

Daniel Petrie's **The Bay Boy**

Perhaps the real history of Canadian feature film and TV drama making is in what we call Hollywood. Though Daniel Petrie, at least before *The Bay Boy*, did not get much coverage as a "Canadian in Hollywood," he has survived there as a successful director, part of the Hollywood machine, a man capable of turning out popular successes (*Fort Apache: The Bronx*, *The Betsy*, *Resurrection*, *Sybil*) that were also films marked by creative ambition.

What makes *The Bay Boy* so interesting a proposition is that Petrie returns to his native Glace Bay, N.S. to do the film he has wanted to do for years: deeply personal, in-felt, growing out of his Canadian roots, but destined to find a popular mass audience through a kind of well-tested popular movie-making, so desperately needed in Canadian feature production.

English-Canadian films like *The Grey Fox*, *The Wars*, *The Bay Boy* are springing from what is surely fertile soil, in the manner that dozens of Australian films have expressed the Australian spirit in the last decade or so. And there is now a considerable pool of Canadian talent and Canadian production *cadres*. The Kemeny/Heroux team, who have already contributed to a similar, though better-established phenomenon on the Quebecois side, are among the leaders making things happen in the draconian worlds of production and co-production. *The Bay Boy*, to be sure, is their film baby.

The problem – the crux, as always, of the infernal Canadian film debate – is to translate this home-grown creativity into products that people will want to

see. Does Daniel Petrie succeed in wedding his obviously deeply felt home-experience to a film form that one might expect from him, thanks to his successful Hollywood experience?

The answer – as is the case with most of these things – is both a yes and a no. *The Bay Boy* is obviously a quality film, the very antithesis of so much of the shoddy imitation-American exploitation garbage until now (including some of this year's candidates for the Genie Awards). *The Bay Boy* has production values, the look and the feel of a movie of solid craftsmanship, unhampered by unreasonable time and money constraints. Claude Agostini's cinematography handsomely captures the battered, wooden sea-side houses of Glace Bay of the 1930's. And above all Daniel Petrie's fondness for his characters and his town shines through in the camera's treatment of places, things and people. No turgid, *grand-guignol* distortion here (a-la-*Wedding in White* of a dozen years ago) as Petrie looks back on his early days with a critical yet ever-so-sympathetic eye.

Petrie has elicited some fine performances from a cast of distinguished veterans and young newcomers. Deservedly, Kiefer Sutherland has won universal praise in the central role. But another young actor, Peter Spence, does an amazingly convincing and moving job in the minor role of Joe, the Sutherland character's incapacitated brother. Petrie's plot aims his characters toward key emotional moments – and the film delivers on these peaks, particularly in its conclusion. No small achievement, all of this.

And yet, in spite of its real merits, of its essential likableness, *The Bay Boy* does not have that special quality that makes film lovers reach for superlatives. It is as if Petrie's own laudable attitude inhibited the film from exploding with any kind of extravagance of magic. *The Bay Boy's* treatment of 16-year-old Donald Campbell's family, his town, his Catholic background, his stumbling emotional

and sexual gropings – and his eventual leaving all of this behind – is at once reverential, caricatural, fair, sympathetic, funny, critical, nostalgic. Add to this a praiseworthy attempt at poetic documentary of Glace Bay as it was back then.

And (maybe) here's the rub: it is quite possible that the film director's very honesty, his being true to so many ambivalent strands in his own sensibility in this very personal film, may well have prevented *The Bay Boy* from going all the way in *any* direction.

Petrie adopts a picaresque plot structure, with the entire film firmly centred on young Donald at a particular time and place in his life's journey – but all of this seen many years later, via voice-over. Which would seem to point to an essentially poetic memory trip. Petrie, however, keeps the poetry to a minimum. The camerawork is good, but it fails to exploit what is, after all, a land- and sea-scape almost never seen in the cinema, or at least in feature movies. In its effort at realistically recapturing Glace Bay of the '30s, the camera seems inhibited, constrained (as Canadian cameras in similar situations are most always constrained), in order to avoid the icons and daily sights of Glace Bay today.

The story unfolds at its leisurely pace, as boy Donald encounters one thing after another. But commercial cinema plotting demands more: melodrama is lurking in the wings. Example One: there are two girls living next door, one of them more than available, and the other, her lovely sister (played by Leah Pinsent, Gordon's daughter) whom Donald *really* loves. Complication: Donald witnesses their psychopathic police Sergeant father murder an elderly couple. Example Two: Donald's backwoods superstitious Catholicism has him headed for the priesthood. But Donald rejects both priesthood and Catholicism because of the sexual advances of a visiting, soulful, love-starved priest. Heavy waters, these; and it is to Petrie's immense credit that these incidents are

always treated with sympathy and understanding.

The situations, however, are symptomatic of a more generalized malaise. Ultimately, every character in *The Bay Boy* except, to be sure, the boy himself is a one-dimensional creation, playing a one-note tune. Too many scenes and situations (the Sergeant and his two daughters, so essential to the story) are deprived of nuance, mystery, complexity – and artistic credibility. The reduction is too drastic; and there is no compensatory explosion in drama or lyricism or comedy or wit to propel the viewer into Petrie's creative world.

Even *The Bay Boy's* more sociological level, for all the film's considerable success in re-creating Glace Bay, fails to sustain weighty exploration. One does get a vague feeling of the poverty of Donald's parents; the stifling narrow-mindedness of the Catholic ambience (not one iota of religious feeling here, strictly caricatural) is strongly communicated; and the town life, policemen and all, does peep out modestly in the background. But the social reality, like the nuances of social relationships, eludes us. The life of the people – mining? fishing? unions? – exists in one-note references.

To put it another way. At its most basic level, *The Bay Boy* takes no chances. The very *film language* at the level of scripting, of choice of sights and sounds, camerawork and editing, – consistently avoids the personal touch, the personal statement that this film demands, that is at the very heart of the enterprise. And so, ultimately, the factor of commercial viability militates against the intensity of the film, though it may help guarantee a certain mass-accessibility.

And so, *The Bay Boy* is no film masterpiece. This judgement, however, in no way invalidates recognition of the film's real merits – and, maybe more importantly, the fact that this viewer enjoyed it, was touched by it.

While *The Bay Boy* may not succeed at the level, say, of John Ford's popular masterpieces, it nonetheless stands as a fine example of those films of slightly lesser quality which form the backbone of any viable film industry. It witnesses to the mature capabilities of today's Canadian feature film industry.

The Bay Boy is solid popular entertainment, it reveals the Canadian entity, and it touches universal themes. As such, it strengthens a tenuous, often maligned, always threatened tradition in Canadian film life. It points to what can be done today, and to future possibilities.

Marc Gervais ●

● Kiefer Sutherland as *The Bay Boy*: solid popular entertainment



THE BAY BOY d./sc. Daniel Petrie exec. p. Susan Cavan, Frank Jacobs co-p. Rene Cleitman p. John Kemeny & Denis Heroux assoc. p. Paulo de Oliveira p. man. Stephane Reichel d.o.p. Claude Agostini mus. Claude Bolling ed. Susan Shanks cost. des. Renee April p. des. Wolf Kroeger p.c. Bay Boy Productions (Canada) and Hachette-Fox Productions (France), with production financing provided in part by Telefilm Canada and Home Box Office dist. Pan-Canadian Lp. Kiefer Sutherland, Liv Ullmann, Peter Donat, Alan Scarfe, Mathieu Carriere, Chris Wiggins, Thomas Peacocke, Isabelle Meijas, Jane McKinnon, Leah Pinsent, Peter Spence, Josephine Chaplin, Pauline Laffont, Roy McMullin, Kathy McGuire, Robbie Gallivan, Robert Rose, Darren Arsenaault, David Ferrey, Betty MacDonald, Fannie Shore, Sander Zilbert, Tom Rack, Robert Taylor, Joe MacPherson, Kevin McKenzie, Iris Currie, Francis MacNeil, Michael Egyes.

André Melançon's

La guerre des tuques

To disarm the chronically optimistic and their sidekicks – the pessimistic makers of comparisons with the superior efforts of more developed national cinemas – one might as well start with what *La guerre des tuques* is not. It is not *La guerre des boutons*, it is not *Les 400 coups*, and it is not *L'argent de poche*; in short, it is not an extraordinary film. Yet for all it is not, *La guerre des tuques* may well be the beginning of something important.

In its desperate flight from its own identity (or lack of one), mainstream Canadian filmmaking's slavish imitation of American mediocrity has time and again created local vacuums. If there is no such thing as a genuinely national Canadian hit film, there are plenty of examples of local successes, successful precisely because they filled a vacuum, and this from *Duddy Kravitz* for Montreal, to *Goin' Down the Road* for Toronto, to *In The Fall* or *Who Has Seen The Wind?* for the prairies.

The genius of producer Rock Demers – *La guerre des tuques* being the first of an eight-film series entitled *Tales For All* – lies in his grasp of the commercial importance of the local, doubly so when one realizes that there is nothing more grass-roots (nor simultaneously more universal) than children. For surely, part of *La guerre des tuques'* phenomenal success – the film has grossed \$615,000 in 13 weeks in Montreal – is due to the fact that it addresses that pathetically neglected moviegoer: the child.

In yet another sense is *La guerre des tuques* an important vindication of the local, and ironically so at a time when the word 'international' loudly pretends to be the answer to all our problems, especially the filmmaking ones. With financing from Telefilm, from Quebec's Société générale, and from CTV's Montreal affiliate CFCF, *La guerre des tuques* is something of a model for an entirely Canadian approach – and solution – to the problems of Canadian cinema. Indeed, in the light of the film's successful run, Telefilm head André Lamy has gone so far as to point to the \$1.3 million budget *La guerre des tuques* as being a model of profitability, or at least far closer to the solution than those intricately structured, tri-nationally financed cinematic megaprojects of dubious Canadian derivation.

That said, however, once one moves beyond *La guerre des tuques'* strong and successful deployment of the immense potential of the local formula, the film begins to show weaknesses. Briefly, two groups of schoolchildren, one of whom has a Saint-Bernard, spend Christmas vacation in the Baie St-Paul area waging a playful war whose strategic objective is to capture the defenders' snowfort. But is *La guerre des tuques* truly a children's film – a film for children – or is it a film that makes use of children for other purposes? These are not necessarily nefarious or exploitative purposes, for the intention of the film is to tell a moral tale, namely that peace is preferable to war, a moral that few would want to take issue with. Yet the film's moral, rather than building itself

up from within, suddenly intrudes with all the heavyhandedness of the adult world, for *La guerre des tuques* is less about the dog who stopped the war, as its English title suggests, than the filmmakers' seemingly arbitrary decision to stop the film with the *deus ex machina* of the dog's (accidental) death.

This both weakens the moral of the film, since it does not follow from the logic of the story as much as it seems an imposed, exterior moralism, and, I fear, rather wrecks the story for children. My six-year-old kept asking afterwards: "But why did the dog have to die?" If he couldn't understand it, it's because the film itself did not make this clear; and my explanation that creatures are killed in war, which wouldn't otherwise be war if nobody got killed, and that war is a terrible thing, just didn't seem to explain much.

The problem with *La guerre des tuques* is that you seldom stop suspecting hordes of adults hovering about off-camera, instructing, hectoring, moralising, and directing. If the children themselves are, on the whole, perfectly adequate to their roles, with all the enthusiasm and deadly seriousness of children, this ceases to work as soon as the children are made to be anything but children and turned instead into symbolic little adults. This is particularly noticeable in the "love interest" between Luc the attacking general (Cedric Jourde) and Sophie the defending Boadicea (Maripierre Arsenneau-D'Amour). However cute she may be, it would still seem that any boy playing soldier with Luc's fierce dedication (and, one suspects, deep psychological hang-ups) would simply not have the slightest interest in a girl.

Again, the adult world intrudes crudely upon the very symbol of the war between the kids: the snowfort. All it takes is one look to know that no kid on earth could have built this fort. The elaborate structure with its too-smooth sides simply screams of adult engineering. (In fact, so well-constructed was the fort that a special-effects expert had to be called in to demolish it.)

Even so, this still might have worked – the fort is, after all, François-les-lunettes' (Duc Minh Vu) fantasy. Had the entire film been, say, Luc's fantasy, all kinds of surrealism might have been possible. There is surrealism in *La guerre des tuques* – the final assault on the fort with the multi-colored ribbons and astounding use of kitchen utensils for helmets has all the beauty of a child's version of *Alexander Nevsky*. In this wonderful, intricate sequence, one can

clearly see how *La guerre des tuques* might have risen to the heights of *La guerre des boutons*.

None of the above – except perhaps for the death of the dog – could probably matter to children; on the day I saw the film the young audience just lapped it all up, howling with delight at the gags, and the sillier the better. Ultimately it's seeing those hundreds of little faces laughing (in French) at jokes written in their language, laughing along with a film set here, in our winter, starring kids that could almost be themselves, that matters far more.

A critic can – and should – say these kids deserve better. But one has to start somewhere, and one could do a hell of a lot worse than *La guerre des tuques*.

If this film is not completely the model it's cracked up to be, at least it's a good and positive beginning.

Michael Dorland ●

LA GUERRE DES TUQUES (The Dog Who Stopped The War)

d. André Melançon sc. Danyele Patenaude, Roger Cantin, with Melançon p. Rock Demers, Nicole Robert set p. Claude Bonin d.o.p. François Protat art d. Violette Daneau mus. comp. & cond. Germain Gauthier ed. André Corriveau p. man. Daniel Louis cont. Janine Senecal sd. Serge Beauchemin cost. Huguette Gagne gaffer Jean Courteau key grip Serge Grenier 1st a.d. Lino 2nd a.d. Louis-Philippe Rochon cast. children Danyele Patenaude 1st asst. cam. Paul Gravel 2nd asst. cam. Christine Perreault 2nd unit. cam. Jean-Claude Labrecque 2nd unit asst. cam. Nathalie Moliavko Visotsky set dresser Denis Hamel props Abe Lee, Michelle Forest asst. props. Claude Jacques, Gerard Venancio sp. efx. Gilles Aird make-up/hair Diane Simard unit man. Mario Nadeau asst. unit man. Luc Martineau boom Yvon Benoit grips Grégoire Schmidt, Michel Periard best boy Alex Amyot carp. Richard Boucher trainee grip Manal Hassib trainee d. Stella Goulet children's caretakers Gilles Cyr, Michel Hamel, Andreeanne Melançon p. assts. Bruno Bazin, Bernard Vincent asst. ed. Christine Denault hd. sd. ed. Claude Langlois sd. ed. Louise Côté sd. efx. Marcel Pothier asst. sd. ed./asst. sd. efx. Jocelyn Caron p. acct. Muriel Lizé-Pothier p. coord. Lorraine Du Hamel Baie St. Paul coord. Jean Gérin stills Jean Demers unit pub. Bernard Voyer, David Novek Associates Inc. anim. Animabec opticals Film Doctor titles Ciné-Titres lab. & post. p. Bellevue-Pathé Quebec (1972) Inc. mixing Pathe Sound cam. & lenses Panavision p.c. Les Productions La Fête Inc., with the financial participation of La Société Générale du Cinema, Telefilm Canada, La Société Radio-Canada and CFCF Inc. Cdn. dist. Cinema Plus (514) 521-1163, foreign sales: Films Transit (514) 526-0839 lp. Cédric Jourde, Julien Elie, Maripierre Arsenneau-D'Amour, Duc Minh Vu, Luc Boucher, Gilbert Monette, Mario Monette, Olivier Monette, Mathieu Savard, Maryse Cartwright, Steve Savage, Jean-François Leblanc, Nathalie Gagnon, Patrick Saint-Pierre Periz, Christine Dufort, Julie Martel, Carlos Da Costa, François Gratton, Lucy the dog (Dawn Animal Agency), Helene Arsenneau, France Bouchard Lavoie, Jean Gérin, Madeleine Villeneuve Bouchard, Lina Leblanc, Fernande Bouchard, France Panneton, St. Gertrude Youth Choir, Pierre Richard, Paul-Emile Tremblay, Eric Lavoie, and the pupils of Dominique Savio School, St. Urbain running time: 88 mins.

Les Rose's

Isaac Littlefeathers

This film may, as its producer and co-writer Barry Pearson suggests, represent a high-water mark in terms of the number of different levels of government and public agencies who have lent a helping hand to its production.

Although the project has been under development by Pearson and director/co-writer Les Rose since 1976, it was not until it became an early beneficiary of what Pearson calls the "fearless" new willingness of the CBC to co-operate with independent producers and Telefilm Canada that it really got off the ground. With the CBC's letter of intent to broadcast in hand, the project gained a commitment for a third of its \$2.2 million budget from Telefilm, and then, with a decision to move the production from Toronto to Edmonton, another half-million from the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation and Superchannel – not to mention wholehearted co-operation from the City of Edmonton. The CBC will broadcast the movie probably in the fall of 1985, and Superchannel has a second window thereafter. In the meantime, there has been a theatrical premiere and a two-week run in Edmonton via Pan-Canadian, and the producers are hoping for exhibition in key centres this spring.

So it would be nice to be able to say that *Isaac Littlefeathers* is as great a success as a piece of entertainment as it is as an example of the possibilities of the current production climate. But, to be truthful, the film rarely rises above a formulaic conception of its material, despite some aspects of storyline and situation that are unusual to the point of being bizarre.

The title character is an adolescent Métis boy growing up in Edmonton in the early 1960s under the protective care of an elderly Jewish shopkeeper. The offspring of a footloose, motorcycle-riding pro-hockey player and an Indian woman who apparently succumbs to despair and degradation, Isaac finds a home with the kindly, cheerfully philosophical Abe Kapp. At the beginning of the action he is feeling upset not only by the racist taunts of the local rednecks but because he doesn't get invited to his Jewish friends' bar-mitzvahs. (Before the movie is over he has been put up for a bar-mitzvah of his own – a prospect which gives rise to a couple of crude visual jokes about circumcision.) In what at times looks like an effort to leave no dramatic stereotype or ethnic minority unincorporated, the story has the 14-year-old hero encountering his itinerant real father a number of times, hobnobbing with a Jewish boy who goes nowhere without his Charlie-McCarthy-type ventriloquist's doll, acquiring a Chinese girlfriend, getting exposed to a few whiffs of Indian culture in the person of a blind old shaman, exciting the resentment of Abe's older daughter, and engaging in an escalating series of conflicts with the dastardly Varco clan (the father a slovenly foulmouthed drunkard, the sons a pack of cowardly bullies) culminating in a boxing match and a hostage drama where he holds old Varco at gunpoint. Hardly surprising, under the

● *La Guerre des tuques'* Jean-François Leblanc storming the fort



circumstances, that Isaac suffers from identity problems – something that might also be said of the movie as a whole.

The important role of Abe is an index of the film's willingness to be content with off-the-rack characterization. As played in his familiar manner by Lou Jacobi, he is a cardboard figure of limitless affection, optimistic resilience and practical wisdom, punctuated by an ineffably Jewish sense of humour. Similarly, the Varcos are caricatures of rottenness, snarling and snivelling their way through every scene. And torn between so many different conceptions (a lot of them trite) of where the scenario might be heading or what his character might turn out to be, the hero himself fails to stay in focus for any length of time. At a number of different points, in fact, the film is hurt by its inability to reject any temptation whatever to be "effective" – dramatically, humourously, cinematically – despite the damage that is done to a unified direction and structure by the desire to exploit every conceivable aspect of the scenario for a quick emotional response.

But perhaps it is somewhat unfair to subject this modest, essentially TV movie to the kind of scrutiny usually reserved for theatrical features. Certainly it is not without its achievements, especially considering the budget. For the money it really looks very good, with a consistent gloss on the images and some genuinely lovely panoramic landscape shots from cinematographer Ed Higginson. At a few points the budget limitations peep through, and although the look is smooth it is also rather too bright and closeuppy for theatrical viewing (it will look right at home on television). And, for the most part, the details of period settings and location and the general sense of production values are quite acceptable.

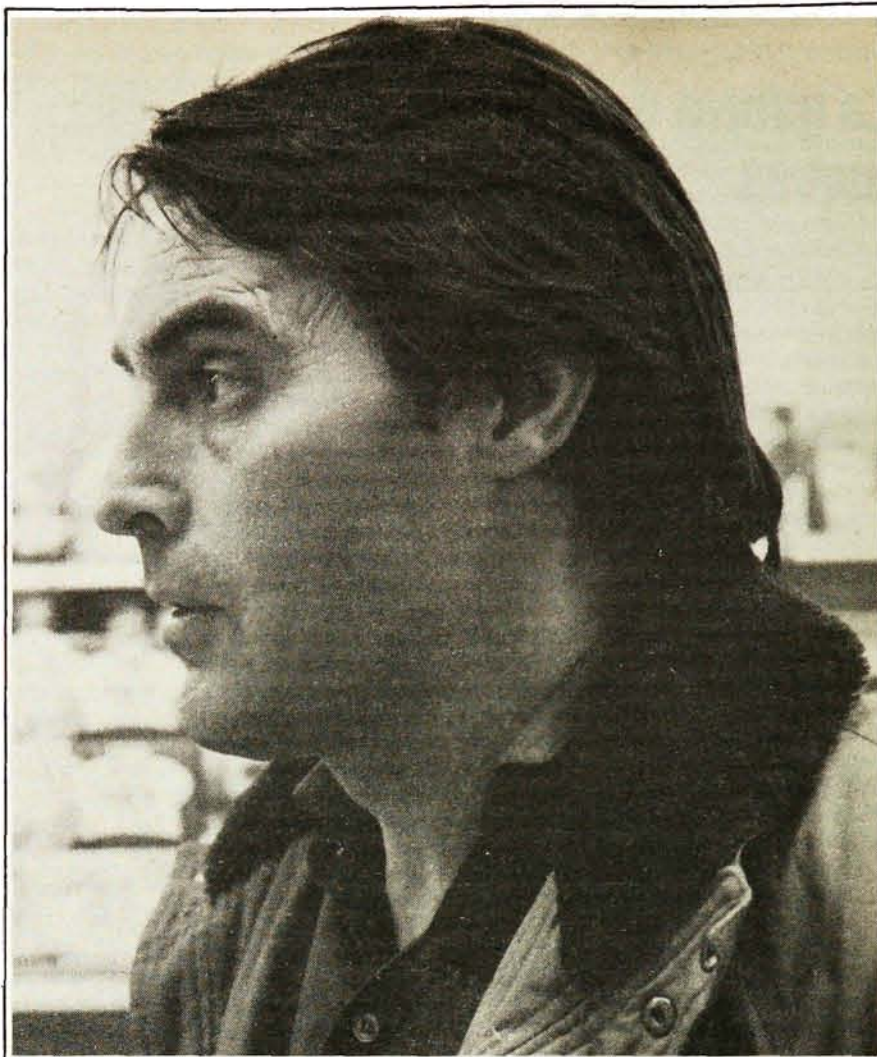
With a couple of exceptions, the performances aren't too bad either, again

particularly considering the lack of experience of some of the actors. In this context the central performance by novice Will Korbust must definitely be deemed a success. At 15 years of age and without the slightest previous dramatic experience, Korbust may not always be polished in his delivery of dialogue, but in every other respect he does a very creditable job. He does have screen presence and the producers are justified in having taken a chance on him. Most of the secondary roles are well taken, and one certainly doesn't have the sense that the film ran out of talent after the most important couple of parts.

Rose and Pearson – probably best known as the co-writers of *Paperback Hero*, and respectively the director and producer of CTV's interesting 1981 feature *The Life and Times of Alonzo Boyd* – have not perhaps done themselves full justice here. The movie will no doubt look somewhat better on TV, and also I should report that the audience I saw it with seemed to be enjoying it pretty well. At the least, *Isaac Littlefeathers* is a testament to the workability of current public mechanisms to aid feature production in this country.

William Beard ●

ISAAC LITTLEFEATHERS d. Les Rose sc. Rose, Barry Pearson p. Barry Pearson, William Johnston exec. p. Gerald M. Soloway, Ronald Lillie d.o.p. Ed Higginson, c.s.c. ed. Mairin Wilkinson mus. Paul Zaza art d. Richard Hudolin assoc. p. Douglas C. Hutton, Arvi Liimatainen p.c. Lauron International Inc., in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, with the participation of Telefilm Canada, Allarcom Ltd., and the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation l.p. Lou Jacobi, Scott Hylands, William Korbust Lynda Mason Green, Tom Heaton, George Clutesi, Lorraine Behnan, Robert Astle, Mark Schoenberg, Bryan Fustukian, Geoff Brumlik, Brent Allen, Eiko Waida, Marek Forsyński, Glenn Davidson, Darren Heaps, Vincent Gale, Michele Thrush, Christine Daniels, Larry Musser, Tommy Fletcher, Robert Koons, Fred Keating, Steve Blackman running time 95 min.



● Derek May: fellow travellers, take notice

Derek May's

Other Tongues

Derek May's new film, *Other Tongues*, begins and ends on a shot of a suitcase, a kind of metaphor for the immigrant experience. Later, in a Greek tavern, someone makes the point that emigrants are like suitcases. They arrive with a suitcase – in which there are only blank pages – and no money, and they leave with a suitcase full of money. Between these two framing shots, May gives us not so much a portrait of the immigrant experience, for he is no didacticist, as a picaresque insight into the multicultural neighbourhood of St-Louis in Montreal. Through the shifting fortunes and love affairs of six people who live there, he expands upon the meaning of this central image.

May's earlier work – *Angel*, *McBus*, *Niagara Falls* – was informed by an immigrant sensibility: an outsider who is looking for a way into the culture that he has adopted. These films are dissonant and fragmented and full of absences – of landscape, harmony, narrative logic – but his art films – *Sananguagat* and *Pictures From the 1930's* – suggested that it was possible to overcome this through the synthesis of experience that art provided. However, the key film in May's unique and distinguished output was *Mother Tongues*, where he confronted his, as well as his wife's past and roots, and their present reality. It was a portrait of a bilingual relationship, she Québécois, he English, which resonated with the problems of the country as a whole.

Other Tongues is an extension of the concerns present in *Mother Tongue*, as its title indicates. While the first film analysed a bilingual relationship, *Other Tongues* extends its dialectic to the multicultural experience where English, Québécois and Greeks intermingle. There are four couples in this film, although only six people (it makes for interesting mathematics): Sam and Anna, Sam and Lise, Anna and Yiannis and, finally, May himself and Suzanne. Each couple somehow defies definition – Sam and Anna having a living arrangement that is non-exclusive, and in the course of the film they both get involved with other people: Sam with the gentle, blonde Lise, and Anna dueling with the sensually temperamental Greek, Yiannis.

These couples live tenuous relationships, where slipping into bed with someone else cannot conceal the doubts and absences that flicker through their thoughts. Sam and Anna, in particular, are trying to define a new kind of living arrangement to suit their needs, because, as Sam puts it, "Couples slaughter each other and reduce the other person to something they can deal with." Yet, he is 35 and would like children. Anna, even though she needs the company of other men, thinks maybe it's time she got pregnant.

The equation becomes confused when a different value system enters to trouble these serene waters. The headstrong Yiannis, cannot accept the fact that Anna, even though she has slept with him, is not his alone. As the opening line intones, "In Paradise, everyone gets what they want. Locally, things are more complicated." In some of the more marvellous interchanges, often arguments, the tone and content descends to soap-opera, which nevertheless makes it no less insightful. While Sam, Anna, Lise and Yiannis negotiate



● Robert Astle, left, and Lou Jacobi prime young William Korbust in *Isaac Littlefeathers*

the various problems in their lives, Derek and Suzanne (she is learning English through tape-recorded lessons) live their relationship apart from the emotional chaos that the film describes. But the wild uncertainties that define the lifestyles of the more demonstrative couples, is here marked by a different kind of absence – Derek and Suzanne avoid domestic conflict, but also interchange with a social world as well.

The key to understanding *Other Tongues* is a piece of graffiti scrawled onto a wall, "We can't solve all our problems in the bedroom." If this is precisely what the film's couples are trying to do, it is delicately balanced by two encounters that point a way out of the introverted turmoil of the relationships in the film. Sam is a radio broadcaster and his work brings him into contact with a woman who has just written a history of the Communist movement in Canada during the inter-war period. Sam is amazed that many of the incidents described in the book took place in St-Louis, yet he knows nothing about this past.

This interview raises questions that are touched on again when Anna meets an ebullient, elderly woman who carries the spirit of life and knowledge in her eyes. She is a union organizer, referred to affectionately as "The Fireball." For her, sex is magnificent and indispensable, but it doesn't solve all our problems. As she puts it, if people don't work together, "It's just everything going down the drain."

Both of these encounters speak to a world that is nowhere visible in the rest of the film, another absence, but their force and impact is undeniable. Like the black-and-white archival footage of immigrants arriving and travelling on the train, a past has disappeared and people are groping for a pattern with which to live their lives. By the end of *Other Tongues*, little has changed in the lives of our couples. Yiannis and Sam have become friends, and they join Anna and Lise for a coffee on a sunlight verandah. Suzanne comes to the end of her English lessons and is told that she now knows something about the culture. But this ending is in reality only a continuation: the suitcase is picked up and carried off, starting on another journey that has no end.

There is a tentativeness to the final moments of *Other Tongues*, as there is to the rest of the film, that speaks to a fragile future. Yet, formally, the film has the precision and imagination of someone whose grip on the medium is becoming more assured with every film. Within its 50 minutes or so, May has sketched, in his own sophisticated visual manner, a warm, complex and occasionally touching tapestry encompassing past and present, male and female, Québécois and English, presence and absence, that synthesizes the immigrant experience and suggests that we are all outsiders, fellow travellers who could do well to take notice of our surroundings and our heritage.

Piers Handling ●

OTHER TONGUES d. Derek May d.o.p. David deVolpi ed. Derek May, Judith Merritt orig. sc. (conceived by) Derek May, (written by) Gerald Wexler mus. Zone Jaune song "There Is a War" by Leonard Cohen p.c. National Film Board of Canada running time 57 min. 23 sec. improv. Peter Bierman, Yiannis Roussis, Linda Lee Tracey, Sylvie Potvin, Suzanne Samson also appearing Merrily Weisbord, Lea Roback, Raphael Mungia and family.

Michael Rubbo's

Margaret Atwood: Once in August

If a Michael Rubbo documentary usually acknowledges its genesis in the NFB, Rubbo's personal presence and persona are, however, more prominent. In *Margaret Atwood: Once in August*, Rubbo declares that such contradictory alignments provide a working license to make personal cinema within the Film Board. As he types a letter to Atwood requesting permission to make a film about her for the Board's Canadian Writers' Series, Rubbo commits a felicitous typo. By transposing the letter "r" for the letter "t" in the surname, the film proves to be a collaboration between A and R – Atwood and Rubbo.

This film is more anthropological than institutional, in the modern tradition of visual anthropology, where the researcher is necessarily implicated in the documentary of the cultural human subject. Its theme is the art of life, with Atwood the found resource on her family's summer island. The island's location is never revealed. It looks northerly, like the landscape in Atwood's novel *Surfacing*, but the full Atwood family forms an energetic presence.

In Atwood, Rubbo finds a collaborator who extends his subject beyond portraiture. Atwood's known ability to control media interviews is evident in her first speech, camping instructions to Rubbo. Rubbo plays the would-be voyeur as a voyageur, ensconcing himself on the island's rim with his working collaborator, Merrily Weisbord, then edging defensively towards his subject. Weisbord gets closer to Atwood when she rebukes Rubbo's chauvinist persona. Rubbo's familiar go-between is redefined as an ironically feminist liaison, a co-between.

Rubbo bounces between his assump-

tions about Atwood and his inability to get at Atwood. He enters her literary territory as "a reader", not a critic, of Atwood's work. But he brings the fears and the fantasies of a male outsider. So he is more comfortable with Atwood's mother as she prepares a pie and recalls the child-writer.

Prosaic events assume a haze of profundity. Often, the artistry Rubbo imposes upon ordinary acts produces irony, especially when he is befuddled. The lake where Atwood canoes is still, so Rubbo's reading from *Surfacing* seems an attempt to fuse Atwood's life and literature. Periodically, Atwood is seen reading a barometer, as if controlling Rubbo's film and his illusions, as well as the elements.

In contrast, her discussions with Weisbord seem spontaneous, unrelated to time or temperature. By night, they chat in a tent aglow with light; on a rainy day, they huddle under an up-turned canoe. These scenes suggest that Rubbo is a lurking outsider. With Weisbord, Atwood's reflections on her life, on her work, and on male perspective (including Rubbo's), exclude the filmmaker who sees primarily through cinematic pretences and cultural filters, but wants to hang around their closeness.

The Atwood island, human as well as geographic, is a metaphor for an order based on mutual respect. Rubbo adopts the ruse of the critical "pattern" hunter. We learn that Atwood's literary sources are 19th century England and Dickens, but Atwood diminishes these discoveries. The real revelation is the complex of Atwoods as touching islands, one and all, untainted by external "realities."

In *Margaret Atwood: Once in August*, Rubbo appears as an outsider who admires his subject's interior stability. But the cynic in him doesn't quite believe it. Though he admits he doesn't solve the Atwood mystery, he is fascinated by her family's personal touching: the embraces between Atwood's daughter Jess and Atwood's parents; the child's resonant independence, humming and painting alone, after

Atwood tells Rubbo that her poetic muse is an old woman. These moments express more than the requisite documentary interviews, with their awkward politeness, props and impatience, or the pretence of Rubbo's portable Atwood library stacked neatly on logs.

In an equally amusing but central scene, Atwood and Rubbo paint together. Atwood sits high on the rocks effortlessly divining a landscape. Rubbo languishes below, in the foreground, labouring over a faceless portrait of Atwood: "I've chosen something incredibly difficult. I'm doing you and I can't see you." He concludes the film with a similar sense of her elusiveness.

In this key scene, Rubbo simultaneously sees Atwood up close and in relief. He drops his ruse, to reveal a prism of keenly felt perspectives – despite the "binoculars" he claims as his constrained vision at the film's conclusion. The epilogue's aerial stills of the island landscape, underlined by Rubbo's resignation, sustain the paradox of his control and his surrender of control.

Yet in counterpose to his previous film (*Daisy: The Story of a Facelift*, 1982), Rubbo here has lifted an ideal out of his subject: a natural woman who is a respected offspring, a committed parent, a fiercely protective writer and an autonomous mate with writer Graham Gibson. If in *Daisy*, Rubbo's subject flies away from him in pursuit of a popular romantic myth, *Margaret Atwood: Once in August* is about the opposite: internal values with a strong physical bearing. Rubbo, the anthropological adventurer, would, one feels like to spread – and to catch – such earth-bound strengths.

Joan Nicks ●

MARGARET ATWOOD: ONCE IN AUGUST d./sc./ed. Michael Rubbo co-sc. and research Merrily Weisbord d.o.p. Andreas Poulsson add. cam. Barry Perles loc. sd. Andy McBrearty add. sd. Ingrid Cusiel asst. res. Donna Dubinsky sd. ed. Stephan Steinhouse re-rec. Hans Peter Strobl unit admin. Bob Spence p. Michael Rubbo, Barrie Howells exec. p. Barrie Howells p.c. National Film Board of Canada running time: 57 mins.

● Michael Rubbo, the anthropological adventurer, finds himself a lurking outsider in *Margaret Atwood: Once in August*



SCAN LINES

by Joyce Nelson

Backstretch : Death by advertising

The recent cancellation of the CBC series *Backstretch* raises some interesting questions about the medium itself. Apparently the series, created by poet/novelist David Helwig, was simply not doing well enough in the ratings to justify its continued existence after a brief second season. As a program, it was gently lyrical and quietly paced – a rather pleasant evocation of a semi-rural, fictional community. But what particularly caught my attention was the way in which the program was effectively destroyed by the ads.

On its own terms, *Backstretch* seemed to me to work well enough. The characters and story had a simple, human appeal. The setting and tone of the series seemed to accurately convey a way of life familiar to many Canadians. But the commercials within and around each episode made the series appear somehow inept. This effect had nothing to do with advertising interruptions per se. Like virtually all TV dramas, *Backstretch* was structured with these interruptions in mind. Thus, the breaks in the narrative were quite smoothly built into its unfolding. The writers clearly worked quite consciously with the dramatic structure

that advertising interruptions dictate. But what the series' creators did not seem to take into account was the fact that its style was markedly different from advertising's style.

The style of *Backstretch* was different: relatively non-glamorous settings and characters; gently paced editing-style and rhythms that seemed to evoke the slower and more natural way of life typifying its fictional community; unobtrusive camera-work and background music. In terms of what Morris Wolfe has called "jolts per minute," this series was decidedly non-jolting.

Aired uninterrupted, the episodes might have effectively established the viability of this style. As it was, however, any time a commercial interruption would occur in the program, the viewer would be confronted with the whole familiar battery of stylistic conventions that characterize current TV ads: the stunning visual effects, the rapid-fire editing pace, insistent music and language, flashy camera-work, glamorous models; in short, glamorous television. *This*, the ads seemed to say, is how the medium should be used. *This* is the state-of-the-art. *This* is viewing pleasure. When *Backstretch* would

resume after such a break, it would inevitably seem pallid, slow, inept... as though its makers did not know how to "correctly" use the medium.

What the fate of *Backstretch* illustrates is the degree to which, on commercial television, the ads dictate not only the structure that TV dramas must follow, but also the style. Any drama that does not match the advertising within it will not succeed in the long run. In other words, TV advertising sets the constraints and provides the context for all narrative: structurally, through its interruptions; stylistically, through its pace and visual "look," and imaginatively as well since only certain kinds of drama fit the mold. American dramatic series seem successfully designed to match the ads. They may do little else – but at least their style is consistent with the context.

We have come to expect commercial television to be a kind of seamless whole: in which dramas and ads flow unobtrusively in and out of one another, and where there is a consistent style that characterizes both. That style is now one of glamorous flashiness, a sort of "disco-look" that even the most mundane products try to give themselves through their ads. Given such a context, all programming must also achieve that disco flash – or else be overwhelmed by the ads and so appear "different," not quite up to par. *Backstretch* was too different (and perhaps purposely so) from the rest of prime-time TV. Its style ruptured the seamless whole, breaking the subtle continuity that con-

ventionally exists from program to ads to program. That the series itself was the victim of this rupture tells us something useful about the power of advertising-as-context.



● Series' MacNeill, Paterson, and Waters

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