

short takes

BY TOM MCSORLEY

RYAN

2004 14m *prod* Copper Heart Entertainment, NFB, *p* Steven Hoban, Jed DeCory, Karyn Nolan, Noah Segal, David Verrall, Marcy Page, Mark Smith, *d* Chris Landreth, *an* Robb Denovan, Sebastian Kapijimpanga, Paul Kohut, Jeff Panko, *ed* Allan Code, *mus* Fergus Marsh, Michael White; *narr and voices* Chris Landreth, Felicity Fanjoy, Derek Lamb, Ryan Larkin.

This Oscar®-winning computer-animated short is a striking portrait, by turns grotesque and beautiful, of animator Ryan Larkin. Larkin's promising career at the NFB (he was mentored by none other than Norman McLaren) faltered and ended after bouts of cocaine addiction and alcoholism; he ended up as a panhandler on the streets of Montreal. Framed by a conversation between breathtakingly rendered animated versions of Landreth and Larkin and interweaving excerpts from Larkin's films (*Walking and Street Musique*), animated interviews with former partner Felicity and producer Derek Lamb, and kinetically manipulated still photographs of the younger Larkin, *Ryan* achieves a prismatic, even kaleidoscopic perspective on this deeply troubled man and gifted artist. It is also a film about Chris Landreth (who previously animated *the end*, an Oscar®-nominated film from 1997) and his own dark struggles with doubt and the haunting memory of his late alcoholic mother. In one critical sequence, Landreth structures into his film a well-intentioned but misguided desire to save Larkin from his alcoholism, exhorting his fellow animator to quit drinking and start working again. He even has a halo appear over his head, mocking his presumption. Larkin will have none of this talk of salvation. He is proud, defiant and will not give up beer. Moreover, as he points out, who will pay for his work now? He then exclaims, frustrated and enraged: "One cannot do anything—anything at all without the power of money." Landreth's halo goes dark and falls to the floor. Without this moment, *Ryan* could be seen as exploiting its subject, but Landreth implicates himself enough to prevent the mere romanticizing of the fall from grace of a fellow artist. Stunning in its multi-faceted animation, *Ryan*—thanks to its sad, prickly subject—offers a searing reminder that art and life are connected, but are not at all the same thing. An important reminder at Oscar® time, made especially piquant given that Larkin himself was nominated for the southern Californian statuette back in 1969. He did not win.

Images courtesy of the NFB.



HARDWOOD

2004 29m *prod* Hardwood Pictures, NFB, *p* Erin Faith Young, Peter Starr, *d/sc/ed* Hubert Davis, *ph* David Tennant, *mus* Fraser MacDougall, Dave Palmer; *with* Mel Davis.

Absent fathers abound in Canadian cinema. Hubert Davis's impressive and deeply personal documentary, *Hardwood*, however, is a Canadian film about a father both absent and present. It is also a film about the peculiar relationship between absence and presence that the cinema itself in some way embodies. The son of former Harlem Globetrotter, Mel Davis, Hubert Davis chronicles his father's life as a basketball player, and as the father of himself and his half-brother in Chicago, where the elder Davis was married to a black woman before returning years later to Vancouver to be with Hubert's white mother. Deepening the historical layers of this theme of absentee fathers, we learn that Mel Davis himself was raised in Chicago by a single mother. Exploring ideas of fatherhood, multiracial relationships and the politics of the family, *Hardwood* is an unflinching, thoughtful and compassionate journey through the Davis family album. While overly earnest in places, the film is neither cloying nor excessively sentimental. It is elegantly photographed by David Tennant and intelligently organized into three distinct but overlapping chapters: "Love," "Recollection" and "Redemption." Using archival footage and home movies, Davis also cleverly insinuates how the cinema, perhaps like individual memory, is a set of powerful but ultimately tenuous lines between what is inside the frame and what is outside the frame. Already a winner of several prestigious festival awards, *Hardwood* was also nominated for an Oscar® in the Short Documentary category, and Davis is the first African Canadian ever to be nominated.

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