

# Probing the depths

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [September 13, 2000](#) issue

My journey to the Montreal World Film Festival has become an annual spiritual retreat. Here citizens stand in long lines to pick up tickets to a sold-out Chinese film at 10:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning. Critics, flashing their media passes, know to arrive early and head for the balcony at the Cinema Imperial because ticket-holders quickly fill up the main floor. There is no popcorn here; and this year not even coffee in the lobby between showings, only bottled water.

A spiritual retreat? When one of the films deals with a drug-addicted mother who loves her daily hit more than her children? Yes, because films at their best probe the depths of life in ways that conventional religious activities too often avoid. This is the case with *Protection*, a Canadian film by Bruce Spangler which evokes compassion while depicting a world that doesn't offer unambiguous answers.

*Protection* opens with a social worker named Jane driving slowly through rainy streets. She is on her way to visit Betty, a heroin-addicted mother who lives with her boyfriend, Joe. He may be guilty of giving Betty's son a black eye and of fondling her young daughter. We see Betty and Joe sharing drugs, and we see Betty's daughter preparing breakfast for her brother and trying to clean up the mess left by her mother.

Alerted by school authorities to trouble in Betty's home, Jane has already warned Betty that the children might have to be removed. She arrives at the house with a policeman at her side, not to make a drug arrest, though there is considerable evidence for him to do so, but to support her if she decides to move the children to a foster home.

Spangler, himself a former child protection worker, originally planned to make this story a documentary, but decided that cameras would be too invasive in an actual home confrontation. Instead, he has secured for his first feature film superb performances from actors who take the viewer into the suffering of Betty, Joe, the children and finally, the social worker and policeman too.

Removing children from a home, even when abuse and neglect are evident, is painful for everyone involved. A powerful image underscores this pain: after watching their slow, agonizing drive to a suburban foster home, we see the officials and the two children arrive and stand at the door, waiting for it to open. We never see the foster parents. The scene ends with the camera looking from a distance, revealing two lonely children gripping their small suitcases in the semidarkness of a rainy afternoon.

A different kind of mother is shown in the Chinese film *Breaking the Silence*, directed by Sun Zhou. It features a remarkable performance by a young boy with a serious hearing and speech problem. His mother, Sun Liying, whose husband has left her, is determined to teach her son to talk “normally” so that he can avoid going to a school for the deaf. She gets little help from the father, who makes only occasional visits, including one in which he teaches the boy to fight back against school bullies, with disastrous results.

Films from China are carefully vetted by Chinese authorities to avoid inclusion of any criticism of the government, but *Breaking the Silence* suggests that things were better for single mothers when there were work groups to help them in matters like buying a new hearing aid. I also noticed the blatant product placement of two major world corporations: McDonald’s, where the family goes for dinner, and Seimens, the producer of the hearing aid. Commercial companies pay film companies large sums for such exposure, but until recently I had not seen these signs of Western influence in Chinese films.

In *State and Main*, writer and director David Mamet includes a scene that makes fun of the corrupting power of product placement. Mamet was on hand to introduce the movie, about a film company working in Vermont that needs money to complete its shoot, so the producer agrees to show the name of an Internet company on screen for payment of \$1 million. One problem: the film is a western set in the 1800s. How the filmmakers solve the problem is one of many sight and verbal gags that enliven this comedy.

*State and Main* will make it to the mall theaters, but you probably won’t get to see *My Little Devil* outside of a film festival. This gentle film from India is about a young boy named Joseph who is sent to a mission boarding school where he gets into trouble for stealing food to give to a poor family. Based on a real incident, the picture is the second film directed by Indian actress Gopi Desai, and stars the well-known Indian actor Om Puri (of *East Is East* and *My Son the Fanatic*). I was unsure

how the film played until a moment when Joseph is caught stealing. A young girl near me in the theater sat up in her seat and whispered to her father, "Will he be all right?" Children do get involved in films, and when the films they see have the quality of *My Little Devil*, they are the better for it.