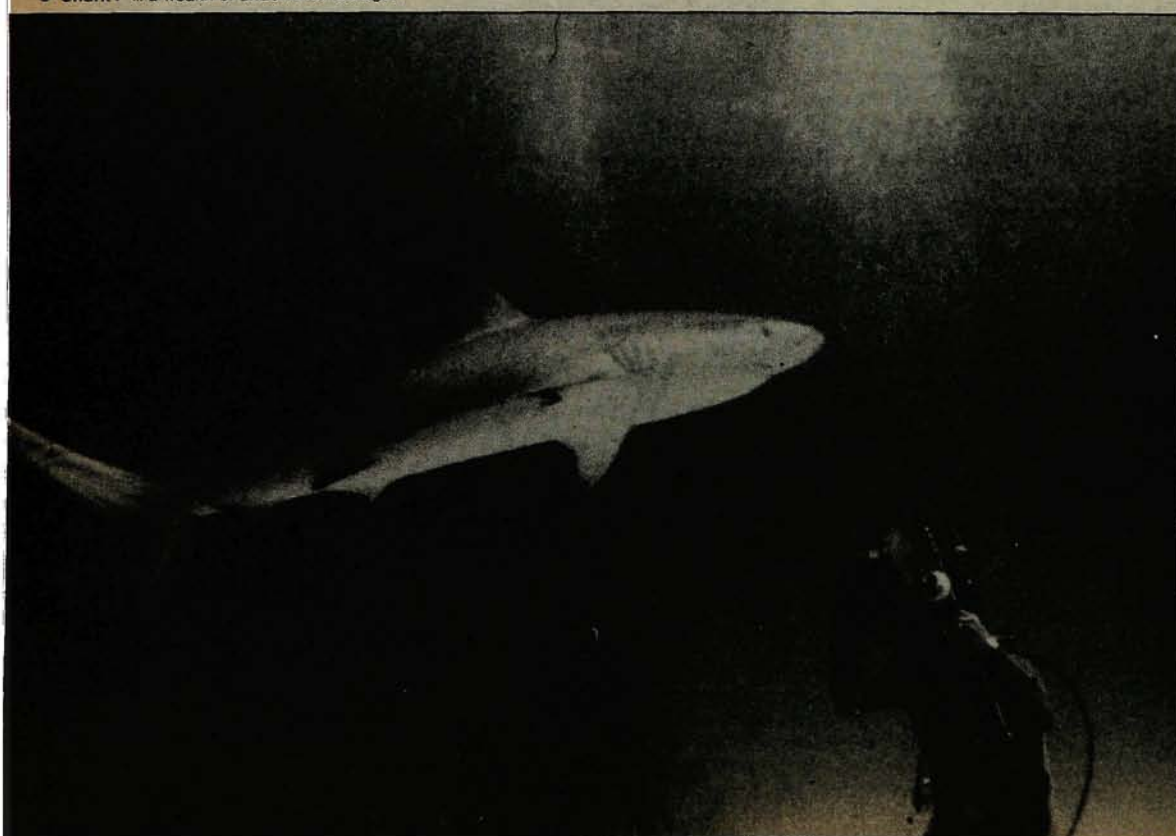


Photo: Barry Parker