

F I L M

THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

by K. George Godwin

The screen is uniformly grey; gradually, vague shadows resolve into a group of elderly women walking towards the camera, hobbling, limping, supporting each other as they come close and then walk past. Cynthia Scott's film, *The Company of Strangers*, takes these women—and by implication the elderly in our society—and gives them space to walk out of obscurity and into the viewer's consciousness. We are made aware of them as beings full of life, whose lives have been full; we see that growing old does not mean a winding down, a loss of thought and emotion. The film's achievement is to make us see these women not as "old people," but rather as "people who are old."

The Company of Strangers is a deceptively simple film. There is virtually no plot to speak of. On a bus trip in rural Quebec, a group of women is diverted by the suggestion of Constance, the oldest among them, to seek out an old farm she once visited as a child. The bus breaks down, stranding them. They don't find the place they were looking for, but as Mary says in a voice-over at the film's beginning, "What we did find was completely unexpected."

What the seven women and their young driver enter is an idyllic breathing space which allows them to reveal themselves to one another, to discover points of contact and difference. They learn that they are not alone and isolated, but that their years of experience have equipped them to survive together and to continue to grow.

The film accumulates small moments, brief conversations, gradually revealing the women's lives and opinions. Humour erupts spontaneously; fears are exposed at unpredictable moments. But there is always a sense of the women's strength underlying the film's quiet events. Catherine, the nun, doggedly tries to repair the bus

and, when she fails, walks out for help. Alice devises a fish trap from some twigs and a pair of pantyhose. Beth, self-composed and reserved, helps Catherine to catch a bucket full of frogs for dinner. Mary, the artist, is endlessly absorbed in the motion of nature around her. Cissie, survivor of a stroke, views everything with humour. Only Constance, who has separated herself from the group, struggles with despair. Facing her own mortality and unable to join in the group's antics, she contemplates her physical frailty and her inability to hear the birdsounds she loves.

What makes *The Company of Strangers* more than a charming and touching comedy is the fact that none of these women is an actor and none has been in a film before. The lives they speak of and the experiences they relate are all personal. Although the situation is contrived, what they tell about themselves is not.

The Company of Strangers, a National Film Board production, was directed by Cynthia Scott, a documentary filmmaker originally from Winnipeg. Beginning as a script assistant for CBC, she worked her way up through researcher to television producer in Toronto. In 1972, she moved to the NFB to make *The Ungrateful Land*, an award-winning portrait of the Quebec village in which writer Roch Carrier was born. In 1984, her film *Flamenco at 5:15* won an Academy Award. More than a documentary record of a class at the National Ballet School, the film uses highly formalized camera movement and editing to interpret the music and motion of *Flamenco* as an expression of spiritual energy.

For her first feature, Scott chose to make an "alternative drama." This form, developed at the NFB by John Smith and Giles Walker in a number of films in the '80s, is a hybrid of narrative and documentary, using non-actors in situations which closely parallel their own lives. In Smith's films particularly, the form is used to deal with social issues (the problems of black urban teenagers in *Sitting in Limbo*; the Sri Lankan boat people in *Welcome to Canada*; a juvenile's prison experiences in *Train of Dreams*). He is currently working on a project about Mount Cashel in Newfoundland.

In the early stages of planning *The Company of Strangers*, Scott worked on several possible scenarios for the film, including one which would have fallen more closely into the social realism category. "The story could be about a group of old people who occupy a low-cost housing project," said the filmmaker, "who take control of their lives. We turned our thoughts around to what are the things that could be better for old people. Certainly one of the problems is that they're disempowered, they're second-rate citizens. They're not young and beautiful, they're not sexy."

Although Scott recognized there were lots of depressing things about old age, she didn't feel there was much to recommend a film "that was going to be full of darkness. It would benefit no one and it wouldn't be fun to watch."

Initially, she had intended to have men as well as women in the film, but relatively few men turned up at the auditions. This is not surprising, given the statistic that for every man over the age of 70 there are five women. This imbalance is reflected in the film, particularly in a scene where several of the women discuss whether or not—given the opportunity—they would fall in love again. The bonding they experience throughout the film is coloured by an underlying awareness of the aloneness they face within the limits of their "real" life.

In seeking a situation in which a group of older people could reclaim some power over their lives, Scott, with writer Gloria Demers, came up with the simple storyline of stranding the group in the woods where they would have to find ways of dealing with each other and with their unfamiliar circumstances. Initially, Scott wanted the group to consist of a travelling chamber orchestra that could provide the film with "wonderful music." But the task of finding a group of skilled musicians who also fitted the requirements of character proved too difficult. A group of "ordinary mortals" was settled on instead: "Nearly everyone had to be cajoled, begged, persuaded to be in the movie," says Scott. "They were all very hesitant."

The film, which contains a range of "types"—a nun, a lesbian, a Native woman—falls into a narrative tradition that



gathers together representative individuals who symbolize society in microcosm. Yet in *Strangers*, the women remain stubbornly individual, their differences so integral to who they are that they wear them like badges.

Although writer Gloria Demers was at work on various scripts for the project while casting was underway, it was expected—given the nature of alternative drama—that whatever was written ahead of time would be tentative:

We assumed these women all were strangers to each other, and we knew they were for the most part shy, so we expected that their life experience would follow easily the story experience, that they would be scared, that they would be vulnerable. We thought the story might have a natural line of feeling inadequate and scared and then they would take power. Well, they were empowered almost from the day they all met each other. They did get stronger and stronger and they did have more and more fun and they did draw closer and closer to each other as they got to know each other. So we would script scenes and predict what might happen in a scene; then we

would turn them loose. We certainly didn't want them ensnared with dialogue that they had to learn. So sometimes they speak lines, but anything that speaks of any real emotional truth comes from them.

It was necessary to allow the women to create the scenes from their own experience and feelings, so perhaps 25 minutes of film would be shot in order to get the material for what would eventually be a three-minute scene. Because the women were not actors, it proved impossible to get them to repeat anything, so Scott shot with two cameras to get the necessary material. In order to generate the spark necessary to ignite a scene, the process required patience and a sensitivity to the personalities of the women:

Sometimes you start a scene and just nothing is happening and it's boring and even if it's not your fault, since you're the boss, you take it all terribly personally and think you're an utter failure. Then suddenly magic would happen in the last five minutes. And the women were enormously inspirational. Every morning when I'd see them getting out



of their van and walking up the hill to the farmhouse, I'd feel, 'Oh my god, I've got to do something for them, they're so wonderful.'

It's this improvisational nature of alternative drama that blurs the line between fiction and documentary. Although the actual circumstances are established by the filmmaker, whether it works or not depends upon non-actors:

Sometimes it would be simple. 'Okay, today you'll make smoke signals. Alice, you're the Indian in the group, you know how to make smoke signals.' 'No, I don't! I've never done it in my life.' 'Well, you're in charge, you're appointed.' We were looking for comedy too, so all of you get into the act. You get this kind of chaotic squabbling and they're just funny. So you turn them loose. In other cases, you're more controlled.

On a production like this, obviously there are two levels of experience occurring simultaneously: in real terms, this group of women has been taken out of the normal run of their lives, set down in rural Quebec to make a film—perhaps a far

more radical adventure for them than being stranded on a broken-down bus. The second level of experience occurs within the narrative itself, the construct within which they are to play themselves as characters. As Scott points out, the real experience was extremely empowering for the women: meeting one another and making a film proved to be exciting and entertaining. But within the terms of the narrative line set down by Scott and Demers, there were certain requirements which conflicted with the spirit of the real adventure:

I was getting very worried that the movie was beginning to look like Pollyanna-land. Everybody was just having too much fun. I mean, it's just part of the human condition that there's a lot of pain. So that scene between Cissie and Alice was planned; I knew I needed a scene where some of the fear and pain of old age would surface. I also knew in script terms that if they'd been lost on location for two days and the bus had broken down again, their good spirits would be starting to fade, they'd be feeling weak, hungry; their vulnerability and suspicion that maybe they just weren't going to make it could cause them to start dwelling on dark things. So on that morning I took Cissie and Alice away from the group, because whenever they were together they were just whooping and hollering and having fun. They understood exactly, they were pros by then. They went off and prepared themselves emotionally like real actors would. And just having allowed themselves to get lonely and depressed and isolated for an hour, they started that scene with that tone. It was amazing. And it was tricky. We all just wanted to cut and put our arms around them and hug them, but by then they knew what they were doing. There was real emotion coming

out of them and it's a very touching scene. The content . . . What is it Cissie calls it? Being destitute? We all have that fear. We all fear being bag ladies or bag men. But the quirkiness of Cissie, when she says she dreads her son dying because she doesn't have any others and people are lucky if they have two because if one dies they still have another, was amazing. And I knew that Alice couldn't bear the fact that she wasn't going to see her great-grandson.

The point, says Scott, is that with this technique you get an authenticity of experience which cannot be duplicated with actors, while at the same time you get closer to the women than would be possible in a straightforward documentary. Also by placing them together, the viewer gets a greater sense of who they are than could be obtained through interviews and documentary observance of the details of their lives. The interaction sparks things within each individual that would remain dormant in the more detached interaction between documentarist and subject. "There is something about storytelling," Scott explains. "It's an entertainment for us. In a documentary, I don't think you'd have been beguiled in the same way."

The blurring of boundaries that occurs in a film like *The Company of Strangers* raises certain questions. Perhaps foremost is why there should seem to be a theoretical problem involved at all. The film, in the end, is simply what it is: gentle and, as Scott says, beguiling. The film's most powerful effect is to shatter the view of the elderly as "other." It evokes the continuity of the women's lives, the progression which has led them to where they now are.

Even so, there is a tension established within the narrative. "In the fictitious structure,"

Scott says, "they use some of the real texture of their lives." But, as in any film, there is ultimately an overriding factor, the filmmaker herself, whose intentions shape the details into something that she wishes to convey. "There's a strange complicity, they let us take advantage of them because they trust us and know that we're after something that's real."

Reality, then, becomes a shifting category. The truths of fiction may at times push aside the documentary truth. The clearest instance of this lies in the treatment of Constance. Throughout the film, she appears withdrawn and often depressed, only occasionally lightening up for a moment with another character:

That was who Constance was. On any given day she fluctuated between exhilaration at being out in nature and sinking into despair about the absurdity of life because it ends in this awful, degrading, terrible way. She was very affected by the fact that she was getting old and frail, and that actually increased between the time we cast her and when they all arrived on set. So we had to reflect her state in the story. She wasn't acting. She would doze off. I actually think she was under too much medication. We had scripted her to be a more active figure; we had thought that she might somehow, at least in fiction, take charge of her life again and start living it fully and get rid of the depression. In fact, the god-damned pills she was taking were contributing to her depression. But there was nothing I could do about that. I had to incorporate it.

And yet, in what is possibly the film's most narrative-driven scene, Scott has Constance empty her pills into the lake. In the film's terms, it is a symbolic gesture of resignation and acceptance. The character Constance, returning to the idyllic nature she has loved since childhood, is

finally able to face her own imminent end. But in real terms, the scene is false:

We made Constance throw away her pills. Now that's storytelling; that didn't happen and that hasn't happened, although the movie gave her a wonderful experience late in life which has sustained her and kept her going. There's no question it's a mix of both, but I think the movie has a power that straight fiction wouldn't have had. I think it's far more interesting than a documentary and I don't think it's a cheat.

The point may be academic, and yet the fact remains that the film draws its considerable power from the casting of "real people" rather than actors, and from the use it makes of their own life histories. Perhaps alternative drama is merely one way of facing the tricky question of documentary objectivity (it should be pointed out that Scott herself does not see the film as in any way a "documentary"). In this form, the filmmaker admits her own presence and influence on the material, and extends that presence far beyond what would be acceptable in a straight documentary. The alternative drama is one way to escape the censure heaped on a film such as *Roger and Me*, in which filmmaker Michael Moore contrived much of the material to make highly polemical points.

Knowing the circumstances of the film's making does add an extra dimension to the viewer's experience of *The Company of Strangers*. It is an enormously moving document, and an entertaining one as well. You don't respond to the women by appreciating the skill of their performances; you connect with them more directly, as if the film had given you privileged access to their company. As Scott puts it, "When they walk off the screen, you're really sorry to see them go because they've become your buddies and you've certainly thought of them as full human beings." ♦

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The Company of Strangers, written by Gloria Demers with Cynthia Scott, David Wilson, Sally Bochner, directed by Cynthia Scott, produced by David Wilson, The National Film Board of Canada, 1991, 100 minutes.



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