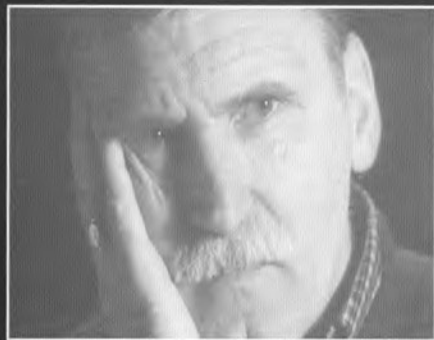


Hot Docs

Hot Docs: Canadian International Documentary Festival

TORONTO, ONTARIO (4/26-5/5/02)

By Paul Townend



Romeo Dallaire

Chomsky's analysis of the role of the press and other media in controlling our lives is both lucid and disturbing. Co-director Mark Achbar's brilliant flexible framing provides the illusion that we are present at each event. "I fear that what the film demonstrates is that the U.S. is a more closed society than most other democracies," Wintonick said. "It's sad that this 10-year-old film is still relevant today."

Cinéma Vérité follows the history of how hand-held cameras and light-weight sound equipment were seized upon by filmmakers such as D.A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, Wolf Koenig and Fred Wiseman to reveal a new reality. This film is a masterful account, beautifully shot and edited, of an extraordinarily important piece of cinema's history. Wintonick commented: "Thank you, NFB. This is the first time after 25 years I didn't have to go after money!" Seeing *Is Believing* is a sort of "follow-up," to *Cinéma Vérité*, which explores the present-day political and social uses of handcams.

In the forum Talking Shop, Wintonick gave details of his extraordinarily varied life as director, editor, producer and teacher. He believes the power of communications technology to change the world will remain very limited while "there is a digital divide between the haves and the have nots." He summarized his philosophy as that of a Buddhist who doesn't meditate. "A philosophy that I will be very happy to discuss further with anyone who cares to meet me in the bar afterwards." He did.

Only a few years ago, one would have scoffed at the idea of hordes of people lining up outside a movie theatre waiting with anxious trepidation to get into a sold-out screening of a feature-length documentary. No big surprise here: the term "documentary" has traditionally evoked nauseating thoughts of dusty reels of boring educational footage etched on old scratched up Super 8 mm. Clearly, things have changed. Judging by the long lineups and listings of sold-out screenings that have become familiar sights over the past couple of years at the Hot Docs: Canadian International Documentary Festival (now in its ninth year), people seem to have finally caught on to the message: fact can indeed be better than fiction.

This year, Hot Docs opened with the charming *Blue Vinyl*, co-directed by Judith Helfand and Daniel B. Gold. The film follows Helfand as she confronts her parents for refurbishing the walls of their house with vinyl siding. The material used is apparently highly toxic, causing not only great harm to the environment but also serious health hazards to anyone living in the neighbourhood. Perplexed by her discovery, Helfand embarks on a personal odyssey, travelling from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to Venice in order to interview CEOs of large chemical plants that produce vinyl chloride and victims who have been exposed to the pollutant. Determined, persistent and sometimes even brash, Helfand deftly wrings out the answers she's hunting down. With the addition of Helfand's unique sense of humour, one can almost picture "non-stupid" white man Michael Moore in a dress.

Made up of 30 features and shorts, the Canadian Spectrum program spread across a range of experimental personal diaries, salacious "exposés," chilling political films and portraits of artists and cultural scholars, such as media guru Marshall McLuhan as depicted in Kevin McMahon's *McLuhan's Wake*, the opening film of the program. Using old family photos, interviews as well as animation and other digital effects, the film is part biography of McLuhan's theories, part recollection of the final months of his life. As tradition would have it, the festival closed with a crowd-pleaser, Nisha Pahuja's dynamic *Bollywood Bound*, an entertaining look at the attractive lure of fame and fortune in Mumbai's booming film industry.

Because they deal with real life and real people, documentaries have a greater tendency to be more affecting than dramatic films. This can be especially true if the stories are told from the perspective of young people. In Carole Laganière's *The Fiancée of Life*, children between the ages of six and 11 open themselves up in front of the camera to disclose the deep wound that inevitably accompanies the loss of a close relative through a car accident, cancer or suicide. Displaying an incredible amount of maturity and wisdom for their young age, these kids share their most inner thoughts and reveal their deepest beliefs on death, reincarnation and the afterlife. Comfort, it

FESTIVAL *wraps*

seems, comes in various ways: making sketches of the drunk man responsible for the fatal car crash, or providing solace in turn to their surviving parent, or simply believing that angels can bring back a missing mother.

Using the child's point-of-view approach just as effectively, Shelley Saywell creates a poignant collage of stories in her film, *A Child's Century of War*. Travelling from Chechnya to Hebron to Sierra Leone, Saywell weaves stories told first-hand by children—some as young as six years old and others who have simply forgotten their age—who have become victims of war, whether witnessing their parents being shot by the military, or forced to live as orphans in abandoned trains, or begging for food at public markets amid the possible occurrence of terrorist attacks. Saywell layers recently shot footage with stories of these children as voice-overs of victims of war from another era recount their own experiences (the voice of a young girl, for instance, echoes thoughts of a former victim of the Hiroshima bombing). As the film progresses, we discover that there are other types of war victims—the non-passive kind. In Sierra Leone, for instance, young boys are trained by the rebel army to use machetes to cut off the arms of other children. In a clever parallel, Saywell takes us back to the time when Hitler used to brainwash young Aryan boys while scheming to build his "perfect army."

While Saywell does a decent job at capturing the poignancy and horror of war as seen through the eyes of young people, Steven Silver's *The Last Just Man* remains by far to be one of the most chilling films of the Canadian Spectrum. When Lt. Gen. Romeo Dallaire was sent to Rwanda in 1993, his mission sounded simple enough: to monitor the peace process between the divisive Hutus and Tutsis. Neither he nor his superiors could have predicted that less than a year later, over 800,000 Tutsis would end up being massacred by the Hutu militia—one of the world's worst genocide since Nazi Germany. In vivid detail, Dallaire (a Canadian who now resides in Montreal) painfully recounts his whole ordeal while in Rwanda, from the underlying tension he'd felt within the first few weeks of his arrival to the growing awareness that a government military coup d'état was being planned to the unspeakable rampage that lasted just under 100 days. Dallaire doesn't mince words in describing the atrocities he has seen. With such a heavy subject to tackle, director Silver wastes no time lingering on insignificant detail, focusing instead on driving forward Dallaire's harrowing accounts and heartfelt confessions of what he deems as his own ultimate failure to save a nation. Clocking in at just over an hour, *The Last Just Man* leaves the kind of emotional imprint that lasts a lifetime.

Not all documentaries in the Canadian Spectrum program were about death, war and world politics. Take *Tyler's Barrel*, for instance. Not unlike any other small-town, average 20-year-old, Tyler Canning wants to break out of the rut of dead-end jobs and make a name for himself. Unlike his peers, Tyler's idea of fame and fortune is sticking himself in a padded barrel and going over Niagara Falls. Firmly determined, Tyler moves to Niagara Falls, but soon finds himself unable to keep a steady job or a place to live, leading him to steal his parents' possessions for resale—a coup that promptly sends him to jail. Matt Gallagher's film may start out as an odd and amusing piece, but it soon becomes clear that Tyler's obsession escalates from quirky to downright unhealthy. Regardless, Gallagher never judges his subject nor does he take responsibility in explaining the young man's erratic behaviour.

Duncan McKinlay, on the other hand, has a different kind of quirk. He barks. He spits. He twitches. And yet he's entirely inoffensive. McKinlay has



The Last Just Man

Tourette's syndrome and *Life's a Twitch* is a witty slice-of-life story that strangely seems like a coming-out story. Instead of being worried about his sexuality, straight-man Duncan finds himself coming out of the closet with a bizarre genetic condition that has afflicted him since childhood. Only through an Ann Landers column on Tourette's Syndrome, does Duncan finally realize that he is not a freak after all, and better yet, that he is not alone. Cindy Bisaillon's film succeeds marvellously mainly due to its wonderful subject. Despite his condition, Duncan has an irrepressible sense of humour that shines throughout the film. Then again, his honesty about his sense of loneliness, alienation and despair during the long hard process of coming to terms with himself is heartfelt.

In addition to the Canadian Spectrum program, Hot Docs organizers have included a separate Focus On program, this year dedicated to Zacharias Kunuk. While it may seem that the Inuit filmmaker has come out of the blue and become an overnight success with his three-hour epic *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*, Kunuk has in fact been capturing and preserving local stories of the people in Igloolik on video for the past 20 years. Bearing evocative titles such as *Fish Swimming Back and Forth* and *Gathering Place*, the videos are part re-creations of life as it was in 1940s Igloolik: fishermen building fish traps by stacking up stones in the river; hunters crawling stealthily on the ice in search of seal pups; and women sitting around the campfire while sewing coats together out of caribou hide. Who says Canadian neo-realism doesn't exist.

TAKE ONE *wraps*