

The Long and the Tall of It  
review by Gerald Saul

Mark dimmed the lights and I sat alone as the stark, black and white image appeared on the screen. I'd seen a rough cut of The Ballad of Don Quinn a year or so ago and so had an idea of what I'd be seeing, but still I was captivated by this honest new film. The Ballad of Don Quinn is a new, ultra low budget drama directed by Mark Wihak. In a nutshell, it tells the story of Don, a guy trying to recapture his past glory days by reviving his old punk band on the anniversary of Sid Vicious's death.

As Mark himself turns thirty, his film shows aspects of the generation gap (yes, it is still there) that are rarely seen. With so much media attention paid to the Baby Boomers in the past few decades, it is startling to see anything about the lost generations that followed. So what happens when the rebels, the energetic youth on the cutting edge, get old? Progression? Stagnation? Hypocrisy? The paths one might take are many; this film shows four of them.

I found this film quite disturbing because of the problems and the choices I see myself needing to make. I have been trying to avoid some of the mistakes made by many 'over 30' people. Is this possible I wonder? Mistakes seem unavoidable and unrepairable. This also seems to be the course followed by Don, the title character played by Mike Burns. He is successful to the extent that he has retained his energy and his ideology. However, he missed in his intent: to remain on the cutting edge. In fact, to most of the young people to whom he feels bound, he is either a curiosity or an antique. Don lacks any sense of self knowledge, else he would soon realise that he isn't what he believes himself to be.

Unfortunately limited to a half hour, due to limited budget and labour, Mark decided to focus on developing his principal character, Don Quinn. Other characters had to remain on the fringe, but still managed to grab a lot of attention. In particular, Alan Zwiig plays Don's old friend and band mate whose life has been predictable and boring since he married and began raising children (not necessarily in that order). Alan's performance made me want to light up a cigarette and go piss on Brett's car. (It was that good). As a filmmaker himself, Alan seemed always at ease in front of the camera. In fact, with the exception of Chris Cunninghams zombiesque character, the whole film was played with an air of improvisation. This grows out of Mark's direction, and the structure of the production. His cast and crew were small and unencumbered by excessive gear. Relaxation and familiarity breed spontaneity. A single headlight of a Skoda lit the final scene! This approach works to make the characters believable.

The film is in black and white and suitably so. I felt it could have been made in 1979 as a speculation of the nineties. The style is minimal with undertones of voyeurism. The grainy image sometimes, as in Don's bedroom, gives the impression of a hidden surveillance camera. A scene in Roger Ing's Utopia Cafe was pure cinema, from the dolly opening to the cigarettes and the magical backlighting. The sound was raw, though at times a bit difficult to discern. Mark created a world of noise, cluttered by the city, by voices and by music, and then punctuated it with disturbing and thought provoking moments of silence. All in all, the film's style reflects the world it reminisces about and exists in.

Mark described the soundtrack as "an archive of Regina bands". It features, amongst others, The Xtroverts, Mrs. Swenson, Funkenstein, and The Donuts. Eddie Lester, previously of The Xtroverts also supplied new music for the film. If it had a soundtrack album, I'd be sure to buy it (on vinyl of course). The film also contains a myriad of other Regina references. It is made here and set here. Mark recognises that people are a part of their environment. Regina people are linked to this city, and the city is getting old. Buildings which once stood proud, the train station, the ill-fated Capital theatre, have fallen into disrepair. They have faded and will disappear, just like Don Quinn. Is 'living' just for the young? Apparently so.

Each generation mocks and eventually buries the previous one. The punk movement is, for most people, an unnoteworthy chapter of the past. But now, as we could have predicted but didn't want to, we find ourselves on the eve of a punk revival. I'm not sure if this will be possible. Unlike the hippies who remained conveniently pickled until their revival began, most self respecting punk rockers are dead. Mark's film seems destined to be made.

Revolutions will come, revolutions will go. Some people will remember, others forget. These are only some of the choices we have to make. Should we change? Should we stay the same? Four characters in The Ballad of Don Quinn make four different choices. None claim any regrets, but neither were they completely right with the paths they took. There are no right decisions anymore, only varying degrees of wrong ones.

I liked the film, though I don't recommend it for the die-hard optimists.