

# SHORT TAKES

## WHITE THUNDER

2002 51m *d* Victoria King.

Newfoundland filmmaker Victoria King's *White Thunder* is an absorbing portrait of American filmmaker Varick Frissell, who perished in an explosion on a ship off the coast of Newfoundland on March 15, 1931. He was there to complete a feature film about the seal hunt, called *White Thunder*. Three months after the explosion, which killed 26, the largest disaster of its kind in the history of Hollywood, Paramount released the film under the title, *The Viking*. King's film is a densely packed, often rewarding examination of Frissell's life and his interest in the seal hunt and the sealers' way of life. Narrated by Mike Jones, *White Thunder's* chronicle contains Frissell's diary entries and letters, as well as interviews with film historian Kevin Brownlow, many of Frissell's relatives, and snippets of radio and newsreel interviews with surviving cast and crew of *The Viking*. Woven into the biography are questions about the nature of documentary cinema in the 1920s, the compromises made to make Frissell's feature film more "commercial," the relationship between the United States and pre-Confederation Newfoundland, and Frissell's attraction to romanticized ideas of the North. Perhaps owing to time constraints, most of these strands are given rather cursory treatment, as the more poignant personal story predominates. (It's welcome news to report that a restored version of *The Viking* is now being completed at the National Archives of Canada.)

## A FRESH START

2001 15m *prod* Festian Lente Productions, Black Sheep Films, *p* Caitlyn Colquhoun, Lisa Mader, *d/sc/ed* Jason Buxton, *ph* Albert Hennen, *mus* Peter Johnston; *with* Kiersten Tough.

Tolstoy once famously observed at the beginning of *Anna Karenina* that "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own particular way." Although Tolstoy never saw a Canadian film, the Canadian cinema has yielded plenty of corroborative evidence for his dictum: Claude Jutra's *Mon oncle Antoine*, Richard Condie's *The Big Snit*, Alan King's *A Married Couple*, Atom Egoyan's *Next of Kin* (and everything after), to name but a few. Add to this already powerful and withering set of family albums *A Fresh Start* by Nova Scotia director Jason Buxton. The film is a quiet, deceptively simple drama of a family preparing to move from somewhere to somewhere else. While the mutually irritated mother and father squabble over the television remote control and other trivialities, their two young sons listen upstairs and wonder about what lies ahead. While not exactly told from the children's perspective, the film constructs an almost tangible sense of the vagueness, even opacity of how their lives change just because mom and dad say it will. Caught in a skein of unresolved tensions, unspoken fear, and undefined destinations, the children adjust in their silent, obscure manner. There are no "scenes" made in Buxton's fictional family, but there's lots going on. Indeed, its understated juxtaposition of the mundane and the profound, particularly in the final sequence when the family car passes a road accident, is intensely powerful. Sensitive, sad, superbly controlled, stylistically authoritative, *A Fresh Start* announces the arrival of a talented filmmaker and contributes considerably to this country's anguished stockpile of family viewing.

## REMEMBRANCE

2001 18m *prod* Fleck Films, OMDC Calling Card Program, *p* Paula Fleck, *d* Stephanie Morgenstern, *sc* Stephanie Morgenstern, Mark Ellis; *with* Stephanie Morgenstern, Mark Ellis.

In addition to being an impressive presence in front of the camera in films such as Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* and Denis Villeneuve's *Maelström*, Stephanie Morgenstern is also a promising director. Her second directorial effort, *Remembrance*, locates itself nicely alongside Alfred Hitchcock's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Funes the Memorious" in its exploration of the mysteries of memory. Set in 1942, the film's drama revolves around the relationship between Aurora, a young woman involved in Canadian home-front wartime activities, and Albert, an awkward and innocent man who performs feats of memory in theatres and town halls. While Aurora's approach to Alfred is motivated by patriotism (she wants him to use his talents in the war effort), the attraction goes deeper than mere recruitment. The film ponders the impact of memory on personal identity, political choice and the construction of knowledge itself. A visually sumptuous, stylishly rendered period piece, the thematic reach of *Remembrance* occasionally exceeds its grasp, especially when the Alfred/Aurora relationship begins to falter. This minor concern aside, Morgenstern's film is a thoughtful and (dare I say it?) memorable drama about those nebulous regions to be found between desire and action, memory and knowledge, the personal and the professional.

Stephanie Morgenstern's *Remembrance*



## SILENT SONG

2001 6m *prod* Wandering Tulip Productions, *p/d/ph/ed* Elida Schogt, *mus* Tom Third.

Speaking of remembrance, experimental/documentary filmmaker Elida Schogt's latest work furthers her meditation (begun with *Zyklon Portrait* in 1999 and *The Walnut Tree* in 2000) on the epistemological, cultural, political and personal implications of memory. Organizing her approach around the Holocaust, *Silent Song* reflects upon an image Schogt found, while searching for other things in the U.S. National Archives, of a young boy playing an accordion in Dachau. Noting that these images of the boy and the other concentration camp prisoners are "in the public domain," she begins to investigate her own reasons for making images, and pushes herself to ponder more deeply the tangled processes of how individuals and cultures remember. As in her two previous concise and poetic films, *Silent Song* suggests with a minimalist rigour the infinitude of the questions raised by acts of memory. Importantly, her film "remembers" that the gesture of remembering that little unidentified boy is somehow part of the process.