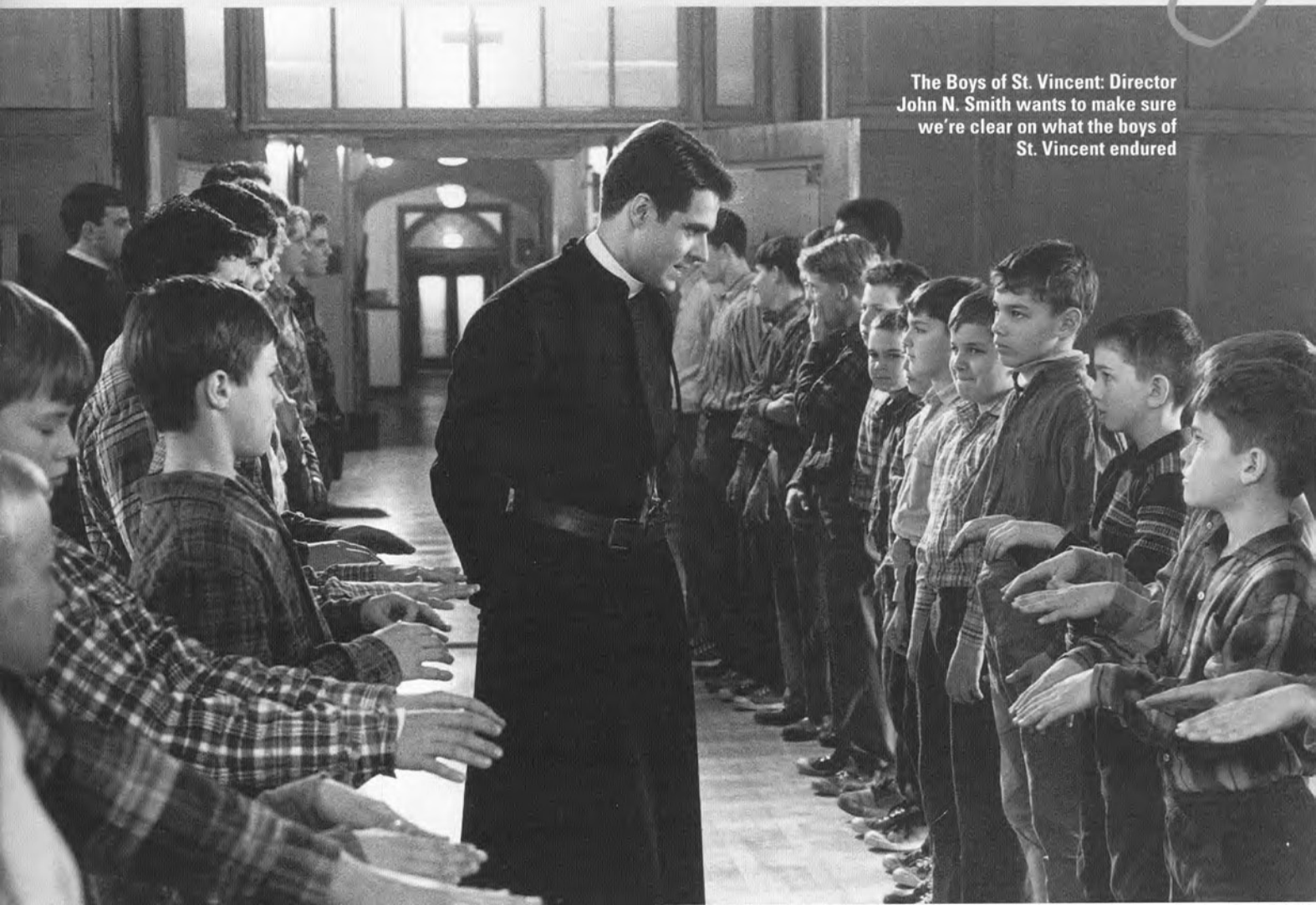


The Boys of St. Vincent

Le sexe des étoiles
Where is Memory

The Boys of St. Vincent: Director John N. Smith wants to make sure we're clear on what the boys of St. Vincent endured



Reviewed by Will Aitken

The Boys of St. Vincent

Directed by John N. Smith, **written by** Des Walsh, John Smith and Sam Grana, **produced by** Sam Grana and Claudio Luca, **executive producers** Claudio Luca and Colin Neale, **with** Henry Czerny, Johnny Morina, Brian Dooley and Brian Dodd. Télé-Action in co-production with the National Film Board of Canada in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corp.

▼ The climax of part one of John N. Smith's *The Boys of St. Vincent* is a sequence not quite five minutes long, in which the boys of a church-run orphanage in Newfoundland in the 1970s arrive at the St. John's police station to make formal statements concerning their long term physical and sexual abuse at the hands of the All Saints Brothers.

As the camera tracks along a row of glass-walled interrogation rooms, we see a series of boys behind glass and hear their voices on the soundtrack: "Sometimes he takes me in his bed and says 'rub me on (my) private part'...He'd be rubbing and kissing and trying to stick it up my bum...Sometimes he wants me to look at him while he's doing it." In the open area next to the interrogation rooms, a dozen or more boys are waiting to tell their stories. An ordinary director might have ended the scene here, discreetly cutting away, leaving the worst to our imagination.

But I think Smith understands that our imaginations are lazy things, unwilling or perhaps only unable to envision the worst for very long. And so he lays it out for us. As an unaccompanied choir sings a Gaelic hymn on the soundtrack, the director cuts between the boys in the waiting room, and their all-too-vivid memories of what has been done to them. We see an All Saints brother bloody a boy's mouth; another brother sodomizing another boy; we see Brother Lavin, the orphanage head, the skirts of his soutane hiked up, being fellated by a third boy. This horrific montage is explicit without being graphic—Smith wants to make sure we're clear on what the boys of St. Vincent endured.

Smith's previous fiction films have always been intriguing, adventuresome projects—"alternative dramas" for the NFB—that began with real social issues and, using improvisation and non-professional casts, took on dramatic structure and intensity. *Sitting in Limbo*

(1986) presented teen-age pregnancy in a Montreal black community; *Train of Dreams* (1987) took on juvenile delinquency; *Welcome to Canada* (1989), boat people-style refugees washing ashore in the Maritimes.

Admirable and carefully crafted as these features were, moving as the performances that Smith elicited from pros and amateurs alike could be, these films in their all-embracing humanism sometimes seemed to skate on the edge of that muffling Canadian tradition—complacency. It was easy to get the sense from those pictures that Smith, like Anne Frank, felt that people are basically good at heart, and that most social problems can be sorted out by well-intentioned people breaking bread together at a long communal table.

In documenting, blending, fictionalizing and dramatizing cases of massive sexual and physical abuse in institutions

abuse issues throughout North America may tend to leave those of us with a lively sense of history unshockable.

What appears to have sustained Smith throughout the making of *The Boys of St. Vincent* is clearly not so much shock as a sense of outrage. Anger runs like a deep molten seam through the movie. The power of that anger comes from the fact that, although Smith continually taps it, he never lets it erupt. Instead, he concentrates on getting the details right, on creating a closed and terrifying world that traps us alone with the boys. The film's surface is impeccable and cold—a look clean enough to eat off, like the high-buffed floors of the orphanage, a place so ordered and inhuman that next to it the St. John's police station looks a cozy, welcoming place.

Over the past decade, sexual abuse has become a hot topic in the made-for-tv movie market, to almost saturation levels. These dramas have run from the sincere to the out-and-out sensationalistic, but they have almost invariably presented abuse as a personal, if highly emo-



Le sexe des étoiles: too genteel and puritanical to ignite real sparks

run by the Catholic church in Newfoundland, Ontario and Western Canada, Smith has at last come into his own as director of passion and commitment. Watching part one of *The Boys of St. Vincent*, it's suddenly clear that a sense of evil was what was missing from his earlier work. I suppose we should be shocked that he had to go to the church in order to find evil, but decades—or worse—of dereliction of duty, outright cover-ups and stone walling on the part of the Catholic hierarchy concerning

tional, issue. Under its harrowing surface, *The Boys of St. Vincent* contrives to be a deeply political movie. Watching the abuse of power in a small provincial orphanage, we also find ourselves thinking of the terror, torture, secrecy, and sexual and physical molestation the world has witnessed in the USSR under Stalin, Chile under Pinochet, of the systematic rape that has gone hand in hand with ethnic cleansing in Bosnia.

Smith never pushes the political, but it's there in the Newfoundland old-boy

network (there's hardly a woman on screen in part one) of police, politicians, business leaders and Catholic prelates, all of whom knew full well what was happening and yet refused to act—the system and the status quo functioned so well, and so profitably, why rock the boat? Part one ends with a scene in which a cheque for the building fund is presented to the orphanage. The camera passes slowly over the smug, glowing faces of the archbishop and various government and community leaders, followed by a series of tight close-ups on to the boys, emphasizing their isolation from the world and from each other, their faces closed, mask-like, pinched and numbed by pain and hopelessness.

These are the faces of prisoners of totalitarian regimes, whether of the organized brutality of the state, the discreet sins of omission and commission of organized religion, or the house-bound depredations of the family next door—the boys of St. Vincent are the prisoners of male power, absolutely held, absolutely corrupt •

Will Aitken is a Montreal film critic and novelist.

Reviewed by Maurie Alioff

Le sexe des étoiles

Directed by Paule Baillargeon, **written by** Monique Proulx, **produced by** Jean-Roch Marcotte and Pierre Gendron, **with** Denis Mercier, Marianne-Coquelicot Mercier, Tobie Pelletier and Sylvie Drapeau. Les Productions du Regard Inc./Bloom Films Inc.

▼ The ad logo for Paule Baillargeon's *Le Sexe des étoiles* shows a band-aid placed horizontally across the nethermost area of a neatly trimmed pubis. This coy attempt at visual wit alludes to one of the movie's principal characters. Marie-Pierre (Denis Mercier) was once Pierre-Henri until, for reasons the film never explores, he opted for a transsexual's definitive commitment to gender re-shaping. During *Le Sexe des étoiles*' evocative, fluidly edited opening, Marie-Pierre has just rolled into Montreal on a bus from New York, dressed in the kind of tasteful outfit favoured by Outremont housewives who clock a lot of hours on bistro terraces. In shots that don't include her face, the character is introduced as an enticingly mysterious figure. Unfortunately, two hours later, you still don't know what Marie-Pierre's got on her mind, or in her heart. Neither Monique Proulx's script (adapted from her own novel), nor the



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