

## NFB'S



• Giles Walker

• Sam Grana and a bull take the documentary where no man has gone before in *The Last Straw*

## Alternative Drama

by Brendan Kelly

Some of the highest-profile English products of the National Film Board in recent years have come out of the self-proclaimed alternative drama series. Films like *Sitting in Limbo* in 1986 and *90 Days* in 1985 have been generating the kind of generally enthusiastic attention that P.R. departments spend years trying to create. But the critics are not the only people who've taken to these films. *90 Days* has so far grossed close to \$1 million, in Canada and the United States which is not bad for the NFB where any revenue is considered a profit. It also opened in several major U.S. cities. (The reviews in New York were generally positive though the *New York Times'* Janet Maslin was not too impressed). *Sitting in Limbo* opened *commercially* in Canada (a rare feat in itself for NFB films) and has garnered awards at two festivals (best Canadian feature out-of-competition at Montreal's World Film Festival and a prize at the festival in Mannheim, West Germany). The first alternative

drama, *The Masculine Mystique*, was more of a mixed success. *90 Days* director Giles Walker has just completed *The Last Straw*, the sequel to *90 Days*, and *Limbo* director John N. Smith's *In the System* is meant to be ready for fall release.

Smith and Walker call these films alternative drama because the films hover in the no-man's-land between drama and documentary. But the films are too improvised to fit into the conventional definition of docu-drama. The irony is that this unique, innovative approach, far from restricting its audience, has pushed the Film Board out of the classroom and community centre and into the commercial cinemas.

Pat Dillon, the charismatic star of *Sitting in Limbo*, says that she's only seen one NFB film in her life. Most of us have seen more than one but we don't usually fork out \$5 or \$6 on a Saturday night to see the latest Film Board product. But these alternative dramas are attempting to break through that tradition of reluctance. These films try to fulfill the NFB's mandate to "interpret Canada to Canadians" outside of the standard documentary format. These films do deal with important social issues — *Limbo* is about the problems of black teenagers in Montreal, *90 Days* looks at male relations with the opposite sex in the 1980s — but these films also want to

tell good stories that will appeal to a broader audience.

And it seems to be working. This success would be irrelevant if the films themselves didn't warrant the attention. But they do. They're funny, moving films that catch you off-balance because they're so low-key compared to the average Hollywood blockbuster (though this low-keyness can also be a fault, as is the case with the painfully drawn-out *Masculine Mystique*). But the pace is deceptive — *Sitting in Limbo* and *90 Days* succeed in dealing with political themes with a lot of wit, energy, and spontaneity.

This spontaneity is not surprising given that most of the dialogue is improvised by non-professional actors. The films mix documentary style with a dramatic narrative to create what Smith has labelled "making fiction truthfully."

"It comes from the tradition of making films here at the Film Board," explains Smith. "From a documentary tradition of small crews, having a close relationship between the crew and the people who are being filmed, and following that documentary tradition out into the world and using the people we find there not as documentary people but as actors. They are not given a script to read. They are given a situation, then the cameras are turned on, and, boom, they react to that situation.

"What you have, if it works, is a story — and hopefully it's a good story that moves you and gets you involved with the people — and it also has a documentary flavour. It feels real. And it is."

Alternative drama's roots lie in one of the NFB's most dire periods. The year 1984 was not a happy time at the Film Board. The Applebaum-Hébert Report had recommended that the NFB should be virtually dismantled. Three Studio B filmmakers set out to prove Applebaum-Hébert wrong. They were Smith, Walker, and David Wilson, who has worked as editor, writer, or producer on four out of the five alternative dramas. They began shooting videos of people round the office in an attempt to find a new way of making films with little money that would prove that the NFB wasn't irrelevant. These tentative experiments grew into *The Masculine Mystique*.

"There was a six-month period of agonizing and soul-searching that went on here," comments Walker. "Where everything ground to a halt as the whole existence of the Film Board was threatened. Out of our darkest hour came what I think is probably one of the most successful breakthroughs in the history of the Film Board."

*The Masculine Mystique*, directed by Smith and Walker, was a brave experiment even if a seriously flawed film.

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Brave because it tried to prove that the men at the Board were making an effort to come to terms with the sexual politics of the 1980s. **The Masculine Mystique** is about traditional men's reaction to feminist women.

The film begins with an encounter group in which four men (all Film Board employees) discuss their sexual hangups. This is intercut with sequences that dramatize the men's fumbling attempts to maintain relationships with women. It's a very personal film.

"Certainly part of it came from the lives that Giles and myself were leading," admits Smith. "Working, raising families, and having wives who worked. Dealing with all the stresses of that situation. We were also dealing with our past – and undoubtedly present – disgustingly chauvinistic tendencies. We thought we'd have fun with that."

Many critics preferred to describe it as "The Masculine Mistake" – labelling it self-indulgent and timid. It is a hard film to sit through. The moments of insightful drama and humour are few and far between and it really is hard to sympathize with these guys' long-winded introspection. But it is an honest attempt to deal with the issues raised by their colleagues at Studio D – the NFB's women's studio. It was also the first of a promised series of feature-length alternative dramas.

Despite the harsh criticism, Walker stubbornly set out on what many at the Board considered a suicide mission – to make a sequel to **The Masculine Mystique**. He took the two most successful characters from **Mystique** – Alex (Sam Grana) and Blue (Stefan Wodoslawsky) – and developed a quiet but off-the-wall comedy of sexual anxiety: **90 Days**. The plot concerns Blue's search for the perfect woman via a Korean mail-order bride. Alex's marriage breaks up and he gets involved in an intrigue with a woman who wants to buy his sperm.

Walker had set out to make another socially relevant film about men coping with their sexual problems. Instead he got a hit comedy. The result was hailed as one of the best English-Canadian films in years. *The Globe and Mail's* Jay Scott called **90 Days** "one of the cleverest, funniest comedies to be produced by any country." Still Walker was uneasy with this success.

"Management of distribution at the Film Board have been delighted. It has given them a door-opener round the world. They have been able to use **90 Days** to market other Film Board films. I think it's fair to say that the reaction of the director of Production, Peter Katadotis, is mixed. His emphasis would be to address social issues much more precisely. For him it's a mixed blessing. He admires the filmmaking and acknowledges the commercial success but he is perhaps uneasy with the frivolity of what we're doing. I can make an argument that we also belong here because we are developing a unique style of cinema and that should also be part

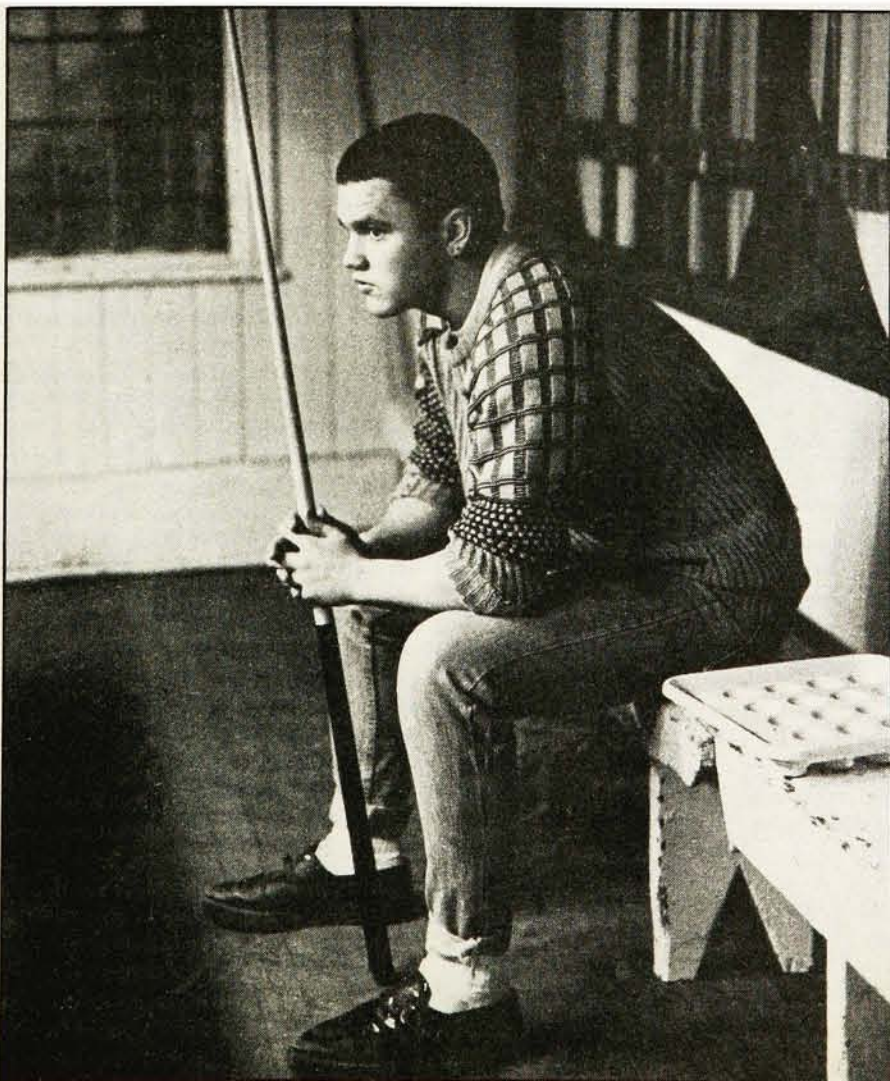


● John N. Smith and some of the **Sitting in Limbo** cast, Fabian Gibbs, Debbie Grant, Sylvie Clarke and Pat Dillon

of the mandate of the Film Board."

No one can level the charge of frivolity at Smith. As Walker moves more into the dramatic side of alternative drama, Smith is busy mining the more documentary side of the method. **Sitting in Limbo** examines the social problems of Caribbean teenagers in Montreal. **Limbo** is a tough portrait of teenage

pregnancy, unemployment and racism. But it is saved from being as depressingly bleak as its subject-matter by the performances of the non-actors from the black community, especially the leads, Pat Dillon and Fabian Gibbs. What makes **Sitting in Limbo** so exciting to watch is how perfectly it captures the language and character of young black



● Sitting on the outside in **In The System**

life in the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce/Côte-des-Neiges area of Montreal.

The film has made the 20-year-old Dillon something of a celebrity (she now says she wants to try to make a career in the film business). Like all these alternative dramas, the character on the screen is a hybrid of the real person and the creative interchange between the person and the filmmakers.

"All of the behaviour and the antics – eyes bulging out of my head, sucking in my cheeks – those things are all the real Pat," explains Dillon. "The only thing that's not me is the situation but it was something I was familiar with."

Smith and Walker's upcoming films reflect their continued different orientations. Smith is working on **In the System**. He continues to probe Montreal's youth culture but this time of the juvenile delinquent variety. Walker, on the other hand, continues to run the risk of being called frivolous. **The Last Straw**, which Walker is trying to get into the Cannes festival, is the final installment of the quest-for-male-identity-in-the-'80s trilogy begun with **The Masculine Mystique**.

"**The Last Straw** is a sequel to **90 Days** in which the balance of the two stories is tipped in favour of Alex," says Walker. "It's a story about the world's most potent man – the Wayne Gretzky of artificial insemination. Alex is blessed with an extremely high motility rate and this leads to international success and fame, which eventually brings about his downfall."

If **The Last Straw** doesn't sound like the standard fare that our tax dollars fund at the NFB, then you're right. It isn't. None of the alternative drama features are. They're very different from most Canadian cinema even if they do seem distinctively Canadian.

"I think my films reflect a Canadian sense of humour and storytelling," argues Walker. "That's perhaps why **90 Days** wasn't particularly successful in the States – or **My American Cousin** for that matter – because they're just not high-powered enough. They don't deliver the right number of jolts-per-minute."

The alternative drama films are a vital part of what many see as a resurgence of English-Canadian cinema. Films like **Loyalties** and **My American Cousin** are reaffirming that English Canada can make strong features with unashamedly Canadian content that are neither art-house obscurities nor big budget made-for-TV co-productions. The NFB's alternative dramas tell Canadian stories and they use English Canada's most important cinematic tradition – the documentary – to mould new ways of telling these stories.

Who would have guessed when Walker and Smith first turned their video cameras on fellow NFB employees in 1984 that it was the birth of a new brand of filmmaking that would not only shake up the endangered NFB but would also make a dent on the landscape of commercial Canadian cinema.