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"Juvenile Court": Powerful New Wiseman Epic



The shred of Kleenex sticks to her left eyelid as a souvenir of her sobs. Diane, 11-years-old and Black, has just been told that she will be placed in a foster home "because your mama can't make you mind." The mother's face is blank, impassive, granite.

The scene is from *Juvenile Court*, Fred Wiseman's latest *cinéma-vérité* documentary. It is an epic, a word not lightly used here: the film runs for two hours and 23 minutes, but its cumulative impact is so powerful that it seems less than half that long. It will be seen on Channel 13 Monday, October 1 at eight o'clock.

Wiseman, who has earned multiple awards with his filmed portraits of major American institutions, spent more than a month recently in the Juvenile Court of Memphis and Shelby County, Tenn. (population: 800,000). He shot 62½ hours of film, from which he distilled a tense four per cent.

Like its predecessors—*Hospital*, *Law and Order*, *Basic Training* and *Essene*, which are also scheduled for broadcast on WNET this month—*Juvenile Court* has no narration, no explanation, no identification of individuals by name or function. But its

purpose and meaning are abundantly clear.

The strong central figure of the film is Kenneth A. Turner, 45, sole judge of the court, which processes 17,000 complaints each year. He is seen in the courtroom, in his chambers, conferring with parents, lawyers and social workers and counselling youthful offenders.

Turner has held this job for the past 10 years; before that he was a detective captain on the Memphis police force. He has large, dark, tired eyes, a gentle manner with the hapless kids who come before him and a tendency to bend the law in their interest. He is compassionate. So are most of the social workers and officers attached to the court. Yet *Juvenile Court* is heavy with sorrow.

Consider, for example, the case of the earnest, bespectacled 15-year-old white boy accused of molesting a four-year-old girl for whom he had been babysitting. When the court psychologist asks him what he would wish for if he had only three wishes, he answers: "That everybody would believe in God, that everybody would go to church and that I had three more wishes." He doesn't, and he's in trouble.

Or the case of the petulant pretty, long-haired blonde who had tried (but not very hard) to slash her wrists. She had once charged her beefy stepfather with making indecent advances, but now she cries: "Mama, I want to come home!"

Consider, too, the pimply, terrified junkie accused of selling LSD: despite the proselytizing of a reformed-addict organization called Teen Challenge, Judge Turner waives jurisdiction and refers this case to an adult court. Bail: \$1,000.

In the endless parade of cases there are children accused of shoplifting, armed robbery, truancy, vagrancy, prostitution, possession of firearms, drug dealing and other offenses. And there are the victims: a diminutive Black boy, his head swathed in bandages, who says his uncle poured hot grease on him; and a four-year-old white boy beaten black-and-blue by his prospective stepfather. (On the recommendation of the welfare department, Judge Turner returns the child to the custody of the mother with the judgment that her boyfriend has been "overzealous.")

There are moments of great beauty. A magnificent Black woman social worker exhorts a morose, pubescent Black girl:

IMAGE

Photo: Oliver Kool

"Anybody can be a slut! You remember you're not a whore! You hold your head up high and say you're going to be somebody! Somewhere in this world you mean a lot to somebody!" The girl is visibly moved. And there are Judge Turner's many wise solutions outside the courtroom.

But these rays of hope are, more often than not, extinguished by clouds of despair. The court officers are people of good will who work, they believe, for the best interest of these disturbed or victimized children. Are they succeeding? Can they cope with this avalanche of misfortune, misunderstanding and alienation?

There is Diane, the little girl ordered to a foster home: she is exhausted from weeping, inconsolable. A probation officer excoriates a truculent adolescent boy accused of stealing from the foster home in which he had been placed. A rebellious 16-year-old girl asks a social worker: "How can the law be any good unless it makes sense?" The reply: "It doesn't have to make sense to you. It's there."

Juvenile Court is full of tantalizing unfinished business, of unexplained vignettes. In Wiseman's *cinéma-vérité* style, they become elements in the impressionistic tapestry that he is weaving for the screen.

Wiseman does follow one case to its conclusion, however, and in so doing provides a stunning climax. To describe it in full would be as unseemly as revealing the denouement of a detective story. Suffice it to say that the case involves a white, middle-class youth just three months short of 18—the upper age limit of the juvenile court's jurisdiction—who has been involved with an older boy in an armed robbery.

The prosecutor, whose bushy sideburns create a bizarre contrast to his bristling Prussian crew cut, argues that the youth should be tried in three months, as an adult, in criminal court, where the boy would face a minimum sentence of 20 years if he were found guilty. The boy's lawyer urges him to plead guilty in juvenile court, where he would be assured an automatic sentence of six months in a training school. The final decision leads to one of television's most shattering moments—*F.A.J.* ■■■■■

IN FOCUS:

Fred Wiseman



When Fred Wiseman was a 28-year-old law professor at Boston University in 1958, he had a habit of taking his classes in legal medicine and criminal law on field trips. One of these expeditions was to the Massachusetts state prison for the criminally insane in Bridgewater. "It's the kind of place that doesn't get out of your mind," he says.

It was also the kind of place that changed his life. The result of that visit, a searing documentary film called *Titicut Follies*, is still mired in the courts because the Commonwealth of Massachusetts didn't like what Wiseman filmed. But he went on to film a high school, a hospital, a big-city police department, a monastery, an Army basic-training camp—and now a juvenile court. In so doing he refined the technique called *cinéma-vérité* into an art form.

The term *cinéma vérité* may be misleading. Far from opening up his cameras and recording every event indiscriminately, he brings to bear a strong editorial

judgment. For *Juvenile Court*, for example, he shot 125,000 feet of film; the finished product, which runs two hours and 23 minutes, contains 5,200 feet of film.

"Even though the audience is aware of my own point of view," he says, "I try to present the material so that viewers can develop their own. It's pompous to suggest that a film can provide solutions or will contribute to social change, but a film can provide information which might, in an undefined way, help in the development of new approaches to the issues the film presents. I try to make the final film reflect the complexity of the subject. Any effort to simplify this reality demeans the subject and patronizes the audience."

An activist on the side of humanity, Wiseman tends to look worried and rumpled, as if he'd just been unpacked. He went to Williams College and Yale Law School. His father practiced law until four years before his death, in 1971, at the age of 85. His mother, now 73, retired that same year, after having served for 20 years as administrative head of psychiatry at the Boston Children's Hospital Medical Center. And his wife, a law-school classmate, teaches law at Northeastern University. Her name is Zipporah, which is also the name of his own film-distribution company. The Wisemans live in Cambridge with their sons, aged seven and 11.

Wiseman feels that if his films work it's because they break down certain stereotypes (the cop as pig, the monk as unworldly, for example) and because they are about experiences most of us don't have, such as riding around in police cars or stalking the corridors of a hospital.

He'd really like to direct a feature film, however, and is actually half-way through the script of a mystery story. He's also started work on the third of five new documentaries commissioned by WNET. Its subject? He won't say. ■■■■■

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Photo: Bernard Gottfried

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