



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*.

Christopher Harris reports on the arts for the Globe and Mail.

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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