

V I D E O T A L E S

by Geoffrey Shea



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At the recent symposium in Toronto on the issues of video art and television one question seemed to surface several times: what differentiates video art from independent production in general? The range in styles and levels of sophistication is so broad now that distinguishing between artists and producers is becoming increasingly redundant. (One fortunate result of this is that the doors are open a little wider at TVOntario and the Ontario Film Development Corporation for innovative or radical video programs designed for television audiences.)

A good example of the inappropriateness of these labels was found during the symposium in the videotapes of Robert Morin and Lorraine Dufour. Morin and Dufour have been producing together at the Co-op Vidéo de Montréal for almost 10 years. During that time they have refined a production technique which reflects their commitment to the medium as well as their belief in the social and political impact of television. Their work deals with reality and truth, thus they have chosen to work on the small screen and avoid the fictionalization which they feel is inherent in the scale of film. But at the same time they recognize the importance of drama and narrative for the general audience, which must be able to get into a work quickly and will probably only be able to see the program once.

In *Le Mystérieux Paul* we are presented with a unique subject: the fate of a professional sword-swallower who must retire due to internal injuries and family pressure. The obviously close and comfortable relationship between the videaste and his subject is reflected in Morin's handheld camerawork during Paul's final performance. The small, probably rural audience is cheerful and ready to be entertained as the 71-year-old showman quickly slices a sheet of paper, runs the razor edge of his sword over his tongue (causing more than a few shudders through the audience) and plunges the instrument down his throat and halfway into his stomach.

But the real drama in this tape unfolds as Paul faces the less unique problems of coping with forced retirement and the pressure to sacrifice mental activity in the interest of physical health. He tries to write a book; he finds work as a night

watchman; but in his spare time he cannot resist developing new tricks and routines and secretly staging little performances in front of the mirror in his bedroom.

All of the incidents in the Paul tape are real (albeit restaged for the camera) and the dramatic element is inherent. However, another combination of reality, truth and drama is exhibited in Morin and Dufour's *Gus est encore dans l'armée*. Using outtakes and scrap footage which Morin shot while working as a film cameraman for the army, they assembled the images as the experiences of a fictional character, a young recruit who explains in the voice-over how he documented his new, regimental life with his super-8. The young man narrates the scenes, describing the economic factors which led him to enlist, his fears and aspirations, the strain, and eventually his budding love for another young soldier. The whimsical camerawork and this rambling narrative combine to make the fictional element of this documentary completely believable – and briefly raises questions about the integrity of the images in light of the producers' avowed devotion to reality and truth. However, it becomes clear that what began as an unmediated document – the raw footage – was transformed through the addition of a fiction into a larger truth – understood through the empathy Morin had for the soldiers. The portrait is more complete (hence more truthful) because it is put in his words, that is, in the vocabulary of narrative documentary.

These concerns with sociopolitical reality permeate all of their tapes, but it is certain that videomakers as thorough and committed as Morin and Dufour are unlikely to be satisfied with the limited distribution and limited effectiveness possible in the alternative media markets. Not surprisingly, they have recently embarked on the path of television and theatrical release. Their current project (now in post-production) is a full-length video feature – and it is still employing the same blend of real people interacting in fictional situations. Many independent video producers will benefit by watching this project and the other video/theatrical release and video/television projects which Morin, Dufour and the Co-op Vidéo are involved in.