Toronto students’ film breaks ground

By Robert Faure

Movies about college students are rare indeed; ones about colleges themselves are even more so. Despite the rising concern on all sides with on-campus happenings, many of the best accounts of young people concern those who don’t go to school at all (Grapes of Wrath, Glory Road). Even when the main characters are students, the story almost never takes place while they’re in school (The Graduate, Le Chienon). Why has no recent movie even attempted to show how intense the artificial pressure to succeed can become, how great the frustration is of being helplessly pushed into unwarranted work, or how confusing a physical and social arrangement one must endure? After all, most of the world’s brightest youths have to undergo such ordeals for four years or more. College life is not an uninteresting topic—and there’s an enthusiastic built-in audience.

Unfortunately, one can’t just demand high-quality movies on any given topic. A writer and a director must come up with good ideas, then find a cast, a crew, and backers—an unpredictable procedure at best. And perhaps there just isn’t any good ideas at all. If circumstances aren’t right, film-makers with both talent and insight simply don’t develop.

This is apparently the case with the college scene. Students at the University of Toronto have made Winter Kept Us Warm, a full-length movie about on-campus life. (The title is taken from Eliot’s “The Wasteeland.”) Despite an unprofessional limited budget, the film is thoroughly professional. Those who made it obviously had to know their subject well. It’s a joy to hear movie characters “talk about the lousy food,” although the writing could be better. The last few scenes are particularly effective.

What the film does point out is this: to make a film about living at college is easier if the writer or director (or both) has done so himself. Better still, he should make his movie after he has left, to see his subject in better perspective. Until recently there was no way to study film-making and still stay in college. A young director went out and learned the trade by working, and artists who stayed in school learned something else. Only in the last few years have formal courses in film production sprung up in such profusion (there’s even one here at MIT this term) and with them, projects like Winter Kept Us Warm.

Winter Kept Us Warm was shown as part of Cinema Kenmore Square’s underground film series at midnight Friday and Saturday. Aside from the inconvenient time at which it was shown, it is not an underground film, and the audience, many of them expecting something different, was restless and distracting. (It is impossible to say what an underground film is, exactly, but generally sex and humor play important parts. Some of them are actually reasonably good.) A better, cheaper showcase for such non-commercial films—colleges, maybe—is a must if many viewers are ever to see them.

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