

Elimination Dance

Directed and written by Bruce McDonald, Michael Ondaatje and Don McKellar. 9 minutes. 35mm. 1998.

Dreamy and deluxe, this collaborative effort is an absorbing confection of archival images, live-action drama, still photography, spoken word and narration. Deftly stitched into nine rich minutes exploring the seductive and subversive possibilities of dance as social ritual and political powder keg are Ondaatje's allusive and densely layered writing, McKellar's penetrating view of the comic possibilities of social life and McDonald's visually playful film sense. Set in a crowded dance hall where the Iguana Café Orchestra swings and sways, the film revolves around an awkward couple trying to remain on the dance floor while a caller reads out stranger and stranger reasons (e.g., "anyone who has been penetrated by a Mountie") why dancers are to be eliminated from further participation. Tautly constructed and amusingly rendered, the film features the ubiquitous and talented Don McKellar, Tracy Wright as his equally clumsy dancing partner and Michael Turner as the caller. *Elimination Dance* also contains a host of cameo appearances by such figures as Chas Lowther, Carole Pope, Alan Zweig, Valerie Buhagiar, Srivinas Krishna and even, as the end credits report for Ondaatje—philes, Billy the Kid. Smart, stimulating and slightly sinister.



Elimination Dance

Under Chad Valley

Written and directed by Jeff Erbach. 8 minutes. 35mm. 1998.

Following on the promise of his earlier films, *Gavin Frogboy* and *Soft Like Me*, Winnipeg filmmaker Jeff Erbach has delivered another troubling, visually stunning slice (or rather, slices) of very peculiar drama. In a murky, subterranean butchery, obscure tensions grow between two burly butchers as they hack apart slabs of flesh and bone. Witnessing the increasingly gruesome struggle are two odd little girls who, the film suggests but never confirms, may also participate in the action. Sprinkled with arresting optical effects, Erbach's latest film seeks out a poetics of the appalling in a world submerged in death, waste and sonically polluted by the din of industrial groans and creaking metal. While lacking the unsettling clarity and political punch of *Soft Like Me*, *Under Chad Valley* is equally compelling and possibly even more disturbing. Indeed, *Under Chad Valley* is a feast of prairie Grand Guignol which stares unflinchingly at the slimy liquids and solids roiling beneath the surface of human society and human skin. One of the brightest talents at the Winnipeg Film Group, Jeff Erbach continues to dream darkly and, pardon the expression, to carve out a distinctive niche for himself as a film artist.

The Fires of Joanna

Written, directed, and produced by Penny McCann. 42 minutes. 16mm. 1998.

Ottawa filmmaker Penny McCann's elemental Depression era tale of repression and desire is an ambitious and impressive treatment of how a nation founded on "peace, order and good government" crushes the passion of its inhabitants. This is the story of Joanna (again Tracy Wright), an epileptic woman haunted by the deaths of her brother and her mother. Marginalized in her God-fearing community and possessing the power to start fires with her thoughts, Joanna lives with her stern father (Steven Bush) on a farm somewhere, as he puts it, on the "goddamn useless land." Between the church, home, the circus and the cinema, Joanna's insistent dreams and desires are constantly thwarted. Shifting poetically from past to present, McCann weaves themes of guilt, sexual awakening, and gender politics into an often startling narrative of solitude, Canadian style. While not unlike those unforgettable (but considerably more gooey) physical consequences of repression in the films of David Cronenberg, *The Fires of Joanna's* concerns more closely resemble the highly charged erotic and spiritual maelstrom found in Paul Almond's famous trilogy (*Isabel*, *The Act of the Heart*, *Journey*). Despite a few awkward moments, *The Fires of Joanna* is an assured, accomplished film of considerable sensitivity and intelligence. Like its protagonist, it searches courageously for ways to remember, ways to imagine and ways to desire.

Rain, Drizzle and Fog

Written and directed by Rosemary House. 49 minutes. 35mm. 1998.

Exactly 50 years ago and by the slimmest of margins, Newfoundland voted to join that distant configuration known as the Dominion of Canada. As a result, Canada gained St. John's, one of the most vibrant, idiosyncratic, intellectually rich and, alas, meteorologically challenged cities in all of North America. With *Rain, Drizzle and Fog*, Rosemary House, herself a native of the city, offers an engaging and offbeat portrait of the city's harbour, hills, alleys, pubs, and neighbourhoods. Assisting her as tour guides is a remarkable group of artists who hail from the dank and delightful metropolis at the eastern edge of the continent: actors/writers Mary Walsh, Andy Jones and Bryan Hennessy, as well as writers Des Walsh, Ed Riche and others. While rather too indulgent of its guests and disappointingly conventional in its form (especially given House's other formally inventive works such as *When Women Are Crazy*), *Rain, Drizzle and Fog* is nevertheless required viewing for anyone who's ever or never been to what is simultaneously North America's oldest and Canada's youngest major city.