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SHIRLEY CLARKE

SKYSCRAPER

Co-makers: Willard Van Dyke, D. A. Pennebaker, Wheaton Galentine, Kevin Smith; Music: Ted Macero; Lyrics: John White.

1959

20 minutes

black & white/color

rental: \$20.00

Shirley Clarke's *SKYSCRAPER* is a documentary of the construction of the Tishman Building in New York City. The soundtrack consists of off-screen dialogue by the workers and a narration in song. Willard Van Dyke, who co-directed the film, comments in *DOCUMENTARY EXPLORATIONS*, "Shirley intended it as a kind of satire... she hoped that you would see underneath the surface of such things as the band playing, the mayor talking, etc."

SKYSCRAPER [is] a musical comedy about the building of a skyscraper. Here the work activities of men and the construction of the building becomes a dance.

Shirley Clarke

On its simplest level *SKYSCRAPER* is the chronicle of a building... But the film is also a comment on the contrast between the nobility and quietly unconscious heroism of the actual construction workers and the shallow, highly polished routinism for which their labor provides a home. The construction sequences are shot in black and white, but the use sequences go to a kind of neon-red argon-blue Eastmancolor.

The futility of the whole business is suggested by a final long shot of the building: someone has suggested that it looks like an enormous square bottle of clear blue underarm deodorant...

As in *BRIDGES-GO-ROUND*, there is an astonishing lyric quality, even when dealing with mechanical processes. Not only are the shots edited dynamically... but the changes in tempo, the pauses, accelerations, retards, and even visual glissandos—shot as a shot looking up an elevator shaft as the elevator ascends—work with a remarkably complex correctness and grace.

Henry Breitrose. *Film Quarterly*