

FILM REVIEWS

Silvio Narizzano's

Why Shoot the Teacher

d: Silvio Narizzano, **sc:** James DeFelice, **ph:** Marc Champion, **ed:** Max Benedict, Stan Cole, **sd:** Richard Lightstone, **m:** Ricky Hy-slop, **l.p.:** Bud Cort, Samantha Eggar, Chris Wiggins, Gary Reineke, John Friesen, Michael J. Reynolds **exec. p.:** Fil Fraser, **p:** Lawrence Hertzog, **p.c.:** W.S.T.T. Productions Limited (1976), **col:** 35mm, **dist:** Ambassador. **Running time:** 100 minutes

True to the best tradition of prairie art it is the prairie itself that emerges as the dominant personality in this promising first feature produced by CTV producer Larry Hertzog and Edmonton independent Fil Fraser. **Why Shoot the Teacher** is based on humorist Max Braithwaite's reminiscences about a year he spent during the Depression as a young school-teacher in an isolated prairie community. Within the context of the book's first-person narrative the prairie functions largely as a grim backdrop to the young man's serio-comic confrontation with the alien human realities of grassroots existence. But in adapting the story to the screen the makers of the film have seized the opportunities inherent in the transfer and objectified the setting as an overwhelming presence in its own right.

What stays with you after you've left the theatre are less the details of the human interactions than images of the human figure in interaction with the landscape. Marc Champion's photography displays an acute sensitivity to the dynamics of this peculiar interrelationship — for example, to the paradoxical effect the flat immensity of the prairies achieves in both dwarfing and at the same time magnifying the human figure that



Samantha Eggar and Bud Cort find consolation on the Canadian prairie

strides its surface. Or to the curious resemblance this most arid of landscapes bears in winter to the sea, and the horse-drawn sleighs of the farmers to boats as they rock and toss their way across its rolling cover of drifts. The young teacher is forever being framed within a vista of unrelenting horizontals, sky and land, with himself or perhaps the schoolhouse far back in the distance the only upright elements in that whole stretched-out world. There is one scene in which the local farming families are shown arriving for a dance at the schoolhouse in a prairie darkness relieved only by the glimmer of a few oil-lamps that carries a hushed beauty almost archetypal in its poignancy.

Not that the film is another **Slipstream**. It does work at other levels than the purely visual. For one thing, it is often deliciously funny. Max wakes up in the cramped house of the McDougalls after his first night in Willowgreen with an urgent need for the toilet facilities. After finding the seat of the outdoor privy piled high with snow he is just crouching down to business in hasty desperation in the barn when the bell-clear voice of a young child asks him whether he has seen their cow yet. In another scene, Max, beleaguered by the demands of so many age levels together in one classroom instructs an older girl to read to the youngest

children from one of the books on the shelf; and only later discovers that the rapt little group is taking in every sordid detail of *White Slavery-The Horrible Traffic in Young Women*.

For the most part, the humor of the film emerges directly from the humanity of situation and character, rather than being purchased at its cost. Nowhere is this more true than in the classroom sequences with their ongoing collisions between the teacher's expectations and the children's rugged priorities. When the students are asked what the capital of Canada is and a boy answers "C", when they are called upon to define a "beach" and a girl responds "a female dog" — we laugh at their responses, but with the knowledge that their responses illustrate the gaping distance between the rarefied world of the text-books and the narrow strenuous world they inhabit.

The children themselves are one of the best things in the film. Drawn largely, I believe, from the local population in Hanna, Alberta, where the film was shot, they are entirely and touchingly believable as the tough-innocent progeny of the Depression-ridden farmers and their worn-out women. Dale McGowan is especially fine as the class bully, Jake, with whom Max has his central conflict.

There is, in fact, a wonderful grittiness of texture to the film's depic-

Film Credit Abbreviations: d.: Director. asst. d.: Assistant Director. sc.: Script. adapt.: Adaptation. dial.: Dialogue. ph.: Photography. sp. ph. eff.: Special Photographic Effects. ed.: Editor. sup. ed.: Supervising Editor. sd.: Sound. sd. ed.: Sound Editor. s.d. rec.: Sound Recording. p. des.: Production Designer. a.d.: Art Director. set dec.: Set Decorator. m.: Music. m.d.: Music Director. cost.: Costumes. choreo.: Choreography. l.p.: Leading Players. exec. p.: Executive Producer. p.: Producer. assoc. p.: Associate Producer. p. sup.: Production Supervisor. p. man.: Production Manager. p.c.: Production Company. col.: Colour Process. dist.: Distributors. narr.: Narration.

tion of the community as a whole, a powerful quality essentially documentary in feeling that reaches its climax in the raw vitality of the dance scene. I see this documentary quality working with the film's other major strength, the sense of the landscape to preserve the resolute unsentimentality of Braithwaite's voice in the book. The young teacher can alter nothing to the shape of his desires. He is confronted with a reality in the people as obdurate and uncompromising as a force of nature. His education lies in the process of his acceptance of the place with all its givens, both human and nonhuman, intact. When Alice Field, the British war-bride of long ago runs away from her home during a ferocious blizzard and ends up spending the night at the schoolhouse with Max, no neat romantic resolution of her dilemma is proffered. Her husband, a man as hard as the land he battles, played with great authority by Michael J. Reynolds, comes to collect her the next morning; and his answer to the young teacher's attempts to tell him that he must do more for his wife is brutally conclusive – "You take care of the kids, teacher. I'll take care of the woman. And if you mention to anybody she was here, I'll break your back".

The major weakness of **Why Shoot the Teacher** lies in its structure. The makers of the film seem to have had some difficulty in translating Max's development, the process of his growing realizations as they appear in the narrator's leisurely ruminations on the page, into cinematic terms. In the book, for example, Max writes home asking for money to get back, but moves further and further away from sending the letter as he gradually yields to the logic or illogic of his situation. There is some business with a letter in the film but what it says is never really explained and its significance as a structural device is completely unrealized. Also, the book can begin with Max arriving at Willowgreen because the author is at liberty to go back and fill in something of his background anytime he feels like it. The creators of the film, however, are pretty well stuck with establishing Max's context in dramatic terms from the beginning, in order to make the contrast between what he's used to and what he finds in the prairie schoolhouse meaningful. They try to do this in a very rapid scene at the train station as Max is being seen off by

his family but it doesn't work. So much is going on in this initial scene – it's the Depression era and people are out of work, Max has never been away from home before and his family spoils him, the train station is in the big city and it is very rushed and noisy – that the opening turns out one big overdrawn confusion. There is even a tentative stab at voice-over narration from Max which basically gets drowned-out by the main sound-effects.

Elsewhere, too, caricature ends up obscuring a scene's meaning. The local women who come in to clean up the schoolhouse and provide Max with food are so strident and fractious that we miss the point of their mingled toughness and kindness. In the crucial scene with the school inspector, Max must articulate his changed awareness of the local reality through a rousing defence of the students' rural experience. But the significance of his encounter with this type of the Canadian colonial mentality is deflected by the slapstick choreography of their interaction and the histrionic performance of Kenneth Griffith as the inspector – speaking an outlandish, hopelessly unidentifiable version of the mother-tongue.

This partial failure to make more of Max's adventures than self-enclosed comic episodes and to objectify his gradual development is attributable to weaknesses in both script and direction. When the Chairman of the School Board, genially played by Chris Wiggins, points out to Max that the small salary he will end up making is more than many farmers with thirty years' experience are living on, the teacher refuses dinner and rushes out the door with an abruptness that suggests a sudden attack of dysentery. It's not a particularly good way to show us that he been deeply affected by this revelation of prairie poverty.

The film's biggest problem, though, as far as I am concerned, is Bud Cort. Max is supposed to be the most ordinary of Canadian young men, not especially intelligent or courageous or idealistic or unusual in any way. It's a perfect ingenu role, with perhaps a dash of half-awakened sexuality thrown in to make him halfway interesting. Any number of Canadian actors could have played this role. Bud Cort is not, by a long stretch, your ordinary young man; and cutting his hair and dressing him in thirties style only emphasizes his enormous individual oddity. The very elements that

made him so right as the fantastical Brewster McCloud – the peculiar mixture of innocent babyishness and slightly sinister puckishness in his face, the virtually asexual angularity of his body – work against him in this film and provide an unsettling, extraneous dimension to his struggle for acceptance in the prairie community. He looks like a cartoon character to begin with, partially because of the slap-stick quality of the opening sequence. And although our identification with him deepens eventually, through the varied experiences we see him undergoing, this is less a tribute to his acting than to the richly-textured depiction of prairie life.

Cort simply doesn't convey any of the young man's easygoing charm that comes through in Braithwaite's book and would make the students' capitulation to Max (or his to them, for that matter) understandable. We get little sense that the character has grown on the inside because Cort just tends to alternate between a very tight-assed well-intentionedness and desperate comic hysteria. Even at his most emotionally earnest, a quality of self-righteous priggishness seems to attach itself to his manner – a function, I think, of Cort's attempt to clamp down on a screen presence whose essential strength is its quirky feyness. Where he really comes into his own is, appropriately enough in the scene where he does a reading with Alice Field from Noel Coward's *Private Lives*.

Samantha Eggar, on the other hand, is a delight as Alice Field and justifies every second of screen time she is given. It is a rich, multifaceted performance with fresh surprises about the character coming at you at every turn. The long sequence in the schoolhouse with Max that follows her desperate flight from her husband and children is the emotional centre of the film. We watch her move among the most amazing variety of metamorphoses – half-crazed drudge, dreamy-eyed young girl, terrified child, glowing, self-assured woman – and even after she has left the screen we feel that the character's complexity has been nowhere near exhausted. Alice Field is finally defeated by the prairie once again. But in the depth and emotional authenticity of her performance, Samantha Eggar is the one human element in the film that comes close to challenging the dominance of the prairie's grim imperatives.

Katherine Gilday