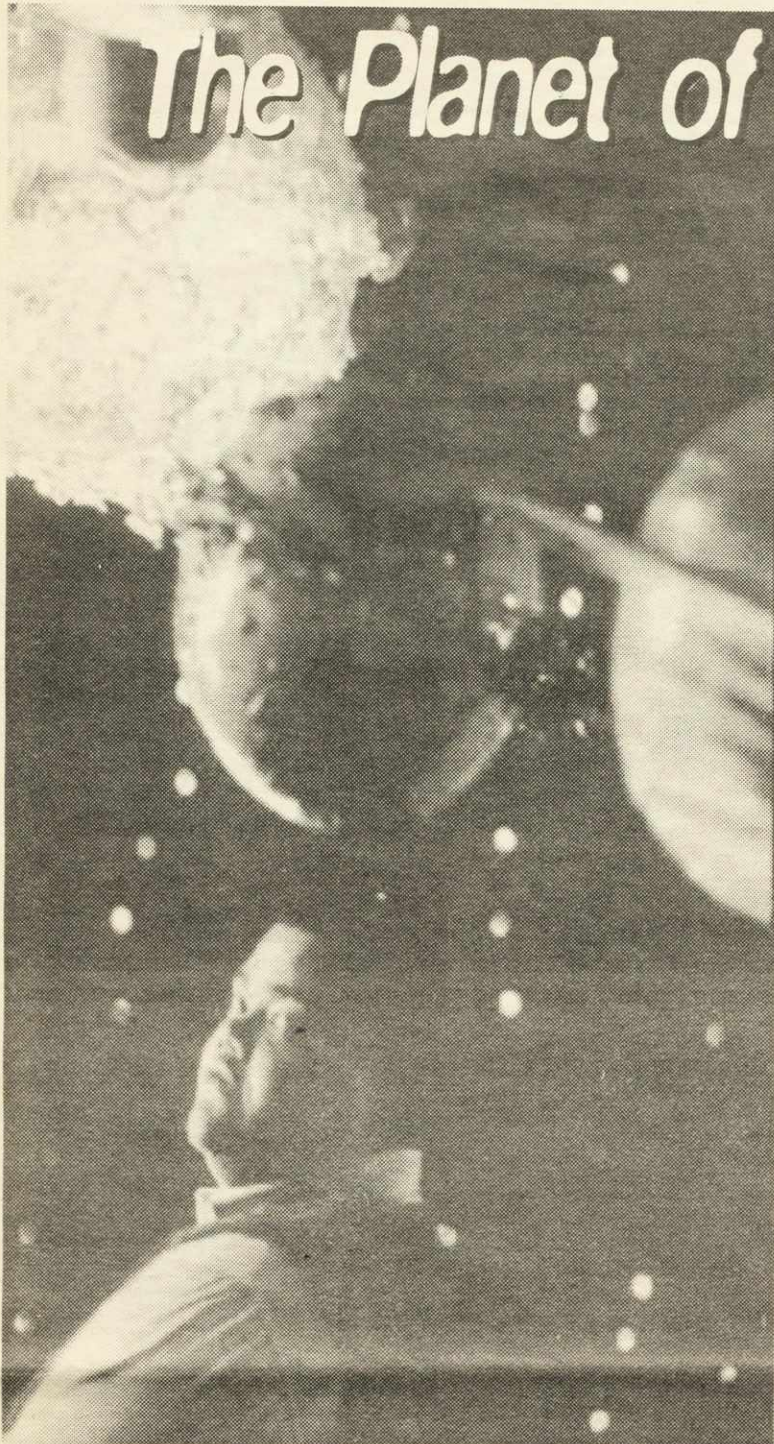


ARTS & CULTURE

The Planet of Junior Brown work of art



BY DAISY KIDSTON

It was a strong sadness I experienced when I saw *The Planet of Junior Brown*, the final movie shown in the series of international films by black directors at the Dalhousie Art Gallery.

In keeping with the excellence of the other films shown in the series, this film was wonderful, both in terms of content and artistry. However, I enjoyed this movie the most because it broke my heart by forcing me to look at things that are difficult to acknowledge the existence of in our comfortable society. In fact, I was exhausted by the end of the film, rather overwhelmed with emotion, as were others with me.

The Planet of Junior Brown, made in 1997, is directed by Clement Virgo, a Jamaican-born film maker raised in Canada.

The film takes place during Christmas time on the streets and inside dark, strange buildings in a poor district of Toronto. Junior Brown (Martin Villafana) the central character, is an obese teenage piano prodigy who lives with his diabetic, rather insane, possessive mother (Lynn Whitfield).

His best friend who looks out for him is Buddy Clark (Rainbow Sun Francks), a gentle but tough street kid who is scarred physically and mentally by a family fire that killed his baby sister. Sarah Polley,

who you may know from the TV series *Road to Avonlea* and such films as *The Sweet Hereafter*, plays a young street girl nicknamed Butter who is a victim of sexual abuse.

The film follows the lives of these three characters, giving us gritty scenes of the lives of poor street kids, and the stunted genius of Junior Brown who, because of poverty and cruelty, does not have access to a real piano.

It is frustrating to watch Brown play at a piano without strings, or on the coffee table at the impoverished apartment of his so-called piano teacher, the crazy Miss Peebs.

When Buddy and Junior are not in the basement of Junior's school contemplating a model of the solar system under the guidance of the school's janitor, Mr. Pool (Clark Johnson), they go to a piano store to ogle at a baby grand which the store owner will not let Junior touch.

The movie kept me on the edge of my seat, waiting for the climactic moment when Junior is actually able to play a real piano. Fortunately, it does happen.

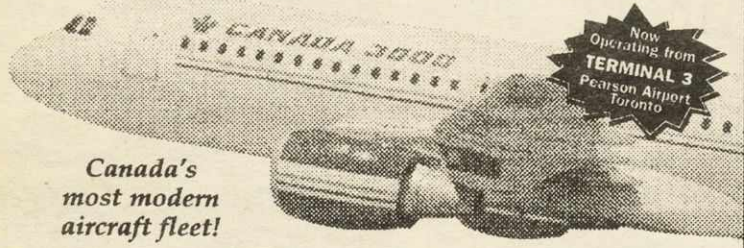
The lives of Buddy and Butter are also compelling (if not gut-wrenching to watch) as they are a combination of both violence and innocence. As is likely the case for most street kids, Buddy and Butter live in two worlds or "planets". Though they experience daily the

tough, violent world of the streets, they also have the safe haven of what Buddy calls his "planet", an abandoned room which, despite his scars from the fire, he fills with candles giving it a warm, maternal glow. It is no coincidence that this safe haven is the setting for almost all the happy scenes in the movie.

The Planet of Junior Brown is also a provocative film for the reason that it artistically cloaks different facts about the characters' lives in mystery, choosing to enlighten the viewer with sudden flashbacks to the past giving the viewer an idea, but not completely providing all the pieces of the puzzle.

Some things eternally remain in mystery, such as the couple who videotape Butter for some likely dark and twisted purpose, or the story of Mr. Pool, the janitor of the school, who in his spare time, has become an underground philosopher, teacher and astronomer, sharing his wisdom with Buddy and Junior in their clandestine classroom.

The Planet of Junior Brown is Virgo's second feature length film, following his first successful 1995 film *Rude*, which he wrote, produced and directed. Virgo has also won numerous short films which boast some colourful names such as *A Small Dick Fleeshy Ass Thang* (1991), *Split Second Pullout Technique* (1992), and *Save My Lost Nigga* (1993).



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TORONTO	—	16:05 ¹⁰ 22:15 ⁷	—	16:05	11:30 ¹ 16:35	—	—
ST. JOHN'S	—	06:00 11:05 ⁴ 17:15 ² 20:10 ⁶	—	06:00 ⁵ 10:25 21:35 ³	—	—	—

HALIFAX DEPARTURES TO USA

ST. PETERSBURG	—	—	17:50	—	—	—	07:20
FT. LAUDERDALE	—	—	07:00	—	—	—	—
ORLANDO	17:50	11:05 ⁸	07:00	—	—	—	—

¹ Begins April 12 ² Begins April 19 ³ Ends April 18 ⁴ Week of April 1 only
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