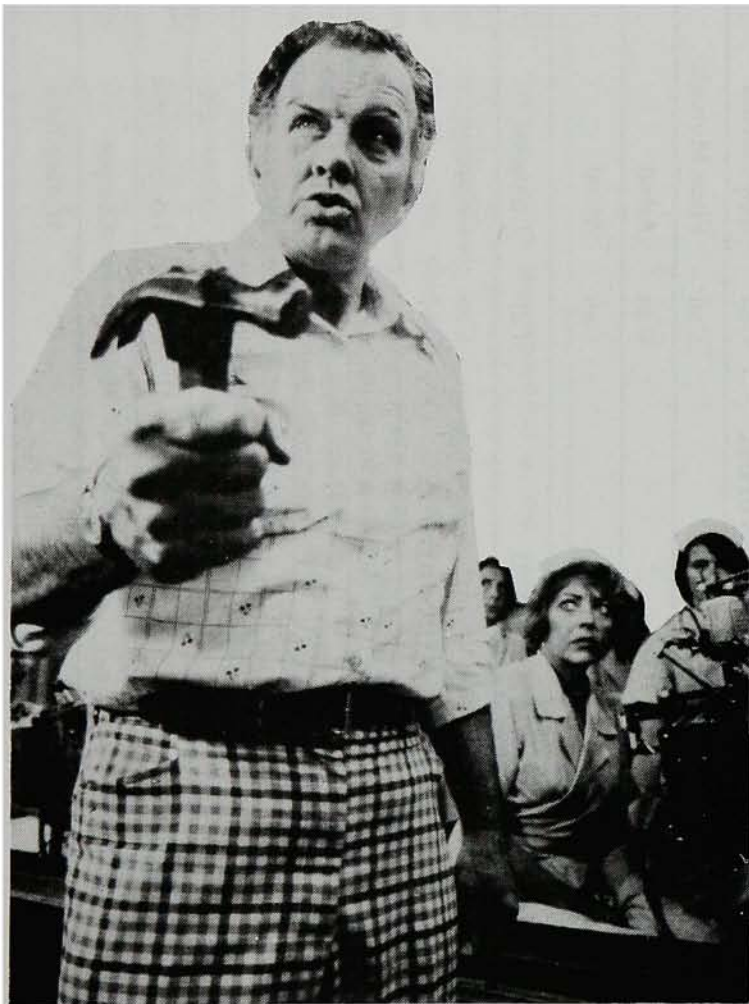


for the record

lightyears ahead

The CBC has given Canadian film enthusiasts a shot in the arm with its dramatic series *For the Record*. Marc Gervais takes a closer look below.

by Marc Gervais



Hank (Bob Warner) fighting back as competitors and labor try to force him out: director, Don Haldane

"To reflect this country in an honest way... to deal with our joys and problems – I believe this series does just that, in an exciting way."

PR handouts are not generally to be accepted without a goodly weight of salt, but this statement by John Hirsch, CBC-TV drama head, aptly describes *For the Record*, this year's continuation of the highly interesting CBC "journalistic dramas." TV dramas they are, to be sure; but in a very real sense they are movies, *films* commissioned by the CBC.

On Sunday nights, beginning January 16, a series of four films were shown across Canada. Initially, there were to be five; but the missing fifth film, Peter Pearson's *The Tar Sands*, was temporarily shelved because, apparently, its treatment of the Athabasca Tar Sands question was deemed too explosive. If Pearson's film measures up in any way to its four predecessors one can only wish for a speedy reversal of judgment.

For a number of reasons, the *For the Record* series seems condemned to relative obscurity, both at the critical and the mass-consumption levels – at least in those parts of Canada where people have a choice of TV channels.

How can the shows escape floundering on either the Scylla or the Charybdis of popular reviewing? On the one hand, your conscientious TV reviewer has about 10,000 offerings a week to choose from. In such circumstances, it is difficult to psyche oneself up into giving yet one more one-hour TV film serious, enthusiastic consideration. On the other hand, for the slightly more relaxed film reviewers, it's only a TV show after all, too short (one hour, yet) and CBC to boot. Noblesse oblige (almost) to ignore it totally.

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Jenny (Anne Anglin) comforts Ada (Janet Amos): director, Claude Jutra

The same dilemma exists for the viewers. Those with a TV choice are so programmed by the thematic and audiovisual recipes of New-Hollywood's series factories that they simply refuse to look at anything reflecting different concerns and attitudes. The moviegoing public is in a similar bind. *For the Record* gives them no superstars, and no outlet for living out their sex-and-violence fantasies. Or if they take their moviegoing seriously, they surely will find no Fellini or Bergman among these Canadian TV offerings.

All of which is a pity, really. For the simple truth of the matter is that the four films shown on *For the Record* are excellent, within the limitations of their modest aspirations. They achieve exactly what they set out to do. And they are far superior to most of both the usual American TV fare and the Canadian feature films produced these last few years.

The concept guiding the series is an enlightened one, ideally suited to television. Surely Sport, Variety, and American Big-City Crime are not the only things of concern to Canadians. There are forces within our society, and daily events, that are the warp and woof of a good part of our lives. In the hands of good, insightful writers, directors, and technicians, this long-neglected dimension can furnish the stuff for good drama, and for good moviemaking.

For the Record, precisely, focuses upon this aspect of our lives. Its producer, Ralph L. Thomas – he also was involved with "journalistic dramas" last year, witness the "Performance" series and others – has succeeded in bringing talents together, but above all in sharing an understanding about a certain type of filmmaking. That extends to key practicalities: all the films have modest budgets, and are tailored, or structured, accordingly.

To put it another way, the *For the Record* films consciously and willingly share a common ethic and a common esthetic, both of which are a contemporary, adapted-for-TV reincarnation of what perhaps is the richest tradition in Canadian filmmaking.

It is an old truism that *the* cinema that has achieved great distinction in Canada is the documentary. Through the pioneer work of John Grierson and the infant NFB, a certain Canadian reality became the object of study, and then of film creativity. Canadian film directors long ago learned to

analyze this or that aspect of the socio-economic cultural context. And they perfected the means to communicate the results of that analysis through film – very often with world-acclaimed success. As time evolved, the particular Canadian excellence centered more on the *direct cinema* approach, on both sides of the great cultural divide. Has anyone in the world matched the work of Michel Brault/Pierre Perreault, or of Allan King in the '60s?

Conversely, Canadian cinema has not yet enjoyed any glory days in what seems to be, for us, the more difficult area of the fiction movie.

The journalistic films commissioned by the CBC represent a serious attempt to graft fiction stories onto the main-line documentary tradition. Even the most cursory examination reveals that each of the films is structured on a popularized, yet far-reaching analysis of the society we live in, its various mechanisms, institutions, etc. At the level of texture, the films have the feel of reality about them; they breathe the sights and sounds of real places, things, people. Particularly in Don Haldane's two episodes, one rarely has the impression that effects are sought after for their own sake. The pre-existing "reality" seems more important.

Against this background individuals, however, do emerge: the fiction is structured around them. The characters are important; they are at the very heart of the situation. And so, the viewer cares, becoming involved in their plight, because it is an eminently human, believable one, reflecting our own lived experiences.

And that is perhaps the greatest strength of these films – their believability at an immediate, lived level. Save for a few recurrently facile, one-dimensionally heavy cops and mounties, there are no stereotypes. Indeed, the films do "reflect this country in an honest way... (they) deal with our joys and problems." And that, TV viewers, is rare enough in our mass-media wasteland!

A few random comments:

Don Haldane directed the two films which, I feel, are best fitted to the series' avowed aims. Haldane's movies, **Some-day Soon** and **Hank**, are intelligent and incisive, yet glowing with human warmth. Haldane and his writers (Rudy Wiebe and Barry Pearson for **Someday Soon**, Don Bailey and Ralph L. Thomas for **Hank**) have done a remarkable job in bringing enormous economic problems down to human size. One



Dreamspeaker by Claude Jutra: a shaman and mute friend nurse a small boy with love

feels that one can cope. Suffusing the films is what, I suppose, one might term the *liberal* spirit: no self-pitying here; human beings have individual dignity, and they can engage in worthwhile struggles against injustice, the inhumanity of huge industrial concerns or ruthless neo-capitalist labor unions.

The effortlessness of Haldane's style is a joy to experience. Unaggressive, it trusts its own materials and insights; it does the job. The very sureness of touch and ease may be its greatest pitfall, however, for Haldane's films tend to lack that mysterious poetry which is a hallmark of much of the world's great cinema. In their weakest moments, they verge on the pedestrian. While the film language is far removed from the triteness and banality of the unending big-city cops TV series – avoiding facile vulgarity, and showy, cheap shots – ultimately it may remain too close to the main-line TV fare, too safe, too neat. It lacks some of the ragged edges of the more intensely pure direct cinema.

That is the limitation. But it is a limitation that in no way invalidates the real measure of excellence enjoyed by both Don Haldane films.

Claude Jutra directed both the other films, **Dreamspeaker** and **Ada**. And here we are faced with quite another phenomenon.

Quite unlike Haldane, for a number of years now, Jutra – along with Don Shebib, and, briefly, William Fruett – has enjoyed a very rare privilege in Canadian film circles: he has been overpraised, or rather given too dominant a position, by a certain Toronto critical establishment (those weekend and biweekly magazines, CBC reports, and so on). For all his real contributions to Canadian cinema, Jutra in no way overshadows some of his top colleagues on the Quebecois scene, where the feeling, in so far as it is negative, is that Jutra too often succumbs to his own artistic showiness, whether it be manifested in the esthetic elephantiasis of **Kamouraska** or the pyrotechnics that mar, say, parts of **Mon Oncle Antoine** and all of **Wow**.

Paradoxically enough, the discipline and limitations imposed by the journalistic films serve Jutra beautifully. As never before, Jutra, in his two *For the Record* films, exercises artistic control, subjecting himself to a benign kind of austerity. The austerity is benign precisely because it counteracts a sensibility prone to certain excesses, which have their roots, perhaps, in Jutra's obsessive themes. If Haldane's films incarnate the liberal spirit, Jutra's incar-

nate a kind of adolescent, anarchistic romanticism. Jutra's characters are forever the outsiders, and they are doomed. Society and, worse still, life itself have given them a very raw deal indeed. Inevitably, the Jutra film screams out in anger that things are the way they are.

The nightmare world of **Ada** could easily verge off into something unbearably *grand guignol*. But it does not, thanks to the journalistic style – or something vaguely related to it – that the format, and Jutra, adhere to. Similarly, the very touching and poetic **Dreamspeaker** remains within range; it does not become its own esthetic trip.

Both are essentially personal films, limited to the concerns which inform all of Jutra's films. But Jutra none the less touches all of us with his humanity, his pity for those on the fringe, or on the edge. The self-indulgence, esthetic or otherwise, that weakened earlier films is absent. But the Jutra poetry remains, more discreet, and hence purer.

A series such as *For the Record*, put out by a public corporation such as the CBC, has its own inevitable pitfalls. An obvious one: if the repertorial concern unearths issues that are too hot, the corporation will chicken out. "It's awfully good to examine things in Canada, *provided that ...*"

I have not seen **The Tar Sands**, the Peter Pearson contribution that was to close the series. But from what one hears and reads, it may well have been cast into the nether regions by overzealous CBC caution.

Too bad. Pearson has done brilliant work in his CBC films – **Best Damn Fiddler From Calabogie to Kaladar**, **The Insurance Man from Ingersoll**, and **Kathy Karuks is a Grizzly Bear**, to name but three. He seems eminently suited to the genre, much happier with it, so far, than with his "real genuine feature movies".

The one good aspect to the mini-scandal may be that when **The Tar Sands** is finally allowed into Canadian living rooms, more people will know about it and be titillated into watching it.

That is a good note to end these comments on. That more people may know about this series, and give themselves a chance to enjoy these "journalistic films"...

In the long run, these movies may well point the way to viable feature filmmaking in Canada on a more ambitious scale. One thing for sure – in quality, merit, and solid entertainment values, they are lightyears ahead of most of the mindless schlock presently being pushed upon the Canadian public. □





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