

John N. Smith's

## Train of Dreams

I never thought I'd hear the punk classic, *Anarchy in the U.K.*, in a National Film Board movie. Well, my preconceptions of a stodgy NFB, more at home with the likes of Gordon Lightfoot than the Sex Pistols, have been roundly disproved by John N. Smith's exciting new feature, *Train of Dreams*. Don't get me wrong, this isn't a documentary on punk rock nor is it even a music movie. In fact, Smith and his partners call it alternative drama — a mysterious phrase that basically means the movie uses lots of documentary techniques within the framework of an almost-totally improvised dramatic structure.

Like his last alternative drama, *Sitting in Limbo*, popular music plays an integral role in *Train of Dreams*. While last year's *Sitting in Limbo* used the lilting tunes of reggae greats like Jimmy Cliff to underscore the ironies of life for teenagers of Caribbean origin in Montreal, *Train of Dreams*' music has a tougher edge to it.

In one scene, the film's teenage lead, Tony (played by non-actor Jason St. Amour), sings a particularly wild and disorganized version of *Anarchy in the U.K.* ("Get pissed, destroy") backed musically by some of his fellow inmates at the juvenile correctional centre where much of the story takes place. This anthem to the joys of random destruction captures the inarticulate anger and frustration that seems to be boiling under Tony's skinhead haircut throughout most of the movie.

There's another wonderful scene where Tony and one of his roommates at the correctional centre start dreaming about the wild 'party' times they're going to have when they get out. They spontaneously break into a manic, air-guitar rendition of *Twist and Shout* that sends them careening around their little cell-like room in wild abandon. It says more than any amount of dialogue could about the pent-up frustrations of being young and stuck behind bars.

Then there's the soundtrack by Montreal country rockers, Three O'Clock Train. These songs, some of which were written expressly for the film by singer/guitarist Malcolm Mackenzie Jr., and others which have already appeared on the band's first two records, complement perfectly the film's landscape of broken homes, loneliness, teenage rebellion, and broken-down relationships. From the opening credits where the title song accompanies the camera down Montreal's St. Catherine St., Three O'Clock Train's music is given a prominent place in the movie. Almost inevitably, if there's a scene with no dialogue, Mackenzie's plaintive voice can be heard singing songs that echo the undercurrents on the screen.

The music's hard edge is entirely appropriate. *Train of Dreams* is a tough

movie about a tough subject: juvenile delinquency. What's great about this film is that it avoids the traditional pitfalls of films on this topic. It neither takes the typical benevolent social worker perspective (i.e. "We have to take pity on these kids because they've been screwed by the system") nor the exploitative teen rebel movie approach. The main reason *Train of Dreams* succeeds in capturing the rough texture of the lifestyle of these kids on the wrong side of the law (with neither condescension nor sensationalism) is because real teenagers rather than professional actors are used. This realism is heightened by the absence of a formal script. These amateurs are given a situation and they improvise lines as the scene develops. The teenagers in *Train of Dreams* (most of whom were picked from auditions of regular high school students) manage to accurately convey the social milieu the filmmakers are trying to recreate and, at the same time, cook up a rich variety of personalities out of the sparse materials at hand.

From Smith and Walker's *The Masculine Mystique* to Walker's *90 Days* right up to *Sitting in Limbo*, these alternative dramas really stand or fall on the casting of the leads. One of the reasons *The Masculine Mystique* was so hard to sit through was because we just weren't captivated by the personalities of the NFB producers in the lead roles. And *Sitting in Limbo* worked in large part due to the intense performances of the lively Pat Dillon and the brooding Fabian Gibbs (whose very good performance was often downplayed by critics more taken by the hyper and more appealing Dillon). Jason St. Amour is this year's discovery.

As Tony, who is doing time in the correctional centre for breaking and enter-

ing and armed robbery, St. Amour exhibits a charisma that virtually grabs the viewer by the collar and demands that you pay attention. He's perfect as the prankster who can't keep a straight face, as the street-corner punk looking to kick someone's head in, and as the trapped inmate who's under intense physical and emotional pressure from all sides. Throughout, St. Amour makes you feel like you know the hell Tony's going through even though he never verbally articulates it.

The other standout performance is playwright Fred Ward as the correctional centre teacher with the thankless task of trying to help these delinquents deal with the mess they've got themselves into. It's a key role since the development of the relationship between this tough but understanding teacher and Tony is really at the core of the film. And Ward pulls off this difficult task without letting this part of the story degenerate into the clichés it skirts (you know, "good teacher saves troubled kid").

Of course, credit has to go to the film's right-on casting decisions but there's also no denying that director Smith must be doing something right to be able to consistently elicit these powerful performances from non-actors who don't even have a formal script to work with. The writers — Smith, associate producer Sally Bochner, and producer Sam Grana — seem to have successfully created a suitable skeleton of a scenario that allows the improvisation to fill in the holes (if I correctly understand how these alternative dramas are constructed). The writers come up with the raw material — like the situation — and then the amateur actors use this as the malleable background to come up with the improvised narrative.

*Train of Dreams* works because it

deals with a social/political issue like juvenile delinquency that would have been handled traditionally by NFB documentaries and it uses an entertaining format that combines the narrative pleasures of fiction with the down-to-earth realism of documentary.

It's a film that would be enjoyed by a fairly wide audience but the problem the Board faces is how to convince average Canadian moviegoers — especially young ones — to plunk down six bucks to see an NFB movie. A first start is the unprecedented step (for the NFB) of releasing a rock video to hype the movie. It's a MTV/MuchMusic formula video with clips of Three O'Clock Train playing *Train of Dreams* in the studio which is intercut with scenes from the movie.

One problem audiences might have with the film is its slow, somewhat anecdotal pacing. The story, which is told through flashbacks while Tony is doing time at the correctional centre, shares the low-key style of all these alternative dramas.

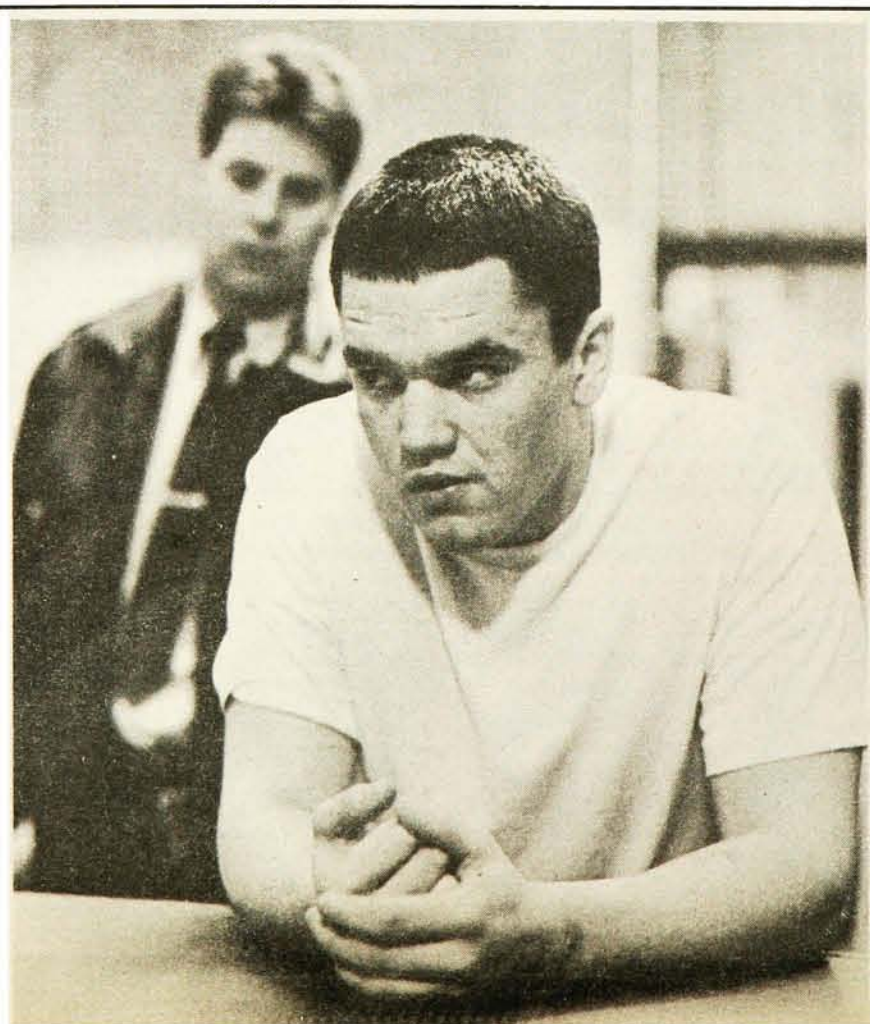
One criticism that falls squarely on the shoulders of the writers is the film's conclusion, which seems like a forced happy ending, where suddenly Tony starts behaving like a responsible citizen and his previously troubled home life is magically transformed into one happy family. The strength of the film up to that point has been in portraying, with believable gritty realism, the incredibly messed-up life Tony is stuck in the middle of. The optimism of the last scenes just doesn't make sense within the film's terms. It's hard to forget teacher Ward's comment that Tony can do what he wants since "It's almost a free country."

Which is not to say that the tone of the movie is totally bleak throughout. The film paints a grim picture of the lot of people like Tony but there's still a glimmer of hope that is captured in the film's change of title from the original pessimistic phrase, *In the System*, to the Three O'Clock Train-inspired *Train of Dreams*. The tune *Train of Dreams* is a really good song about that perennial rock theme of being on your own against the world. But at least you've got your dreams.

"He's riding on the train/Train of pride/Train of heartaches/Train of twisted self-esteem...You're riding on the train of dreams."

**Brendan Kelly •**

• Jason St. Amour in a wagon of nightmares



**TRAIN OF DREAMS** sc. Sally Bochner. John N. Smith. Sam Grana d.o.p. David de Volpi loc. sd. Jacques Frouin orig. music Malcolm MacKenzie Jr. performed by Three O'Clock Train assoc. p. Sally Bochner p. Sam Grana d./ed. John N. Smith cam. David de Volpi. Zoe Dirse casting Lois Siegel assistant d. François Gingras prod assts. Angela Carter. Brian Caudle. Norman Lusty. Darren Wrightman makeup Gina Caron. Heather Reilly ed. consult Michael McKinner asst. pict. ed. Martial Ethier sd. ed. André Galbrand dialogue ed. Danuta Klis foley artist Andrew Malcolm re-rec. mix Hans Peter Strobl. Adrian Croll music. rec. Louis Hone m. ed. Diane Le Floch muc. consult. Elliott Majerczyk unit admin. Marie Tontodinati pub. Karen Marginson title Val Teodori add mus. "Don't Worry About Me" by Ted Koehler and Rube Bloom Performed by Billie Holiday. Polygram Inc. and Mills Music Inc. "Anarchy in the U.K." by Steven Jones. Paul Cook, Glen Matlock, Johnny Rotten. Carrers Music Inc. and Warner Bros. "Twist and Shout" by Bert Russel and Phil Medley. Screen Gems-EMI Music Inc. l.p. Jason St. Amour, Marcella Santa Maria, Fred Ward, Christopher Neil, David Linesky, Milton Hartman, Basil Danchyshyn. A National Film Board of Canada Production. running time 90 min. colour 16mm and 35mm.