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From the. New York Avant-Garde to the Falls of Academe at UCLA, a Film Maker Valeo Artist/ Teacher Keeps Making the Connection

By Bruce Bebb

One evening in 1960 a trim, tough young dancer sat by herself in the lobby of a New York City movie theater. The pull from the auditorium was very strong: Her friends, and their friends, and important outsiders, and her parents—all were in the audience. At times she could hear snatches of bebop that brought pictures to her mind. Since she had spent so many hours editing the film, any few seconds from the sound track told her just what the screen looked like at that moment. Tonight was the opening-night screening of her first feature-length film, and she knew that this could be-must be-another turning point in her career. Yet her feelings were too strong for her to sit with the people she cared about most as her film unreeled. Years later, someone would look back on this night and this film and say that she was after their eyes: Shirley Clarke's film version of The Connection was one that alters viewers so much that they can never see pictures in quite the same way again.

fter working as a dancer with Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, and Anna Sokolow, Clarke started directing films in 1953 because all of the dance films that she

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The people who made them apparently had little comprehension of the possibilities inherent in making moving pictures of moving bodies. Given the competition, she thought it would be easy to be a great dance film maker. Dance in the Sun (1953) was her first. After three or four films, she said, "I was hooked. I cared more about film than I did about dance." In a thumbnail autobiography she wrote some time ago, she said, "I became a good director by becoming an excellent film editor to cover up the fact of my really rotten camera work."

One film led to another as Clarke became one of the hottest young underground film makers in the world. In 1958 Loops was shown at the U.S. Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair, and Bridges Go Round played at the first Belgian Experimental Film Festival. Skyscraper (1959) was nominated for an Academy Award; Scary Time (1959) was made for UNI-CEF. Then, through friends and acquaintances in Greenwich Village-Clarke had become a regular resident of the Chelsea Hotel, site of many Andy Warhol films-she got the opportunity that every ambitious performer dreams of, the chance to leap to center stage. She was invited to make a film version of an extraordinary play that was making a splash with an avant-garde off-Broadway company, The Living Theatre. It was Jack Gelber's The Connection, a raw, uncompromising piece that shows different forms of reality oozing into each other.

In the play-within-the-play, a roomful of heroin addicts, including several musicians, kill time with music and gab while they wait for a man called Cowboy to return with the stuff; at the same time, they are performers onstage enduring the pestering of a writer and a producer who are presenting them to a paying audience—the latter role is played by the actual, real-life audience in the theater. The conventional invisible fourth wall between the stage and the audience appears and disappears. An actor sits in the house, portraying an audience member, commenting out loud from time to time. During the intermission some of the addicts mingle with the customers in the lobby, perhaps trying to borrow money from them. About half an hour of jazz is played in each act; the author's notes say that the music is in the tradition of Charlie Parker, and that its division is a matter of pacing that must be worked out on stage. The nonmusical characters have fictitious names -Leach. Javhird, and so on-hir the musi crans are supposed to use their own names. Some of the musicians in the original production were known to have been arrested on drug charges in real line, and at the end of the Fiscahower clathic of hid atouch of sleam glamour. There were deminators that, when Cowboy returned in the second act and the addicts fixed, real drugs were sometimes used.

A number of other aspects of The Connection were unusual, or even unheard of: Characters could be played either by white or by black actors, and the word "shit" was commonly used, both as a synonym for heroin and as an expletive. When the time came to transform the theater piece into a moving picture, Clarke and the producer had long, serious discussions about whether to retain the word "shit" or to call heroin "stuff." Shit stayed in, with long artistic and legal ramifications. But a more important problem was how to make The Connection into a film, rather than a celluloid record of a stage play. The solution Shirley Clarke came up with was to move from the stage to a filthy apartment and to replace the audience's role in the stage play with the camera's role in the film. After more than twenty years, more than one viewer still carries vivid memories of lurching and spinning in the dim, foul atmosphere of that junkie's pad. On opening night it was too much for two audience members. Halfway through the film, the doors to the auditorium swung open and a middle-aged couple hurried through the lobby where the frightened director sat. They were Shirley Clarke's parents, and her father was furious. He told her that she had disgraced the family.

wenty-two years later, talking to a reporter and a photographer, Shirley Clarke laughs about disappointing her parents, especially that man who "never went past the seventh grade in school, just made a lot of money." Her father manufactured machine parts in New York—her grandfather on her mother's side, a man from Russia, invented things he needed, including the Phillipshead screw. She hopes there is a heaven, so

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'Theater is not a director's medium. Film is a director's medium.'

that her father knows that Shirley, the daughter (he had three) who could not read until the fifth grade at Lincoln-Horace Mann in New York, nor write until the seventh, and never finished college, is now a full professor at UCLA. Clarke and her visitors sit in a television studio in Melnitz Hall, on the floor, chatting after a recent session of her television class. (She also teaches a film design class that is, one of her former students assured the reporter, "the best thing in the film department." The reporter, who saves some of the best student evaluations he got during his own days as a college instructor, dutifully notes the description, ranking a student's compliment a teacher's highest accolade.)

Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall,

on board the Kennedy yacht, circa 1961

poet Robert Frost, and Clarke

"This is high class kindergarten," Clarke says drily, watching a monitor as her students take turns playing with quartering the screen and electronically attaching parts of different bodies together. When class offically ends lots of students hang around, frequently interrupting her with no sign of fear. In fact, their attitude is cool, carefully disguised reverence. When something important to one of them comes up, he or she barges into the interview and Clarke deals with each interruption unhesitatingly, answering a question, signing a form ("What am I signing?"), making an appointment.

"You get an interesting perspective on life after a certain point," she says. "Twenty years of working in a field will produce it. Which is, you have so many failures and successes—

I mean, I had a fabulous experience once, one of my first experiences in the theater. A friend of mine owned a bar in New York that was a jazz club in the late sixties. He wanted to be an actor. But he was running a bar, so he decided we should do a little theater, since the music was so successful. But there really wasn't any space. So we decided he would write a play about two guys in a bar. So we put some spotlights up, and we told the people doing the music that night—some pretty hip jazz band—to stop playing when they saw the lights come up and heard some voices. The play was about a black guy who comes into a bar and there's a white guy there who's a bit of a twerp who tries to make him. And they have a terrible fight." Clarke's eyes twinkle at the memory.

"The audience thought it was real, and called the police. The show never got finished! So then we decided we shouldn't let it all go to waste. We took it to the Actors Studio . . . where it had no such effect whatsoever."

Shirley Clarke has been teaching film and video at UCLA since 1975, when she moved here from New York. By then she was well-established as one of the New York leaders of what, for lack of a better term, may be called underground cinema. In 1961 *The Connection* won the Critics Award at Cannes and Shirley Clarke was named Best New Director of the Year at the Locarno Festival in Switzerland. After that she spent two years directing *Love Letter to the World*, a work about Robert Frost

that JFK wanted to see made. It received an Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary. In 1963, she wrote and directed *The Cool World*, based on Warren Miller's ventriloquial novel about a Harlem boy who gets in trouble. It had the distinction of being the first feature film to be shot in Harlem, as well as the first feature made with a handheld 35mm camera.

The problems to be dealt with in putting together The Cool World were delicate and, in many cases, more sociological than artistic. "We sometimes were able to find out who the boss of a block we wanted to work on was," Clarke says, "and then we'd talk to them and everything was OK. My assistant was a black woman and we learned that if she explained to people just what we were doing when the crowd gathered, then it was cool. We had something stolen only once—a camera or a tape recorder or something, the guy just walked into the middle of a bunch of people and grabbed it and took off. The people in the neighborhood got it back for us in about a half hour." The police, she says, "came around in shifts for their payoffs. The producer took care of

The Cool World won many awards, played all the appropriate festivals, and was endorsed by regular people again—as it had been during production—when it played near Times Square. Clarke says that for her "the greatest award it received was the fact that it was held over for two weeks on Forty-Second Street



Shirley Clarke at home with videotape equipment

and there were lines around the block!"

In 1967, she made Portrait of Jason, the first feature film with only one actor on screen for the entire length. "I had the concept for two years," Clarke says. "The only problem was finding the right person." The right person turned out to be a hustler who had been a singer in a Greenwich Village club at age eighteen, "and had gone downhill ever since, if you know what I mean." Jason still finds Clarke whenever she revisits New York, and borrows money. "Somehow he always knows when I get to town," she says. "He has an instinct or something for it." The same year, 1967, that Clarke made Jason's portrait for posterity, she designed the concept and editing for Man in the Polar Regions at Expo 67 in Montreal. Jason meanwhile remained on - the streets of New York, his day-to-day life unchanged by a film that Ingmar Bergman gave the highest praise.

In 1969, after a complicated and still unpublishable imbroglio that involved six months of filming jazz innovator Ornette Coleman and his son, and then being fired from the Public Broadcast Lab, Shirley Clarke was walking down a street in New York, weeping.

"I bumped into a guy I knew who was carrying a great big box," she tells her visitors at UCLA. "I knew him because he owned the sound studio where I had done the mix for *The Cool World*." Seeing her distress, the man told her what was in the box he was carrying:

a little camera that could be taken out into the world to record a signal for television. "At this point, nobody could get these cameras. They were unavailable to the regular folk. I said, 'Gee, do you think you could get me one of these?" The man knew the right people, and Shirley Clarke wound up with two. "Then I got the grant . . . I took [the cameras] home, and my life changed overnight." The grant was from the New York State Council on the Arts for an artist in one field to explore another. Others, from the Museum of Modern Art and the National Endowment for the Arts, came later. Clarke went to work on the roof of the building where she lived, the Chelsea Hotel, as well as on locations around Manhattan.

"I have a thing of Viva and me being arrested for videotaping—the entire arrest is on videotape. The cops screaming at us, beating on us, throwing us into the police car. It was some crazy building that was about to come down. We thought it would be fun to go tape it because all the sides of the walls had fallen off but all the rooms still had their furniture. You could see that one was a child's room, one was a roomful of rags, one was a living room. So we went on this little performance trip and by the time it was over we were in the clink."

She did four hundred videotapes, most of them about people she knew who were seeing themselves on television for the first time. Through a misunderstanding, she made a half hour of Alan Watts silently watching himself on the monitor. Watts was waiting to be told to begin, and Shirley Clarke says she "thought he was giving me some kind of fucking Zen lesson." Watts was furious—there are those who suspect the guru from Marin County talked about Eastern wisdom more than he practiced it—yet some found liberation in the experience of being videotaped. Actress Sally Kirkland, for example, said recently that working with Clarke on the roof of the Chelsea was a turning point in her career: "She was the first person to make me feel totally interesting just being myself on camera."

"So," Clarke says, "I have all these tapes. I even did a few pornos. My dog would come in just when the couple was about to come, and he would leap onto these people lying on the floor. Nothing could ever go quite straight. I had a lot of fun for about four years." She pauses; on the tape of the interview the UCLA students' voices are a happy sound, a babbling brook of young energy. "All these tapes are of no value artistically—they're high class home movies that you can do because of video."

She formed a troupe that toured the East and Midwest from 1973 to 1975, giving workshops and putting on what she refers to as "interactive video shows with our hosts." They did a Video Ferris Wheel, using a real one, and at the 1973 and 1974 Avant Garde Festivals in New York Shirley Clarke told fortunes with the Videoracle.

Then she followed the man she was living with, an actor, to Hollywood. After a while, however, she found herself "pushing him onto a plane back to New York, goodbye, I never want to see you again." Then she got her teaching job at UCLA. Yet she continues to commute between the coasts. Last year, using another grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, she collaborated with actor Joseph Chaikin and playwright Sam Shepard on a project to transform live theater into television.

Savage/Love was the result—it is a disturbing monologue by an obsessive killer. The videotape premiered at the American Film Institute's First Video Festival at Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., last June. A recent private screening in Melnitz Hall showed that Clarke is still exploring: In Savage/Love not only is the music (by Harry Mann and Skip LaPlante) experimental, the camera drifts occasionally from the single actor (Chaikin) in the piece to the musicians as they respond to the beats of the play, helping prepare actor and audience for the next transition. More unusual still is the editing, which jolts and surprises the viewer relentlessly, so that the character's mood shifts and growing horror are not simply observed—they are shared.

larke continues to work in film and live theater. Her next movie project will be an adaptation of Lewis John Carlino's play, Snowangel, which she plans to make with Shelley Winters. Her current live theater work is directing Big Time Boogie, a multimedia play by actress Sage Allen that is being presented at the Lee Strasberg Institute in West Hollywood. Big Time Boogie has drawn reviews from both ends of the spectrum. It's the sort of work a viewer loves or hates, taking on the themes of office politics, technological oppression, prostitution, guilt, and personal liberation, all with an extreme reality-plus atmosphere reminiscent of the plays of Friedrich Durrenmatt. The usual braces and knots have snapped in this world, and tendencies that we are all aware of but choose to ignore are pulling everything out of control.

Closed-circuit television and a large onstage screen recall the days in 1970 when Shirley Clarke found herself irresistibly drawn into another medium of expression. Back then, after her friend arranged for her to buy two of the new cameras, she "took them home and my life was changed overnight, because these kids came to help me set up and a friend of mine was sitting playing guitar on the couch and they put up a monitor, and they put up a camera, and I did not look through the camera [as she did with film], I looked into the monitor. And there was my friend playing the guitar. That whole thing of my being able to see the finished thing while I was doing it and the immediate feedback and the immediate playback just flipped me. As a film maker the only thing I don't like is that time lag [while the film is being developed]. So here was what I thought was ideal, which is a combination of live theater and film—because there's a whole aspect of the video thing that's just like theater -it's live-but you can see again what you looked at earlier today."

At the Lee Strasberg Institute, Clarke involved author Allen at every stage of rehearsal. "Theater is not a director's medium," Clarke says, "it's a playwright's medium and an actor's medium." She stops and thinks, then says: "Doing theater—any time I do any kind of theatrical thing--I'm so happy to go back to film or video. It's my lack of control over the actors that drives me insane. If you're doing a film and you get the scene right, you've got it in the camera, and that's it. You don't have to wait each night, praying that they're going to do what they did the night before. Invariably, if she's good he's bumming out, and if he's good she's bumming out. You never can get the whole thing all at once. I guess if you do it's a wonderful, ecstatic miracle and makes live theater worth it. But oh, it's hard on the director. Theater is not a director's medium. Film is a director's medium, it's my experience, and I've done them all.

"No, film is a director's leditor's medium. Most great directors also control the editing. A lot of them do it. I do both, always. I have people helping me, but I would never let anybody do the editing because that's really when I take all those wonderful pieces I have and create what I'm doing. In video, I've discovered that, since I did the Sam Shepard-Joe

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Chaikin thing last year, I was finally able to find a way to not only be live, and deal with it live, which is the theatrical part, but then go back into the editing and come up with some extraordinary stuff, just wonderful. Hanging around teaching here, teaching the kids, I started to learn some of the possibilities."

Before she kissed her visitors goodbye, she turned to an utterly serious side of things. "I think art as such in the United States of America nowadays is having a very heavy time. I think that in novels, in theater, in films, in music, it's really retarded. It's real hard for anything to be about anything. If you notice theater, there are very few new plays. Mostly old ones get revived. In movies they're going back to old movies and making them over again. Novels remind you of something you read a hundred years ago, and music's in exactly the same state.

"My own personal feeling-I feel this quite strongly—is that I think the human race is going through an extraordinary transition, similar to the Renaissance or any other great moment in history, and this time . . . " She pauses, and for a change she has to search for words. "This time we're going to connect the whole futuristic sci-fi technological world with spiritual values. And that's a tough thing to do. It's real tough. And the result is that we're floundering, we're having a very hard time, and we're getting little teeny bits of it, but if some of us aren't willing to at least try, it's just going on longer and longer "

A student appears with a problem, and with the ease of a magician producing a dove from thin air, Shirley Clarke sets free a solution and sends him away happy.

"It's fun working," she confides. "My survival depends on the fact that I do things all the time."