

Britannia Rules Cannes

By Gerald Pratley

The dominant nation at Cannes this year was Britain, with five films of enormous impact: Mike Leigh's *Naked*, Stephen Frears' *The Snapper*, Ken Loach's *Raining Stones*, Peter Greenaway's *The Baby from Magon*, and Chris Newby's *Anchoress*. Additional market screenings of Channel Four, the BBC and BFI films made an impressive contribution. Canada, regretfully, with its five new films at Cannes, *La Florida*, *Ganesh* (now *Ordinary Magic*), *Cold Sweat*, *I Love a Man in Uniform*, and *Requiem pour un beau sans coeur*, made little impact.

Last year, in the first issue of *Take One*, I wrote about the success of Terence Davies' *The Long Day Closes* at Cannes. This year, he was followed by the down-to-earth, Loach-Leigh realist group in the company of Stephen Frears. One does not at first link Frears with the two other filmmakers. Yet, his work reflects similar values and personalities of working class life filmed with the characteristic poetry of documentary realism, the roots of which date to the pre-war Grierson.

Here the screen lives with the despair of unemployment. But there are happier moments and humour to lighten the grim realities of domestic life. The laughter is touched with sadness, the kindness marred by the cruelty of poverty, and the individuals speak with accents sometimes difficult to decipher. The daily conflicts are honest and real as far as these qualities can be made to convey a semblance of living. Finding the money to exist is a constant theme. In *Naked*, Mike Leigh (who won the Best Director Award) has turned a corner into a dark and brooding drama set in a lonely London, about an intelligent but rootless man. Sometimes he is witty, certainly not likeable, but nevertheless understandable. Seemingly with little purpose in life, he abuses women horribly and is condemned to a life without hope. This is an amazing performance

by David Thewlis, winning him the Best Actor Award. It is a film many will dislike, yet, as Leigh said at his press conference, "My feelings about it are as ambivalent as my feelings about our chaotic late twentieth-century world, as ambivalent as the film itself, as compassionate as it is loathsome, and as responsible as it is anarchic."

Ken Loach's *Raining Stones* (Special Jury Award) brings together many of the team responsible for *Riff-Raff*, voted European Film of the Year in 1991. "Will this film be *Riff-Raff* two?" Loach is asked. "No. Firstly there's a different writer (Jim Allen). *Riff-Raff* was set in London, *Raining Stones* in Manchester. Each region in the U.K. has a certain individuality, its own accent and slang. The fundamental problems are the same, but I prefer to address them from different angles."

Filmed entirely on a council estate in the north of England, *Raining Stones* is the funny, desperate story of the Williams family. The father is on the dole and does all kind of odd jobs to keep the family fed. Now his old van has

been stolen, and his daughter needs the traditional white dress for her communion. He has no idea where the money is to come from. "Yes, the theme is alienation and unemployment," says Loach. "You've seen this area? It's depressing, the architecture is ugly, the people have no money. What interested me about Jim's screenplay was the strength and depth of the characters involved. They have an amazing vitality."

Loach is praised for carrying on his personal battle against a government "that has declared war on the working class." Is he the only one left of the "angry young men" of the sixties? "No, I never really believed in what they were doing. Working class was just the backdrop, but they were never really angry enough."

Religion is also a factor in Stephen Frears' *The Snapper*, written by Roddy Doyle, the author of *The Commitments*. "When I heard that Alan Parker was filming *The Commitments*," said Frears, "a shaft of jealousy ran through me. I knew it was bound to be good, and it was." Doyle continues his family chronicle



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cle. This time the cheerful, noisy, close Irish home is shocked when the unmarried daughter announces she is pregnant and refuses to name the father.

"Alan had all the music," said Frears, "but my gold mine was Roddy's words. When you're making a film about a particular world it's important to understand that world. *The Snapper* forced me to deal with my own mixed feelings about the Irish. I went to Dublin, where we filmed everything. I met them, understood them. They were wonderful." Why did Frears choose not to accept another Hollywood movie after *Grifters* and *Hero*?

"I only do things I like and believe in. That sounds spoiled; what I mean is that I only accept screenplays that capture my imagination. I go where the work is, and there's not much of that in Britain today. Scripts as good as *The Snapper* are very hard to find."

Every projection of *Naked*, *Raining Stones* and *The Snapper* received enormous audience acclaim at Cannes. •

Gerald Pratley is a freelance writer, film critic and teaches film studies at Ryerson.

**David
Thewlis in
Naked**

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