

Clement Virgo's THE PLANET OF JUNIOR BROWN



Photos by Sharon Stephens, courtesy of The Film Works.

by Marc Glassman

Maybe MBanx or that former balladeer of the Woodstock generation, Bob Dylan, have it right and “the times, they are a’changin’.” Imagine this scenario: CBC-TV green-lighting a film on multiracial street kids that isn’t a documentary or a reality-based drama; add to the mix The Film Works (co-producers on *The Arrow* miniseries) which hires Clement Virgo, known for such edgy, adult fare as *Save My Lost Nigga*, *Soul* and *Rude*; then ask him to adapt an award-winning children’s book and when he decides he needs a writing partner, allow him to work with first-time scenarist Cameron Bailey (film critic for *Now*); make the story dependent on casting a 350-pound black kid to play the lead character; have the emotional core of the story be the friendship between Junior (an isolated piano-playing prodigy) and a homeless boy, Buddy Clark; then have the CBC schedule the production as a special for the winter holiday season.

Sound like a recipe for disaster? It could have ended up that way but, in a nice endorsement for risk-taking, the results are just fine. *The Planet of Junior Brown* is a moody, atmospheric film fully in keeping with Virgo’s previous work. The lives of a funky crew of downtown Toronto teenagers are dramatized with empathy and compassion. Their differing methods for coping in a tough world form the core of the piece. Instead of a gritty look, fantastic decor is featured in several significant scenes, reinforcing a central tenet of the film, that dreamers can be survivors. The script and direction work wonders at evoking the close relationship between the film’s main protagonists, Junior and Buddy. More than most films made in the independent sector and intended mainly for broadcast, one is struck by the emotional power of some of the scenes in *Junior Brown*. One ends up caring about the characters, particularly Buddy, his girlfriend Butter and Junior.

Much of the philosophy and the characterizations in *The Planet of Junior Brown* come from Virginia Hamilton’s multi-award-winning novel. Written in 1971, it received numerous accolades, most notably the Newberry Medal, annually given for the finest contribution to children’s literature. It was Hamilton who created the idea of the “planets,” places where homeless street kids could go. She invested passion and strength in the devoted friendship between Buddy and Junior. But most of all, she imagined Junior Brown, a huge mass of contrariness and artistic prowess.

Devoted to a mother who uses her illness (diabetes in the film; asthma in the book) to control him, Junior would love to express his individuality through art. He is a fine pianist and a talented painter but due to the awful limitations of his mother’s perceptions and the madness of his piano teacher, Miss Peebs, he is denied a true chance to paint or play. Forced to practise on a piano whose strings have been cut by his mother, Junior insulates himself through layers of fat. In a gesture of pure nihilism, he and Buddy cut their classes for months, choosing to spend time instead with Mr. Pool, a former teacher who has lost his faith in the school system and the general human condition.

In the basement of the very school that they have chosen not to attend, Buddy and Junior have their own lessons with Mr. Pool. It is here that Buddy and Mr. Pool make a planet for Junior Brown, “a stupendous mass in a brand new solar system.” Hamilton is a fine writer of dialogue—the script incorporates chunks of it verbatim—and her descriptions are superb. Here is Junior confronting the nightmare of what has happened to Miss Peebs’s piano: “The rich mahogany surface had been gouged with some dangerously sharp tool and marked by blows the size of hammer heads. A cup of coffee



From left: Rainbow Sun Francks as "Buddy," Martin Villafana as "Junior."

This page: Lynn Whitfield as "Mrs. Brown"; Nicole Hardy and Warren Bennis.

had broken over the black keys, spilling liquid onto the piano bench. The coffee mess had dried the colour of turkey gravy on the ivories." Ostensibly easy, adapting Hamilton's prose and general aesthetic sensibility to the screen provided its own set of challenges.

It was Paul Stephens, a principal at The Film Works, and one of the producers of *The Planet of Junior Brown*, who initially read Hamilton's novel at the behest of a musician friend. Impressed by the writing and feeling that the main character's plight would translate into cinema, Stephens acquired the book. In tandem with partner Eric Jordan, Stephens commissioned Virgo to write and direct the project. The dilemma that confronted Clement Virgo, and Cameron Bailey after he was brought on to the film, was how to update the story without losing its social framework. Both were impressed with the heart of the novel, the near kinship between Junior Brown and Buddy Clark. Although Junior Brown's situation is timeless due to his cloistered existence, Buddy Clark has to operate in the public sphere. As Bailey notes, "A street kid in New York in 1971 is very different from a street kid in Toronto in 1997. It all had to change. How Buddy dealt with other kids, how the planets operated."

Bailey and Virgo moved the location of Junior's and Buddy's story from Harlem to Toronto. "It made it more immediate for us," says Virgo. "Cameron and I grew up in Toronto. We would have been self-conscious [if the film had been set in New York]. I also don't think it would have been appropriate for the CBC to make the film outside of Canada." By placing the action in Toronto, a multiracial community of kids was created, replacing the exclusively black characters from the book. The film draws its players from Japanese, Anglo, Jamaican and non-Jamaican black groups.

In general, the contemporary urban environment is much more harsh than it was 25 years ago, especially for kids. Crack has replaced heroin as the drug of choice on the street. Panhandlers, sex hustlers, drug dealers and, yes, squeegee kids are an obvious presence in every major North American city. Child abuse, rarely mentioned a generation ago, has come out in the open. When Hamilton wrote her book, it was possible to imagine havens for homeless kids being run by benevolent adolescents. In the book, Buddy Clark is such a





Clarke Johnson as "Mr. Pool" with Villafana and Francks. Virgo made it his goal "to capture the emotional reality of life on the streets."

character, a "Tomorrow Billy," able to protect other kids and teach them right from wrong. Even though they are poverty stricken, Hamilton's "Tomorrow Billys" didn't even steal!

Virgo and Bailey reimagined Buddy as a flawed, 1990s character. Given the chance to protect two new kids, a girl and her brother, Buddy refuses and passes them on to Duckie, a Jamaican-Canadian who was his mentor. Though Virgo is careful not to pass judgment on the Jamaican—"he has his own code...but he is brutal"—it is clear that Duckie's planet does allow for sexually aggressive behaviour. For Buddy, sex should never be about power. In a major change, Bailey and Virgo created a lover for Buddy, an abused white girl named Butter. As played by Rainbow Sun Francks (veteran Don Francks's son in a strong debut) and Sarah Polley, the chemistry between Buddy and Butter works astonishingly well. Says Virgo, "Something clicked. All those moments between Buddy and Butter are very intimate. There's a subtext about trust; all those scenes I really love."

The film makes more explicit than the book the dynamics behind Junior's difficult relationship with his mother. In a spare, cruel scene, in which Junior's absent father shows up to give Christmas presents to Mrs. Brown and their son, it becomes clear that the boy is illegitimate. Clearly, this is a reason for Junior's mother's misdirected rage toward his piano playing. "The image of her cutting the strings is so violent. Just to play a keyboard and not to hear anything is so chilling," comments Virgo. More intriguingly, the sexual tension between mother and son is dramatized in a way that might well surprise Hamilton. In an early scene, Mrs. Brown returns from work and asks Junior to give her an insulin shot in her stomach. She has to partially undress and lie down on the couch so that Junior can lean over her and shoot "sugar" in her belly. Casting the beautiful Lynn Whitfield as Mrs. Brown opposite Martin Villafana's Junior allows the scene to "play naturally with a lot of sexual tension and energy. We never talked about it openly. If I had asked Lynn and Martin to play it for the sexual element, it would have been self-conscious," allows Virgo.

In *The Planet of Junior Brown*, Clement Virgo made it his goal "to capture the emotional reality of life on the streets." It has made him look at the debates surrounding homelessness, child abuse and street life with a historical perspective. "At the end of the last century, children being abused and abandoned was an important issue in the Victorian era. Now we are reaching the end of the millennium and there's a crisis in every city in North America. After 100 years, we still haven't learned to embrace and care for our own children."

As a filmmaker, Virgo sees *The Planet of Junior Brown* as an opportunity "to develop. If I were an amateur boxer, I'd have to learn how to jab, how to feint, how to roll with the punches before getting my big shot at becoming a champ. It's the same when you are reaching your potential as an artist." Unlike *Rude*, which Virgo admits "was very much about me, *Junior Brown* is not about me. It is about the characters." He pauses. "In independent filmmaking, there is a real movement toward cold, cynical films that don't engage. For me, I have to feel and connect with the characters. I think it's easy to be cool. It's harder to make the choice and try to keep the audience engaged." In *The Planet of Junior Brown*, Virgo has thrown his hat into the ring and taken the chance to be emotional. It's a risky choice but one which should pay dividends in the years to come. ■