Pennies from heaven

Two films by D.A. Pennebaker.
Town Bloody Hall and Bowie, at the Boston Film/Video Foundation, October 12 and 13.

D.A. Pennebaker was one of the pioneers of the cinema-verite movement. His 1971 film Section head Ricky Leacock, Pennebaker worked on one of the classics of the genre, including Happy Mother’s Day and Monsey Pop.

At the Boston Film/Video Foundation last week, two of Pennebaker’s most recent works were shown. Pennebaker, who had planned to come to Boston to discuss the films, was unable to attend the screenings. To compensate for his absence, he sent a stereo print of Monterey Pop and a short film called Daybreak Express.

Town Bloody Hall, shot in 1971 with associate Chris Hegedus, chronicles a night when Norman Mailer defended his “Prisoner of Sex” against a panel of famous women. Mailer’s chief critic, Gayl Jones, was one of the panel. The audience is crowded with the cream of New York’s intelligentsia. Susan Sontag, Betty Friedan and Anatole Broyard all give orange and ask bewildering questions. Town Bloody Hall is 41 minutes of laugh-out-loud antics. It’s full of side-splitting glances, chuckles and perfectly-timed reaction shots. Pennebaker knew that he could do little to diminish the absurdity of the evening.

On the other hand, Bowie is much a contrived effort than Town Bloody Hall. After a jazzy neon title sequence, the film shows Bowie’s fans outside London’s Hammersmith Odeon while part of the Clockwork Orange soundtrack plays in the background.

That is the last we see of Bowie’s audience. The camera lavishes attention on the stage, Bowie, and guitarist Mick Ronson. Occasionally the camera cuts to forms or faces in the darkened hall, and sometimes they’ll be singing along, creating a spooky effect of hearing David Bowie’s voice coming from the tear-stained face of a teared-up girl.

As the concert progresses, we see Bowie on stage doing his Ziggy Stardust number. Interspersed with the concert footage we see a thin, wired redhead changing costumes backstage. Bowie onstage and Bowie offstage are two different people.

Even Bowie admits this. He refers to the Ziggy Stardust years as a time when he was playing the part of an arrogant, selfish rock star. He does it to perfection. The film ends with Jeff Beck coming on to jam with Bowie and the Spiders From Mars on “Jean Jeanie.” Beck contributes some scorching slide guitar and squawks through a version of the song on his talk-box, then a novelty.

Town Bloody Hall and Bowie are both satisfying documentaries. Both give a sense of the event they are documenting that is definitely filtered through the perceptions of the filmmaker. No one but D.A. Pennebaker could have made these films the way they are. And the way they are is wonderful.

The Pennebaker films are just part of the Boston Film/Video Foundation’s year-long series of film and video showcases. Artists like Jonas Mekas and Vivienne Dick are just two of the upcoming attractions. From time to time the Foundation also has open screenings for artists who wish to show their work.

-Claudia Perry

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