



Andy Xu and Reimonna Sheng in KEITH LOCK's *Small Pleasures*

Keith Lock

A nation erupts

Keith Lock made Small Pleasures on Super-16mm, without agency funding, on a tiny arts council budget. It premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1993. Small Pleasures explores the age-old conflict between immigrant and (settled) Canadian values, and at the same time the film portrays complexity and contradiction within the immigrant Chinese community.

NINETEEN NINETY-FOUR will go down in history as the year the Canadian film industry progressed towards a more ideal and representative cinema. A new wave of feature dramas written and directed by filmmakers of colour is approaching: Midi Onodera's

Sadness of the Moon, Clement Virgo's *Rude* (formerly *Rude Boy*), Stephen Williams' *Soul Survivor*, and Mina Shum's *Double Happiness*.

Collectively, this explosion of features (and there are others) represents a significant expansion of the images and consciousness of Canadian cinema. It will alter the way people think about this country.

But these filmmakers of colour do not consider their work to be essentially different simply because their cultural background might not be defined as mainstream. Onodera is quick to point out that she sees herself not as a lesbian filmmaker or Japanese-Canadian filmmaker but simply a filmmaker. Virgo echoes this, saying that for him, ethnic filmmaking doesn't enter into it at all. Williams points out that he is a Black filmmaker coming from a Jamaican background, but shouldn't be seen as a spokesperson for the Black community. Shum is ambivalent about being

described as a Chinese-Canadian filmmaker, wishing to recognize its importance yet wanting to be able to ignore it at the same time.

In all of this, it's important to remember that the production of a first feature by an independent remains a struggle for all filmmakers, regardless of colour. But whatever the complexities are for a white filmmaker making a first feature, they increase dramatically when marginalized filmmakers are engaged in the process.

One Asian Canadian filmmaker described to me how the conversational use of the word "racist" spelled disaster for him during an important funding agency meeting. Part of the problem stemmed from the fact that the word "racism" can have different emotional values for a person of colour than for a white, middle-class Canadian.

First Nations filmmakers or filmmakers of colour who have had to deal with racism in their personal lives may drop

Feature Bound

Keith Lock

Stephen Williams

Stephen Williams

Stir it up

Soul Survivors is a contemporary urban fable which takes a stylized, expressionistic view of two Jamaican immigrant cousins fighting for emotional survival in a rapidly changing Toronto neighbourhood. Soul Survivors is being produced by Paul Brown (I Love a Man in Uniform) with commitments from Telefilm, the OFDC and distributor Norstar, with a budget of 1.3 million.

"You a go tired fe see me face, can't get me outta de race" Bob Marley

the word "racist" in an almost casual way during a discussion. On the other hand, to an educated person of the white middle-class, the word "racist" may be a supreme insult, conjuring up images of the KKK, segregation and lynch mobs.

One very talented Black filmmaker with a project in development a few years ago bitterly recalls a script meeting with a distributor in which he was told that his central character "wasn't Black enough."

Comments about a character not being Black enough or Chinese enough or Indian enough can be problematic, since they deny the filmmaker's right to define his or her own vision.

Fortunately, the Canadian film industry is starting to emerge from this denial and racial misperception. The iceberg of indifference is beginning to melt. But if there is a weak link anywhere in the system, it lies in distribution. Surprisingly, most of the filmmakers I spoke with did not encounter problems with the agencies, but found great difficulty in convincing distributors to back their projects. Since the distributor is the trigger to agency funding, this looks like a potential bottleneck. Of the four films mentioned, only *Soul Survivor* has a distributor (Norstar Releasing), and is being produced with the participation of the agencies (Telefilm Canada and the OFDC). One senses that distributors shy away from what they perceive as the multiculturalism "kiss of death" at the

Canadian box office. The idea that Canadians do not want to see films about people who are not white is being challenged and will no doubt be put to rest in years to come.

This year will see the first Japanese-Canadian feature, the first two Black features, and the first feature by a Chinese-Canadian woman. How are these new filmmakers seen by the rest of Canada's writers, directors and producers? Without a doubt, the vast majority of Canadian film industry insiders embrace First Nations filmmakers and filmmakers of colour as colleagues. However, at certain times, there is confusion or at least bemusement among white filmmakers about these filmmakers. Who are they and why are they intentionally segregating themselves from "the rest of us?"

Recently, in the presence of a group of filmmakers of colour and First Nations filmmakers during a session of the Canadian Film Centre's Summer Lab in which I took part, one exasperated white filmmaker blurted out, "Are you making race-specific films, or are you just making films?" She herself is a white filmmaker who had only made films about white characters, yet couldn't see that she might also be described as a maker of "race-specific" films.

Cultural identity can be a refuge and harbour for all filmmakers, or it can form a kind of prison where we limit our affections to those few who are like ourselves. Ultimately, once the excitement dies down over the present cinematic string of firsts, the expressed desire of the First Nations and filmmakers of colour is to free themselves from this prison of being perceived as "ethnic." Even so, it is only through these first productions that there can be a widening of the current boundaries of Canadian Cinema so that it truly embraces everyone.

WERE THERE particular difficulties in getting a Black feature film financed by the agencies? Absolutely. Issues surfaced frequently around language (Jamaican dialect is a prominent feature of the script), and its various nuances and subtleties. Cultural behaviours and assumptions that the all-white adjudicators brought with them to their read of the material were both frustrating and revealing. Questions were also raised about the existence of a strong enough Black cast in the country. My feeling is that these folks are here and, frankly, we ain't seen nuthin' yet. All the films made by Black folk in this country, present and future, will continue to demonstrate for our actors that there is life after *Top Cops*.

Other issues impacting on funding involved expectations around an audience for this film. The traditional bureaucratic mantra around this is that there is not a large enough Black audience to support a film of this nature. As if only Irish folk go to *The Snapper*. As if