john walker: the deeps of doc directing

by Janis Cole

ACCLAIMED DOCUMENTARY DIRECTOR JOHN WALKER launched the Canadian Perspective programme at Hot Docs 2003 with his cinematically stunning *Men of the Deeps*. This riveting effort was directed, co-produced, written and shot by the veteran filmmaker whose career in recent years seems to be reaching greater heights.

Walker's trademark as a documentary director has much to do with his eye, lens and aperture. By selecting his own frames on celluloid in super-16mm, which was blown up to 35 mm, he achieved a richness in *Men of the Deeps* that stood out among the genre's ever increasing number of digital doc offerings. Walker began his career as a highly regarded photographer and moved into film in the mid-seventies when Budge Crawley handed him a movie camera to shoot *A Song for A Miner*. Almost thirty years later he has come full circle, and this time the film is entirely his own.

Men of the Deeps is about the last of 275 coal mines closing down in Cape Breton. It's equally about thirty of its gruff-looking miners who have formed a singing group called Men of the Deeps, who deliver their strong repertoire of emotional mining songs to Canadian audiences. Walker cleverly weaves their lyrics into the narrative of his film, portraying the miners with great respect and integrity, and giving them two roles in the documentary, as men in the pits and on the stage.

Miners recall, with difficulty, the loss of their comrades and their own experiences getting black lung. Then the same men, dressed up in miner's gear, faces forlorn but hearts engaged, retell these very same perils in song. A subtle sequence shows the men filmed in groups discussing their loyalty and bonds to their fellow miners. This is intercut with footage of their wives hovered around a kitchen table discussing the fear and uncertainty about what their husband's work lives are like. We never see the men in the same frame as their wives. This visual choice clearly illustrates what we learn from the miners. It seems their reliance on each other is greater than any other dependence in their lives, given that they work five miles underground, in filth and potential hazard, with only the other guys on their crew to rely upon.

One miner shares his belief that his work buddies would risk their lives to save him if necessary, adding that he would unquestionably risk his to save theirs. Another tells how the miners can discuss anything and everything without censor or fear of exposure because, "What's said in the pit will stay in the pit." The most powerful song, "We'll Rise Again," which closes the film, demonstrates just how much the sharing of songs acts as a spiritual release in the miner's otherwise harsh lives.

The life of the coal miners is one of darkness and danger while the life of the choir is about light, freedom and expression. The film is truly lovely to watch, and it's a crowd pleaser, picking up the third place audience choice award at Hot Docs. Walker's use of a double narrative is its main strength, allowing the men to tell their experiences and then present them in song.

While every frame is enjoyable, at an hour, there wasn't enough time for the film to be either an in-depth portrait of the miner's livelihoods being ripped away by the closing of the mine, nor an in-depth portrait of all that is involved in belonging to the singing group. It weaves the double lives of the miners with great skill, but one is left yearning for more on both fronts. Walker's film truly exemplifies the old saying, "better to leave them wanting more than feeling it will never end."

Men of the Deeps is the second Hot Docs premiere in three years for Walker. It seems like a good time to look back on his twenty-year film career, to chart his path as one of Canada's leading documentarians.

John Walker has evolved from cinematographer to director and he's added producer, writer and narrator to the credits of his fourteen films. (He's also shot another fifty.) His body of work is entirely in documentary with one brief sidestep into drama for the 1987 feature hit, *A Winter Tan*. Walker photographed the film, providing its sensuous look, and he co-directed with four others — Jackie Burroughs, Louise Clark, John Frizzell and Aerlyn Weissman-in what was then, and still is, a unique approach to dramatic directing. But not unlike other industrious documentarians, like Ron Mann (*Listen to the City*, 1984) and Gail Singer (*True Confections*, 1991) who dove into drama only once, Walker returned to his documentary roots for the long haul.

His first documentary as director was the 1982 *Chambers: Tracks and Gestures*, a portrait of the vastly productive, yet all-too-short life of major Canadian artist Jack Chambers, produced by the then budding

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Atlantis Film trio of Seaton MacLean, Michael MacMillan and Janice Platt. Walker went on to produce, direct and narrate a feature length artist portrait even closer to his heart, *Strand; Under the Dark Cloth*. It's a thorough examination of world-renowned photographer Paul Strand and a personal homage to his life's work. While the Strand film is more accomplished in almost every way, including its length, look, filmmaker/subject connection, and artistic and critical acclaim, it is the Chambers bio that moved me most.

The hour-long film opens with a voice and visual montage capturing the headlines of Chambers' brief life. A male voice (Ted Johns) narrates in first person fashion, starting with Chambers' birth and ending with his death from leukemia in1978, at the age of forty-seven, shortly after he'd set the art world on fire with the sale of one of his paintings for what was then the unheard amount of $25,000. Unlike the Strand film, which relies on the work rather than the man, "Chambers" is an unveiling of the artist through his work, and reaching to find his very soul. The film moves nicely, presenting the development of his life, his paintings and experimental films, in a portrait that eventually unearths his spiritual beliefs as he approaches his death.

Chambers is portrayed as an interesting character while Strand is more distant, merely the maker of interesting work. Chambers was searching for meaning in life; Strand's search was for the ultimate subject. Strand's second wife recalls him as a man whose passion and connection went into his work, leaving no room for touch or personal presence, while his third wife remembers a man whose photographs were his women, his children, the love of his life.

In contrast, Jack Chambers' friends fondly recall his return from Spain, where he'd received formal training for eight years, to bring his future wife Olga home to London Ontario. Jack sat with his back to the restaurant's entrance where Olga was to meet him while his friends sat facing the door. When a young woman walked in they asked Jack if it might be Olga. Without looking, he told them with absolute certainty that it was not. When a different woman entered some time later Jack told his friends, without turning to look, that Olga had arrived, and indeed she had. Olga's presence is felt throughout the portrait film of her husband, even though she did not participate on screen. Their bond appropriately concludes the film with a voice recalling how Olga asked her paper-thin, dying husband how he was feeling; Jack's response to her, that he was feeling "Just wonderful," says everything about the peace he had reached in their parting.

With artist portraits exhausted, John glided effortlessly into social essays on historic events. He made five one-hour films between 1990 and 1996 and all are memorable. *Hand of Stalin*, (two parts for the BBC-TV series of three), uncover the horrors of Stalinism through Walker's meticulous research and compassionate direction. *Hidden Children*, produced by Toronto's Sienna Films, introduces us to half a dozen survivors who hid their Jewish identities as young children in wartime Europe to save their lives. They escaped capture, but none have escaped the painful scars left from the devastation of losing family, living with memories of war crimes or having conflicts about their Jewish roots after being raised in Polish Catholic families. There is also *Orphans of Manchuria* about Japanese children orphaned in China after the war, and *Utshimassits: Place of the Boss* about the relocation of nomadic Innu to Davis Inlet, juxtaposing the sumptuous landscapes of Labrador with the sad demise of Innu history, language, traditions and culture.

Walker has called these five films his tragedies and they are indeed laced with unforgettably tragic moments. They are also expertly presented, often with his trademark images helping to tell the stories, and always showing great respect for his film characters that seem to go through purgative experiences by sharing their traumas with the worldly director. While all the films in this grouping are effective, the one affecting me most is *Hidden Children*. There is a scene I cannot shake from my mind.

We meet Maria, a Jewish woman who is, working out the math, in her late fifties, but with a weathered face that should belong to a seventy year old. Hidden at age nine, she was raised Polish Catholic and has always wanted to meet her Jewish relatives most of whom perished in the war, including her immediate family. After fifty years of longing, she goes to Israel with her daughter, who is about thirty. They meet, for the first time, Maria's uncle and his family. It's both tearful and joyful. Later, with her daughter sitting in the frame beside her, Maria cries while telling the filmmaker that she has at long last found happiness, that her entire life has been nothing but unhappiness, and that she has lived her whole life only for this moment of finding her Jewish roots. Her daughter says nothing. The absolute pain filling these two women makes you want to reach out to both. Their inability to embrace, or console each other in any way is shattering. Is there anything more tragic than a mother not finding happiness in her daughter, and her daughter having no words to call her on it, nor the warmth to embrace the sadness away?

Walker purposefully pulled away from historic tragedies in 1996, deciding to enter contemporary high school life in Toronto. He co-produced with the NFB, directing and shooting *Tough Assignment*, a feature-length, primarily verite film set at Oakwood Collegiate. The film sets out to capture a

year-in-the-life of four teachers. There's the former cop-turned-teacher with a Kindergarten level rulebook (and yes, she really does try to enforce it!), another who admits to regularly taking Tylenol to get through difficult classes, a mad professor type who endlessly juggles armfuls of work and a thirty-year veteran who likens teaching to babysitting teenagers. Did I ever have a deja-vu meeting these folks!

While the modern day teachers in *Tough Assignment* have shortcomings, none are bad or malicious. It's clear that they're trying to inspire students who are primarily apathetic. The best intentions of these educators are hopelessly lost in ineffectual results caused almost entirely by the lack of student reciprocation. Sadly, not much has changed in the thirty years since I was in high school.

The only significant change between '66 and '96 is the marked increase in ethnic students. The administration, teachers and janitors are mainly white, and they reign over a student population with strong Black, Asian and South Asian representation. All the Tylenol, babysitting juggling and rulebooks in the world will not close this gap. It's clear what needs to happen, but no one — at least at Oakwood — wants to address it. Surprisingly the topic of race is rarely touched upon, but if there has ever been a scream for change in the educational system, it's right there, in the subtleties of *Tough Assignment*.

After examining present day education, Walker seems to have yearned for a very different exploration. He turned his attention 360 degrees, landing on folkloric myth, and the magic of fairies. Walker set out on a journey to find out if the little creatures could be seen and captured on film. *The Fairy Faith* is visually lush and engaging. Walker directed, wrote, narrated and shot *The Fairy Faith* and he co-produced the feature-length doc with the NFB. While we never actually see a fairy in Walker's film, we meet some memorable characters who have surely spotted them.

Considering his career as a whole, one can draw some inferences, but no conclusions. The director/cinematographer still has much work in front of him. Still, one notices some things.

Walker uses his camera not as an instrument to probe at life but rather as a tool to capture it. He does this with great care. Walker speaks his commentary not as a voice-of-authority but one of thoughtful accompaniment. His work has taken viewers around the world, and deep down inside it. In his films, one witnesses personal tragedy and human triumph.

Personally, I have lost some faith in our schools, and found greater faith in fairies. I regret the government's misguided mismanagement of indigenous peoples. There's a painful mother and daughter relationship resting inside me. I've seen coal miners take to the stage as grand singers and witnessed that by raising their voices in song they can lift the human spirit. I'm confident that when the spirit is lifted, one can find peace in the face of death.

John Walker's body of work has not followed a linear trajectory, but rather a jagged path of vastly divergent topics and fluidly changing film roles. The personal pieces and the political ones; the whimsical style and the tragic tone: all are part of Walker's carefully crafted puzzle, leading him to an open door of discovery, where he'll undoubtedly recognize his next pursuit. **POV**

Janis Cole is an award winning film maker and scriptwriter. She won a Genie for P4W and the Toronto International Film Festival's John Spotton Award for Shaggie.