



Lights, Camera, Action!

Critics missed the film's relevance

Where the reviews of Prologue went wrong

By DAN MERKUR

Prologue is well on its way to becoming the most poorly analyzed film in years. Seldom have I seen such a barrage of inept criticism as with this one simple effort by Robin Spry.

I would suppose that the root of the problem is that Robin Spry is Canadian; his actors are Canadian; his theme is Canadian; his film was backed by the National Film Board; and in fact, Prologue is intrinsically Canadian in every respect.

Critics, especially armchair critics, are so full of Nouvelle Vague or Bergman, or of Hollywood, that when a new type of film comes along, all they can bring to bear are the old delineations. And Prologue is one film that just doesn't fit the old categories.

Let's tackle it from the basics, and see where the Toronto Star, the Village Voice, last week's EXCALIBUR, and most everyone else who wrote a review went wrong.

The first thing you notice while watching the film, is that it is in very grainy black and white, and the predominant style is one generally associated with documentaries. By that I mean that the individual takes are very long because the camera just keeps grinding away, and when there is dialogue, the camera pans back and forth, back and forth, instead of cutting directly between the actors, which is a luxury of the studio technique of film-making.

Now the way an audience reacts to documentary footage is to believe it. Documentary is non-fiction, therefore true, therefore believable. This line of thinking builds the film up in the viewer's mind into something it never was intended to be. This supposition of the self-importance of Prologue is

a misconception that critics have played too largely in their reviews.

Spry comes from a school of economy minded directors who have learned that one of the cheapest ways of making movies is to use a documentary style.

Okay, we get over the immediate problem of the "documentary is reality" nonsense, and we get headlong into the major problem of the film as an artistic endeavor. It lacks continuity, and therefore lacks believability. For example, through most of the film the documentary camera style is maintained, but in the crucial scene (for the plot development) on the roof, the dialogue takes place with straight cuts between the speakers.

Spry said that the shots were done hurriedly during brief intervals when construction was not going on on the street below, and since the noise was so heavy the shots had to be very tight in order to accommodate an off-camera mike that had to be very close to the speaker in order to pick-up the dialogue. Hence the shots all had to be one-shots in extreme close-up, and because they were not shot as a conversation (the way the rest of the film was) but instead as separate takes, they do not appear as documentary-like. Even if the casual viewer does not notice this serious problem, it makes a subconscious impression, because it doesn't feel right.

Other problems are things like the grain of the original film stocks are not consistent, the sound quality is not consistent, the light values waver from shot to shot, focus is not always tight.

These are all the little things that Hollywood has fifty union members to watch, but are quite forgivable in an underground film (which Prologue certainly is.)



John Robb and Elaine Malus in the crucial rooftop sequence of Robin Spry's Prologue.

The next most obvious thing is the acting.

Some of the characters were non-actors caught candidly on film, and so appear quite natural because they weren't acting — the camera just happened to record what they were doing.

Elaine Malus, who plays Karen, is a non-actor with some minor talent but mainly a tremendous self-consciousness in front of the camera. She is unsettling to the viewer because she seems so uncomfortable in front of us.

Gary Rader, who plays David, has more presence in front of the lens, but his part is sufficiently ambiguous that he doesn't make much impact.

John Robb, who plays the lead role of Jesse (and who I guess is a Torontonian because I keep running into him at Cinema-lumiere and Cinecity) is a pro, and he looks it. He knows what he is doing; he moves right; he moves at the right time; he speaks well. He doesn't have quite the magnetism that is "star quality" but I don't think I have ever seen star quality faked better. Robb is appropriate in every sense — he looks the part, and he looks like he feels the part.

The other characters, particularly the actors who played Karen's father and the young pot-smoking lawyer, are generally quite good. The two I mentioned managed to flesh out roles that the script left quite two-dimensional.

I suppose I have to mention the cameos by Abbie Hoffman, Allen Ginsberg, Dick Gregory et al, but that's all they were — cameos. No great hell, and nothing so remarkable as some would like to make out.

The only major thing about the cameos is that Hoffman was talking about Chicago troubles before they took place when Spry filmed him. According to Spry, Hoffman was engaged as an actor, at equity's \$100 minimum daily,

and did quite nicely. The ham comes through.

Things like the camera-style, the inconsistencies and the acting stand out in a film, and so are the easiest to notice, and to overlook. But everyone catches the script and the theme, because those you have to look for.

The dialogue, purportedly by a character named Sherwood Forest, is as inane as it comes. The problem is that it is real.

The plot deals basically with a girl, Karen, who knows these two guys, and can't decide which one she likes more, nor whose philosophies she prefers. Jesse is a Montreal underground newspaper editor, activist, concerned radical. David is the pacifist-mystic, seeking his own libidinal utopia through various recreational pursuits.

And so the dialogue is the kind of hard-core radical propagandizing you can read everywhere you look, or else it is the kind of 'heavy' dialogue you hear from a lot of stoned beautiful people. 'Like man it was so real, Man, it was, like beautiful man,' or else it was a question of politicizing the passive majority by polarizing them about the issue which is only structured to bring them to a point of malleability.

Yes, the dialogue was real, but the two types of dialogue in the film are the types I habitually walk out of rooms in order to avoid. In fact the script is as trite as the script-writer's name.

The theme of the film is very simple, what is Karen to do. Karen of course represents the audiences approach of 'gee, it'd be nice to be really doing something, but, you know, on the other hand a person could get hurt by getting involved, and what can one person do anyways?' Jesse is the protagonist of the film, perhaps because director Spry favors him, and perhaps because his argument is more intricate than mystical, stoned David's.

The film doesn't arrive at any neat solutions. Jesse travels on to Chicago for the convention riots after he is beaten up in Montreal by a cop. David retires to the woods with Karen for the duration. At the end, Jesse, having arrived closer to David's position, decides to stop the charges he was pressing against the cop, and Karen leaves David to rejoin Jesse.

Hollywood would have sermonized, and told the audience

whose philosophy (Jesse's or David's) is better. Spry had the good sense not to do so. Prologue clarifies the situation by defining the choices clearly, but does not presume to be able to decide for you.

Dorothy Mikos (Daily Star) called this lack of resolution banal and an affront to Canadians. I think perhaps that Spry was merely illustrating the stand Canada takes — sympathetic to both sides. Yet undecided.

There may have been thoughts of politicizing Canadians by confronting them with the film, but I doubt it. At the end of the movie, my own convictions were much the same as they were at the start, except that Spry had helped me to define the issues for myself.

Consequently, I take exception with everyone who had decried Spry for his theme. It is a very valid one, because it is a real one, far too real for Hollywood's saccharine-coated num-nums whose sledge-hammer effect of driving a point home (e.g. the end of Easy Rider) convinces you time and again that this is all fiction. Prologue is more valid, because it is a real statement, and because it represents the position of so many undecided youths today.

On the other hand, there is much to attack Prologue for as an artistic venture, because it's a flop. When I asked Spry whether he liked the film, he answered simply that he now cringes at every scene. He ought to. But his theme was a damn good one.

Prologue is being mishandled by the distributors on the top-half of a double-bill at the Odeon Coronet. It probably won't play long because it's theme is of relevance only to concerned youths, and the film has little else going for it.

It cost the NFB \$130,000 and is barely expected to make its money back. Which is too bad, because with Prologue, the Canadian film industry takes a major step forward to relevance to the Canadian fact.

Prologue is a film that could only have been made by a Canadian. Perhaps this means it is only of interest to Canadians, and therefore a poor box-office, but that doesn't discount its meaning.

Prologue, at the Coronet. See it, see it again, and think.

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