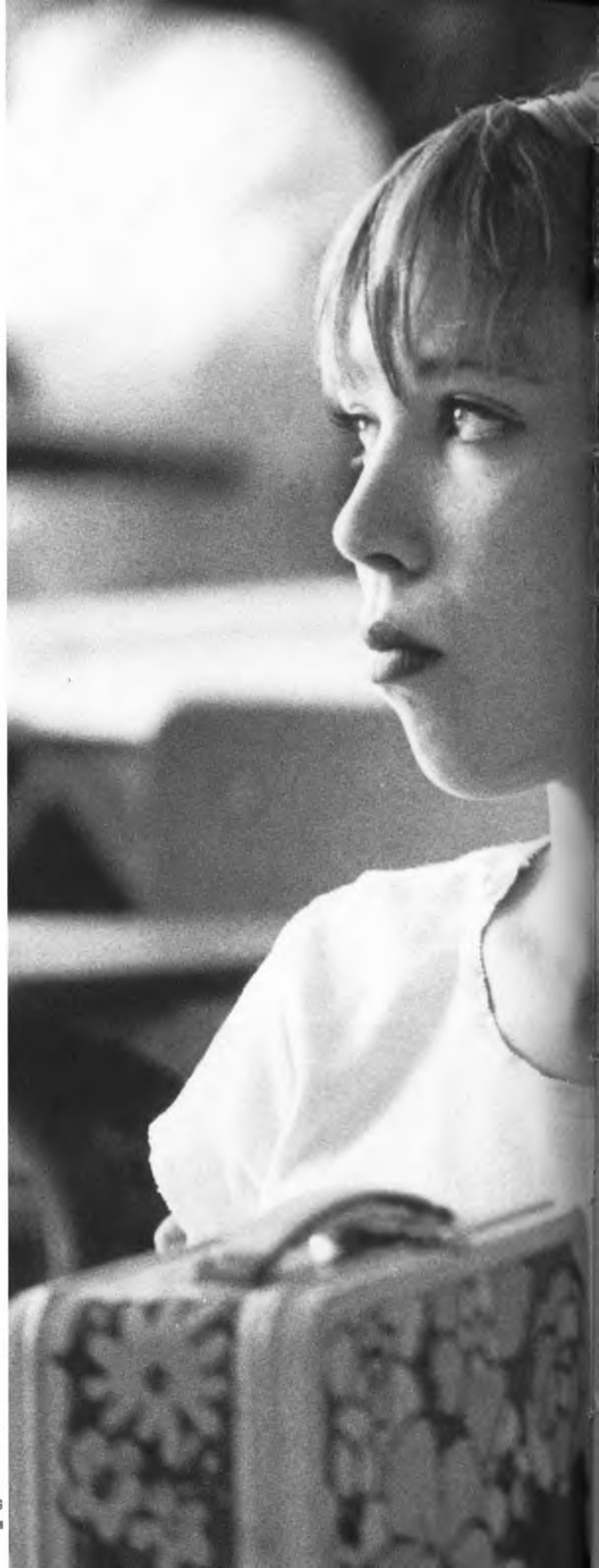


BY TOM PERLMUTTER

Tough Assignment is a feature-length documentary produced by the National Film Board of Canada in co-production with Orbit Films and in association with TVOntario. I produced it for Orbit Films, Adam Symansky for the NFB. John Walker directed. Rudy Buttignol commissioned it for TVOntario. The film's first public screening was at the Capitol Theatre in Toronto on March 6, 1996. Its first broadcast was March 20. The following is a somewhat idiosyncratic account of the thinking that went into the planning and making of the film.

All photos: Vincenzo Perrepaolo



DOCUMENTARY



Tough Assignment

A Film by John Walker



John Walker is a filmmaker who has a direct and intimate relationship with his camera.

For some time I had been wanting to produce a film about teachers. I had been discussing the idea with John Walker and Adam Symansky at the National Film Board. Whenever we ran into each other, I would bring up teachers, and we would launch into an anecdotal analysis of teaching. Educational issues were constantly making headline news. There was violence in the schools. The Ontario government had launched a Royal Commission on Learning as the first step in a radical revamping of the Ontario school system. High schools were being destreamed. Schools were being urged to forge closer ties with business. We seemed to be at a fundamental crossroads about the nature and value of formal education. There was a lot of material to make a film about. Yet, none of us was interested in an essay or issue film.

What we kept coming back to in our talks were stories of teachers who transformed lives. Teachers not as institutional child caretakers, but teachers in a larger, more profound sense, mentors of the soul who opened up new worlds for their students. We each had stories and memories of encounters with at least one such person during the long years of our formal education. We wondered if we could find that kind of teacher in the institutional settings of today. And could we find a way of creating a convincing film of our exploration of that terrain where teaching meets education?

Obviously, film is not the best vehicle to provide either a theoretical or analytical discourse on education. Film works best in a Wordsworthian way—emotion recollected in tranquillity—but with a twist which goes something like this: Wordsworth recalls a visit to Tintern Abbey and the range of emotions it gives rise to, from which he constructs his poem. The filmmaker constructs his/her film in the moment of engagement with the site that sparks the emotional resonance. Without that resonance there is no voyage to undertake; what will be filmed will remain flat, unconvincing, a kind of Sunday painter's landscape. Without a resonance for the filmmaker there is no resonance for the audience who, in viewing the film months or years later, undertakes again the voyage the filmmaker has taken, which remains fresh and vital because it is shot with and through an emotional intensity and honesty.

I knew that something of that kind was happening when we stepped into the schools we were visiting. John, and he kept coming back to this, was reexperiencing his own high school days. Things were stirring. There was a questioning of himself and his own experience with teachers and later that became, in some fashion, translated into the film.

We thought that we could find a film in the lives of teachers. The Film Board was already engaged in a school film. Paul Cowan had started to follow the lives of a group of students entering high school in Montreal. There was some discussion of doing a kind of *7 UP*, with Paul following those kids right through their high school career. At the same time we were proposing our film. It was clear that we had two very different films in mind. One would be very much from the point of view of students; the other very much an immersion into the lives of teachers. The Film Board decided that the films would complement each other. Rudy Buttignol at TVOntario also believed that there was a film in teachers. (Later he would buy and broadcast Cowan's *Lessons*.) He quickly became involved in our discussions of where to go with the film. The first fundamental question we had to resolve was what kind of teachers to film.

My deep interest in the subject came from spending years with one of the most brilliant primary school teachers in the country. I spent much time in her classroom, and even more time listening to how this teacher was always, in and out of the classroom, involved in and thinking about teaching. Teaching was about life itself. I saw what it meant in the classroom: amazing transformations of young children, whose minds and senses and bodies were growing, being honed, sharpened in spectacular ways. I envisaged filming in a junior school setting and the film as a kind of nature film. The director would have the sensibility of a wildlife filmmaker, the patience, the observational capacity, the empathetic and intuitive blending into the rhythms of what at that age seems like a natural cycle and which does follow the natural rhythms of nature: autumn, school starts; winter in the deep heart of the school year; spring and the fruition of the school year. It was not to be.

Adam was skeptical. Rudy was skeptical. John was skeptical. It seemed too soft, lacked immediate dramatic focus. High schools were in the news. Adolescents are mouthier; high school teachers more harassed. Committing to a year in the life of a school with no guarantee of a story on which to base a film was risky enough; we

felt we should try and reduce the odds against us. O.K. It was going to be a high school. Where? What kind of high school? Our very able researcher, Elizabeth Klinck, set to work. What we were trying to do was create a situation that helped the film. Because what we were going after seemed so intangible, we wanted as much tangibility as possible.

We saw urban schools, suburban schools, rural schools. We looked at collegiates, secondary schools and alternative schools. We had long debates about the profile of the proposed school. Inner city with a diverse ethnic mix or a more homogeneous rural school? Which was going to be more representative? Did we want to be representative? What could that mean? No school could stand for any other. No small group of teachers for the range of teachers. We weren't doing a study. It was, and is, a year in the lives of a particular group of teachers at a particular school at a particular point in time. We had to cast our characters, but with our underlying premise intact: teachers who made a difference.

As part of our research we brought together groups of high school students and had long open-ended rap sessions with them. What makes a good teacher? we asked. Across the whole range of schools, with every type of student imaginable, we heard the same response. It didn't matter what the teacher's style of teaching was—the teacher could be formal and severe or cool and with it—the one thing all students responded to was respect. If the teachers respected the kids, the kids were ready to respect back and to create at least some space for learning.

We finally settled on Oakwood Collegiate in the western part of Toronto with some 1,200 students and over 80 teachers. It is in a largely Italian neighbour-

hood, but the student population is enormously diverse, with more than 40 languages spoken. The classrooms are mini-United Nations with just about all races and religions represented. The school had had a somewhat troubled past with a succession of four principals in the past five years. In October, after we had started shooting, the principal announced he was retiring at Christmas. At the same time, there was talk of a strike by the supply teachers. The Board of Education was demanding more for less money and teachers were wondering how they would survive the year. At this point, John was on his own. He was going back to school, and we all wondered if he would survive.

John is a filmmaker who has a direct and intimate relationship with his camera. He has shot close to 50 films and is uncomfortable leaving the "seeing" to anyone else. In his previous films a sense of history has played a part in the film's structure. *Chambers: Tracks and Gestures* was an intimate portrait of the artist Jack Chambers who had died of leukemia. *Strand: Under the Dark Cloth* was his personal exploration of the work of one of the great photographers of this century. He subsequently shot and directed *Leningradskaya—A Village in Southern Russia* and *Leningrad* for the BBC's three-part series, *The Hand of Stalin*.



The first fundamental question we had was what kind of teachers to film.

His most recent films, *Hidden Children*, *Orphans of Manchuria* and *Place of the Boss*, have all dealt with the trauma of individuals caught up in events of the past. While *Distress Signals* was an essay on the cultural impact of the globalization of American television, *Tough Assignment* was John's first extended foray into *verité* filmmaking.

Recently, I sat down with John to do a kind of post-mortem on *Tough Assignment* and reflect on the nature of *verité*.

Q: We had found the high school. Now you were going to live there for a year. What were the principle things you were facing as you went in there?

John: A lot of my films have been highly structured. When you're making a biography, you have the person's life as your structure. Or you're doing an oral history of the Stalinist period. It's already lived, so it's a retelling of history. A lot of my films are retelling of events in the past that have an impact on the lives of the subjects in the film.

This is a film that exists in the future.

Q: How do you deal with that?

John: An interesting process of change took place during the year. The first day was easy. Everything was chaos. I love chaos: shoot everything. When I went in the following week fear set in because there was so much going on. I honestly didn't know where to start. Also, I found that when I walked into the classroom I changed the dynamics of the classroom. That was one of the most difficult things about this film. The intimacy that the teacher has with the class occurs when they close that door and he or she is in there alone, on stage, with their 30 kids who are hungry for whatever. Hungry to get out of there, or to learn something, or physically

hungry because they want to go for lunch. I walk in with the camera and it changes that intimacy. I thought I'm going to be in big trouble here because teaching happens in the classroom and I'm not going to get anything in the classroom.

Q: How did you deal with that?

John: A lot of times I would go in and sit in classrooms without the camera. I was observing the teachers. We didn't precast who our characters would be and I was still finding characters. I spent a lot of time studying teachers, trying to understand characters, so I could know what I was doing, and get a sense of the pace of their lives. Finally, I realized that when you walk in you may be the most interesting thing in that classroom, but you're waiting for those moments when the dynamic that's going on in the classroom transcends their interest in you and the camera. I had no agenda. I kept trying to remove any potential agendas, like should I be dealing with issues of racism? I'd say, no. This is not an issue film. Whatever comes up and whatever I see I'll respond to. If racism comes up in the school, and it's in front of the cameras, I'll film it. I'm not going to go looking.

“As a teen-ager I was anti-teacher. Teachers were the enemy. I kept struggling with what should be with the teachers.”

John Walker



Q: That raises interesting questions about the nature of making a *verité* film. What you're suggesting is that you were in Oakwood as a *tabula rasa* on which events inscribed themselves on you, the seeing eye, a blank eye which recorded everything that happened, reality as it is.

John: Not really. Being middle-aged, as I am, walking into a high school with a camera, you cannot escape your own high school experience. So, I went in with all the feelings of a teen-ager; it was like a dream, going back in time. But with the knowledge and awareness of an adult. For the first several months, I was reliving my high school days.

Q: What were your emotions in reliving the past and how did that affect how you were seeing and filming?

John: It was quite problematic, because as a teen-ager I was anti-teacher. Teachers and the administration were the enemy. I kept struggling with my allegiance because my allegiance should be with the teachers. This is, after all, a film about the teachers. I'd be sitting in the classroom for days without the camera and I'd be thinking: What am I doing here? What kind of film am I going to make here? I never stopped thinking about it for a moment.

Q: What kind of answers did you come up with?

John: Well, it was like I was relearning. I often wanted to raise my hand and say I know the answer to a question. Or make a joke. It was so tempting to make a joke, to be the joker that I was in high school. That's the unique process of *verité*. It's more about being there than about filming. The film is not objective. It's very subjective.

Q: Except an audience doesn't see it as a subjective film. From what has been a very intense, personal experience for you, whose seeing eye creates the film, it becomes objectified on the screen for the audience. Why not have that personal voice declare itself, become part of the filmic process? The "I" that is the eye.

John: You mean verbalize it? A lot of my life is experiencing life without dialogue. Observing and thinking.

Q: In terms of the audience, which walks away thinking they have seen a film about real life in a Toronto school and not a subjective experience, don't you end up, to borrow the title of an earlier film of yours, "under the dark cloth"?

John: It's true of any art. Look at a court painting by Holbein. We look at those court paintings and see Henry VIII and his court. But when you look closely at those characters—the twitch in their eye, the way they're sitting—you see the artist in all portraiture, in all



Teachers and the administration my allegiance because my allegiance



"It is a film in which I consciously threw out any desire for an aesthetic. I went more for roughness." John Walker

art. You can look at a painting and see the thing or the person, but you can look beyond and see the artist. Documentary is the same. There is an objective reality. There is a teacher teaching, but there is also a human being behind the camera responding to that teacher teaching. There's various degrees of how a filmmaker wants to guide his or her audience. This film is more observational; different people will have different responses.

Q: You're noted for shooting in a particular kind of way. Were you conscious of trying to get a particular look?

John: No, quite the opposite. It is a film in which, if anything, I consciously threw out any desire for an aesthetic. I went more for roughness. It was nearly all hand-held. I wanted to be loose and not to think very much. Just feel. Not think. In *verité* you have to respond to the human dynamic. You have to start rolling before an event happens. You're constantly attuning

your instincts. It got easier to do later as I got to know the school. For example, I observed that a certain classroom was a tough classroom, that something would happen there. And sure enough it did. At the beginning you don't know the dynamics. You shoot a lot of boring stuff.

Q: Over the course of the year, one of the things I became aware of was the degree to which you were becoming integrated into the school.

John: When I went in after Christmas it was totally different. I was part of the community. Teachers kept coming to me, telling me things. I was an outsider but I was trusted. I had to be very careful. I couldn't talk about their colleagues. I couldn't talk about any of the people I was filming with anyone else. I had to keep my mouth shut. I had to be friendly but keep my distance. That was sort of a problem. When I'd go in without the camera, it would be, "Hi, John." I'd sit in lunch rooms and staff rooms and talk about stuff. I was just a person. When I came in with the camera, I had to tell them, "don't talk to me, I'm just observing here." It was a bit of a distraction, because they'd be talking to me while I was shooting. I ended up doing interviews in a manner I had never done before. I would talk to them with the camera

at one eye and the other eye open to them. You could only do that with people who knew you and trusted you. I was the man with the camera. So, the later interviews were just dialogues and the camera happened to be rolling.

Q: Eventually, you built up that trust. Did that pose a problem at the other end? Did you feel hindered in what material you could use by the responsibility you felt for these people and the trust they had given you?

John: In general terms, I'm not interested in making films that make people look bad. It's not an exposé. I felt I had a responsibility to reflect in a fair way the place I was spending a year. That's why it's impossible to make a film about Oakwood. It's an institution. There's so much going on there. You can't do it in an hour. *Tough Assignment* is a portrait, a slice of life. ■