FILM REVIEW

VERA and LIFE CLASSES

Reviewed by Randi Spires

Although many of the films most hooplahed and hyped by both the 11th Montréal World Film Festival and the 12th Toronto Festival of Festivals were indeed worthy of such attention, other equally interesting films were often missed by both the press and the public.

One of these films was *Vera* (screened at Montréal), a first feature film by Brazilian director Sergio Toledo. Luckily, for readers of this journal, it found a North American distributor and, by the time you read this, should be making the rounds of the art house circuit.

The heroine, if one can call her that, is an 18-year old orphan by the name of Vera Bauer, who is convinced that she is a man trapped in the body of a woman. At the start of the film Vera — or the more masculine 'Bauer' as she prefers to be called — has just been put under the guardianship of a kindly professor who is associated with a high-tech research institute. His motivation for taking this poorly educated, but obviously bright working class girl under his wing is not clear; he does, however, seem impressed with her angst-ridden, yet tender adolescent poetry.

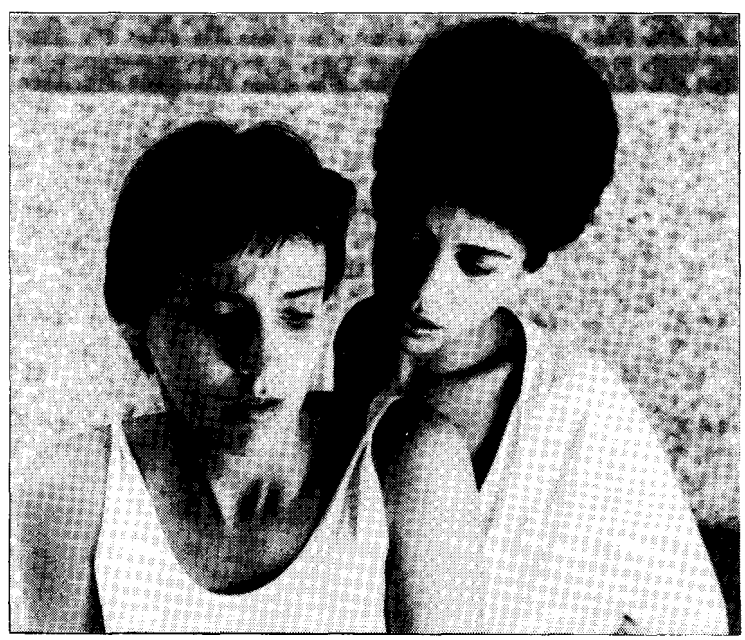
Throughout the film present-day events are smoothly intercut with scenes of Vera's previous life in an oppressive, jail-like orphanage. If reports from the daily press are to be believed, this, unfortunately, is an all too accurate depiction of such Brazilian institutions. But in this film the orphanage is also a metaphor for how trapped Vera is by her class, her gender and her sexuality. Compounding this is her cultural and political isolation, which effectively bars her from the information available through feminist and gay literature and institutions, for instance, which might help her construct a more comfortable identity. Without this, she arrives at the simplistic assumption that because men desire women and she desires women, she must therefore be a man.

The director of the orphanage is highly concerned with keeping order and with easing his charges into correct feminine behavior. We never see the girls at school. But we do see them doing factory work — assembling dolls — genderless types (which are presumed female because they lack any outward anatomical signs of maleness).

We watch Vera inserting blue eyes, although the toys are meant for a nation of mostly brown-eyed people. The girls' work is in part a metaphor for the way in which female sexuality is socially constructed and passed on from mother to daughter, generation after generation, in ways so unnoticed they appear to be almost 'natural.' The blue eyes signify both the colonial (read American and Northern European) standards of beauty which have been imposed on Latin American peoples and the impossible ideals to which women are expected to aspire.

Saying "I'm concerned about this butch girl business," the director of the orphanage attempts to make these young women wear skirts, make-up and other signs of submission to heterosexual norms and to make them interact with the male inmates of another institution. When poor Vera is forced to watch her girlfriend happily dancing with a boy, the pain and desire on her face is poignantly clear.

Knowing only the norms of patriarchy, the girls adopt a social structure complete with masculine names, power relations and blood ceremonies reminiscent of male prison culture. They divide themselves into 'families.' The dominant girl is known as the grandfather. One girl says of another, "Tunica, he's a super girl." At the research institute Vera adopts a style of dress and gesture which gradually becomes more and more masculine. This alienates her none-too-liberal colleagues, and she loses her job. When she attempts to form a relationship with Clara, a heretofore heterosexual woman, Vera's stereotypically male behavior (jealousy, bossiness) threatens it. Despite the hurt she has suffered at the hands of sexist males, her view of sexual politics is rather traditional. This clashes



***Ana Beatriz Nogueria [left] in Sergio Toledo's* Vera**

with the more egalitarian expectations of middle class Clara.

But the most profound crisis of their relationship occurs in bed, brought on by Vera's refusal to remove her jockey shorts and her men's undershirt and let Clara touch her. Exposing her body, even to another woman, would force Vera to reveal both to herself and to others that she is very much a woman. It would also force her to acknowledge her social and political weakness, something she has spent a great deal of effort obscuring. She has fooled only herself — and Clara's parents, who are eager to see their daughter safely attached to an acceptable man.

Throughout the film we repeatedly see pictures of high technology (images of a Challenger launch) and of male culture run amok (combat news footage). For a Brazilian audience, scenes of the research centre may evoke pride that their supposedly third world country is somehow associated with the frontiers of American technology. But beneath the substantial cultural and technological achievements of modern day Brazil lies an underclass rife with poverty and despair. In this film Brazil's embrace of the American space program is a metaphor for that country's acceptance of American technology and values.

The technology which launched the Challenger was flawed; the result was a deadly explosion. So, too, are there bound to be imperfections in the process by which women are colonized by the patriarch and the third world colonized by the first. But people are much more complex than bundles of fuel. In order to make changes they must develop a conscious understanding of their situation. The film sadly suggests that Vera is incapable of doing so.

In the final scene a bank of video monitors is set within the rubble of the orphanage (her past). Vera's face, rather than the accelerating rocket or the fighting soldiers, is seen projected there, visible on every screen. This indicates her further integration into patriarchal ideologies.

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Economically, at least, the Maritimes have long been the underdeveloped part of Canada. Many of the more isolated outports of Newfoundland and villages of Cape Breton retain much of their traditional way of life to this day.

Life Classes, a film by Nova Scotia director Bill MacGillivray (screened in Toronto) celebrates female connectedness and resilience. "My daughter's my mother returning ..." go the words of a lilting folk song heard repeatedly throughout the film. These ties predate patriarchy and have allowed women to live through its various oppressions. They also, the director suggests, give women greater flexibility to better weather the coming changes.

The central character of the film is Mary Cameron, whose journey through physical and emotional space is effected by her ties to various other women. At first she is a naive, dull young woman, 30ish, still living at home and caring for both her beloved aging granny and her judgmental father, who has never forgiven Mary's mother some unspeakable, 30 year-old offence. Nonetheless, his attitudes don't dampen Mary's yearnings for information about her long-departed mother. Like her mother, Mary is fond of painting but she is so culturally underdeveloped that she believes paint-by-numbers is art, and proudly signs her work.

In this film the instigator of both personal and social change is Earl, the local jock. By bringing in a pirate satellite dish he ensures that the outside world will at last penetrate this isolated village. By making Mary pregnant, he inadvertently sets her down the road to Halifax where she undergoes some far-reaching changes. In both cases Earl is simply an agent. The people of the village desire the technology he brings to them as much as Mary seems to desire him sexually. Neither was fully prepared for the results.

Mary survives in Halifax because she has the help of a number of female mentors. Her landlady, Mrs. Miller, meanwhile helps Mary by babysitting her daughter and by not pressing her too hard for the rent money. She, too has gone through the trauma of dislocation. Ten years previously the city sent bulldozers (low technology but still technology) in to raze the Black community of Afriqueville. A replay of the event on local television sends Mrs. Miller into tears. Despite the pain, she has survived. Her ability to do so is an example and an inspiration for Mary.

***Jacinta Cormier in Bill MacGillivray's* Life Classes**

Mary's intellectual and artistic growth is encouraged by Gloria, an art student from Toronto whom she meets while working part-time at a chain store. Mary's reaction to a lecture on Cubism at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design is one of dismay, "Those women were really evil," she says of the lecture slides. Mary's ability to change is thus shown to be real but circumscribed. She will always remain grounded in the realist traditions in which she grew up. At Gloria's suggestion, Mary begins earning extra money posing nude for

life drawing classes at NSCAD. She becomes as much a student as an employee, practicing on her own daughter the very exercises she has modelled for.

In contrast, the work of the chipper but alienated Gloria consists of a hilarious, rather superficial construction of rope and green plastic garbage bags. The different orientations of the two young women are highlighted during a lecture by a visiting German artist, whose work is abstract and theoretical, at once elegant and cold. In tune with the methods of industrial production, the woman designs the specifications; others make the artifacts. This astonishes Mary whose vision of the artist is of someone who by necessity produces work hands-on. She asks a series of seemingly simplistic questions, culminating with the embarrassingly elementary, "What do you do?" The more sophisticated Gloria then rescues both parties by changing the line of enquiry.

The apotheosis of the film takes place during a performance developed by a visiting female New York artist, whose relationship to Halifax parallels that of Halifax to Cape Breton. The participants are lured by money and curiosity — the same motivations Earl had for acquiring the satellite dish. Each stands within a circle, enclosed by a clear plastic shower curtain, improvising a monologue on their most intimate concerns. The performances are supposed to be broadcast only in New York, but Earl's illegal dish picks it up: Mary's father is mortified, Earl is acutely embarrassed, but Mary is able to handle the situation with equanimity.

Like *Vera*, this film is framed by images of technology. The opening and closing sequences feature a slow motion look at a sale, in a modern shopping mall, of a now obsolete generation of televisions. Like the culture of the Cape Breton villages, these machines, once state of the art, have now become devalued and will soon be discarded. The Marys of this world — those who are capable of growing beyond the old definitions without losing their roots — will survive best. Culture has become a commodity. Everything — including those things which nourish human sensibilities — is for sale.