

SFU FILM WORKSHOP

A CRITICAL LOOK

Peter Bryant

The showcase for new films from the workshop premiered May 21st. This was the first group of films produced by new resident Guy Bergeron.

The films were divided into two categories of drama and documentary. Each category showed that as an entity, the workshop is achieving more each year. However, since a number of film makers at the work-shop are moving on, this year will probably remain a high point, at least until a new group of film makers have a chance to develop.

The films in the program were as follows, with some comments on each:

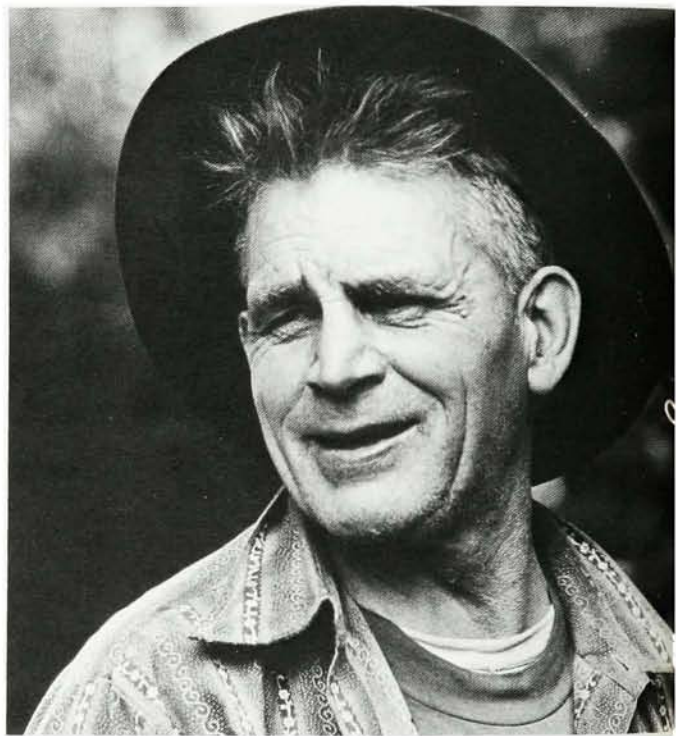
Country Dance is a 30 second computer animation film by Doug Starrat, a very short exercise using a distorted moving map of Canada.

Once Upon A Climb is a first film by Keith Nannery. It is a somewhat satirical look at the technology of climbing, and also offers some interesting information for the layman on pitons, hooks, and clamps. It is well edited with some camp narration, and it works.

Cowboy is a short black and white first film by Patrick Chotikian on a Gastown rubby. Even at the length of four minutes the film manages to be repetitive, with nothing exciting or illuminating about the character. The film is more of an exercise than a film.

Via Dolorosa is one of three films on the Maya and Mazatec Indians made by George Payastre and Claudine Viallon. The film is on the re-enactment of the road of Christ, by the people of Antigua, Guatemala during Easter. There seems to be an interest in the ritual and religious activities of primitive Indians, however the film is basically coverage of a parade, with little development of the subject other than the simple walking along of the people and it seems that five minutes of material is stretched out to ten.

Sammy, Sammy a film by Michael Chechik was by far the best film in the program. It is a documentary on an eccentric on Hornby Island who runs an amusement show consisting of funky ghost puppets and bits of nonsense. The activity is so bizarre and unorthodox that one is immediately intrigued. Chechik also gives us glimpses into other parts of Sammy's life; like a visit to Vancouver to find a whore, skinning deer, operating a one man saw mill, and moments of revelry about his fifteen children. His subject is well chosen. If the National Film Board were to find some grizzled old timer to represent some aspect of our regional identity he would end up lovable, admirable and full of earthy wisdom, thereby fulfilling another piece of mythology. Sammy is fortunately none of those things, he is instead very real, interesting and human, and more like the grizzled old timer who is actually out there. The



Sammy

other important aspect of **Sammy Sammy** is its superior technical competence and craftsmanship. The photography and sound are excellent, and the editing, done by Chechik, reveals a disciplined, thoughtful approach to the film. If it had been produced by the N.F.B. or the C.B.C. with a great deal of money it would still be a film to compliment, the fact that it was made by the workshop with very little makes it a remarkable accomplishment. There is absolutely nothing in the film that suggests poverty or nonprofessionalism. It is a completely well made and interesting film.

No Entry is a dramatic film by Lawrence Day and Mel Kennedy. The film has some similarities with **Ivory Founts**, since it is a "film within a film" film. A young man goes to the movies. He sees a film of himself, and on screen he is making love to a beautiful girl in a diaphanous white gown, who also happens to be the usher in the theatre he is attending. The film is confusing and meandering, but straight narrative would seem inappropriate for it, since it's basically a send-up satire with some fine and funny mo-

ments. Earlier in the program there was a film called **Jack's Lunch** — a three minute one-shot film of Jack eating a banana and some popcorn in a garage. In **No Entry** the protagonist visits Jack's garage, and it becomes obvious the earlier short was an out-take from this film. The put-on works beautifully, and becomes extended as Jack and the car owner/movie goer engage in a conversation that convolutes into double and triple talk while played seemingly straight, so that by the end you are not sure just exactly what has happened or what has been said. The other fine moment in the film occurs while the movie goer is driving his car along the street. He starts thinking of the girl in the movie who is giving him a blow job. He stops and a hitchhiker gets in the back and proceeds to jerk off. He cuts back and forth between humping shots, and then the car stops, the hitchhiker having come, gets out and leaves without saying a word. The hitchhiker is none other than Harlan Dorfman, who played the leads in **Ivory Founts** and in **Trapper Dan**, and appears in this film seedier than ever. Dorfman might well become the Flying Dutchman of student film makers, forever destined to appear in bit parts in bizarre movies. Any hidden meanings in **No Entry** will probably remain hidden, but it is an interesting off-beat film to sit back and enjoy.

Exit and 336 are two short films by Day, Kennedy and Doug Starrat. In the first, which lasts about thirty seconds, a campus security guard discovers a student hanging in a concrete stairwell. In the second a campus worker is run over by his own car in the underground parking lot. The films are brief sketches of paranoid commentary of student life, subtitled together as **The Concrete Mountain Chronicles**.

After Friday represents the most ambitious effort in the program. It is a twenty-four minute drama about the destructive relationship between two brothers, one a successful businessman, the other fresh out of jail. It represents a major step in the workshop since it is the first attempt at serious drama. The production values of the film are excellent, and it is obvious a great deal of work was done to give the film a solid professional look. However, although it makes good use of location shooting, authentic sets, props like police cars and ambulances, and a simple story line: the film fails in an essential way. It is not dramatic. The performances are at best unconvincing, although the actors themselves are well-chosen. Rob Johnson, whose gravelly voice and natural presence and street-wise quality makes him a natural for the part, plays the younger brother, and this type of role is Johnson's forte. The older brother is played by Richard Ouzounian, a local theatre director with a solid reputation and good credibility. However, neither of them can give life to the parts they play, and the problem seems to be critical judgement and guidance on the part of the director. The audience commented by treating the film as a comedy. Tim Sale did everything right in terms of production, but failed in terms of direction. Another flaw in the film was the music, which became an unintentional parody of movie suspense music. The older brother ends up dead in the streets, carrying a rifle, apparently driven to the act by the harassment of the younger brother. It is an extremely difficult turn of events to accept, and if it had been carried out successfully would have made for a strong content in the film.

The Blizzard, a film by C.R. Wrench, was the highlight film of the program. The story is based on the short story by Sinclair Ross, *The Painted Door*. A man leaves his wife to visit his father, and while he is gone a blizzard occurs. During his absence his wife has an affair with a visiting neighbour. In the morning she finds her husband frozen to death in the snow. His hand is covered with paint from the

door she was painting inside the house. The point being, he returned in the storm, witnessed his wife's infidelity, and left to die.

The story is an effective one, and C.R. Wrench was given every opportunity to make a good film. He had the rights to a good story, a fairly substantial budget for a student film, and an excellent crew. Unfortunately, his film suffers from the same problem as Tim Sale's and that is lack of characterization and performance, and consequently lack of drama. The ending is an unveiling of human nature that is unexpected, but here the ending is robbed of its irony and meaning, because of the lack of substance and development preceding it.

The film works as a limited set piece, but not as substantive drama. It has a quality of slickness and professionalism that is appealing, but like Tim Sale, the director needs to create content to match his style. Both Tim Sale and C.R. Wrench are excellent cinematographers, and have considerable skills in giving a "look" to a film. However, as directors they need to develop their skills with actors. It is because they have superior abilities in creating sophisticated looking films that their works are evaluated on a higher level than one would use for more run-of-the-mill films made by students.

At the National level, in comparison with student films from elsewhere, the films from Simon Fraser will certainly stand out. The reason for this is not that people born on this side of the Rocky Mountains are inherently better film students but in the way the workshop itself works and operates.

Most of the students in the workshop are students of one thing only, and that is film production. They are there precisely to make films. There are no courses, degrees, academic structures, or requirements. As a group they are older than students in traditional film departments, since many of them have degrees, have been working for a few years, and return only to take advantage of the film activity.

Consequently the workshop attracts people with a high degree of motivation and energy for film making. The ones that are allowed in must have something to offer, and it is measured by a more appropriate yardstick than the ability to write a paper, which is the yardstick for the liberal arts student. They must offer either energy, ambition, talent, technical skills, desire, hustle, or a willingness to work: the things you need to make films. The other strength of the workshop is in the students themselves. Their biggest resource is the talent and energy of their fellow students. The crew of the films are people who want to be there, who learn to shoot, produce, light, record sound, and edit with constant experience. The workshop offers equipment, production money and a resident who acts as a producer, who can offer technical guidance, and who can make sure people perform. He also has to cajole, praise, hassle, swear and work where necessary. Each year, with only about fifteen or less students actively involved, the workshop produces 90 minutes of films.

A large number of students in the workshop, the core group of the last couple of years, are leaving or have left to become working film people. All of them worked on a substantial number of films while at the workshop, and while they are all film makers themselves, they have also developed other skills, and they have a solid grasp on the different crafts, as well as realistic attitudes regarding film making. As a group they represent a large measure of talent and creative influx. They also have strong instincts for survival. They are: Chris Windsor, Fred Easton, Ron Precious, George Payastre, Bob Ellis, C.R. Wrench, Tim Sale, Lawrence Day, Michael Chechik and the Flying Dutchman himself, Harlan Dorfman. □

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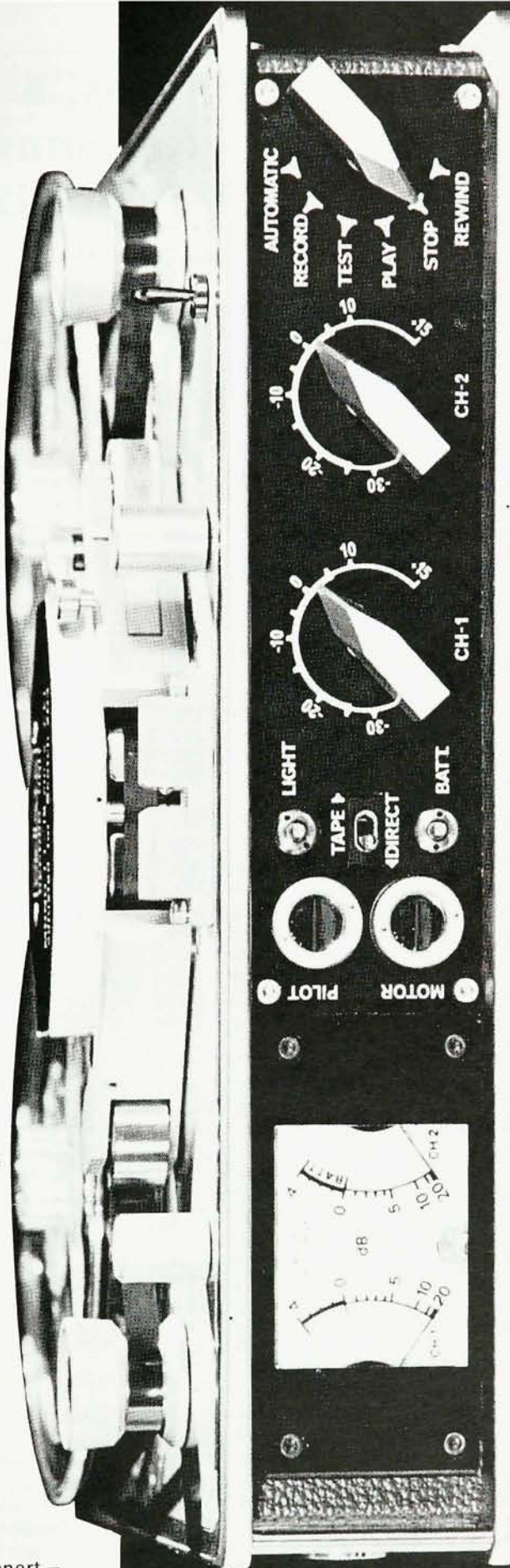
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