

Can I Get a Witness?

Written and directed by Kris Lefcoe. Produced by Anita Herczeg and Helen du Toit. With Liisa Repo-Martell and Scott Speedman. The Canadian Film Centre, 1996. 17 min. 16mm

In the decline and detritus that is late 20th Century capitalism, it should come as no surprise that the great existential and epistemological questions of our times should find their dramatic focus in the convenience store. Within the oddly attractive, slightly crazed, fluorescent transience of tabloids and Slurpees where the coolers hum and the video cameras whirr, we have a site custom-made for pondering the status of individual identity and modern disconnection. In writer-director Kris Lefcoe's clever, brash exploration of this simultaneously familiar and alien social space, loquacious clerk Tito (Richard Yearwood) talks to his pal Eddy on the phone about what he sees in the store's video surveillance monitor. He is soon jolted out of his technological cocoon when what appears to be a murder scene appears on the screen. While Tito panics, a Gen-X couple cruising the store offer pointed and often withering observations about the state of the world. Crisply paced, perceptive and with a winning sense of humour, *Can I Get a Witness?* is a sharp and concise treatment of the quintessential Canadian investigation of the unreliability of images. As we've seen in the work of Canuck filmmakers from Lipsett to Snow to Elder to Hoolboom to MacGillivray to Gruben to Egoyan to many others, what you see is not always what you get. That Lefcoe locates these philosophical interrogations of empirical knowledge in the convenience store is evidence not only of her talent as a scenarist, but also of her promise as a relevant and engaged Canadian filmmaker.

Stiffy

Written, directed and produced by Brian McPhail. Independent Filmmakers Cooperative of Ottawa, 1996. 9 min. 16mm.

Imagine you are a little boy and it's your birthday. When you wake up that special morning you find a gift from your parents, who have, of course, already left for work. Opening the package, you discover it's the dog you've always wanted, except for one small detail—it's dead. Those absent gift-givers forgot to drill air holes in the box after buying the now inert canine at Mutts-R-Us. Undaunted, you drag it out into the world for fun and adventure. Ottawa filmmaker Brian McPhail has rendered a very funny and very poignant animated short about parental absence, loneliness and imagination. Its finely nuanced script more than compensates for the limitations of the crude but still effective claymation and the film's unfortunately over-extended denouement. The first work of an inventive young filmmaker, *Stiffy* has been selected for screening at Montreal's World Film Festival and Ottawa's International Animation Festival in October.

Sshhh...

Written and directed by Scott Smith. Produced by Sarah James Overton and Helen du Toit. With Andrew Sardella and John Dolan. The Canadian Film Centre, 1996. 17 min. 16mm.

Another short work about a dark Canadian childhood (it's hard to grow up well-adjusted in the Great White North). *Sshhh...* is a taut, superbly executed and decidedly macabre



Sshhh...: A macabre tale of an 11-year-old boy's decision to stop his father's adulterous affairs and save the family.

Photo courtesy of The Canadian Film Centre

tale of an 11-year-old boy's decision to stop his father's adulterous affairs and save the family. While mom is away at work and dad's mistress comes over, junior studies how to produce a lethal poison, tests it successfully on his pet rodent, and then, in a marvelously assembled suspense sequence, quietly administers it. Writer and director Scott Smith has assured cinematic sense of pace and design, and an imaginative approach to *mise-en-scène*. While firmly rooted in the tradition of Hitchcock, Chabrol and others, Smith's film is well-wrought and disturbing in its implications. *Sshhh...* is stark, unsettling and, yes, entertaining fare.

Soft Like Me

Written, produced and directed Jeffrey Erbach. With Marc Ducusin and Alison Northcott. Winnipeg Film Group, 1996. 26 min. 16mm.

What does this futurist dystopian fantasy film from the prairies have to do with contemporary Canadian life? Plenty. Much like his earlier film about adolescent alienation, *Gavin Froggboy* (reviewed in *Take One* No. 11), Winnipeg filmmaker Jeffrey Erbach's latest offering is a stinging indictment of one generation (read: Baby Boomers) literally and metaphorically devouring its offspring. Set on a farm in which boys are forced to work in the fields and to become sexual slaves for the rapacious, even cannibalistic owners, *Soft Like Me* is disturbing both in its imagery and its incisive, Swiftian assessment of Boomer politics: *après moi, le déluge*. Despite some minor awkward passages, this is an intelligent, dramatically compelling and strangely poetic examination of where we might be headed, or where we have already arrived. ■