

Fun and informative

by Ira Nayman

Documentaries get no respect.

Theatres won't show them because they aren't commercial enough. Most television stations won't show them because they compete with the station's own public affairs divisions (public stations like TVO and PBS are noteworthy exceptions).

The only place outside a university or studio film library to see a lot of documentaries is a film festival. And, this year's Festival of Festivals had some wonderful ones.

Gail Singer's *Wisecracks* was one of the best (second only to the superb *Hearts of Darkness*, reviewed last issue). Using a mixture of concert footage, archival footage and talking heads interviews, Singer (whose *True Confessions* made her a rarity: a director with more than one film at the Festival) looks at the lives of female stand-up comedians.

During the interviews, we find that female comics have all the same problems that male comics do: stage fright, hecklers, how to develop routines, etc. But, women comics also have problems specific to their gender: while anticipation is a major element making comedy work for men, women are often initially greeted with hostility which they must overcome. This is partially because men (who are usually in the majority of club audiences) cannot relate to jokes about women's experience. On a deeper level, comedy is seen as a male tool; women who use it threaten men's power in our society.

Another problem, discussed by members of Toronto theatre group The Clichettes, is the lack of respect from (predominantly male) critics. Shows which the critics would hail as

festival of festivals

Wisecracks
directed by Gail Singer
produced by Zinger Films and the NFB
Picture This: The Times of Peter Bogdanovich in Archer City Texas
directed by George Hickenlooper
produced by Kino-Eye America
Christo in Paris
directed by David and Albert Maysles
produced by Maysles Films
35 Up
directed by Michael Apter
produced by Granada Television
The Leader, His Driver and the Driver's Wife
directed by Nick Broomfield
produced by Lafayette Film Ltd.

innovative when created and performed by men are frequently ignored or criticized as being too "far out" when created and performed by women.

The issues are not dealt with in depth, however; the film is made up mostly of generous dollops of the women performing. They include Canadians (Sandra Shamas and The Clichettes), lesser known comedians (Faking It Three, Dreenagh Darrell, Deborah Theaker) and clips of old performers (from Lucille Ball and Mae West to Fanny Brice and Hattie McDaniel), as well as well-known North American comedians (ie — Paula Poundstone and Whoopi Goldberg).

Wisecracks is frequently hilarious and raises a number of issues. Few documentaries deliver as much.

Made for Studio D, the women's filmmaking unit at the National Film Board, *Wisecracks* will be available on video from the NFB (150 John Street; phone number: 973-9093).

You would expect that *Picture This: The Times of Peter Bogdanovich in Archer City, Texas*, directed by

George Hickenlooper, would be as interesting as *Hearts of Darkness*, which he co-directed, but it's not. Not even close.

The cast and some of the crew of *The Last Picture Show* are united twenty years later to film the sequel, *Texasville*. Hickenlooper's documentary gives the older, and supposedly wiser artists an opportunity to reflect on their original experience.

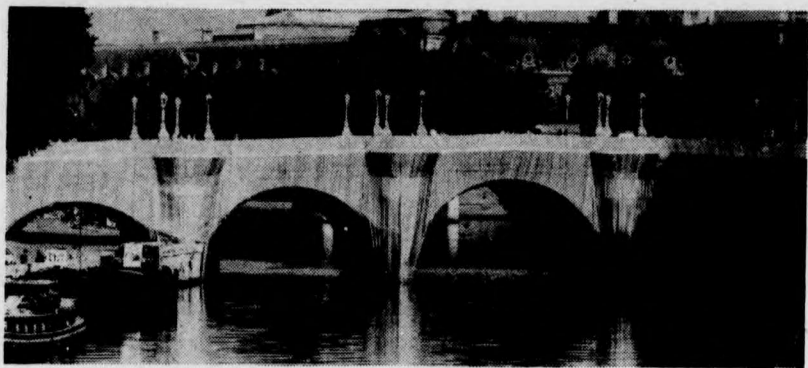
Unfortunately, they have no startling insights, nothing of particular historical (or other) interest to say. There are some interesting observations on the relationship between novelist Larry McMurtry and his home town and how the film changed the town; but, there is little light shed on the filmmaking process.

Besides, Peter Bogdanovich seems like a nice guy with a few quirks and a tragic personal life; he isn't nearly as compelling a figure as Francis Ford Coppola.

On the same bill was an unexpected delight: the Maysles brothers' *Christo in Paris*. Christo, a Bulgarian refugee visual artist living in Paris, had a vision of the famed Pont-Neuf Bridge completely covered in plastic. *Christo in Paris* explains what he hoped it would accomplish and how, after almost 10 years, it was finally done. We also get glimpses of his romance with Jeanne-Claude de Guillebon and an unflattering portrait of then-Paris Mayor (now French Prime Minister) Jacques Chirac.

"Art is transformation," Christo says in the film. By wrapping familiar objects, he hopes to provoke people to reassess the way they look at things, and, ultimately, question the nature of art and reality.

"Too often, documentaries are the poor brothers," of theatrical films



The Pont-Neuf Bridge, successfully wrapped in canvas by French artist Christo. *Christo in Paris* was one of many delightful documentaries at this year's Festival of Festivals.

noted director Michael Apter. Perhaps best known as the director of *Coal Miner's Daughter* and *Gorillas in the Mist*, Apter has also created a unique series of documentary films, the latest of which, *35 Up* premiered at the Festival of Festivals.

In 1963, Apter filmed a group of seven year-old children from a variety of backgrounds, primarily interested in how they thought their lives would go. Since then, he has filmed the same group at seven year intervals.

Although originally intended as a commentary on how expectations are determined by class, the series has taken on universal philosophical issues, particularly how what we want out of life changes over time.

All of the people I know hated the last installment, *28 Up*. I loved it. I feel the same way about *35 Up*; it is a welcome look at the lives of people who are fast becoming old friends.

Last, though by no means least, is *The Leader, His Driver and the Driver's Wife*, which chronicles British filmmaker Nick Broomfield's attempts to get an interview with South African fascist leader Eugene TerreBlanche, of the far right AWB. He doesn't quite get it, but he does

manage to make what he calls "a black comedy about the white right."

There is the danger that, in missing his main subject, Broomfield will become the subject of the film; while this does happen to a small extent, the filmmaker shifts his focus to the rank and file of the white supremacist movement in South Africa. In so doing, he paints a portrait of people who are religious fanatics, easily led by somebody charismatic and, well, not very smart.

TerreBlanche himself, when caught by the camera, comes across as dictatorial, high-handed, prone to whims and not totally sane. The portrait is largely comic, but darkens when we are confronted by facts about how many weapons the AWB owns, and becomes chilling when three AWB members explain that they are against racial mixing because Blacks spread AIDS through sex; if they wait long enough, they figure AIDS will kill off all the Blacks in South Africa.

By taking an ironic attitude towards its subject, and putting the words of the people onscreen in a relevant social context, *The Leader, His Driver and the Driver's Wife* is the film that *Blood in the Face*, which dealt with white American racists, should have been.

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