

## FILM REVIEW

# Toronto Festival of Festivals 1988

by Randi Spires

One of the most startling aspects of Margarethe von Trotta's first solo directorial effort, *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1978), is its premise: to those who are unaware that the film is based on a real-life incident, the idea that someone would rob a bank to get funds for a co-operative daycare center does seem a bit far-fetched.

The focus of von Trotta's work was the psycho-political development of her protagonist from the time of the armed robbery until just after her arrest. Unlike the fictional Klages, the real-life bank robber, Margit Czenki, did not take a hostage, did not run off to an idyllic Portuguese hideaway, and did not get off scot-free. Czenki, in fact, spent several years behind bars, including time in solitary confinement. It's not surprising, then, that when it came time for Margit Czenki to tell her story, she focussed not on the crime but on her incarceration. The result — *Accomplices* — is an amazingly accomplished first film.

With no hint of apology or self-justification, Czenki's cinematic alter-ego, Barbara, is portrayed as guilty as charged. The po-

litical nature of the heist is barely mentioned as Czenki delineates the cruelties of prison life.

For much of the film the camera is canted so that the viewer feels the disorientation a prisoner must experience. The camera moves almost continually, but the area revealed by each shot is usually narrow, with the larger picture only occasionally established. This fragmentation of vision reinforces the sense of disorientation. The result is an edgy prisoner-eye-view of the proceedings that is at once involving and distancing.

For it is difficult to identify with many of these women, some of whom committed serious crimes. Besides the bank robber and the inevitable junkie, there is a woman who murdered her child to keep

the girl from enduring the misery of a children's home; without agreeing with her "solution," one can feel a certain sympathy for her. It's unlikely she's a danger to anyone else; obviously she belongs in a mental hospital — not a jail.

Because few have a penchant for reading or writing, filling all those hours is a constant struggle. Solutions range from the conventional (gardening, needle-point) to the bizarre (one woman built a elaborate cockroach castle for what are normally the most unwelcome of cell-mates).

The condition that these women have been reduced to is that of closely-watched but deprived children. They are forbidden intimacy (denying children affection is called emotional abuse), permitted no privacy and kept from meaningful decisions about their lives. How penal authorities expect those incarcerated for any length of time to function upon release as emotionally mature, responsible citizens is a mystery.

The women are often understandably angry or frustrated but, for the most part, they don't lash out at their keepers. With no solutions to their problems and few ways



Pola Kinski, Terese Affolter, Marianne Rosenberg in Margit Czenki's ACCOMPLICES

of displacing their anger, it is almost inevitable that they occasionally erupt into childish tantrums, trashing their cells and often destroying those items they most value. Even the politicized Barbara succumbs at one point, overturning her bed, tossing her food about and smashing the flowers she has so carefully cultivated.

One of the highlights of the week appears to be the Sunday morning Church service. As they giggle and chatter under cover of the priestly chanting, and pass notes under the somewhat relaxed gaze of the guards, they are well aware that they are subverting a traditional ceremony. When they respond en masse with raised fists to another prisoner being led away for some minor infraction, this idea is reinforced. For the most part these women are not particularly political; indeed, their social attitudes are rather traditional and their most enduring attachments are to their husbands and children. But they do demonstrate that they are capable of conscious mass political actions, such as when they go on a hunger strike to protest Barbara's two-year stint in solitary.

When Czenki went behind bars, political prisoners had the choice of living with other politicians or staying with ordinary criminals (whom Czenki calls "social prisoners"). This opportunity is not given to political prisoners today, perhaps because of the success of Czenki's organizing efforts.

*Distant Voices/Still Lives*, British di-



Freda Dowle, Pete Postlethwaite, and Angela Walsh in Terence Davies' *DISTANT VOICES/STILL LIVES*

rector Terence Davies' second film, deservedly won the International Critics Award at the 1988 Festival of Festivals. His first film, the spare and depressing Terence Davies Trilogy, took ten years to make. Its stark black-and-white footage and austere style suited its subject — gay oppression and Catholic repression in working-class England during the 1950s and '60s.

*Distant Voices/Still Lives* is as autobiographically-based as the trilogy, but it's a much jollier film. These hard working-class lives do have their sunnier moments, although ultimately the feelings we are left with are emotional dislo-



Jackie Burroughs (Mrs. Ambrose) and Emma Richler (Joanna) in Lori Spring's *INSIDE/OUT*

cation and stifled potential. Structured around the death of the father, the film is basically a wake, an exploration of the love-hate relationship between the entire family and their brutal patriarch. *Still Lives* drifts slowly toward the wedding of the last child, an event that signals the disassembly of a once-strong, though traumatized nuclear family. These siblings are now all on their own with nothing

to lean on but their own strengths and the succour they find within social conventions. It is with sadness — and understanding — that one comes to realize how much of the worst aspects of their parents' lives these young people are already in the process of repeating.

In the repressed British working-class milieu, the men are allowed limited outlets for emotional expression — mainly for sports. They may be patriarchs, but their place within the broader social hierarchy isn't very high: they can consistently dominate only "their" women and children. Even in this context, the father's violence seems excessive. He sends his

schoolboy son away, forces one daughter into the basement with the rats, and throughout barely demonstrates a glimmer of affection. Only when he slaps two of the children for arriving late at the bomb shelter during an air raid, do we realize that, in his own way, he really does care for them. As he begrudgingly gives one of his daughters money to go dancing, we learn that this monster himself was once a "dance-mad" boy,

who loved to dazzle the crowd on the dance floor. What happened, then, to turn him from a charmer to a curmudgeon?

Women, on the other hand, are allowed more emotional latitude, although anger remains problematic. For both sexes one of the main releases from all this grimness is popular music. From the dance-crazy daughters of *Distant Voices* to the interminable rounds of pub singing in *Still Lives*, music is the balm which makes these tough lives bearable. The women seem to be the most enthusiastic singers. The men appear to be a little uncertain about whether or not this is a suitably masculine activity; they sing most comfortably in a military context.

One by one, each of the three sisters gets married and moves away from her father's house. The eldest girl particularly seems doomed to repeat her mother's unhappy story. We wince as we hear her new husband declare "You're married now. I'm your husband. Your duty is to me now. Frig everybody else."

As his sisters depart, Tony begins to feel more and more isolated both physically and emotionally. He, unlike many other men, will not go happily into the masculine emotional night; at his own wedding he sobs profusely. As the youngest child and the last to be wed, the new responsibilities of family life burn in him like a wound. For Tony, as for many of the others, only the healing powers of art and song and memory remain.

*Distant Voices/Still Lives* is often as non-linear and illogical as memory and poetry. It contains images of astonishing beauty, which work through tone and rhythm in much the same way as does the music the director and his characters so obviously love.

Among the films screened in this year's Perspectives Canada program was *Inside/Out*, a half-hour drama by Toronto director Lori Spring. *Inside/Out* tells the tale of Joanna, a woman afflicted with an acute case of existential agoraphobia. Unlike the women in *Accomplices* and the people in *Distant Voices/Still Lives*, Joanna's isolation appears to be self-imposed.

We are not told how this alienation came about, only given indications of its existence. From the unnerving wail of a siren to the harried faces of pedestrians, everything Joanna notices confirms her present state of mind and reinforces her decision to retreat.

Joanna's decision to withdraw from the world may stem from impending panic, but her methods are calm and controlled, and her resources fairly bountiful. She lives in a spacious loft, has plenty of trendy furniture and the latest electronic and exercise equipment. She can afford to have her food delivered, has friends who are willing to run errands for her and can exercise her profession (she's a writer) at home. She is not Every-woman.

Joanna's coolness initially makes it difficult to like her, but Emma Richler's sympathetic performance gradually draws one in. Joanna eats healthfully, exercises regularly and works steadily. For someone who complains of feeling disembodied she certainly takes good care of herself both physically and mentally, unlike many women whose isolation is due to depression, not philosophy. The only thing Joanna seems to lack is a personal life.

This overriding rationality both attracts and repels the viewer. The orderliness of her life is appealing. And most of us have, many times, felt overwhelmed by a world crowded with people and information, obligations and expectations. Anyone who has endured the frustration of trying to find a quiet public corner, restaurant or elevator will understand her complaint that "we have lost any contact with the wisdom of silence."

Yet all this reasonableness is disquieting.

Joanna explains her condition by saying "I must live carefully because I am not carefree." If she were ill or had family responsibilities, this statement would be more credible. "Beyond these walls," she continues, "I become a prisoner of circumstance," and so she circumscribes her own prison.

After a while one begins to suspect that underneath all that calmness swirls turbulence. Our suspicions are confirmed as we watch Joanna tattoo a butterfly on her arm. The desire for decoration is a longing for something beyond the purely functional, and the painful procedure is also an indication of her need to pierce the shell of her rationality and let a little chaos through. It is also a sign that certain events which she will not be able to control as easily as that tattooing needle will soon penetrate the skin of her isolation.

While Joanna may not physically leave her apartment she continues to interact

with the world through machines (telephone, computer, answering machine and a video camera). She also allows selected elements of the outside world to enter her domain: the grocery delivery boy, her mother, and friends for a dinner party. Of all these machines the pivotal one is the video camera, through which she initiates contact with the elderly woman across the street and through which she attempts to communicate her plight to her dinner guests.

We never see her watch television; we hear only the radio in the background. Television, because it has both pictorial and auditory elements, has a verisimilitude that radio does not. But a televised version of events is as mediated, constructed and false (and true) as that of any other medium. Joanna's reaction to her own feelings of unreality is to simulate contact with the world through her video camera. She wants contact with the old woman, but can only make a parodic connection by taping her. Occasionally, their eyes meet and they communicate in mute gestures like players in a silent film.

Mrs. Ambrose's situation is the reverse of Joanna's: as an elderly woman, her isolation is physical and unwilling, not conceptual and voluntary. Jackie Burroughs' performance in this small role is simply amazing; without saying a single word, she conveys a wealth of emotions.

Try as they will, neither individuals nor nations can completely control their boundaries. Joanna's dinner guests bring along a visiting American artist, Eric. He doesn't belong to their circle, he's a bit of a jerk, and his insistent questions (which border on rudeness) upset Joanna's complacency with her routine: "If you don't go out," he maintains, "you're not dealing with anything." In a scene just prior to this, we hear a radio news report about immigration.

Eric's words prove prophetic. Once again it becomes hard to sympathize with Joanna as she frets about what to do about the obviously deteriorating Mrs. Ambrose.

*Inside/Out*, which won the award for best film under 30 minutes and best music score at the 1988 Yorkton Film Festival, works both intellectually and emotionally, (with a few minor reservations on the emotional side). Lori Spring works well with actors and is a talented writer to boot. It all augurs well for her future films.