

Black lesbian film angers conservatives

Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* one of many good films at the Dal Art Gallery this month

BY DAISY KIDSTON

Since the beginning of February the Dalhousie Art Gallery has been showing a series of films by black directors from North America, Africa and Europe. Such titles as *Body and Soul* by Oscar Micheaux (USA), *Looking for Langston* by Isaac Julien (Britain) and *Black Girl* by Ousmane Sembene (Senegal/France) grace the roster. One film that I particularly enjoyed was Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (USA), which had some of the most beautiful cinematography I've ever seen.

The Watermelon Woman was the most recently screened film and, along with its companions, was excellent. Directed by Cheryl Dunye of the USA, *The Watermelon Woman* was first released in 1996 and toured the world's film festivals picking up awards, accolades, and scandals along the way.

A vibrant, topical, modern film, *The Watermelon Woman* is likely to give conservative sod-heads a rash because the film is extremely liberal and focuses on issues that are still taboo for the unenlightened. Senator Jesse Helms of the United States was so offended by the film he called it "smut" and "flotsam flowing down the sewer".

Cheryl Dunye is a young, black, lesbian film director who directed and starred in the feature-length film. It follows the life of a young film director and video store worker named Cheryl who is

attempting to make a documentary about a black 1930s movie star and singer known as the Watermelon Woman.

As Cheryl learns more and more about the Watermelon Woman — or Faye Richards, which is her real name — parallels between Faye's past and Cheryl's life become apparent. Both are black women struggling to forge a path in the movie industry, and both are lesbian women who have interracial relationships with white women. Cheryl has a strong identification with Faye, and the more she discovers about this woman's life it seems the more she discovers about her own.

Cheryl allows the audience to follow her on her search for facts about Faye Richards, which gives us a glimpse at the hip subculture of lesbians (black and white alike) living in Philly. Cheryl's interviews with a variety of people who may know something about Faye form an integral part of the movie and are very raw and entertaining.

In fact, the whole film has a young, raw flavour to it — smart and tough, but somehow not in your face. The film deals with topics that could easily be pushed onto the audience with an aggressive "screw you, this is who we are" attitude, but instead Cheryl cordially invites us to peek at the lives and experiences of lesbian women. We are taken all over the Philly lesbian community, voyeuristically going to lesbian clubs, dining parties, women's centres, and yes, even into the bedroom.

The now famous sex scene in

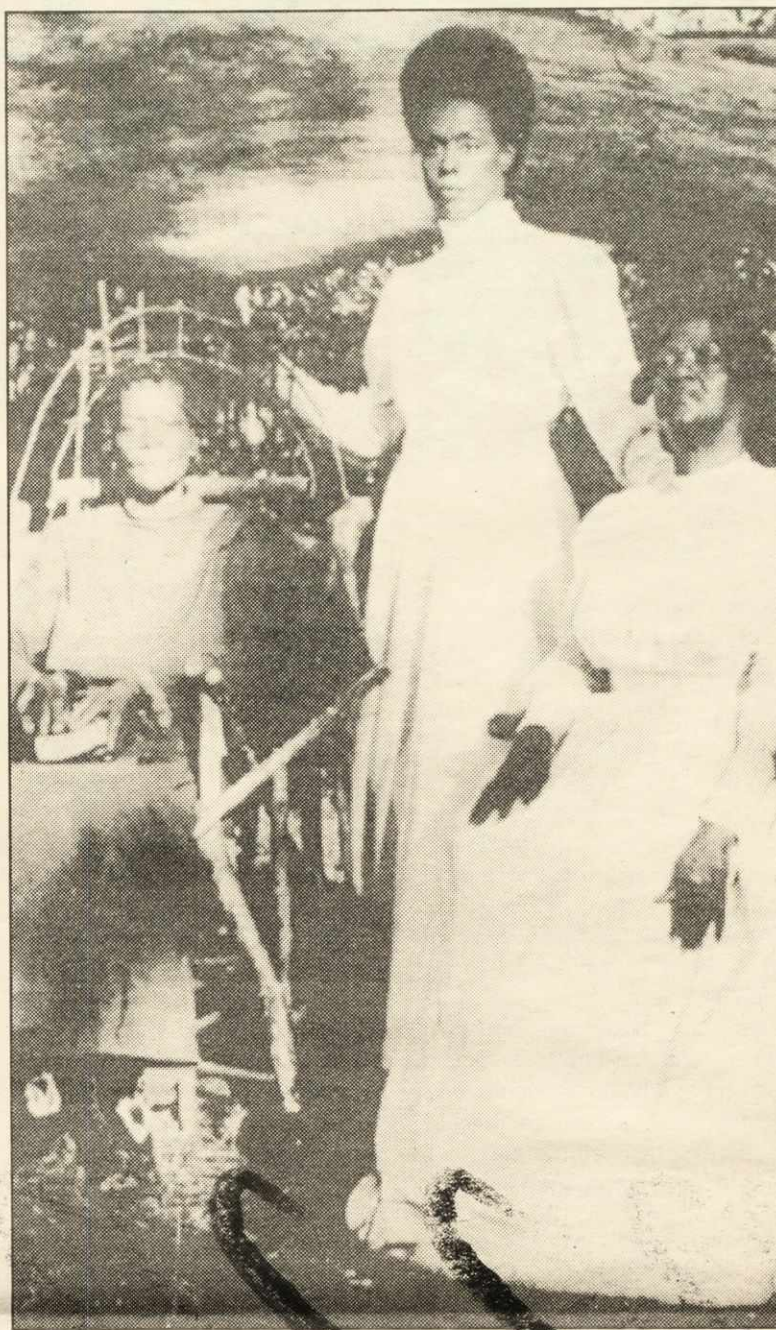
this movie which enraged senator Helms to give it his "F" for "flotsam" rating, as well as pissing off the National Endowment for the Arts, occurs between Cheryl and her white girlfriend Diana (Guin Turner of *Go Fish*). Maybe because it is inter-racial, or maybe because it is between two women, some people out there hate it.

One of my favourite scenes in the movie is when Cheryl and her acid-tongued best friend Tamara (Valerie Walker) go armed with their video camera to CLIT, the Centre for Lesbian Information and Technology, where they run into an eccentric but sincere woman who runs the very disorganized centre.

I also loved watching Tamara interact with people. Both she and Cheryl work in a video store together and the movie often treats us to Tamara's funny interactions with the customers, or her witty jibes at people she doesn't like, of whom are many.

This movie is first-rate, and I thought Dunye, as both an actress and a director, did an excellent job. The supporting cast and cinematography are excellent too. I should mention that Dunye, with help from Zoe Leonard, created fake film clips and photographs of the 1930s that look so extremely real that I was surprised to learn that Faye Richards never truly existed.

Definitely an artistic film which makes you wonder why so many people waste their time watching mainstream Hollywood drivel when you've got gems like this, not "floating down the sewer", but flying high on the fringe.



BEAUTIFUL LANDMARK: Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*

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Dog Tales
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to call it. It usually involves a campfire, a steel guitar, maybe a banjo, repetitive chords and sombre undertones leading to drink.

So, if it's going to be considered good, it has to be comfortable. Or it has to be Dave Teichroeb.

Teichroeb is a virtual nobody who, let's face it, is sadly going to remain that way. Hailing from Guelph, Ontario, his *Dog Tales* is an independent release bound to appeal to long lost hippies and roots aficionados, if they ever get their hands on it.

If they do, what they'll find is gold: "Austin in the Springtime", "Postcard Home" and "What I Usually Do" are plaintive and

honest, and "The Truth" uncovers Teichroeb as a realist's romantic — understanding every step of the way what's gone on, feeling awful about it, but not willing to cry too hard.

And listeners will also find plenty of Canadiana, too, in songs like the aforementioned "Postcard Home", "Alberta Rose" and Wilf Carter's "Blue Canadian Rockies".

Overall, *Dog Tales* contains more edge than Teichroeb's bluegrass roots would indicate and more sentiment than the too-cool-surfer-dude photo of him on the CD jacket would let on.

It's too bad not enough of you'll hear it.

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