

JOHN GREYSON'S The LAW of Enclosures

Photos: courtesy of Odeon Films

by Cynthia Amsden

John Greyson made his moving-image debut at the age of 16 with a black-and-white, 3/4 inch AV camera rented from the school board at his London, Ont., high school. His impetus was seeded by an art teacher who believed art history began in 1960 with Vito Acconci, a New York-based experimental artist.

It was a piece about his family, and he wrote an "automatic text" in which the length of each line was determined by the size of the page. Family members read the text. It's was a single shot. The text made no sense, but conceptually he was striving for a very formal pose based on a family portrait (the idea sprang from a visit from his grandparents) and the reactions between each person. A normal documentary would watch them interact around a picnic table capturing everyday life. This was a formal set-up divorced from everyday life, catching pieces of humour as they giggle and tease each other, shifting uncomfortably. He is particularly fond of it.

Twenty four years later, Greyson has completed *The Law of Enclosures*, which he coyly labels his mid-life-crisis film. Sitting in the kitchen of his newly acquired Toronto home, he revels in his new-found status as an owner/gatherer, no longer a renter/gatherer. Having transversed his

way through the political hinterland of gay subjects, he concedes that *The Law of Enclosures* is less political than any of his other films. "But it ain't no comedy," he says.

Damon D'Oliveira, producer on *Law* and a strong supporter of Greyson's work (D'Oliveira acted in his *Uncut*) notes, "John, at 40, is at the central point between the two ages of the relationship which *Law* picks up on. So he can look back on his early 20s and forward to his 60s." Most relationship films work their way up to the "happily ever after" stage. *Law* is the "after" segment. "This film picks up on the reality of relationships and how what attracts us about a person at the beginning of a relationship can change very quickly. It's not pretty, but it's fascinating," says D'Oliveira.

Adapted from the novel of the same name by American author Dale Peck, *The Law of Enclosures* is a duet in collapsed time, a marital portrait of Henry and Beatrice. For 40 years they have been stuck in their marriage,



Dianne Ladd with Sean McCann

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stuck in 1991, stuck watching the Gulf War on TV from the moment they meet until the hour of their death. Beatrice (initially played by Sarah Polley and then later by Dianne Ladd) first meets Henry (Brendan Fletcher/Sean McCann) in a check-out line, noticing an egg-shaped tumour at the base of his neck. At first intrigued by his terminal illness, and then entranced, she follows him around the back roads of Sarnia, a petrochemical refinery town perched on the Ontario/Michigan border, ultimately falling in love.

A last-chance operation brings Henry new life, and the two marry. Tragedy averted and their roles of co-dependence eliminated, the marriage carries on for four more decades, withering their respective personalities until husband and wife are alien to each other. While visiting their old friends Myra (Shirley Douglas) and Stan (Victor Cowie), who is dying of cancer, Hank and Bea make one last ditch effort to renew their lives by buying land and building their dream house, hoping to find the dreams to fill it. But Bea falls ill with cancer, ironically reigniting the spark that began their relationship, and together, their original roles reversed, they attempt to repair their love.

Inherent in Peck’s novel, and gleefully enhanced in the screenplay, are the organizing metaphors that are signature Greyson. “The art of the metaphor interests me. All the artists I’m interested in, which is a broad spectrum, share a commitment to formal innovation and innovative structures that are sometimes self-reflexive or bring attention to themselves. When I’m looking for something to adapt, I’m drawn to visually strong things. The metaphors have some sort of life to them that speaks uniquely, but it’s not about being pretty or grand.”

There is a sampling of easy-to-decipher metaphors such as a clock as a representation of stuck time. A deer is Henry, elegant and fated. The location itself, set in Long Island in the book but moved to Sarnia’s Chemical Valley, is an industrial landscape. It is one of the most surreal metaphors and offers a tie-in with the Gulf War. Indeed, war footage is threaded throughout the film—another bit of vintage Greyson. Both Sarnia and the Gulf War are about oil. “The film never goes into it specifically, but there’s a very high rate of cancer in Sarnia. We chose the location and we started thinking about that iconography and spent time there, staring out at those shining pipes gleaming against a blue sky, spewing out perfect clouds of gas and exhaust.”

The embedded metaphors can be found in a deserted water park, a symbol of desolation and loneliness to Greyson. At a more cerebral level are the number games (Greyson used the alphabet for the same purpose in *Uncut*), specifically countdowns. “These play a huge part in the film. We have 11 countdowns. We couldn’t stop. Sometimes they’re very explicit, sometimes buried.”

The Law of Enclosures is very much the film of the book. As Greyson’s fifth feature, it marks the first time he has stepped out of his own storytelling and written an adaptation. D’Oliveira points out that Greyson wanted to make the shift to a more narrative-driven film as well as work on a literary adaptation. He also wanted to do something that wasn’t necessarily gay and this book fit all of the criteria. “It was so much easier,” says the writer/director who requires complete and absolute isolation (defined as no telephone) for his writing process. “The exercise was not about figuring out the story, because it was already there. It was about telling it best.” In the adaptation, he found a kinship with



Sarah Polley with Brendan Fletcher

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Peck’s approach. “Dale is not a kitchen-sink realist. He’s not trying to make a traditionally realistic portrait of the world.” This alignment with the novelist’s intent meant the director used the book as his bible, returning to it whenever questions needed answers.

The one major departure from the original work, however, was the location. In moving the venue, Greyson felt a strong need to assign a new and unambiguous place. “When we moved this to Canada, we didn’t want to make it a generic Anytown, like some filmmakers choose to do. I don’t know how to make films—and I don’t think actors know how to create characters—when I don’t know who the characters are or where they come from.”

This may be the beginning and the end of Greyson’s traditionalistic approach. Known for his “broken-field running” technique, this video artist/filmmaker’s filmography is unique, verging on radical. His early work in the 1980s consists of a multitude of shorts including: *The Perils of Pedagogy*, *The Kipling Trilogy*, *The Jungle Boy*, *You Taste American* and *The Pink Pimpernel*. His first feature, in 1988, was *Urinal* (*Pissoir* for Henry Miller enthusiasts), about Eisenstein, Mishima, Frida Kahlo and other dead artists who are uncannily summoned on a mission to probe the policing of public toilets in Ontario. It garnered the Teddy Award at the Berlin Film Festival.

The Making of “Monsters” (1991), often cited as the favourite of Greyson’s short works, is a highly controversial satire addressing the 1985 murder of a gay man by teens, who were sentenced to less than three years in prison. This was a Canadian Film Centre, 35-minute fictional documentary of a movie-within-a-movie directed by Bertolt Brecht, portrayed

as a catfish ensconced in a bowl. A copyright brouhaha sprung up around Greyson’s rewritten lyrics of Kurt Weill songs (although the 50-year limit comes up this year making those lyrics public). “*Monsters*” won Best Canadian Short at the Toronto Film Festival and at the Berlin Film Festival.

Two years later came *Zero Patience* (1993), a feature-length musical homage to both MGM musicals and music videos about the ghost of Zero—“patient zero,” a flight attendant who allegedly brought HIV to Canada—who materializes and tries to contact old friends. It won Best Canadian Feature Film and was Special Jury Citation at the Toronto Film Festival.

Lilies (1996), was Greyson’s most widely distributed film, which reached across orientation barriers to mainstream audiences. Starring Brent Carver, *Lilies* is a hauntingly lyrical story about a Roman Catholic bishop who makes an unusual visit to a prison to hear a dying inmate’s last confession, then is forced to witness a re-enactment of horrendous events in his life as a teenager. The film won the Genie Award for Best Picture, plus the Audience Award at the Austin Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, Grand Jury Award at L.A. Outfest, Golden Leopard at Locarno Film Fest and the Audience Award at the San Francisco Lesbian & Gay Film Festival.

Uncut (1997), the fourth feature, was shot on video and transferred to film. Visually inventive, and mixed with authentic interviews, it tells the story of three gay men named Peter and three obsessions: circumcision, copyright and Pierre Trudeau. Additionally, Greyson writes and lectures. He published *Urinal and Other Stories*, co-edited *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* with Martha Gever and Pratibha Parmar, and has had more than 50 articles, lectures



Sean McCann

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and reviews appear in various publications. This is complemented by teaching directing, writing and video workshops across Canada, the United States, South Africa and in Cuba.

Renowned as an outspoken gay activist, or as the *San Francisco Examiner* earmarked him, "the cult homosexual filmmaker from Canada," Greyson morphs back and forth across the media boundaries, non-plussed that his work defies classification. "When I started 20 years ago, the film community and the video community were mutually exclusive. Video was primarily coming from a community base and an arts base and felt very disenfranchised from film, and vice versa. The two factions wouldn't talk, wouldn't hang out, wouldn't go to each other's festivals or co-ops. I was one of the weird ones because I joined LIFT (Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto), one of the best co-ops in the country and pretty well every independent filmmaker in the city belonged to it. At the same time I joined Charles Street Video. Today the mediums have become interchangeable, especially in post. We have so much flow back and forth between digital and celluloid and video that all these formats speak to each other now."

The politics of video have evolved in relationship to the politics of celluloid so that now the distinction is between industrial production and independent production. "That's where the real debate should have been from the start. The difference is between an Arts Council documentary or drama where you have a 100 per cent artistic control, and a film like *Law* where you have a lot of cooks in the kitchen. Odeon, our distributor, was very hands-on. They did *Zero Patience* and *Lilies* and they were onboard with *Law* from the third draft. The ongoing history with them is great.

"*Uncut* was *Domino*—a perfect example, because they picked it up for distribution after it was completed. *Uncut* was made 100 per cent with Arts Council money and an award from the Montreal Film Festival. I had no one to answer to but myself and there's an incredible joy in that sort of production. But it's also, by definition, kept at a certain level of distribution."

Moving from video to film is not an either/or proposition for Greyson. He acknowledges that purists would say just

the opposite, but he does not consider himself of the genus. Instead, he indulges in the richness available to him. *Urinal*, was literally half-film/half-video; half on 16mm and half on 3/4 inch video, then transferred to film. Greyson cut it as a film. And that is where he began. All his video drew on references from the history of cinema, grabbing from popular and not-so-popular Hollywood film and porn.

A quirky pivot in Greyson's track record, one which will likely be amplified by press looking for a novel angle, is that *Law* is his first film on straight subject matter. This appears as part of a minor trend among gay filmmakers. Patricia Rozema (*When Night is Falling*) made *Mansfield Park* and American filmmaker Jamie Babbit (*Sleeping Beauties*, *But I'm a Cheerleader*) is currently in production on a heterosexual romantic comedy, *Conjugating Nikki*, for New Line.

"I come out of activist video when I shot AIDS Action Now demos through the late 1980s, early '90s. That was one way to participate, which was to make sure they were on tape. You can't guarantee that people are going to see what you see and that is part of the excitement of making media. Having the hubris to think you can control people's reaction is hugely naive." This positioned him tidily in the film community, leaving no equivocation. Yet is Greyson's preference to be known as a gay filmmaker or a filmmaker who makes films with gay subject matter?

"It's a bit of both. I believe when people hear the term 'gay filmmaker,' they tend to think the term refers to the work, which is good. That makes sense. If I'm going to a gay film festival, I want to see a gay film. When people ask if I'm going to take *Law* on the gay film festival circuit, I say 'no, it's not a gay film.' My favourite analogy is, 'Should Ang Lee's film, *The Ice Storm*, be programmed in an Asian film festival?' No, it's not an Asian film. Should *The Law of Enclosures* be programmed in a gay film festival? No. For me, it's subject matter that's important. Is Stephen Frears, who made one of the best gay films of all time, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, gay? No, he's not. It's not about the filmmaker. Frears brought incredible intelligence and insight to those characters and so did those actors who, as far as we know, are straight."

This begets the next question of whether the polymathic/polymedia orientation of Greyson's work means he is a filmmaker? The obvious answer is that of course he is, but at a gut level, he is more of an artist. D'Oliveira observes, "Most people think he is the quintes-

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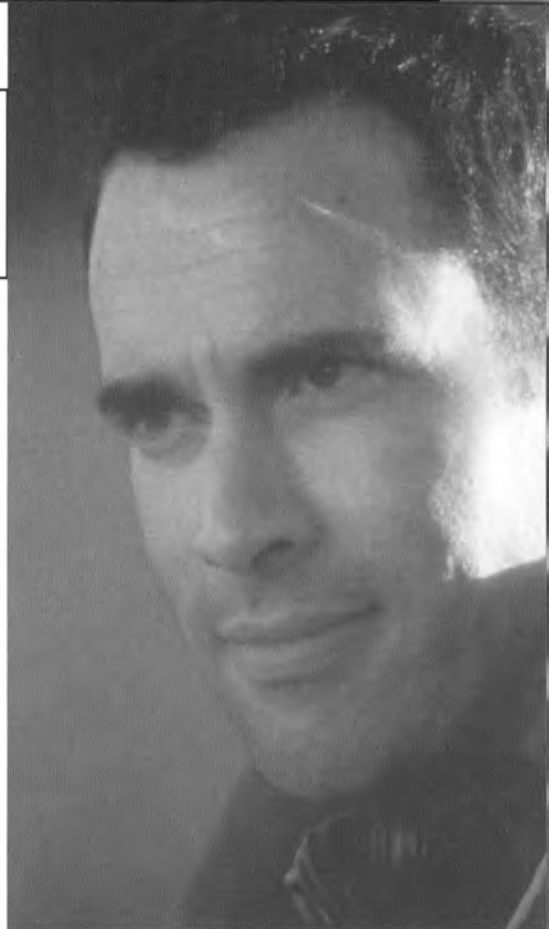
sential artist, and he is more interested in achieving an artistic vision. That's John's first priority rather than making a film that will be completely accessible to a target audience of 18- to 34-year-old crowd, which is what most directors have as their goal when they get out of film school."

"If every camera disappeared off the face of the earth tomorrow, I wouldn't be heartbroken because I started as a visual artist. I've always written and I've always painted." Greyson

Greyson takes the commitment further, "It took me a while to realize this, but if every camera disappeared off the face of the earth tomorrow, I wouldn't be heartbroken because I started more as a visual artist. I've always written and I've always painted. The interest for me is combining words and images and you can keep going back to that well because it's very rich and never dry. There's also ways of doing image/text on paper or now with the Internet. I'm working on a complicated interactive Web site which is a fictional piece using correspondence between two men. To me, it's about words and images, not about cameras and film and videotape."

This would be a wholly true statement if not for "The Film Project Formerly Known as *Proteus*," a sweeping story in the same vein as *Lilies*. Based on found court transcripts, this is a true story of two South African prisoners executed for sodomy off the shores of Cape Town's Robben Island, the prison where Nelson Mandela was held. Greyson, who is once again working with producer D'Oliveira, has recently completed the fourth draft of the screenplay. The original title of *Proteus* (now changed because Miramax is doing a submarine story with the same title) involves the naming of the Protea flower in 1735 when it was given its correct Latin binomial. "Out of the coincidence of history we have spun our story about naming and classifying and putting people in their place. It is a political, interracial sodomy story. It's very *Lilies*. A prison story again, very fantastical...but this is true. It's as romantic but it has this other side because of the history."

Assessing the success of the velvet revolution his films have created is not how Greyson chooses to consider his progress. "Talking about your work is interesting," he believes, "but it's only ever about right now. Walter Benjamin has a quote about how you can't go back to enter the past, you can only bring the past forward to be part of the present. Thinking about all the work that I've done which includes documentaries and dramas, straight dramas now and gay musicals, the thing I want is to keep pursuing that eclecticism and not be put in a box." •



John Greyson



Sarah Polley