



Stories from the Silent Front

Gaylene Preston on War Stories

Gaylene Preston, the woman who put the tale of *Ruby and Rata* onto our big screens and injected some guts into *Montana Masterpiece Theatre* with *Bread and Roses*, introduces her new film with a childhood reminiscence. Young Gaylene's squeezed down between the chair and sofa in her family living-room, furtively poring over family photographs stored in a Cadbury's chocolate box. The radio's playing, and she spins tales to fit the images she's holding. "*War Stories* is the logical extension of that. Look through, sift through the evidence and uncover the larger tale," she says.

Preston sees her new documentary film, interviews with seven women about life during wartime, as "returning to my roots in a way. I started making films in a psychiatric hospital in England — and it's completely against the fashion. My interest has always been to do documentary in the true sense, and I'm not talking about the reality programming which is what we mostly see on the telly — sound bites, exposé and all that. I'm interested in the very small details of ordinary lives, and I think you can make great cinema out of that."

War Stories was a difficult project to get off the ground. "The film funders thought it was just a bit of television and wanted me to film it on video. I'd always thought of it as interesting cinema. I didn't want to do soundbites."

The meagre money supply ended up having a beneficial effect on the filming. Preston, cam-

eraman Al Bollinger and interviewer Judith Fyfe spent a day over each interview, and the film-making process itself was ingeniously resourceful.

"We put black velvet behind the women and in front of them, because we didn't want to see Judith. I wanted a full frame figure of the person talking and a close eye line to camera — I hate it when they're looking off camera. So, really, we made a little black velvet room for the people to be in, with physically cold light HMI lights, so they didn't get overheated, and they forgot we were there filming. Something like this had a wonderful psychological effect, and it was mainly the result of not having any money."

From her 1984 first feature *Mr Wrong*, watch any Gaylene Preston film and it could only have been made by a woman. In *War Stories*, she creates a deep rapport with her subjects and they are remarkably frank, especially on sexual matters.

"We never asked probing questions. Women talk about sex a lot. I find the 1940s interesting because of the double standard and it was that double standard, I had to fight when I grew up."

I express some surprise at the fierce anti-Americanism that one woman encounters in the film, and then recall my own childhood where 'yank' was a fashionable term of derision. It strikes a chord with Preston. "There's another title for the film — *War and Prejudice*. You do get a picture of a very prejudiced, monocultural society, and it's hard to imagine anyone took those opinions so seriously. It's not even very long ago."

War Stories is just "part of a bigger project". It grew from 60 sound tape interviews done for the Oral Archives. Preston confesses to "feeling like a bit like a butterfly collector", and there are still more stories to be told.

"I would love to do an interview with a lesbian woman of that generation. We've put all sorts of requests out into the lesbian community down here in Wellington, but nobody's wanted to do it. I'd like to talk to a woman who was a prostitute during the war, and one of the thousands who had abortions. I'm hoping the film will lift the lid off things and make it easier for people to talk."

War Stories is emphatically a cinema documentary, and Preston emphasises that is where it will work best. "The advantage is you can't beat everybody sitting in the dark, looking at the light reflected on the screen, all laughing at once, all crying at once, and all talking madly and not wanting to leave the cinema at the

end. To me that's a communal experience. That's what film is about. I live in a small community. I live on Mount Victoria, I think up the films in Blair Street, and they're shown at the Paramount Theatre or the Embassy — it's all happening within three or four blocks down here. I would love to make a film one day which won an Oscar or got a Palme d'Or, but I'm not shaping my films to appeal to three or four French people, who sit on the selection panel at Cannes. I'm making my film[s] so I can sit in the dark, with my community at the Paramount, and watch them."

There are many levels of 'reality' encountered in the 90 minutes or so of *War Stories*. Preston found the two Maori women particularly inspirational, and is pleased she caught the story of Aunty Jean Andrews, who was diagnosed with lung cancer a few days after the filming (Aunty Jean died last year and the film is dedicated to her). Perhaps our media could learn from that very Polynesian openness.

"Our television and cinema should be — it's not because it's been taken away by market forces — little campfires where, in the last five years of the twentieth century, we can sit and have our elders tell us stories, because that's what storytelling's always been for. That's who we are as human animals."

And it is the Maori stories that might well give us Pakeha the most food for thought. "The Maori seem to have been better at acknowledging the pain and the sadness that had happened in the war. Their returning soldiers were acknowledged as having blood on their hands. The Pakehas were given a number and a guinea to buy their civvies. They got off the boat, kissed the wife and went home. There was so much that couldn't be talked about, they just rolled their sleeves up and worked for the next 10 years, and that dreadful silence I grew up in was the 50s. It wasn't silent exactly, it was terribly bright, a bright light where everything was happily happily... until Elvis came along."

WILLIAM DART



Video

NATURAL BORN KILLERS

Director: Oliver Stone

The Quentin Tarantino film that isn't was definitely the movie event of 1994. This visual onslaught has its scale lessened somewhat by its swing to the small screen. At the same time, this makes it seem all the more like a demonically extended music video. A multitude of film styles are employed rapid fire, ensuring the tale of Mickey and Mallory Knox (Juliette Lewis and Woody Harrelson) is as eye popping as it is stomach churning.

Essentially the tale of a mass murderous honeymoon and its consequences, the Stone-conspiracy twist comes via a large chunk of this story being told by the big bad media. Heading the charge of the Bullshit Brigade is the digger-ish Wayne Gale (Robert Downey Junior), host of the *Hardcopy* style *American Maniacs*. The show's story on the Knox's murder spree ranks second only to Manson's, which drives Gale ratings rabid. His quest to better the second best leads to more massacre, and the whole caboodle plays live to air.

If you like more bang for your buck, but aren't keen on sending your brain on holiday for a couple of hours, you can't go past *Natural Born Killers*.

BRONWYN TRUDGEON

EVEN COWGIRLS GET THE BLUES

Director: Gus Van Sant

With a cast of actors you wouldn't expect to see in a movie at the same time (Uma Thurman, Angie Dickinson, Roseanne Arnold, John Hurt and Crispin Glover included), you'd think this movie would be a blast. What it lacks in script, it makes up for in sheer cartoon colour, overall ridiculousness, and some very funny moments. Thurman plays Sissy Hankshaw, a total fox, who is born with abnormally large thumbs. Therefore, she decides her destiny in life is to "move", that is to hitchhike.

Sissy has a friend in New York ('The Countess'), a total queer queen played by Hurt. Sissy is his muse. He has helped Sissy with her modelling career by making her the face of feminine hygiene product range. The Countess bundles Sissy off to his health ranch, where she is to do a new hygiene ad. She meets the naughty cowgirls, led by Bonanza Jellybean (Sissy's love interest, played by Rain Phoenix), who want to take the ranch over from the horrid countess, and do so in a fashion never seen before. It's quite neat really.

SHIRLEY CHARLES

BOXING HELENA

Director: Jennifer Chambers Lynch

Most film buffs have probably read more about this fiasco than anyone should have bothered writing, so I won't waste too much ink on it. The personalities involved include director and screenplay writer Jennifer Chambers Lynch (daughter of David Lynch), Sherilyn Fenn (who was roped in when Kim Basinger walked) and Julian Sands (who continues to work despite remarkable evidence he shouldn't).

The story around which this fuck fest' is strung concerns a limp dick doctor named Nick (Sands), who is obsessed with a rotten bitch named Helena (Fenn), who hates his guts. When Helena is run over by a car, Nick sees it as a wonderful way to make her need him. Before you can say "riding on Daddy's coat tails", Nick's chopped Helena's legs off. This upsets her and makes her throw stuff at him and hoot around in her wheelchair very fast. Of course the only solution facing Nick is to chop off her arms, which he does. No, you do not see any of the operating business. What you do see is a lot of ridiculously prolonged rooting, a tonne of really bad kissing and some of the worst serious acting ever filmed.

I can't even bear to relive this any further. Sod all else happens anyway.

BRONWYN TRUDGEON

TRUE LIES

Director: James Cameron

Arnold Schwarzenegger plays a spy called Harry. His wife Helen (Jamie-Lee Curtis) thinks he's a computer sales person. While Harry is out at night — saving the world from nasty Arab type terrorists, banging dogs' heads together, cleverly dodging 10,000 bullets, chasing suspects through the streets, hotels and even a hotel's lift on horseback, generally having a good old time — old Helen waits home alone for him, thinking what a dull-fuck marriage she has.

A big dork called Simon tries to seduce Helen during her lunch hour by pretending he is a spy. Helen is entranced (she wants some action). How ironic, we all think, because her own husband is the action packed man she really wants!

Anyway, one thing leads to another and, before we know it, Harry and Helen are both captured by the terrorists, taken to an island and shown what fine arsenal the terrorists have, i.e. a large nuclear bomb. Much shooting, fire and romance (rekindled) follows... and the story ends happily ever after, naturally.

The stunts are very exciting. The story is very dodgy, but amusing. Jamie-Lee's boobs are entrancing.

SHIRLEY CHARLES

THE DARK HALF

Director: George A Romero

The Dark Half is Stephen King movie number 24. It tells the tale of writer Thad Beaumont (played here by Timothy Hutton), who finds success writing hardcore horror novels under the pseudonym George Stark. Like King (with his Richard Bachman pseudonym), Beaumont has his cover blown and decides to publicly bury his 'dark half'. He and his wife are photographed grinning over Stark's gag grave stone, but the joke's on them when the photographer is found clubbed to death by his artificial leg.

Beaumont's jilted alter-ego (an unrecognisably ghouled up Hutton) has come to life and is not happy about losing his celebrity status. Stark leaves fingerprints identical to Thad's all over the show, and kills in the same manner as brutal Stark character Alexis Machine. Understandably, all eyes are on Beaumont, who looks guilty as buggery and is becoming increasingly prone to conjuring up swarms of sparrows (the harbingers of doom and heralds of Stark). *The Dark Half* holds you in your seat until its feathery finale, where you'll see the kind of bodily mutilation (right down to internal organs being ripped from bones) most 'good' horrors are too holy for these days.

BRONWYN TRUDGEON



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