

Paul Almond's

## Ups & Downs

The contemporary youth film is an anachronism that's ahead of its time. Because it trades off images of innocence against an uncertain future, it simplifies the inflated reflections of our adult state of bankruptcy. The youth film thus becomes an excellent place for filmmakers to hide their shame and perhaps to expiate their embarrassment at having betrayed their own youth by growing old. This makes the youth film an accurate measure of the degree of cynicism prevailing in a national film industry at a given moment.

In the England of the late '50s and mid '60s, the *St. Trinians* cycle of films about pubescent school-girls represented a nadir in the fetishization of youth in a context of institutional bankruptcy (and a declining national cinema). Yet Lindsay Anderson could still filmically explode all that in *If...* Contrariwise, in the U.S., films like *Blackboard Jungle* or *Rebel Without A Cause* would only help develop a thicket of *Gidgets* and worse.

In Canada, the greatest triumph in the genre so far has been *Porky's*, a celebration of the swinishness of adolescence that largely epitomizes the reckless immaturity of Canadian filmmaking.

Now Paul Almond's most recent feature, *Ups & Downs*, offers a diametrically opposing view of adolescence in a film that single-handedly attempts to reverse recent Canadian cinema's lamentable pandering to the worst aspects of the North-American youth market.

A low-budget (just over \$1 million), non-union, privately financed (though with some CFDC support) film, *Ups & Downs* represents Almond's contribution to the second new wave of Canadian filmmaking. (Almond's film trilogy - *Isabel*, *Act of the Heart* and *Journey* - were part of the first Canadian wave that began with Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Goodbye*.)

In *Ups & Downs*, there are no stars, no names (save that of the director), and no American flags. The cast is resolutely non-professional, drawn from the staff and student-body of St. Michael's University School in Victoria where the film was shot over the last two years.

Instead of the anonymous institutionalism of the North-American high-school, St. Michael's - redubbed St. Martin's Prep for the film - offers with its 1908 red-brick buildings the intimacy of tradition and the healthy expansiveness of wide playing fields. Here, in this Canadian version of the British public school, gone co-educational in the spirit of the times, the rich for a substantial fee exile the little creatures they have had the misfortune to bring into the world until such time as the young can finally do something useful with the family money. The small universe of the School, where the teachers function *in loco parentis*, becomes the context through which the young rich learn about the games people play.

The kids of *Ups & Downs* are stolidly WASP, with nicknames like Mouse, Chip and Biff. The landscape is evocatively Etonian, the religious atmosphere faintly Anglican; and there's plenty of emphasis on character-building sports (rugby for the boys, lawn hockey or show-



● The kids from *Ups & Downs*: front row, Sam (Margo Nesbitt), Mouse (Alison Kemble), Penel (Leslie Hope); back row: Derek (Eric Angus), Jed (Bobbi Permanent), Chip (Andrew Sabiston), and Drifty (Gavin Brannon)

jumping for the girls). The remote outside world is symbolized by Santi (Santiago), the scion of a wealthy South American family; the Canadian world beyond by Miss Natalie Ramone (Kim Prowse) who for a living removes her clothes in the local drinking establishment.

"The rich are very different from you or I," Scott Fitzgerald once sighed. "Yes, they have more money," was Hemingway's sarcastic reply. Within these parameters, the kids of *Ups & Downs* experience some of the ups and downs of life that lie ahead: obesity, friendlessness, death, sex and the breaking of taboos. It's all done with enormous affection and enthusiasm; the kids are wonderful, the teachers remotely eccentric; and Peter Benison's sublime cinematography delivers the images with nostalgic clarity, from fresh faces and rosy cheeks to the lush B.C. rain-forest. *Ups & Downs* is a nice, skillfully made film that demonstrates once again that what distinguishes the upper-class view of the world from the more vulgar apperceptions of the lower classes is class. Had it been made by anyone less accomplished than Paul Almond, *Ups & Downs* could be hailed as a qualitative leap in the maturity of Canadian filmmaking.

But it is a Paul Almond film, and if there is a quality that accurately describes the films of Paul Almond, at least until *Final Assignment* and even there with qualifications, that is the quest for truth. But *Ups & Downs* is a film whose truths are only secondary: even if every incident in the film is based on true events, even if those are real students and real teachers, even if it takes place in a real school. For the film itself seems to present a false face: it wears its innocence as a mask.

In part this is because all the hard truths underlying the film are only alluded to, and while there are references to the unpleasant world beyond the cocoon of the school (or the making of the film) they are oblique, if not merely parenthetical, which reverses the fact that being in school is itself the parenthesis. And yet these glimmers are arresting because they are all structured

around the presentation of media, suggesting a rather intriguing subtext. That Sam (Margot Nesbitt) has an alcoholic mother is communicated by telephone, as is the news of the death of Drifty's (Gavin Brannon) mother; Santi's (Santiago Garcia de Leaniz) torment over the socio-economic privileges of his family is communicated by a book on terrorism. Even the accidental discovery of Emmie's (Sandy Gauthier) epilepsy occurs through (the theft of) the medium of her pills. Further terror and violence is signified by gruesome sounds excerpts from horror films and television voice-overs that sonorously point of the media's sinister and lurking presence, as though the world would otherwise be a peaceful place.

Is this Almond's hint that media, and that includes film, compromise life? Is that why he re-edited *Ups & Downs* to give it a more up-beat and up-market ending? The paradoxical intrusion of such 'realistic' considerations, since they are not explicitly developed, only casts a tremor of calculation upon the sincerity of the film's reflections.

Not that this will especially matter in terms of a young audience, and in a genre where *Porky's* has set the standard, perhaps all Almond could do was over-compensate. The result, though, is to lock *Ups & Downs* into some of the same set of determinants that produces a *Porky's*: instead of a *Porky's* about lower-class slob, *Ups & Downs* becomes a nice, wholesome *Porky's* about preppies.

On the other hand, in an institutional and market context that has largely reduced filmmaking to the luscious portrayal of stereotypes, it may just be that *Ups & Downs*, by devoting an entire film to young people whose chief characteristic is not their stupidity, points in the general right direction.

For something does appear to be stirring in Canadian film. There's a restlessness for its own roots exemplified by Don Owen's update of *Nobody Waved Goodbye* and in Almond's characterization of his return to feature film as an attempt to go "back to the way films used to be made in Canada."

If *Ups & Downs* does not of itself

augur the dawn of the second Canadian new wave, it does suggest the longing for an innocence that, whatever its compromises, is at least our own. And that must be a sign of hopefulness in the surrounding dark night of Americanization.

Michael Dorland ●

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