
Valerie Buhagiar as Harriet

Alexandra Gill's Harriet Loves

Re-views present the fundamental conundrum of artistic endeavour. How does one adequately re-present experience; in this instance the watching of *Harriet Loves*, by Alexandra Gill? Whether we are telling a story or retelling it, re-presentation or re-view delimit the infinity of consciousness and meaning. The magic of our minds diminishes in proportion to its structuring. For the artist, the fine line between a humiliating mess and mystical re-creation is the road travelled.

It is a road to which only the courageous, or fools are drawn. Alexandra Gill, as demonstrated in her first film, is of the former. In this neon Rome, where the so-called sciences of commerce and communication rule, *Harriet Loves* pays tribute to neither, it only nods in passing. Watching this film, one knows it is the inspiration of youth. The product of someone of an age who, like Rimbaud, still sees innocence and the worm at once glance. An artist only gets one shot at expressing these inchoate emotions, before the devastation of self-consciousness takes hold. *Harriet Loves* follows a path few dare to cover, and fewer still successfully navigate.

The story, if such it must be called, is of two women, told as memory, revealed in pursuit. The narrator attempts to retrieve a friend, Harriet, who has *chosen* to cross the threshold of civilized behaviour. The abjured Harriet entices the narrator to join her on the other side. The narrator wants to follow and repossess her lost love. The narrator (sleep)walks through an industrial landscape, an incongruously pretty figure in white lace. She recalls moments from the time of their friendship. Knowing not the road she's on, her destination is never gained, Harriet's love's lost.

The form, as must be evident by now, is lyrical. There is no ordered sense of time, rather, the story unfolds by association. Like consciousness, moments are recalled, associated with others, then resonate and recur in patterns of growing complexity. With a poet's sure sense, when the complexity is no longer sustainable and about to fall into chaos, night comes and the film ends with a final lament.

If Alexandra Gill's inspiration comes from youth, her production is decidedly mature. Fine performances have been coaxed from her leads, Valerie Buhagiar and Judy Cade. The tones and rhythms of Gerald Packer's photography and Bruce McDonald's editing are sensuous and tuned to the evocative poetry of the scenario. The soundtrack is an astoundingly rich orchestration of music, natural sound and dialogue. When gifted crafting and poetic imagination meet, the result might be confounding, but it's always a pleasure.

Harriet Loves is a short wander through the mystery of our consciousness. Trapped in a time-bound world, we seem cursed by the impulse to order. Invocations that set us free, that release us briefly to wonder in the magic of our beings, common enough in literature and painting, are too rare in film. *Harriet Loves* belongs to that fine art. "May Art continue to be the music of our Reason." – Guy Davenport.

Marsh Birchard •

HARRIET LOVES *p./d./sc./ed.* Alexandra Gill *d.o.p.* Gerald Packer *art dir.* Virginia Rankin *sup. ed.* Bruce McDonald *sd. ed.* Michael Werth *mus.* Bill Gilliam *1st. a.d.* Camelia Frieberg *1st. asst. cam.* Charlotte Disher *grip* Cynthia Barlow *prod. mgr.* Derek Rogers *soundmix* Daniel Pellerin *titles* Metamedia *l. p.* Valeria Buhagiar, Judy Cade *Funding* LIFT, Ontario Arts Council, private investment. Colour, 16mm, 28 min. *dist.* Film Clips.

Martha Davis' Path

The "road movie" has a long and honourable history in both literature and film, encompassing everything from Bunyan's pilgrim looking for salvation to mindless teenagers searching for the victim of their next prank. After all the highway provides a ready-made metaphor for the journey from life to death and travelling allows a subject to encounter more of the sublime and the ridiculous than is likely to be available close to home.

Path, a feature-length experimental film by Martha Davis, is not exactly a road movie; it might be called a piece of sidewalk cinema. This bit of amblin' entertainment takes the viewer on a walk through various downtown Toronto neighbourhoods. Each brief stroll is followed by a period of reflection in and about the filmmaker's home during which the images previously gathered are re-ordered, re-examined and re-imagined. Of course, taking experience and reworking it into something meaningful is one of the main tasks of art and artists. The journeys are shot from the pedestrian's point of view while in the reflective portions the subject is usually in medium shot or closeup. Thus the


PHOTO: GILL COLLYER
Martha Davis

public domain is given a private perspective and the private realm a public aspect.

The segments thankfully vary in length and pacing. Over the course of the film the types of responses the artist has to the images gathered during her excursions gradually change. At first the reactions are literal. The sight of poultry in Kensington Market results in a string of paper chickens. Various dogs are seen and drawn. After encountering a group of boys playing war, the subject plays dead in her bedroom. The walking motif is paralleled by a series of wind-up toys. Davis has a great collection ranging from a marching telephone, a chain gang and two sets of wind-up shoes. Slowly the responses become more and more abstractly gestural, culminating in the ritual dance in the final moments of the film.

Some of these neighbourhoods aren't terribly exciting, being just rows of residences with a few yard dogs worth scratching. With the constraint of a single point of view, Davis has to resort to some time-honoured tricks to retain visual interest. These include shooting in mirrors, windows and puddles of water, creating irises by shooting through pipes of various dimensions and even shooting her own shadow. Luckily, for the most part this works, although the film does lag in places.

Besides pets, Davis has a penchant for children, perhaps reflecting her own playfulness, and digits. The number four is repeated frequently. Apparently, in numerology, the number four signifies transformation and change. Fortunately, obscure references such as this are kept to a minimum.

Very few women are among the adults filmed. Davis seems to prefer middle-aged or older males. She certainly isn't a consciously feminist filmmaker, nor does she appear to work from a strong theoretical base.

Although buried within the film there are moments of sadness, it is for the most part a playful and joyous work. Except for a few drunks sleeping on the street and one man with an amputated leg making his way crab-like along the sidewalk, few urban grotesques appear. Davis certainly could never become the Diane Arbus of Super-8. (*Path* was originally shot on Super-8. The film was later bumped up to 16mm and is now being distributed in that format.)

Davis does have a happy facility for catching certain serendipitous gestures. For instance, during a marathon foot-race a young boy lies on the side of the road, his legs sawing the air. He is a horizontal reflection of the athletes passing behind him.

The one moment of real drama in the film also occurs by chance. A couple of unemployed men argue vehemently, first with a born again Christian preaching outside Toronto's Eaton Centre, then with a Hare Krishna more quietly spreading his word. Only the intervention of a nearby flower-seller prevents those secular boys and the follower of Krishna from coming to blows.

One of the most moving sequences in the film occurs after a visit to a graveyard and a mausoleum. In response, Davis makes her own set of tombstones from the dust jackets of books by her favourite photographers. These are loving mini-monuments; they are also a reflection of the inherent sadness and deathlike aura of all photographed images.

Besides being an essay on the artistic process, *Path* is also a kind of diary. But a cinematic diary has limitations a written one does not. With print, one can record thoughts and events at the end of the day. A writer can decide what is worth recording long after the fact. A photographer or cinematographer is more bound to the moment. Not all lost images can be readily recaptured. In addition, the very fact of creating a diary may change the diarist's behaviour. Would Davis have attended a scarecrow festival and watched a marathon *and* attended an antinuclear rally if she were not in the process of making this film?

Except for the argument between the religious types and the unemployed men and conversations between the filmmaker and two different blind people, the film eschews words, preferring to let the abstract rhythms of image and sound (the track is by Bill Grove) do the talking. The trouble is it takes several viewings to readily appreciate these patterns. But the film's length (104 minutes) makes repeat viewings, in most contexts, unlikely.

Most of Davis' previous films are concerned, as is *Path*, with the choreography of everyday life. Several also involve spontaneous, open-ended interactions with people on the street. *Path* may not have the slickness of Davis' most recent film, the Genie-nominated *Elephant Dreams*, but it has a good deal of charm and a number of cinematic ideas worth further exploration.

Randi Spires •

PATH *p./d./ed./d.o.p.* Martha Davis *mus.* Bill Grove, Martha Davis, Glenn Milchem *2nd. unit cam.* Karen Lee, Midi Onodera *prod. asst.* David Bennell, Ian Cochrane, Gill Collyer, Rae Davis, Mychol Dyer, Denis Fujiwara, Peter Gress, Ross McLaren, Music Gallery, Dot Tuer, Optimage Lab *Funding* The Canada Council. Colour, 16mm, 104 min.