

Coming Down



Deborah Cox and Larenz Tate

on the Side of Love



"I wonder how many people will come to the film with an expectation of what they *think* I will be doing. I never really thought about the fact that I have a style that I need to uphold," Clement Virgo muses. "I'm just reacting to what's happening inside of me and trying to put that on film and not worrying about making *Rude 2*." He pauses, wondering if others will react as I did to his latest feature film, *Love Come Down*. I confessed that I came to the new film with certain expectations based on his earlier work. When he failed to meet them, I was naturally disappointed.

Virgo takes this all in stride. He has, after all, built a reputation for doing things differently. More importantly, he sees the change as an important and necessary step in his career: "After a while, as a filmmaker, as an artist, you want to develop and find another way to express yourself," Virgo explains, "you can't keep making the same record. I see this [film] as part of a process. I don't know where I'm going with it but it's part of the process of developing."

The artist who burst onto the international film scene with unflinching bravado has toned down the aesthetic stylings that characterized much of his earlier work. Previously, Virgo admits to being "conscious of directing the audience" but is now aware that "if the audience is spending time trying to decode your film, you're not engaging them emotionally. I want them to work but not have the work be heady to the point where it cuts off their emotional reaction to the film."

Aiming more for the head than the heart, films like the short, *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul* (1993), and his debut feature, *Rude* (1995), revelled in their heightened aesthetic strategies. Not without their poignant moments, they nevertheless daringly and glaringly mixed aggressive stylings with deliberate metaphorical threads. *Rude* recalled attempts in contemporary American cinema to depict the inner-city black experience, but to its credit, moved beyond the characteristic bleakness and predictability to create a complex portrait of a group of individuals, each struggling with demons but not necessarily succumbing. Cliches were used deliberately in the film in order to subvert their powerful hold on our cinematic imaginations. As Brendan Kelly noted in *Variety*, in *Rude*, Virgo brought "a new take on a familiar tale." Kelly's cogent description of the film sums it up perfectly: "Sporting highly stylized visuals and a hip rock 'n' reggae soundtrack, *Rude* is a tough yet poetic look at life in the hood that's equal parts gritty realism and inspired arty, filmmaking."

Nominated for eight Genies, *Rude* was produced as part of the Canadian Film Centre's Feature Film project. It premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in the Un Certain Regard section, to much acclaim. Among its many festival screenings, *Rude* opened the Perspective Canada section of the Toronto International Film Festival and was awarded a jury citation for Best Feature Film.

Rude's precursor, *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul*, was an equally stylized and moody piece. A favourite of audiences and critics alike, it won the prize for Best Canadian Short at the Toronto festival, then called the Festival of Festivals. The vis-

CLEMENT VIRGO'S LOVE COME DOWN



Sarah Polley

LOVE

ceral charge evident in *Rude* is even more concentrated in *Save*. It's a self-conscious film, one that artfully reworks the Cain and Abel story into a fusion of hip, urban aesthetics and ancient sensibilities. As Virgo explains, "You watch *Save*. What I mean by that is that you're conscious of the fact that you're watching a film." He goes on to admit that, "The characters were created to express ideas that I had in my head at the time. The film is in a way affected and the film is made for effect. Even the title is made for effect."

One of the most "affected" elements of Virgo's style thus far has been the language of his narrators. Virgo typically uses his narrators not only to bind the episodic narratives but also his aesthetic strategies. Each film's moody style literally springs from these raw poetic raps. The language is heightened and mannered, perfectly suited for Virgo's surreal vision. In *Rude*, the pirate radio DJ connects the disparate stories into a coherent meaningful statement about redemption. In *Save*, the narration functions even more overtly, establishing the film's metaphoric function right from the beginning. "I want to tell you a fable, a fable about two brothers, about Cain and Abel, a couple of guys that live on the fucked up side of Eden." The following film naturally obliges.

In *Love Come Down*, Virgo returns to the themes and characters of *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul*. *Save* was always meant to be a feature, he tells me, "I took the basic elements that I was working

on for the feature and I put it into a short film. But I've always wanted to go back to it and complete it. I never felt like I completely finished with those characters, with that story."

The difference between *Love* and *Save*, besides the obvious, is the change in stylistic approach. Virgo's hyper-real vision of inner-city urban existence is muted in this film, replaced by a more conventional approach to cinematic storytelling. Gone is the aggressive stylization of the earlier work; the elaborate lighting and colour schemes are now muted in favour of narrative trajectory and character development. "With *Love*, I didn't want the aesthetics to be a factor," Virgo explains. "I didn't want people to look at the aesthetics as you're watching the film and be thinking too much about meaning. I wanted the audience to just sit back, relax and just experience the film as opposed to having to analyze the images."

In *Love Come Down*, Virgo wanted to reflect everyday urban experience on a different level. Like his previous work, *Love* is a film of grand passions (it is after all based, albeit loosely, on a story of one brother who kills another). Unlike the others, however, it considers them on a human scale as opposed to a mythic plane. In this film, Virgo insists that he's "more interested in creating humanity. I'm really not interested in creating ciphers or creating characters to represent different points of view. I want to create characters that are flesh and blood. I want to understand and know their fears and what makes them tick. That's what I'm interested in, black or white."

The world of *Love Come Down* is an expanded view of humanity, one that refuses to divide along colour lines. One of the strengths of the film is that the characters are varied and their relationships, complex. Race is simply not an issue. "Watching the film, you see white and black characters interact and there's no mention of race," Virgo remarks. Any film that mixes characters of different races tends to prompt a political reading, but once again, Virgo refuses to do what's expected. "There's an analysis that's going on as you're watching the film and after a while you realize that's not going to happen and you let go of that and then you experience the film." Virgo does, however, manage to challenge some assumptions surrounding race. One of the biggest changes from *Save* to *Love* is the fact that one of the brothers is now white. He is also a boxer. "We have assumptions around race and gender. The assumption is that black men are boxers and athletes, but in this film, it's the white character."

Love features the largest cast of characters to date in a Clement Virgo film. It is also his most plot-heavy. The film is essentially Neville's (American Larenz Tate from *Menace II Society* and *Dead Presidents*) story—a drug addict attempting to clean up his act once and for all. He is our narrator and this first person account draws us in. When he talks of a "fable" of two brothers, "fire and ice," he recalls *Save* and the Cain and Abel story, but the more character-driven nature of this film subverts the religious parallels. *Love Come Down* is the story of two brothers not two metaphors. "With *Love*," Virgo explains, "I wanted to really break down that idea of watching the film. I wanted the audience to have much more of an emotional investment in the film and identify more with the characters."

Through Neville, we meet his straight-laced brother Matt (Martin Cummins), a second-rate boxer determined to succeed, and Niko (hip-hop sensation Deborah Cox in her first movie

COM E



Larenz Tate and Deborah Cox

film role), a sultry singer who falls for Neville despite herself. They all have family secrets to confront and they all employ individual strategies to forget. Emanating from this trio is a cast of characters and a complex web of family trauma demanding to be addressed.

Interestingly, it may have been the rough and ready experience of making the short *Untitled* for the On The Fly Festival that influenced this toned-down aesthetic approach. "It was one of the best things I've ever done." Virgo told me that he's a meticulous planner, knowing every shot, every angle, every movement before going on set. "*Rude* was so tight it was like a military operation. I knew exactly what was going to happen when it was going to happen. We had every single frame planned out. I didn't leave myself a lot of room for mistakes or accidents to happen. I controlled it. I was looking at filmmakers like Kubrick. You have a sense in his movies that nothing is by accident. Every time he points a camera he wants you to see exactly what he wants you to see."

The time restraints central to On The Fly (a festival that requires participants to complete a film in 48 hours) did not allow for such meticulous planning. In fact, Virgo seems to have gone to the complete opposite extreme. As organizer Scott McLaren recalls, "It was truly one of the most 'on-the-fly' pieces in the festival.

D O W N

Virgo

C O M M O N | D I V I D E N



**Top: Cox and Tate
Middle: with director Virgo on right
Bottom: Martin Cummins**

He didn't plan. He touched down two days before his shoot from Washington, I believe, and I think he pretty much wrote it that day, cast it that night and crewed it the next day. So, very seat of the pants. He did a good job and had some terrific people in the cast and crew helping him out." *Untitled* moves with a breathtaking precision, packing quite the emotional punch in its condensed length. The film is stylized in a minimalist way, elliptical and concise, unravelling a moving story of family tragedy and systemic racism. The emotional impact of the film allows it to make its political point without being preachy.

Virgo credits the experience at *On The Fly* with inspiring him to take a "much more intuitive" approach to directing. "I put less constraint on myself with this film. I didn't have as much of a rigid approach to the filmmaking and I think it lends itself more to an emotional experience." More importantly, the film's thematic core stems from personal experience. The shift from *Save* to *Love* is one that reflects a shift in the filmmaker's perspective. Virgo calls it "the most spiritually personal film I've made—in terms of the emotional lives of the characters." Each of the characters undergoes a spiritual journey in the film, but no one has a tougher time of it than our protagonist, the drug addict determined to go straight.

Virgo's work has always featured religious iconography to support its metaphoric workings. In *Love*, however, Virgo uses religious symbolism as a road map to the protagonist's journey. Neville attempts to finally deal with his past and stop trying to avoid the struggle he must face. At first, he surrounds himself with religious artifacts, covering every religious affiliation possible, as if external objects by their very presence could invoke a transformation. This is, of course, a mirror of his drug-related problems: he's looking for a quick fix. Eventually, he realizes the futility of this strategy and he changes course. "Once the gaze is inward, there's two routes you can take," Virgo says, "You can take the road of trying to find grace or you can take the road of bitterness and resentment and anger. We've all had those experiences."

In Neville's case, his gaze is directed inward by Sister Sarah (played by Sarah Polley). Despite the fact that she is a representative of the Catholic church, she has learned how to mix her personal spirituality with the tenets of this organized religion. She wisely advises him that, "Nothing material can give you the high that you crave. The way to ecstasy is through yourself." Virgo uses religion as a possible answer, one that is qualified: it's not the specifics of a given faith but the underlying spirituality that's important. "A friend of mine said that religion is for people who are afraid to go to hell and spirituality is for people who have been to hell.

"The characters are really searching, and I was really searching, searching for a kind of grace, a transcendence and a kind of peace," Virgo explains. Like his previous work, the underlying theme of *Love* is redemption. In this film, however, his intentions are clearer, much more grounded in human experience as opposed to metaphor. Virgo's characters find their answers when they look inward and face their demons. It's an act of courage, of faith, one that the filmmaker himself understands. "As an artist and as a person, if I want to grow, I have to have courage. I want to go to the other side of the hill that I don't know as opposed to the valley that I do know." •