



Portrait of a Street: The Soul and Spirit of College

2001 52m prod Rodna Films, *p/d/ph/ed* Sandra Danilovic, *s ed* Konrad Skreta, *m* Jeff Holtzkener; *with* Johnny Lombardi, the Sherman brothers, Rose Grieco, Sam "the Record Man" Sniderman, Fanny Brass, Stanley Grizzle.

If Mordecai Richler had been brought up in Toronto, College Street would have been his rue St. Urbain. Steeped in the Jewish history of Toronto, College Street morphed into a multicultural mix, experiencing a huge influx of early 20th-century Italians, post-Second World War Portuguese, 1960s hippies, 1980s yuppies, and now the up-scale restaurants and bars of the new millennium. There are only a few signs left of its long Jewish history; a small number of synagogues, one of the last of which was almost destroyed by an arsonist just this past March in the Kensington Market area.

At the turn of the 19th century, there was a huge urban slum around the area of College Street and University Avenue, just south of Queen's Park, within sight of the provincial capital building. This Irish-Catholic enclave, the birthplace of future Hollywood star Mary Pickford, was rezoned in the early 20th century to make room for a grand boulevard with a broad centre median along University Avenue leading up to Queen's Park. This pushed the poor and growing immigrant community westward along the wide roadway that was, and still is, College Street from University over to Grace Street, past Spadina, Brunswick, Bathurst and Palmerston.



The European Jewish immigrants had settled in and around Kensington Market, just southwest of College and Spadina. They had bakeries, restaurants, tailor shops lining College Street from Spadina to Bathurst and down Bellevue into the market proper. The Italians then began to move into the cheap housing just north and south of College, especially west of Bathurst. Grape vines and tomatoes plants grew in back and front yards, and suddenly Toronto had its second ethnic neighbourhood. For the most part, the Jews and Italians got along, both groups being poor and marginalized in a WASP world, but tensions prior to the Second World War lead to the infamous Christie Pits race riots, which start-

ed at a baseball game between a local Jewish team and a team from the Beach and quickly spread south down Grace to College Street.



By the war's end, most of the Jewish population had moved uptown, or out of town. Many Italians followed in the 1950s and '60s, going to mid-town Toronto around Dufferin Street and St. Clair Avenue, leaving the College Street area open to the flood of immigrant groups from Southern Europe, Southeast Asia and South America during the 1960s and 1970s. The housing prices were still relatively cheap by Toronto standards and by sheer force of numbers, the Portuguese became the dominant ethnic group south of College. Ironically, when the planners at the City of Toronto got around to naming the neighbourhoods on its street signs, they called the area around Grace and College Little Italy, long after the majority of the Italians had left the area. College Street, especially that part that runs between St. George and Dufferin, is quite possibly the most ethnically diverse stretch of real estate in all of Canada, if not the world. When Trudeau enshrined the concept of multiculturalism in the Canadian consciousness, its best and most relaxed example of a multicultural mix could be found any day of the week on College Street.



REVIEW

Take One

Sandra Danilovic's *Portrait of the Street: The Soul and Spirit of College* focuses on six subjects, interviewing them at length, mixing the talking heads with archival footage. However, her real subject is not the street, but the immigrant experience in a WASP world, which is not unique to College Street, or any other part of Toronto, or any major North American city neighbourhood for that matter. Danilovic is right to think there is something unique about College Street, but she doesn't find it because she leaves out too much.

All the interviews travel the same arc, from poverty and discrimination to success and material happiness, and you get the impression that College Street was the happiest place in Canada. Not a harsh word is spoken. However, some of the stories are poignant and have the authentic ring of truth about what it must have been like to be poor and growing up ethnic in Toronto the Good. Johnny Lombardi, the very popular self-proclaimed mayor of Little Italy (who died at 86 as this review was being written), tells how as a young boy he walked with some friends down from College to the Sunnyside pool along the lakeshore, west of Parkdale, which is a good hour's walk. Being a hot and humid Toronto summer day, they found the popular spot full to overflowing. The next nearest public pool was west of Mimico, which was another hour-and-a-half walk. When he got there, he and his friends were denied entry. The man at the gate pointed to the sign, "Gentiles Only." Lombardi turned to the man and asked, "What does that mean?" He tells him no Jews. Lombardi says, "but I'm not Jewish, I'm Italian." "That's worse," said the man at the gate, and Lombardi spent the long walk home in tears. He tells the story without bitterness, but the memory lingers.

Portrait of a Street is Danilovic's first film and was made with funding from the NFB's Filmmakers Assistance Program and the Toronto Arts Council. It has a warm, fuzzy feel to it,



Johnny Lombardi

but the real College Street is more than just a sum of its immigrant's experiences, no matter how poignant. Its fabulous early 20th-century architecture, its close association with the University of Toronto, its large student and professional population, its Asian population (the Chinatown that grew up around Spadina and Dundas and moved north to College in the 1970s is the largest in North America), its distinctive clock tower at Bellevue Avenue, its thriving artistic and filmmaking community, its winding streetcar ride that takes you all the way out to High Park; these are only some of the things that are missing from this heartfelt but incomplete portrait of a street.

Paul Townend

REVIEW

