

REVIEWS OF SHORT FILMS

Lies

d: Jonathon Reid and Peter Walsh, **ph:** Robert Fresco and Robert New, **ed:** Honor Griffith, **sd:** Ed Jeffers, **sd. re-rec.:** Ian Jacobson, **m:** John Mills-Cockell, **exec. p.:** Wayne Arron, **p:** Jonathon Reid and Peter Walsh, **assoc. p.:** Angelo Stea and Peter Lauterman, **p.c.:** Capital Arts Productions Ltd., 1976, **col:** 16mm., **running time:** 57 minutes, **dist:** Rhodes International.

Beneath the veneer of any film lies the unpolished reality of the film's coming into being. It is the reality in which the cinematic illusion is nurtured. *Lies* is an ambitious attempt to penetrate and explore such a reality.

Lies, directed by Peter Walsh and Jonathan Reid, is a behind-the-scenes examination of the filming of *Lies My Father Told Me*, directed by Jan Kadar. A film about the making of a film, *Lies* may be viewed as a biographical study of a film's birth. In *Lies*, we see a film in its embryonic stages of development, as yet unredefined by the editing process. *Lies* illuminates the intricacies and ironies that complicate a film production. Its startling impact resides in its portrayal of how reality is acted upon, manipulated, and interpreted.

Lies assumes the task of discovering the real people who live in the world behind the screen. Perhaps most lucidly captured is the oppressive tension that charges the set. In the patriarchal figure of Jan Kadar, we encounter the catalyzing agent not only of *Lies My Father Told Me*, but of *Lies* as well. A man of scathing intensity, Kadar moves through *Lies* like a cry of frustration. The enormity of his presence, at times, is such that one forgets that he is not directing *Lies* as well. The camera, though drifting to scrutinize other issues, seems to be drawn magnetically back to Kadar. Whether this is

attributable to a bias on Walsh's part, or simply to the fact that Kadar dominates the set, cannot be determined. Nevertheless, *Lies* provides us with an enlightening glimpse into the influence that Kadar exerts in developing the filmic illusion. Hovering over the set nervously, he guides the film into existence and nudges the actors and actresses into their roles. He is the nucleus of activity, around which the crew, actors, and actresses re-



All dressed up for *Lies*

volve — at one point, prior to the shooting of a scene, Jeffrey Linus, who plays the little boy, asks if he may stay with Kadar. Everyone on the set must attune themselves to Kadar's erratic moods. He explodes (sometimes for no apparent reason), then utilizes the tension he has caused to channel the energies of the actors and actresses. The impression that we receive is that the actors and actresses are almost totally in the hands of Kadar. He is, incontestably, the star of *Lies*.

Additionally, *Lies* gives insight into the creative process of acting. We watch as real people wrestle with the nuances of their roles, trying on various dramatic accoutrement in order to achieve the desired effect of credibility. In the shooting of the breakfast scene, for example, both Birman, who plays the father, and Lightstone, who plays the mother, experiment with various rearrangements of lines and intonations. It is a tricky scene, occurring after the death of the grandfather and the subsequent disappearance of the son. In

berating the mother for her concern, it is essential that Birman does not overdo his harshness. Similarly, Lightstone must not exaggerate her anxiety into hysteria. Together, along with Kadar, they must find a viable balance of emotion (unfortunately, we are never shown the resolution). In probing the evolution of a character and of a mood, *Lies* fathoms the polarity existing between the real person and the role, between reality and illusion. For example, in preparing for the scene in which the father tells the little boy of his grandfather's death, Birman and Kadar must first impress upon Linus the import of the grandfather's death. Similarly, in rehearsing for the scene when the father spansks the little boy in rage, it must be explained to Linus that he must pretend that he is really being hurt.

Lies is somewhat circumvented, in its effort to expose the behind-the-scenes actualities of filmmaking, by the self-consciousness of the actors and actresses and Kadar as well. Walsh could not masquerade about the set in anonymity and everyone on the set, as a result, is highly aware that they are being filmed. The actors and actresses steal surreptitious glances at the camera and, in their interviews, seem primarily concerned with justifying the way they handle their roles. Linus, who is nauseatingly endearing ("Any kid my age could do what I do"), is blatantly aware of Walsh's camera and is constantly seeking its attention. One wonders whether the actors and actresses are really unmasking or whether they are simply exchanging the paraphernalia and props of one role for those of another. Kadar, too, is painfully conscious of the fact that he is being filmed. He is naturally embarrassed and apologetic about his eruptions and one cannot help but speculate that he is monitoring his actions and attempting to tame his acerbic tongue. Walsh provides the actors, actresses, and Kadar with a publicity platform and they capitalize on the opportunity for self-aggrandizement.

Moreover, it is highly possible that the very presence of Walsh and his crew served to aggravate the emotional abrasiveness on the set. Walsh's camera is an interloper; the people on the set are both intimidated and teased by the invasion. As a result, it appears that they censor and

modify their actions accordingly. Spontaneity and impulsiveness are sacrificed for the sake of control.

The integrity of any documentary rests on its objectivity. Pure objectivity is, of course, an unattainable ideal, due to technical limitations (i.e., the camera's view can never be totally omniscient) and to the filmmaker's attitudes, which inevitably sneak into filming. Yet it is the fundamental task of the documentary filmmaker to protect his work from the intrusion of distorting subjectivity. This is accomplished through distancing. In *Lies*, Walsh distances himself, but he does more than dispassionately report. Without editorializing, Walsh interprets and focuses, imposing significance on the material he is examining. Unfortunately, in clarifying some aspects of the making of a film (i.e. the development of character), he clouds others. We are given only a fragmented representation of what is happening. For example, at one point, Kadar is shown discussing the effects of a particular camera angle. Unfortunately, our view is obscured and we cannot see the technical set-up that is being explained. The film is misleading for we only receive haphazard glimpses into the filmmaking process. Complexities are glossed over, appearances are manipulated, and the reality behind the screen is only further mystified, becoming an extension of the Hollywood myth. *Lies* presents the reality of filmmaking within the Hollywood tradition — as a pressure-cooker reality of frayed tempers that snap too quickly and lines that come too slowly, of too many cigarettes and not enough sleep, of conflicting wills and technical distractions. Though Walsh decontextualizes the actualities of filmmaking, he also recontextualizes these actualities, utilizing Hollywood techniques. The filming is tight and dextrous, and, at times, rather cliché. For example, the freeze-frame shot near the end of the film, of Kadar and Linus strolling off together, is a worn tactic, reminiscent of Hollywood sentimentality. Also, tacked on to the end of the film like an afterthought, is the interview with Kadar, wherein he states, "Everything that is beautiful is destroyed someday." The interview only confuses and distracts; what do such platitudes referring to the transitoriness of life have to do with making a film? It is such sugar-coat-

ing that serves to parody the reality of filmmaking. Perhaps it is because *Lies* is polished with Hollywood slickness, that the reality of filmmaking is eclipsed, rather than uncovered.

Thus, we are faced with the nagging suspicion that perhaps *Lies* is not the unsheathing of an illusion at all, but rather the perpetuation of yet another illusion. Walsh, not content with mere surfaces but concerned with subterfuges, was aware of his predicament. His recognition of the dichotomy of reality as inextricably bound to illusion, and of the inherent manipulations in filmmaking, is evident in the very title.

Susan MacLean

Home Free

d: Rebecca Yates, Glen Salzman, **sc:** Marilyn Becker, **ph:** Mark Irwin, **ed:** Rebecca Yates, Glen Salzman, **sd:** Brian Day, **m:** Panorama Sound, **l.p.:** Karyn Robertson, Yuet Ngor Lau, Mai Lyn Quan, **p:** Rebecca Yates, Glen Salzman, **assoc. p.:** Rudy Buttignol, Peter Maynard, **p.c.:** Fruits and Roots, 1976, **col.:** 16 mm, **dist:** National Film Board, **running time:** 18 minutes.

Home Free is a film about multiculturalism. A hot topic, certainly, at the moment in Canada. A complex topic, too, that deals with a basic need in our society today, that of communication between the diverse peoples and cultures that live here. It seems, therefore, that the goal to achieve in presenting multiculturalism on the screen, in order to create that understanding needed, is simplicity. And *Home Free*, to its credit, operates on just those terms.

The film also offers a fresh approach to the problem, and in this small but effective twist lies the strength of the film. Usually we see, in such WASP-based efforts, a foreigner — usually a child — placed in an English home situation that is alien and frightening. Through such a film the foreigner learns the new ways and begins to feel acclimatized. In *Home Free* the roles are reversed: a young girl, fresh from the country (the ultimate symbol of Canadian roots), moves to the city, specifically Toronto's Kensington area, rich in peoples from everywhere, be it Portugal, Hungary, Italy or, in this case, the Far East.



Mai Lyn Quan in *Home Free*

Mark Irwin's cinematography and Brian Day's sound convey the sensual nature of such a community extremely well, especially since directors Yates and Salzman have taken advantage of the sights, sounds and smells of the market, where the young girl is confronted with the alien presence, in this case a wonderfully mysterious, inscrutable Chinese laundry woman.

Since the film is told from the girl's point of view, she has to develop an understanding of the environment she will now live in. An opportunity occurs when a classmate invites her to a birthday party. Karyn's discomfort is allayed by the creativity in fashioning an original birthday card, and returns only when, at the party, she is forced to eat the strange food offered with chopsticks, and furthermore to do so under the gaze of the laundry woman, the matriarch of this naturalized family.

All of the Chinese family speaks perfect English. The kids play, laugh and tease each other in the same way as kids or adults anywhere, and, through the use of a game of hide and seek, Karyn learns to understand them and realize that she has been accepted by them; even the grandmother helps Karyn to get 'home free' in the game, and in the environment.

The film has already met with some success. Financed by the Ontario Ministry of Education (one of three projects funded out of 270 applications) and International Tele-Film Enterprises of Toronto, it has been accepted for distribution promotion by the NFB, mainly because the Board has nothing like it. ITF president Murray Sweigman is confident that he'll sell 100 prints in no time, and is backing up his faith in the project by spending money to highlight it in his distribution network.

The film deserves it.

Stephen Chesley

FILM REVIEWS

Lady From Montreal

d: Andrew Adams, **sc:** Andrew Adams, **ph:** John Bak, **ed:** Andrew Adams, **sd. rec.:** Roger Segalin, **m:** Chappell, **l.p.:** Claude Desroches, Vanessa Jensen, Lorna Pelkey, Hank Kruger, Chester Pelkey, Lizzie Fleck, Tim Higgins, Perry Soretis, David Kirk, Andrew Adams, **p:** Andrew Adams, **assoc. p.:** John Bak, John Westhauser, **p.c.:** Fecal Arts Production, 1974-76, **col:** 16 mm, **running time:** 24 minutes.

Movies made by film students in their graduating year usually serve two purposes. They sum up what the student has learned in the three or four years of his studies and they must present the student in a good light to prospective employers. It is too much to expect such a film to suggest as well that the filmmaker is developing a personal style or vision.

Andrew Adams' 1974 graduation film from Conestoga College in Kitchener, Ontario, called **Lady From Montreal**, has all the clumsy self-consciousness common to most student films but it contains enough unusual elements to raise it above the expected norm.

For one thing, it's an endearing film, whimsically fetching in a bumbling sort of way. But over and above the puerile humor lies a wryly viewed parody of gangster genre films. The plot is pure B-movie hokum: mysterious lady entices hard-boiled private eye to take up her case though he soon learns that nothing is as it seems.

But filmmaker Adams, who studied under Vaclav Taborski, isn't merely content with parody. He has set up this creaky mechanism expressly to pull the rug out from under his hero. Tough-talking bottom-pinching Sam Risk, it develops, has a strange dark secret and wherever he turns during his investigation, he meets characters who say they know what the secret is. Sam's complacent world reels under this knowledge which plunges him into a nightmare of uncertainty.

Sure, the parody is ladled on rather heavily and gaps in the plot are numerous, but this too serves to establish a strong sense of displacement, of illusive reality in which the hero must grope.

The director has used the relative inexperience of his actors to good ad-

vantage. Their uncertain movements and forced acting style enhance the unease we feel in exploring this world and make us more aware of the relentless movement towards Sam's final humiliation.

On a visual level, the film is remarkably effective. Adams and his cameraman John Bak have taken considerable pains to evoke the stifling underworld through which the hero moves. Harsh light rakes the strong expressionistic shadows that pervade the film and there is more than just a little **Touch of Evil** in the set design. Odd discordant sounds distort and intensify the mood while snappy editing by Adams, particularly in the boiler room sequence amid swirling jets of steam, whirls the viewer around in the hero's nightmarish perceptions.

Another delightful aspect of the film is the exacting way the crew has scavenged all manner of period props like old-style telephones, office furniture and cars and the skilful way they have photographed these props against a backdrop of suitable architectural styles. The lovely art deco stair railing in a hotel scene is almost a throw-away image since one catches only a glimpse; but knowing that it is there gives the films that much more credence and adds up to the look of a much more expensive film.

Lady From Montreal is orchestrated like a giddy, disturbing dream. You find yourself giggling uneasily at the constant barrage of dislocations. The film's texture is like trying to run through thick fog without knowing where you are. You share in the hero's isolation and increased alienation from reality while marvelling to yourself that a student film is doing this to you.

One grudgingly comes to the awareness that beneath to hokiness, the melodrama and the juvenile confession that climaxes the film, there is a tenderness and a formal structure that takes the isolation of the character beyond farce. At the end of the film we realize that superficial tackiness has clouded our vision of the character's obvious despair over his predicament. Here the interior energy of the film shines out in a touchingly understated denouement which offers us a glimpse into the beginnings of artistic style.

Günter Ott

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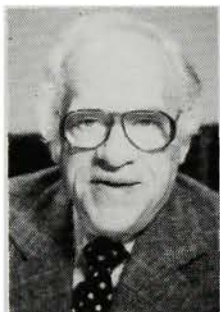
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