

Death

Cynthia Roberts

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Wish

by Marc Glassman

Roberts's *The Last Supper*

The founder of the National Film Board, John Grierson, used to enjoy recalling to people that natives in the South Seas had been horrified when Robert Flaherty instructed film crews to stage shots of them performing ancient rituals. They felt that the power of these ceremonies might be robbed of their significance and that their souls might be in jeopardy by having images recorded through “godless” cameras. Of course, the great director was able to persuade their elders that this was nonsense. Cameras were mere mechanical devices. Photographed rituals would retain their mystery. After all, this was the twentieth century. But, Grierson would point out, the irony was that the natives might have been right. Even if their souls were not about to be consigned to the Devil, certainly the cinema had more power than Flaherty was willing to admit to the subjects that he chose to shoot.

This cautionary tale is worth recalling when thinking about a new film that unhesitatingly stages events for the camera that are as intense to watch as they are difficult to process and comprehend. Cynthia Roberts's *The Last Supper* is a powerful addition to the growing body of art devoted to AIDS. The subject of her drama, Chris (played by Ken McDougall), is terminally ill. A former dancer, he has convinced his doctor, Parthens (Daniel MacIvor), to aid him in ending his painful days. With Val (Jack

Nicholsen), his lover, by his side, Chris creates the rituals that will close his life. Everything—the wine, the reminiscences, the music, the beautifully prepared food—is choreographed with the care worthy of a meticulous artist. With the camera never leaving the room, the audience watches, implicated in the closing moments of an extraordinary life.

If the production of *The Last Supper* was simply that: a drama played out, seemingly in real time, with fine performances by all of the principal actors, it would already be controversial due to its implicit advocacy of euthanasia. What gives the film its immense power, but also raises an even greater moral dilemma, is the circumstances under which this adaptation of Hillar Liitoja's play was



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shot. The lead, Ken McDougall, was literally dying of the same disease as Chris, the character he is playing in the film, as Roberts's movie was being made.

The Last Supper transgresses the terrain that normally exists between documentary and drama. Like Flaherty's *South Sea natives*, the audience has to wonder whether something blasphemous or something metaphysical has taken place. After seeing this tremendously moving but morally complex film, one is left pondering how much of what appears on the screen is fictional and how much was truly taking place.

The filmmakers who created

The Last Supper are remarkably sanguine about their project. Probably it is because director Cynthia Roberts and her producer/husband, Greg Klymkiw, have been involved, individually and as a team, in a slew of maverick productions in the past few years. Klymkiw was one of the prime forces in the Winnipeg Film Group when that entity was producing marvelously expressionistic black comic features and shorts in the mid to late eighties. He produced ma-

Roberts recalls that "when Greg and I went to the opening night production of *The Last Supper*, we were immediately struck by how poignant the play was—telling the tale of two people who love each other and how they face the death of one of them together. It was then that Greg said, "This is a movie." That was October of 1993; within a few weeks, Klymkiw and Roberts convinced Liitoja and McDougall that they could do a cinematic adaptation of the play.

Klymkiw, Roberts and Liitoja each took turns working on a script which would transfer the essence of the play into a film. A fairly lengthy play, *The Last Supper* has been trimmed to a 90-minute running time for film. Although the char-

ny of the films of Guy Maddin, whose dream-like narratives—*Tales from the Gimli Hospital*, *Archangel* and *Careful*—constitute a unique *oeuvre* in the history of Canadian cinema. The youthful Roberts had already directed an acclaimed short, *Samsara: The Case of Carp 23*, a wildly surreal comedy involving the love lives of people and fish, and a feature, *Jack of Hearts*, a self-styled "Christian Horror film," before embarking on *The Last Supper*. Neither Klymkiw nor Roberts has ever had a big budget or an obviously commercial property as a jumping off point when considering a new feature. And they did not have one here, either.

Roberts and Klymkiw are aficionados of Hillar Liitoja's creation- and environment-based work. In Liitoja's production, the audience sat in the wings of Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille's Backspace while the dying man's room was set up right next to them. With the enforced intimacy came the possibility for the public to interact with Chris's last environment, his room. The visual possibilities created by this rigorously constrained venue excited Klymkiw.

acters of the grandiloquent Chris and the rather passive Val have remained unchanged, the pivotal role of Dr. Parthens has been hardened in order to create some distance between himself and the doomed couple. As played by the multi-talented Daniel MacIvor, Parthens now is a repressed liberal, cautiously entering the theatrical world of Chris and Val. He has become a stand-in for the audience: like them, he has to come to terms with the reasons for Chris's decision to end his life.

Visual decisions for the film were



made by Roberts, who created story boards for each scene in *The Last Supper*. She resisted the urge to open up Hillar Liitoja's award-winning play at all. Harald Bachman's hand-held camera sticks to Chris in his sick room throughout the film. The sense of loss is made all the more palpable by Roberts's decision to "let darkness and shadowy images on the borders of the frame cover and create ever-new and shifting references and boundaries of our vision."

One gets the sense of how Klymkiw and Roberts operate as a partnership as they describe their roles in creating *The Last Supper*. A producer-writer, Klymkiw prefers to work with people whom he defines as filmmakers. "They can write, shoot, art-direct, direct, and cut their own pictures if they have to because they have a vision that is strong and clear. It's something I look for in people. Cynthia has it, Guy Maddin has it, and so does John Paizs."

There's a lot of respect in the relationship that Klymkiw and Roberts have

forged over the past five years. They met at Edmonton's Local Heroes Festival in 1991, where Roberts's *Samsara* was being screened. Klymkiw recalls that "it was her film that did it to me. When I saw it, I thought 'this film is nuts. I need to know the person who made it.' So we met and hit it off from there."

Like a lot of Torontonians, neither Klymkiw nor Roberts is a native of the city. Klymkiw is, of course, from Winnipeg while Roberts is a Montrealer. As a teen-ager, Roberts shot feature-length dramas on black and white reel-to-reel video. She recalls that one of them, called *Klondike*, "was censored. I was dragged into the headmistress's office and told to cut it down because I had prosti-

tutes in it." Her camera operator was Noelle Spotton, the daughter of NFB filmmaker John Spotton. The Spottons encouraged Roberts in her filmmaking career and are still supporters of her work.

Visually and in personality, Klymkiw and Roberts are a study in contrasts. Roberts is blond and bubbly, while Klymkiw is a dark, Hitchcockian figure. The two seem to work effortlessly with each other, constantly deferring to the other one when discussing how the important decisions surrounding *The Last Supper* were made.

One decision seemed inescapable to them—the most controversial one in the project. Although different actors essayed the roles of Dr. Parthens and Val in the play, Roberts and Klymkiw—and, no doubt, Liitoja—could not imagine anyone but Ken McDougall playing the lead, Chris. The problem was, that between the time of the theatrical premiere and the beginning of the shoot, McDougall had become fatally ill. The filmmakers were prepared to abandon the project when McDougall left his hospital where he had been treated with mind-altering drugs and went to the AIDS hospice Casey House. It was there, said Roberts, that he "bolted back and said, 'Well, what's happening? Are we shooting?'"

Using the meagre funds that they had

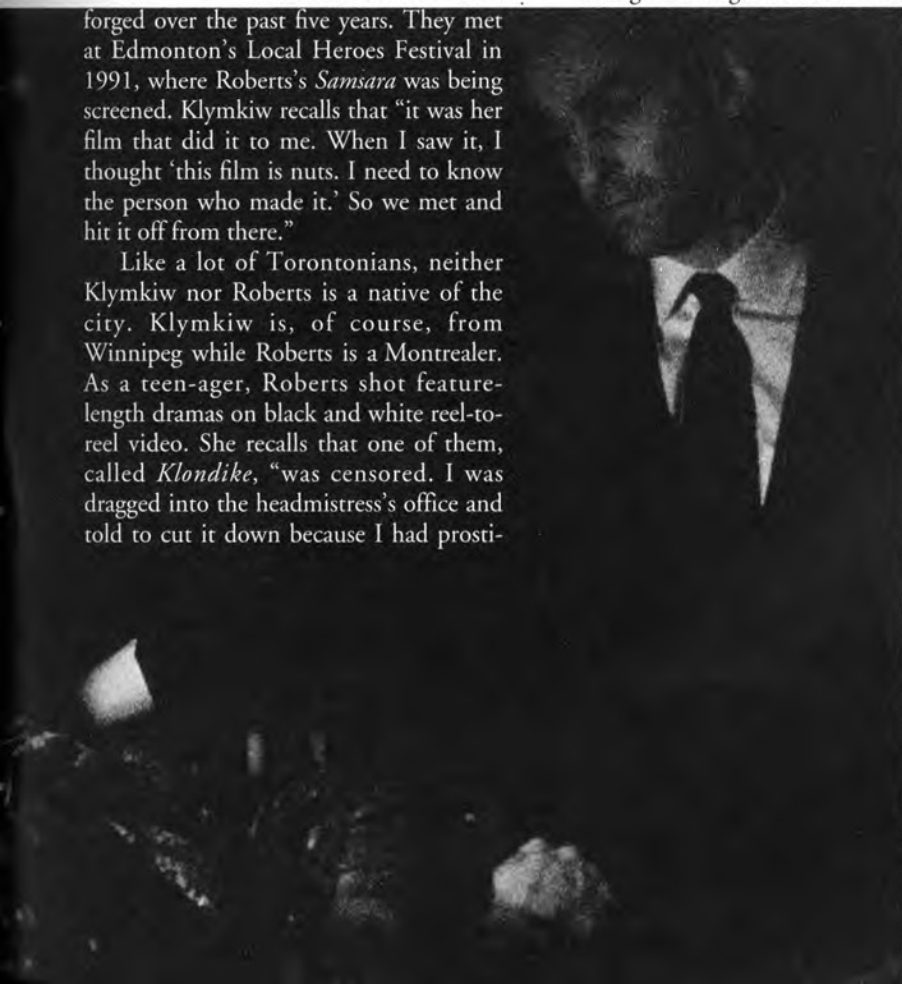
already accessed, Roberts and crew leapt into action. Within days, cast and technical crew were set. Casey House gave approval for filming to take place in the building. The five-day shoot proved to be a very intense experience for all concerned. "In many ways," comments Roberts, "the film crossed over between drama and reality. Ken, like his character Chris, surrounded himself with beauty and all the things he loved in life, thinking that those things would propel him throughout time after his death.... Chris's last supper was literally the last meal Ken ever ate."

So how does Roberts react to the question: where does the drama end and the documentary begin in *The Last Supper*? "It's a funny thing because there is so much reality in the movie. It seems like a documentary but it is a drama.... Some people actually think that Ken killed himself in the movie! But Ken was performing all the time. Chris and Ken were very different characters. The voice Ken uses in the film is something he made up for the part." Discreetly responding to accusations that the film might be espousing euthanasia, she points out, "Ken really willed himself to live to finish the shooting of the film."

McDougall is brilliant, dominating every scene in what can only be called the performance of a lifetime. As the dying choreographer, he has a scene where he must dance a farewell to Val, his long-time companion, and Dr. Parthens. Unable to leave his bed, McDougall suggests all the pathos and beauty of the ending of a life well lived through an expressive use of his hands and face.

Where does *The Last Supper* derive its strength to move us? Even though McDougall was playing a part, the audience can't help but feel the bravado of a dying man's swan song in his performance. Roberts recalls that "Ken's whole room was set-dressed [for the film]. Fresh flowers were brought in every day and Ken was surrounded by his very dearest friends. Shooting the film, there were many happy moments but it was also very tragic. Sometimes you didn't know whether to laugh or cry." In shooting this film, the rituals of filmmaking and dying were allowed to intersect. The results were, as Flaherty's South Sea natives might have expected, very powerful indeed ●

ormally exists



top left: director CYNTHIA ROBERTS; left: JACK NICHOLSEN, KEN MCDUGALL and DANIEL MACIVOR. "Ken willed himself to live to finish the shooting of the film."

PHOTOGRAPH OF CYNTHIA ROBERTS BY HARALD BACHMANN