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Arthur Bressan is a filmmaker best known for his 1978 film *Gay USA*. He's also made four porn films in the last ten years. *Passing Strangers* (1974) was an international hit, and *Forbidden Letters* was shown at the 1980 Berlin Film Festival. Porn was about the only genre in which Bressan could work easily as a gay filmmaker in the 1970s.

But last May 27, he celebrated his thirty-ninth birthday with the first screening of his newest work, a feature-length black-and-white picture called *Abuse*. It is a film which is so explosive, so controversial, that thirty-four distributors have rejected it, along with the juries of the New York and Chicago Film Festivals and the Museum of Modern Art's New Director's Series. "The unanimity of the reaction was astounding," says Bressan. "The universal verdict was: 'a powerful, honest and devastating film but there's no way we can touch it.'"

Finally in August, Promovision International (the New York company which brought North America's *Taxi Zum Klo*) signed *Abuse* for distribution and began looking for theatres.

Abuse is a film about child abuse. It is the story of a fourteen-year-old boy named Thomas Carroll (Raphael Sbarge) who has been violently assaulted by his parents for six years. After one particularly bad session he goes into convulsions and is taken to a hospital. Lying in the recovery room, Thomas returns to consciousness and sees two men standing behind the observation window. One of them is Larry Porter (Richard Ryder) a thirty-two-year-old filmmaker doing a documentary on child abuse for his masters degree at the Horton School of Social Research. The other, Dr Bennett, an intern (Steve James), is sure that the kid is being abused. He won't report it because it might endanger his career. Instead he has called Larry, who he knows is working on the film. As Dr Bennett talks, Larry turns and looks at the boy through the window. The boy opens his eyes. He sees the T-shirt Larry is wearing: "Abused? Call..." Their eyes lock.

How they eventually get together is part of the story, but when they do it doesn't take long for Thomas to ascertain that Larry is gay. Thomas is also gay. Much later Larry asks Thomas, "When did you know about me?" Thomas tells him, "When I saw you in the hospital. That's why I phoned you." Larry is surprised. "I thought you phoned me because you wanted to be in my film?" Says Thomas, "Oh that too. But..." and then Thomas kisses Larry.

That's the kind of stuff of which controversial and explosive films are made in this day and age.

Thomas is bright and articulate and willing to be interviewed. They start to

meet once a week. Thomas begins to help Larry with his film, and Larry proceeds to show the film-in-progress to students and his faculty advisor, Prof Rappaport (Jack Halton) at the Horton School. In less talented hands, the structure of a film set within a film, like novels within novels, tends to be self-indulgent. Here, it allows Bressan to move unobtrusively — at times brilliantly — from drama to docudrama to pure documentary, drawing a powerful profile of child abuse in America.

A social worker named Kathy Logan (Kathy Gerber) who runs a home for battered children, is one of the "professionals" Larry has consulted in the making of his film. She states that "last year in America, there were 4,000 deaths, 65,000 sexual assaults, 200,000 beatings and that's just the tip of the iceberg."

The issues raised by child abuse are not merely issues of physical violence. Children are confronted by a complete lack of power. Thomas tells Larry, "I can feel it coming.... I want to run away but that's crazy, there's nowhere to run to, it only makes them madder...."

Distributors and film festival juries who screened and rejected *Abuse* make the somewhat suspicious claim that it is not the homosexuality which make the film too hot to handle, but rather the graphic portrayal of violence. In the opening scene, Thomas's parents catch him drinking milk from a carton. They make him drink it properly from a glass and get angrier when he spills some of it. The scene bears an eerie resemblance to the surrealism of Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* stripped utterly of erotic release, and with the symbolism of the milk turned upside down. In *Fireworks* the milk is cum and balm to the dreamer's wounds. In *Abuse* milk is milk, and everything which that implies, and when Thomas is beaten to the point of convulsions, he pukes it out.

All the abuse scenes have a surrealistic quality about them. They begin with premonitory music (scored by Shawn Phillips), an alien presence intruding in-

to the boy's life. The confrontations are filmed from Thomas's point of view: the camera becomes his eyes. He is, in alternate scenes, beaten, slapped, burned and drowned (not in that order). There is a jarring contrast between the level of violence and the calm, collected manner in which it is inflicted by his parents.

"When I set out I thought it would be easy to do movie violence through cuts," says Bressan. "I saw it as a technical problem. I interviewed a lot of people and one woman told me that every Friday her daddy would come home drunk, beat her up and the next morning make her breakfast. This went on, she said, for five years. I thought, 'What is it like in year three?' It was no surprise. The pain is never the same, the hurt is always new, but he beat her up exactly the same way. They got into it. It was a ritual. That was the key word."

"So I asked the actors to be violent without being emotional, which made it very unlike typical movie violence. It was hard for the actors to trust me, and even the movie crew resisted. But I had to unmovie it to make it seem real."

Bressan has been showing *Abuse* in private screenings in large theatres in New York, San Francisco and Boston, and listening to the audience react. There are palpable gasps during the abuse scenes, and sometimes heads are lowered. Bressan has faced vehement criticism for the explicit violence.

But after some of the screenings, something began to happen for which Bressan was quite unprepared. Two or three people would lag behind. Then they'd approach him when the crowd had gone, congratulate him on his film and, *sotto voce*, confide that they had been abused as children. "In all my calculations, in all my arrogant plotting, I hadn't anticipated it as a coming-out thing for an audience of abused people." They tell him that in his movie, "the violence was very real."

Body Politic
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Body Politic

Abuse

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Body Politic

Bressan wrote the screenplay for *Abuse* in the summer of 1980, and based it on a true story. He met the original Thomas Carroll in 1975 and rescued him from his family by fleeing to the west coast — a solution Larry Porter considers in the film. "But," says Bressan, "the heart and guts of Thomas was me. I had my first sexual experience when I was nine, and for five years I looked for older guys. I wanted them, but the problem was to go back for a second time, because it was dangerous for them. The film is not a romantic fantasy. It's about a need and that need is in a lot of people regardless of their sexuality."

Thomas and Larry have their first and subsequent meetings on Sunday mornings after Thomas finishes delivering papers. Larry waits for him under a bridge near a river. When they meet for the first time, the acting is stylized and contrived. The audience feels as uncomfortable with the scene as Larry and Thomas obviously feel with each other.

"The first twenty minutes of the film, the kid doesn't say a word," says Bressan. "It's basically a silent movie for him, partaking of a film style which died in America in 1931 or '32." As Larry and Thomas become friends, the acting style relaxes.

Thomas takes the initiative in ascertaining whether or not Larry is gay. Thomas also takes the initiative in seducing Larry. It happens in what is, for homosexual men, a highly eroticized setting — a public washroom, amid the sound of flushing toilets, the backdrop of urinals and men walking towards the cubicles. Larry and Thomas are standing by the sinks, Thomas reaches for a paper towel and.... The entire scene is filmed without cuts from behind the mirror, where the vice squad, not a movie camera, is the usual ambushade.

The last time Thomas and Larry meet at the bridge by the river, Thomas's wave to Larry is very different from the stylized and nervous gesture of their first meeting. "I wanted the audience to know from the difference between the first wave and the last wave how a person changes when he has someone to love him," says Bressan.

But not all is romance. Larry Porter, despite his charms, is not a completely sympathetic character. After viewing the first interview with Thomas, Professor Rappaport calls Larry into his office. He urges him to drop the boy from the film, not merely because of the potentially scandalous situation for the school, but also because "It's unethical, it's truly abusive to the boy. If you know a child is being abused, you're morally bound to report the parents and help." Rappaport is not only voicing comments which people made to Bressan while he was making the film ("Drop the boy and you'll get your film distributed") but is also setting Larry up to defend his exploitation of Thomas.

Larry replies rather arrogantly, "Says you. Knowing about child abuse and proving it in a courtroom are two different things." The defence is not without substance, but it's clear Larry is preoccupied with the opportunity to film an abuse case in progress. "It's no great perception that in the first thirty minutes of the film Larry is exploiting the kid. It's that *Medium Cool* question. If a journalist sees an accident, does he help the victim or take a picture first? The issue is crucial to the film and it's not toyed with."

But the abuse cycle, in which adult and child can both become unwitting accomplices to the child's victimization, begins to act itself out in Larry's relationship with Thomas. The question of degree rears its head: what constitutes child abuse? — physical violence? or rendering the child powerless by not allowing him to make his own decisions?

Ultimately, Larry has to realize the extent of his involvement with Thomas and take responsibility for the chain of events which has been set in motion. This transition in Larry's character begins one Sunday morning when Thomas doesn't show for his appointed rendezvous. Larry is anxious, terrified that Thomas might have become another abuse statistic. He cannot go to the boy's home, or telephone. He decides he will "kidnap" Thomas and run away with him, assuming that that is what Thomas wants.

But when he turns to his friends for help, he finds that they turn on him. One asks, "How do you know Thomas hasn't made all this up?" Kathy Logan says, "I know, you're thinking Thomas is different. Larry, they're *all* different!" At the hospital, Dr Bennett accuses Larry of dragging Thomas into his "own homosexual fantasy world." Larry pleads, "But maybe this time his parents have gone too far!" Dr Bennett replies, "You certainly have."

Later, in a dream sequence, Larry sits in a theatre watching a film of himself and Thomas kissing and hugging; then their passion becomes more violent, until Larry is shaking and strangling Thomas. He has reached the point where he not only recognizes the degree to which he has exploited Thomas to make his film, but he also feels angry with the boy for getting him involved.

Not only does *Abuse* portray the complexity of Larry's situation, it also manages to express a number of differing points of view about Larry's actions and about the predicament of battered children. Once again, Bressan's decision to make a film about a film serves him well.

As Larry Porter's documentary is being made, it must be shown to a number of students at the school. Professor Rappaport explains, "It's those six students with their politics, rhetoric and religion that are going to vote yes or no on your film." In a similar way, the audience, with their own opinions about the rights of children, will judge *Abuse*.

Early in the film, when Larry is first introduced, he is in front of the students at the Horton School defending his presentation of "stereotypes" in a series of street interviews he has filmed. He says to them, "The only thing that really counts for me is whether or not the scene works. Does it move you? Make you think, feel, laugh, cry, get mad, or fall asleep? It doesn't matter if you've seen it in Charlie Chaplin or *Charlie's Angels*. In film, everything is a cliché until it works again."

Clichés are instant feelings in brightly-wrapped packages designed for express delivery. Not only do they allow us not to think, but our range of feeling is defined by the limited selection we are offered. To make *Abuse*, Bressan wrested from the lexicon of popular entertainment the clichés of romance, surrealism, expressionism, the clichés of documentary formats and even the cliché of a film about a filmmaker making a film. He has woven them together and applied them for the first time to the issues of child abuse and intergenerational sex. He has made it work so powerfully that instead of throwing instant feelings at people (and risk knee-jerk reactions), *Abuse* communicates radical issues seriously in an innovative, entertaining way. It comes off like a black-and-white Hollywood suspense thriller laced with elements of the cinema noir.

"*Abuse* is a story movie," says Bressan. "But there has never been a film about Thomas's and Larry's story before." The film is, on one level, an eloquent plea that the rights of children be recognized. On another level, it is the most articulate response made by a gay artist to bryantism, the doctrine that it is homosexual men who abuse children.

Just before the conclusion of *Abuse*, Larry Porter's documentary deals with possible solutions to child abuse. There is no single answer, but Bressan wants the words Kathy Logan speaks to stand for his film. "Right now there are kids taking their licks, being abused and learning how to be the abusers of the future. Parents don't own a child. They give it life but it doesn't belong to them. The child belongs to the child."

That expresses a sentiment for a more perfect world, but it does not offer Larry and Thomas a solution to their immediate predicament. Larry Porter's solution to Thomas's problem will be criticized. People are wont to ask, is it realistic? and what happens next? "No one asks these questions about *Casablanca* or *The Graduate*," Bressan points out. "Gay writers and artists are made to be rather hypersensitive about how to end their work."

The people who have seen *Abuse* at the private screenings love it or hate it, resent it or are moved to tears. It has attracted rabid criticism and fierce praise, passionate defence and virulent attack. All of which Bressan takes in stride. "It means the film is working. No one has been bored by it."

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