

view. The celebrities, however, emerge from the elevator and stride quickly past, and he is unable to get the shots he wants. "This is the worst!" Malafronte ejaculates angrily. "Jeremy Irons won't even stop for us!"

Malafronte's professional reflexes are always rapid, but no one galvanizes him like Michael J. Fox. In one scene, after a long stakeout, we see him sprint across the street after Fox has finally emerged from his home for a run with his wife, Tracy Pollan. Fox spots him and ducks back into his apartment building. "It's unprofessional," Malafronte whines.

In a few masterstrokes, the filmmakers show us at least one of the compelling reasons why the celebrities avoid these photographers. An ordinary shot of Jack Nicholson flanks the lurid headline, "Jack Nicholson had a gay affair with Marlon Brando," along with a picture of Brando that dates from his *Apocalypse Now* days. Another equally generic photo of Mary Tylor Moore in a low-cut gown illustrates "Mary Tyler Moore in breast surgery disaster." Not nearly as amusing (but probably intended to be) are the candid comments of second-tier actress Sally Kirkland who makes four appearances, which is about three too many. She loves the camera, but it does not love her and the footage of her histrionic self-promoting is embarrassing, almost cruel.

There are a few wonderful moments with one of the original Italian paparazzi in 1960 who was shot with a bow and arrow and kicked in the groin by Anita Ekberg when he tried to take a picture of her with her married lover. A real pro, he kept shooting throughout, and the photos of Ekberg taking aim with the bow appeared in magazines around the world. The sobriquet "paparazzi," as he tells us, was picked up by the press after Federico Fellini included a photographer named Paparezzo in *La Dolce Vita*.

The paparazzi seem to lead a life of perpetual discomfort and frustration. Why do they do it? The only answer is implicit in the action of the film. There is that split-secondness to it all. It seems to charge them up, the thrill of the chase. Celebrities become visible for a beat only as they emerge from doorways or taxis. There is another beat, and they are enveloped by the crowds of fans and

the many security men and bodyguards. Blasioli and Coccimiglio have given the audience the sense of how the celebrities must feel. Bernadette Peters, putting on a brave smile, is clearly terrified by the swarms of paparazzi jostling each other and calling out her name. Jack Nicholson, enigmatic behind his trademark dark glasses, is stony-faced and phlegmatic. Jane Fonda and Ted Turner grip each other's hands, smile wanly and walk away.

The filmmakers give Malafronte a lot of rope and, predictably, he hangs himself. There is one moment when someone off camera asks him why he feels he has the right to intrude on people's private lives in this manner. The camera has him pinned down, and we watch him squirm as he casts about for a quick answer. Finally he says, "I don't even think about questions like that." Malafronte is a sociopath with a Nikon. But there is something perfectly cinematic in his feral on-screen presence, and for the first hour of *Blast 'Em* his hyped-up hustle is fascinating to watch.

However, Blasioli and Coccimiglio neglect to provide their subject with either a professional or personal context. A few magazine editors (or we assume that's what they are) are interviewed on camera but not identified and this happens throughout. Talking heads appear and re-appear without any mention of who they are. It is impossible to evaluate the information or the speaker and issues are not being addressed. Malafronte is never placed in any critical or sociological context, so we are never quite sure how to evaluate him. He believes he has talent but the few photos of his we see are undistinguished, the result of his crafty opportunism rather than artistic ability. With his characteristic candour, he admits to distancing himself from his peers. "People are afraid of me. They're afraid of my potential," he says. No doubt. But his potential for what?

At one point there is a shift in our perspective on him. It comes with the recounting of an incident involving JFK Jr. Malafronte has already captured him on rollerblades on a New York city sidewalk but he wants more. In one scene, Kennedy spots Malafronte outside and takes off across the street to avoid the

camera. The rest, which happens off camera, is only recounted but even so is one of the film's more memorable moments. Malafronte tells us how he took a short cut and arrived at Kennedy's house before he did. This was too much for John Jr., who, in desperation, confronts his pursuer. "Why are you doing this?" and urges Malafronte to "look into himself."

That Malafronte is unable to do so is perhaps his greatest failing. That the filmmakers cannot look into him either is, ultimately, their film's greatest failing.

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Reviewed by Christopher Harris

Secret Nation

Directed by Michael Jones, written by Edward Riche, produced by Paul Pope, with Cathy Jones, Mary Walsh, Michael Wade, Rick Mercer and Ron Hynes. A Black Spot Inc./Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers Co-operative production.

■ If you're one of those people who always thought Newfoundland was just another province, see *Secret Nation*. You'll probably never look at the place in the same light again. With his second feature, Newfoundland director Michael Jones has added 110 minutes to the body of Canadian film culture and in doing so has made a unique contribution to that culture.

Secret Nation has been compared, on numerous occasions, to Oliver Stone's *JFK*. But it's hard to compare *Secret Nation* to anything. Like *JFK*, this accomplished 1992 production is driven by revelations of a well-covered-up conspiracy of immense proportions. And it blends real and fictional characters. But that's about as far as the similarities go. Jones' creation is far less self-important than Stone's and far more funny. More to the point, *Secret Nation* seems somehow free of the taint of paranoia that clings to *JFK* and most other conspiracy dramas. Sure, there's abundant paranoia within the bounds of its storyline, but the film itself (in its own

eccentric way) is one of the sanest movies to come out of Canada in a long time. What really separates *Secret Nation* from *JFK*—and practically everything else on film—is its ringing statement of Newfoundland nationalism, albeit wrapped in a highly entertaining package.

For his subject, scriptwriter Edward Riche has told a contemporary story that turns on the axis of Newfoundland's grinding journey into the Canadian confederation in 1949. Our heroine, Frieda Vokey (Codco's Cathy Jones, the director's sister), is a Montreal graduate student labouring over a thesis on Newfoundland nationalism. After a humiliating oral exam, she returns to St. John's, giving herself six months to finish her paper.

She moves in with her family: mother Oona (Mary Walsh, another Codco regular) and father Lester (Michael Wade) who, in his younger days, was a delegate to the National Convention, which, from 1946 to 1948, debated the future of what was then "Britain's oldest colony."

Frieda's arrival coincides with the death of a mysterious figure from the days of the Confederation battle. Leo Cryptus, the sole scrutineer on the night of the fateful 1949 referendum, remained a cipher while alive. Now his personal papers, delivered to the provincial archives, have the fingers of all sorts of people twitching. While Frieda grows increasingly frustrated with her father's refusal to say a word about his involvement in the great debates, she has a fleeting yet significant affair with a rival academic (Ron Hynes). As matters quicken, Frieda begins to close in on her elusive quarry, which is nothing less than the shocking discovery that the referendum vote was rigged from start to finish. She also comes to realize that treachery is often found where you least expect it and nothing is as simple as it looks.

On one level, *Secret Nation* is a comedy, rich with deadpan humour (a brief vignette with Frieda's taxi-dispatcher brother—played by playwright Rick Mercer—sorting out the tangled knots of his cabbies' love lives via two-



Blast 'Em: (top) Rebecca Broussard and Jack Nicholson; (middle) Iman and David Bowie; (bottom) paparazzo Victor Malafrente



Cathy Jones in *Secret Nation*

way radio is a masterpiece of absurdity); on another level, the film is a cutting satire; on another, a surprisingly effective political thriller; and on yet another, a moving elegy for a "little country that disappeared." That Jones manages to

make these potentially conflicting elements work together owes much to his cast. Cathy Jones shows herself, yet again, to be not only an engaging screen presence but as potent a dramatic lead as she is a comedian. The rest of the cast,

which includes some of Newfoundland's most talented performers, is equally strong. *Secret Nation* is not a flawless film, but the flaws are minor. Walsh, for instance, looks suitably middle-aged in her first scene, but ever after looks young enough to be Frieda's sister.

Mike Jones' first feature was *The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood* (1986). It was a loosely structured, off-the-wall satire—likeable but technically rough.

The production values of *Secret Nation* are of a higher order, and the editing, by Jones and Derek Norman, is brilliant. And Jones and Riche have a refreshingly original narrative style that interweaves fact and fiction until it's hard to know where the boundary lies. Even the recurring "archival" footage is a clever and technically adroit blend of real and recreated history. Seldom has a film of such comic dimensions been so thoroughly saturated with acts of betrayal.

Betrayal and deceit, whether personal or national, are the leitmotifs that run from end to end of Riche's screenplay. And given what we learn of Newfoundland nationalism in *Secret Nation*, it's clear that underlying those explicit betrayals is a bigger one—the sense of betrayal and anger many Newfoundlanders feel towards the rest of Canada. In an unforgettable scene, Frieda interviews a dying Joey Smallwood through the fluttering plastic walls of his oxygen tent. "Our resources, our fisheries, our oil are owned by Canada...our water was stolen by Quebec," she sputters, her grad student facade crumbling to reveal the wounded island patriot beneath.

For those of us "from away," without a firm grounding in Newfoundland culture, it's hard to know how seriously we're supposed to take the film's conspiracy thesis. *Secret Nation* is clearly fiction, but is it satire that cuts so close to the bone of truth that it sends a shudder up the spines of the cognoscenti? One thing is certain, the 1949 referendum and the events leading up to it were marked by heated debates and bitter divisions. And the final vote was so close that it's hard to believe the pro-Confederation faction truly thought it had a mandate to join Canada.

In this strangely disconnected coun-



Laroux Peoples (left), Kim Tomczak and Brad Gough in *Legal Memory*

try called Canada, doomed to debate the merits of regionalism versus centralism forever, *Secret Nation* transcends regionalism by drolly giving voice to one region's long-sublimated "national" status. (The film's frequent allusions to Quebec are no coincidence.) And yet the film is far too sophisticated to offer up any comfort for the afflicted or proffer any easy answers. Instead, it offers a rare and haunting view of Canada's tenth province as a nation *manqué*.

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Reviewed by Jane Perdue

Legal Memory

Written, directed and produced by Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak, with Lisa Steele, Rosy Frier Dryden, Geoff Naylor and Ed Mitchell. Distributed by V Tape.

■ In 1974, Lisa Steele made her first videotape called *A Very Personal Story*, in which she laments the day, at the age of 15, she came home to discover that

her mother had died. Sitting alone in front of the camera, her poignant tale is an emotional outpouring of that memory. Nearly 20 years later, Steele, with collaborator Kim Tomczak, is still exploring how memory can become the present tense. *Legal Memory* is an 80-minute film that centres on the 1959 trial and execution of a homosexual. Leo Mantha confessed to entering the naval base in Victoria, B.C., and murdering another man. Tomczak plays Mantha, who was actually a distant relative. Steele plays Helen, a cousin who tries to piece together her childhood memories of the trial but fears what will be revealed.

The story unfolds when Helen returns to Victoria and becomes obsessed with reconstructing the events 30 years prior. According to the film, legal memory is "the period of time required for certain customs to attain legal significance, usually 20-to-30 years." A combination of documentary and narrative format reveals a blend of "customs" and attitudes towards the gay community in Victoria and Canada-at-large. This was a time when homosexuals were called "people with disorders."

Archival black-and-white stills and footage from public records and stories

of repeated interrogations by the RCMP are fused with blurred visual and audio childhood memories and whispered family secrets. By the end of the film, Helen recognizes the RCMP's interference in the case through moral judgment and sexual censorship. We are told that while Diefenbaker's cabinet commuted the majority of capital cases, Mantha was not saved because of his sexual orientation. Mantha's death was the last corporal punishment in British Columbia.

Since 1983, Steele and Tomczak have collaborated on videotapes and performances through what they call a "mutual vocabulary" in their analysis of mass media and cultural politics. Their combined talents have been featured in many contemporary art institutes such as their retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1989. Their tapes are constructions—complex layers of traditional narratives and performance art—with unsettling results. In *Legal Memory*, as with their other productions, we are forced to reconsider the moral and political implications of the actions within a traditional society.

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