

NFB series:

# Women fight poverty

by Lynda Cassels

"After divorce, the standard of living for a Canadian woman can drop by as much as 73%, while divorced men on average enjoy a standard of living 42% higher than when they were married."

A murmur of agreement ripples through the audience. On screen, a young woman with a baby under an arm and a three year old tugging at the other scans the classifieds for an affordable apartment.

The film is *For Richer, For Poorer*, a no-frills expose of a middle-class woman trying to free herself and her children from a violent marriage. Produced by Silva Basmajian for the National Film Board, *For Richer, For Poorer* is the second film in a planned five-part series entitled "The Feminization of Poverty".

Haligonians had the opportunity to view the first two instalments in the series last Friday night. Over thirty-five people who shunned the attractions of a Halifax night on the town in favour of a free movie at the NFB were sympathetic and attentive, seeking to understand a social phenomenon which has been consistently overlooked in Canada: over three-fifths of this country's poor are women.

Being poor, says former British Columbia cabinet minister and feminist Rosemary Brown, is simply being unable to afford sufficient food, decent housing, and



**For Richer, For Poorer.** 85 per cent of Canadian men default on maintenance payments after divorce.

proper clothing.

The first film in the series, *No Way Not Me*, is drawn from a lecture Brown delivered to a group of high school students last year. This is an "images and stats" film, and its message is clear. Women are poor, Brown insists, because the image of an idyllic and inevitable wife/mother role is dangled before them from childhood on, perpetuated and exploited by the media through advertising and the nebulous messages of popular rock videos.

"We are taught to wait," Brown tells her teenage audience in the film, "never taking our rights or responsibilities

seriously." A few of the teens agree; others appear skeptical.

If the media of the '80s taunts women with an ideal of simultaneous corporate and domestic success, Rosemary Brown doesn't see it. To her the dominant message is consistent with what women have been hearing for centuries — namely, that they needn't worry. Some nice man will marry them and look after them. Obviously this notion is as much a misrepresentation today as ever, if not more so. The solution, Brown concludes, lies in education, financial independence and a restructuring of the wage system for traditionally

female occupations.

Between films the audience shifts in their seats, reflects, gets up for more free popcorn the women perhaps questioning to what extent they have had to fight the image of female fragility and passivity which persistently suggests itself, however subtly; the men perhaps reflecting on the image of self-sufficiency and financial success with which they may have felt pressured to conform. The *For Richer, For Poorer* begins.

The audience meets Joan. Unskilled and with two small children, she is the epitome of the battered, abandoned wife. Since leaving her husband she has moved sixteen times.

As the camera follows Joan through her daily struggle to find a job and a roommate so that welfare won't kick her out of her two-bedroom Toronto apartment, it becomes apparent that her most immediate problem is her husband's refusal to produce the child-care payments they had agreed to. She is lucky; a lawyer agrees to work with her under a legal aid programme. But the financial difficulties only complicate Joan's job search and attempt at skills training.

Like most single parent families, the prospects of Joan and her children finding a permanent home depend on Joan's ability to land a job which pays substantially more than the minimum wage. The most poignant words

in this all-too-realistic film are those of her three year old son as they settle into yet another apartment:

"Is this house our home, Mommy? Is this house ours?" More heads in the audience nod in sympathy.

As the credits roll up the screen three Halifax women are introduced to lead a post-film discussion: lawyer Maureen Shebib from Dalhousie Legal Aid; Suzanne Copan, a worker with Adsum House, a temporary shelter for women in Halifax; and Brenda Thompson, a single mother and full-time student who ran for office in September's provincial election.

Statistics presented in the films are re-iterated. Eighty-five per cent of Canadian men default on maintenance payments after divorce; 85% of all single-parent families live below the poverty line, compared to 14% for single-parent families headed by men.

During the discussion it is generally agreed that most of these inequities can be attributed to an inflexible welfare system, shortages of affordable housing and daycare and the persistent lack of adequate basic skills training for young women. Shebib emphasized the need not for welfare "reform" but for a complete restructuring of the social services system to better accommodate single-parent families.

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# Tune in, turn on, beat bust

by Andrew M. Duke

The departure of R.E.M. from the I.R.S. label is marked by the just-released *Eponymous* LP, a greatest hits compilation of sorts. The album includes "The One I Love", "It's the end of the World As We Know It" and a reworking of "Finest Worksong", this time with horns added to the mix. Along with these singles from *Document*, the previous release, are found favourites such as "Fall On Me", "Driver 8" and "So. Central Rain". Die-hard R.E.M. fans will no doubt appreciate the inclusion of the original recording of "Radio Free Europe".

The self-titled debut from Minneapolis-based funksters *Information Society* (WEA) is a solid effort. The dance mix of the initial single, "What's On Your Mind (Pure Energy)" topped club lists and the radio version seems ready to do the same. The Latin-flavoured "Running", an American chart-topper for the band in 1985, is included in addition to a tasteful cover of ABBA's "Lay All Your Love On Me". The INSOC crew have thankfully been able to take advantage of technology in

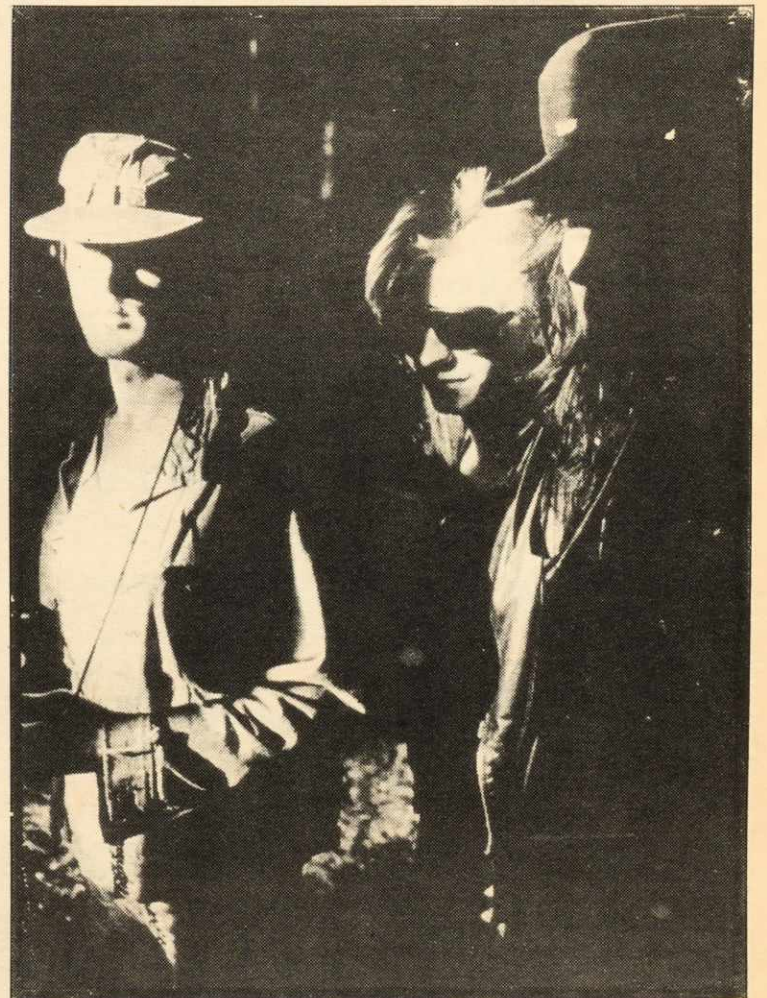
an age where it often destroys music.

The same cannot be said for *Will to Power* (CBS). "Say It's Gonna Rain" is a fine single, but this does not make up for what the other songs on the album lack: originality. Songwriter Bob Rosenberg has cooked up quite the bland musical soup. On the new Heaven 17 album, *Teddy Bear, Duke & Psycho* (A&M), the songs are distinct, yes, but they have tried much too hard in their attempt to be heard on everyone's radio. The result is an over-produced, jarring LP that sounds more like the latest Godley and Creme than Heaven 17, a band who used to be content to do whatever they wished and still manage to produce something danceable.

Now, *Rap's What I Call Music!* (PolyGram) is the compilation to purchase if dancing is your thing. James Brown's "The Payback Mix", a Coldcut-produced track that uses bits of his past hits to create something new, is featured as are the massive club hits "Pump Up the Volume" by M/A/R/R/S and Simon Harris'

"Bass (How Low Can You Go)". In addition, you'll find Tony! Toni! Tone!'s anti-drug song (and a funky one at that) "Little Walter" and "House Arrest (The Beat Is the Law)" the British sensation from KRUSH, plus The Housemartins' B-side, "Rap Around the Clock", and more. . .

Considering past releases, the new Skinny Puppy album *VIVIsect VI* (Netwerk/Capitol) is a smack in the face and this is not a bad thing. "We are not evil. We do reflect that which is putrid and rotten all around" says vocalist Nivek Ogre. Laboratory animals are being tortured every day and this is the information that is being put across by this album and its accompanying tour. *VIVIsect VI* is complete in that it has focus but does not become claustrophobic. "Dogshit" was the first single, one of the heaviest tracks the band has recorded. The follow-up is "Testure", written specifically for the radio in order to increase awareness. Don't expect to hear it, though. This is a smack in the face, not a joke, Ogre would say. You can't help but get it.



Skiny Puppy's new album is "a smack in the face"