

Rugged individualism

The life and work of Michael Chisholm

BY DAVE LOVAS

Michael Chisholm was an identifiable figure in Halifax. The photographer, who died this past year, was visible to anyone who walked down Spring Garden Road. A rough looking man — Indiana Jones meets the Boogie Man — he would often peddle his black and white photography along the Public Garden's cast iron fence.

What many didn't know was that Chisholm didn't have to sell his art on the street. His photographs sold well, through private brokers, to galleries in the U.S., Canada and Europe. Street side vending was not an economic necessity, but a pleasure that allowed him to sell his pictures to "real people". He loved chatting with anyone who showed an interest in his work, giving many pedestrians further insights into his persona.

A couple of my friends and I were fortunate enough to engage in one such discussion with Chisholm. We were on a photography excursion, cameras in hand, when we stopped to browse through his display on Spring Garden.

"What do you think?" he asked, noticing our interest in a picture called "Lifestyles", depicting a bum sleeping on a bridge while a suit wearing business-



Michael Chisholm at the Farmers Market

man ran beneath the bridge.

"Which side would you rather be on?" asked Chisholm.

He went on to explain that the businessman represents conformity, stress and chaos, while the derelict symbolizes individualism, and toughness. It was clear that this picture meant a lot to him.

Like the derelict, Chisholm chose to live outside of society's norms. When he took off at nineteen with his first camera to travel, via motorcycle, to Vancouver and San Francisco, he began a lifelong tendency towards individualism. Following that voyage he never again read a newspaper or watched television.

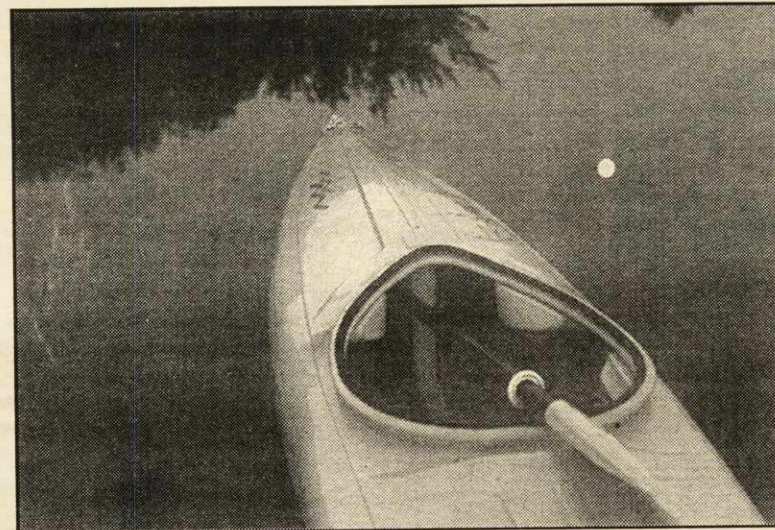
Chisholm continued to walk us through his pictures, and like Luke Skywalker to Yoda, we listened. His influences were many,

ranging from Jung to Taoism. However, he didn't just preach these philosophies, he lived them.

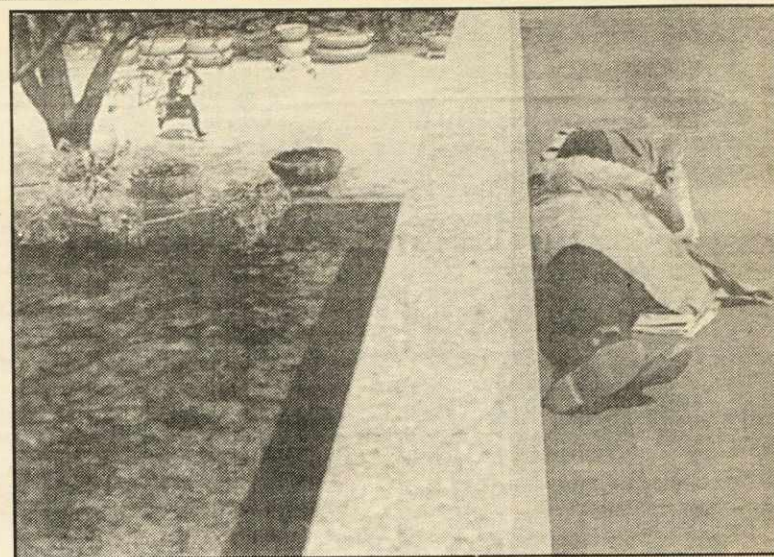
"I make the world my family", Chisholm once said. And this was never more apparent than when he began to speak of his photographic pilgrimage to Prague.

Over the course of his last visit to the Czech city, he took over 4,000 shots in six months.

"There is far more spirit in those small towns [in the Czech Republic]," said Chisholm. "When a cousin comes to visit from the neighbouring town, people celebrate...have a huge feast and break out the Vodka! When your cousin comes over here it's like, 'Change the channel.'"



Heaven on Earth, Yarmouth, 1996



Lifestyles, Toronto, 1988

Chisholm loved the simple way of life he found in Prague — people without much who could be thankful for the little things.

When we left him that day — minds churning with the food for thought we had just ingested — we were unaware that we would

never see or speak to this man again.

The legendary street photographer died on Christmas Eve, 1996, and his death was surrounded by the same mysticism that had defined his life.

In a prophetic picture named "Heaven and Earth", Chisholm's empty kayak lies motionless on Lake George under a full moon. It's significant because Chisholm paddled his kayak on Lake George, camera in hand, under a full moon.

As a scholar once said of Carl Jung, "Only the spiritual essence of his life experience remained in his memory, and this alone seemed to him worth the effort of telling."

Michael Chisholm was a man of many words, and even more photographs. The pictures he left behind were his legacy. They gave us a glimpse of the world through the eyes of someone who wanted to change it.

Memory and growth in dance

BY TANIA TREPANIER

Dancemakers is coming to Halifax next week, complete with strong physicality and poetic imagery.

Serge Bennathan, choreographer and artistic director, has been with Dancemakers since December 1990. He says that the approach of Dancemakers is now characterized by a strong physicality, which contrasts with stillness so that there is a depth, an abstract frame, and within this abstract frame there is imagery and feeling.

"From the moment I have the seeds of an idea, which very often comes from personal experience," said Bennathan, "I spend around a year thinking about it, to see if the idea is going to take roots in me or not."

Indeed, it appears that *Les Arbres d'Or*, or the Golden Trees, have taken root in Bennathan's imagination. The seed was planted when he went back to Normandy, the region in France where he was born. He explains that he was walking with his dog in the countryside early in the morning. Everything was very still, and he was surrounded by beautiful light green hills. Suddenly, a gust of wind caused a golden curtain of leaves to fall from a line of poplar trees. This indel-

ible image was accompanied by a feeling of love and care for his parents. At that time, he did not know this image would form the seed for the dance, *Les Arbres d'Or*.

"It's a dance about memory and growth, looking at a certain path of life," he says. "It's the telling of some emotions. What's very important for me is that the audience receive the visual of this emotion and create, with their own background, their own story. That's why I'm talking about poetry."

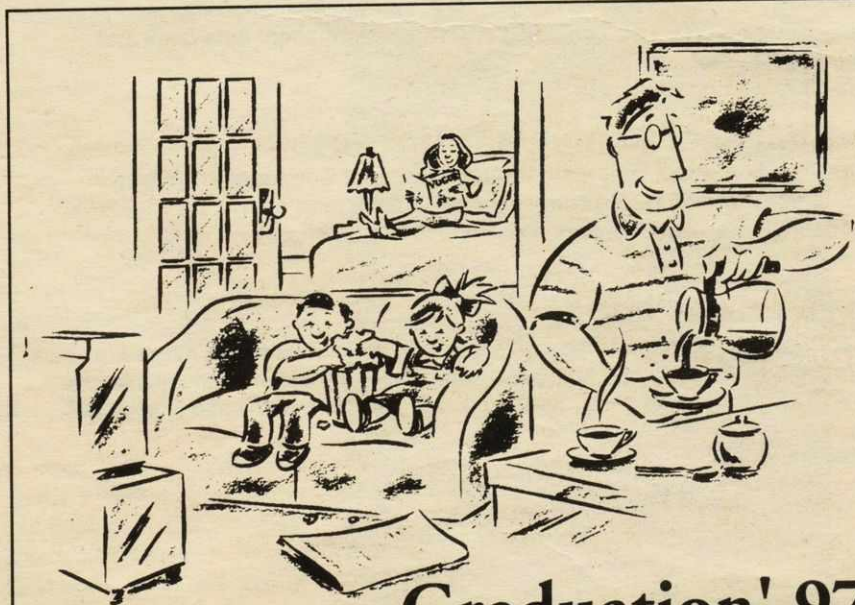
"The main difficulty is to find a universality, whether you perform in Halifax, Morocco or Japan. For me it's not important



if people don't understand it, it's important if people feel it — which is different."

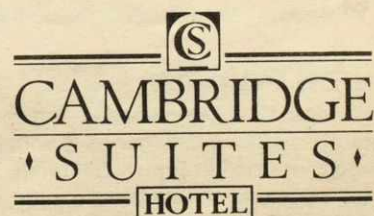
Les Arbres d'Or will be performed from April 10th-12th at

8 p.m. in the Sir James Dunn Theatre, Dalhousie Arts Centre. Tickets are \$16 for students and seniors. For more information, call 1-800-874-1669.



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