

# LOST AND FOUND

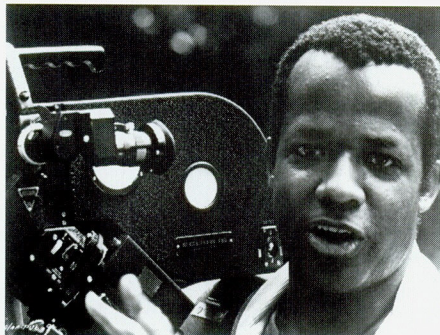
## ***Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One and Take 2½*** by Maria San Filippo

In a behind-the-scenes sequence included in the 1967 film *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, director William Greaves is shown telling a group of curious schoolchildren gathered on set that the project underway will be “coming out next year sometime.” As it turns out, Greaves was thirty-eight years off in his prediction. Instead *Take One* “moldered in its cans,” as J. Hoberman once remarked, for much of the intervening decades. Though Greaves did not actively seek a distribution deal until the 1990s, the welcome arrival of his first feature film in limited theatrical release this fall was tempered by the indignation of it having taken far too long.

We need look no further for a poster child to illustrate the dismal realities of film distribution. However sparse their ranks, it is the modern-day Atlases like Janus Films (*Take One*'s distributor), New York's IFC Center (which hosted last October's booking), and the venerable Criterion Collection (slated to release the DVD this June) that provide the bulwark for uncompromising filmmaking against the relentless advance of multiplexes, Blockbuster, and the general notion that films have become mere fodder for Luddites.

Greaves is, of course, not the sort of filmmaker whom one might imagine would have trouble securing distribution no matter how unmarketable the film (and its perplexing title) may seem. Producer of 200-plus projects and recipient of several industry accolades (an Emmy, an Indy, and the International Documentary Association's Career Achievement Award in 2004), Greaves's name has long been synonymous with maverick independent filmmaking and a commitment to documenting the African-American experience.

My own first encounter with *Take One* was at the 1999 Hamptons International Film Festival. It was one of those transformative film-going experiences that offers not just professional reassurance (though that is not to be underestimated) but also general



**William Greaves during the shooting of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*.**

peace of mind—like the film gods' answer to Job, to paraphrase Woody Allen, they make a lot of crappy movies but they can also make one of these. *Take One* seemed to me (at the risk of sounding maudlin) resoundingly *real*: actors (and nonactors) working without a net—or without a script as it were—and so regularly caught extemporizing to alternately inspired or fatuous effect. The palpable sense of time (the summer of 1967) and place (Central Park) that only location shooting can generate. And a willingness to allow—indeed, to court—chaos, indecision, and derision on the set of a film production, and to leave that unscripted mayhem largely intact in the final cut.

I remember being seized by a rush of elation during the opening credits, a tour-de-force of editing and sound design that pays glorious homage to Dziga Vertov, Miles Davis, and Strawberry Fields. Like most of the festival audience that night, I had never heard of Greaves's first feature, and that purity of non-expectation no doubt buoyed my euphoria.



**Audrey Henningham and Shannon Baker rehearsing a screen test in this scene from William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1967)**

As did the festival programmers' touting that the film had never been given a theatrical release, infusing an air of adventure into the proceedings as if we were along on an explorers' party, preparing to pry open a time capsule.

Which is all to say that as assuredly as *Take One* deserves its reputation as an iconoclastic *cinéma-vérité* masterpiece, it also rides a considerable distance on cultivating the “lost and forsaken” myth. Not that I begrudge it that, but the cult following to emerge from *Take One*'s exhumation on the festival circuit provides the kind of publicity that prime-time television advertising cannot hold a candle to. Ultimately it seems like a blessing in disguise—or a canny strategy—to have abandoned the search for distribution circa 1967 when, as Greaves says, “America was just coming out of its apartheid mood” and industry insiders told him that *Take One*'s unorthodox techniques and genre hybridity made it resistant to marketable pigeonholing.

Whether this was an accurate assessment given the “we'll try anything” mode of the late 1960's American film industry is debatable. *Take One* has as much in common with *Easy Rider* as it does with *Faces* or *Medium Cool*, and it is conceivable that Greaves might have ridden the same wave of countercultural, stoner philosophizing hipness that Dennis Hopper and company cashed in on...but equally imaginable that it might have suffered the studio hackjobs and distribution oblivion that plagued Cassavetes and Wexler. Then again, it's unlikely that distributors in 1967 were clambering for a Brechtian experimental film shot by a multiracial crew of hippies and directed by an African-American—the times they weren't *that* a-changin'.

Funny enough, this debate over *Take One*'s accessibility was not lost on the film's cast and crew. Indeed the crux of *Take One*'s dramatic tension stems from the struggle to save its strategy of improvisatory abstraction from collapsing into unintelligibility, combined with an idealistic attempt at collective filmmaking that is nevertheless susceptible to an infectious *auteur*-as-God complex. The periodic “palace revolt” sequences feature crew members acting as combination Greek chorus/rebel faction, sounding their dissatisfaction with Greaves's dictatorial tactics as they pass a spliff. In one such sequence, soundman

Jonathan Gordon bemoans the production's endless navel-gazing, unwittingly complaining that "It's not a film designed for [Greaves] to keep in his basement."

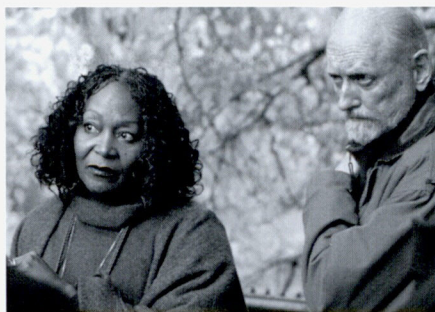
The irony being, of course, that that is precisely where *Take One* largely resided before a Brooklyn Museum retrospective of Greaves's work gave the film its first theatrical screening in 1991 and started the ball rolling for the dozen festival screenings to follow and the subsequent acclamations by Robert Stam, J. Hoberman, and other luminaries. Thanks also to Greaves's perseverance and (in whatever measure) the film's cult following, and further helped along by a couple of high-profile advocates, Steve Buscemi (who pledged his support after attending a Sundance screening in 1992) and Steven Soderbergh (who financed a recent color correction), *Take One* was finally dusted off and resurrected.

As this wildfire word of mouth suggests, despite its tongue-twisting title and mind-trippingly reflexive esthetic, *Take One* undeniably holds potential for mainstream appeal. Its distanciation effects are less Godardian than *Spinal Tap*-ian, its behind-the-scenes bedlam found a popular successor in the recent *Lost in La Mancha*, and it has the same "how much of this is real?" water-cooler debatability as *The Blair Witch Project*, minus the histrionics.

Or rather, *Take One*'s actors do indulge in histrionics but are skewered (or manage to skewer themselves) mercilessly and hilariously. Greaves purposefully designs the mock screen test for his film-within-a-film as a scathing stream of banalities exchanged by two Actors Studio performers (Don Fellows and Patricia Ree Gilbert) playing bickering married suburbanites Freddie and Alice. Except that their bickering only increases in between takes, and because the camera is always on and their acting exceedingly bad (or perhaps, given *Take One*'s propensity for smoke and mirrors, these are two skillful actors shrewdly impersonating talentless hacks), their inane gaffes and self-important posturing provide ongoing fodder for *Take One*'s tongue-in-cheek humor.

As for that mystifying title, it refers to a term coined by the philosopher and social scientist Arthur Bentley, who used "sybiopsychotaxiplasm" to designate all the elements and events that transpire in any given environment which affect and are affected by human beings. Greaves inserted "psycho" into Bentley's term to emphasize, as he says, "the role that human psychology and creativity play in shaping the total environment—while at the same time, these very environmental factors continually affect and determine human psychology and creativity."

*Take One* continues to electrify audiences, as evidenced by its enthusiastic reception in Los Angeles last August, headlining "The Films That Got Away" festival cosponsored by the American Cinematheque and the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. It is a film quite distinctively both of its time and timeless, a privileged glimpse back to a mythical



Thirty-six years later, Henningham and Baker reunite in Central Park for the sequel.

era, but utterly up-to-date in its postmodern irony, its multilayered manipulation of mediated reality, and its sly appraisal (as accurate then as now) of the political arena.

Rather than dating it, then, *Take One*'s high Sixties sensibility allows the film to be both broadly entertaining and (still) politically meaningful. The trendy (in 1967) use of split-screen optical effects seems neither hokey nor contrived but rather provides a clever formal assist to the film's narrative layering, and the Miles Davis score is thoroughly funky. Most significantly, the antiauthoritarian spirit of creativity and collectivity voiced and enacted by the socially engaged, idealistic film crew evokes stirring testament to that high-flying (albeit short-lived) era even as it contrasts dishearteningly with our own.

At the American Cinematheque screening, *Take One* was followed by the long-awaited sequel *Sybiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2*, again thanks significantly in part to executive producers Buscemi and Soderbergh. As Buscemi, onscreen in *Take 2 1/2*, wryly comments, "We're doing a sequel to a film that's never been released," and that awareness of *Take One*'s anticlimactic legacy (despite its considerable cult status) casts a shadow on the sequel.

*Take 2 1/2* is neither as hip nor as iconoclastic as *Take One*, and its lack of vitality seems as much a sign of the times as of Greaves's and his collaborators' ages. There are, to be sure, unfortunate formal deficiencies. The additional 1967 footage intercut throughout has a B-roll insipidity to it that makes it clear why it was initially left on the cutting room floor. The contemporary behind-the-scenes sequences seem paradoxically overrehearsed yet undefined, and the Central Park setting rendered as stilted autumnal postcard.

In comparison to the heady energy of *Take One*'s living theater, whose finest moment featured a full five minutes of poignantly nihilistic stream of consciousness from a homeless alcoholic who wandered onto the set, passers-by in *Take 2 1/2* barely give the motley crew a glance. "We didn't get the kind of interaction with the denizens of the park that I was hoping for," admits Greaves. "What has happened in the intervening years is that independent filmmaking as well as amateur filmmaking/videomaking has become so inexpensive and prevalent that people are very accustomed to it, and that awareness killed the spontaneity and hindered the intuitive process."

Most disappointing to witness is the unquestioning, even apathetic way in which the contemporary crew members humorlessly go about their respective tasks as if it were so much corporate drudgery. "Back in the Sixties, the crew didn't hesitate to challenge my authority and even dared to record their observations on camera," says Greaves. "[On set] in 2003 they were either more lenient of authority or more cagey about the whole thing."

As much as *Take One* remains a revelation, then, *Take 2 1/2* is a letdown—although, in some sense, that seems fitting. As Richard Brody writes in *The New Yorker*, "The liberating audacity of the old material is the product of Greaves' hard-won artistic vision; the flatness of the new material, despite his unflagging spirit of adventure, reflects an era of diminished hopes and narrowed dreams."

A moment of revelation does finally emerge on set in *Take 2 1/2*, however. The clichéd barbs that *Take One*'s auditioning couple exchanged—alternately homophobic vitriol and self-delusional psychobabble—were, while never short of hilarious, not meaningful enough to stand on their own outside *Take One*'s reflexive framework. Where *Take 2 1/2* excels is in allowing its follow-up scenario an unironic sincerity that is mature and affecting.

The exchange between the decades-older Freddie (Shannon Baker) and Alice (Audrey Henningham)—actors who appeared as yet another screen test pair in *Take One*'s final scene—imagines a reunion between the former couple that speaks heavily of the intervening years. Freddie is HIV-positive and has summoned Alice back to New York to pose a final request: that she adopt a disadvantaged young woman whom Freddie has taken under his wing. It is Alice's ensuing transformation from lingering resentment and disbelief at Freddie's presumption to an acceptance of the selfless impulse to act, rather than the behind-the-scenes machinations, that becomes the engrossing drama in the sequel.

*Take 2 1/2* screened at the Museum of Modern Art in February but remains without distribution. Greaves is currently seeking financing to complete *Sybiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 3 1/2*. ■

#### *Sybiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1967)

Written, directed, edited and produced by William Greaves; coproduced by Manuel Melamed; cinematography by Terence McCartney-Filgate and Steven Lerner; music by Miles Davis; starring Don Fellows, Patricia Ree Gilbert, Jonathan Gordon, William Greaves and Bob Rosen.

#### *Sybiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2* (2005)

Directed and produced by William Greaves; executive producers Steven Soderbergh and Steve Buscemi; edited by Chris Osborn; cinematography by Terence McCartney-Filgate, Steve Lerner, Phil Parmet, Henry Adebajo and Jerry Pantzer; starring Shannon Baker, Steve Buscemi, Jonathan Gordon, William Greaves and Audrey Henningham.

For further information, contact William Greaves Productions, P.O. Box 2044, Radio City Station, New York, NY 10101-2044, fax (212) 315-0027, phone (800) 874-8314, [www.williamgreaves.com](http://www.williamgreaves.com).

Hadzihalilovic further emphasizes temporality by representing the seasonal changes that take place over the course of the narrative—radiant summer, melancholic autumn, deep winter, rejuvenating spring. Daily routine (with its variations and singular events) is duly accounted for, as nocturnal scenes succeed, without fail, their diurnal counterparts; composed static shots and a deliberate pace create hypnotic rhythms that deeply immerse the viewer in the film's preternatural unease. It's a spell that seems to envelop the girls, too, arriving alongside an awareness of the bodily changes and cycles that mark their entrances into womanhood. Overall, temporality has multiple modes—while at once describing a circular process wherein another coffin-held girl replaces Bianca, the film also delineates the latter's linear trajectory of maturation.

Time can also stand strangely still in *Innocence*. Each night Bianca and initiate Nadja (Ana Palomo-Diaz) walk a lamp-lit path to the main building where they meet other girls and enter a secret passageway via a grandfather clock—an elderly woman stops the swinging pendulum so they can go through. The passage unwinds to a dark, blood-red theater where the girls perform connotative dances in butterfly costumes for a silhouetted, almost noiseless audience. The most that's revealed of these patrons is an unseen man shouting "Brava! You're the prettiest!" from the balcony as he tosses a rose to Bianca, who places it in her leotard. This display of affection arrives after the girl has received towels from Miss Eva for her expectant period ("A new cycle is about to start"), and before Bianca and Nadja discover a passage leading from the theater where an old woman tells them that the shows help pay the costs of the school. The performances function symbolically as debutante ceremonies existing outside time (eternal rites linked to the natural phenomena of insects, one such performance possibly serves as Nadja's Buñuelian anxiety dream of public humiliation) but also function commercially in a youth-driven marketplace: nascent, virginal adolescence put on display to monetarily support the very system that allows such exploitation.

The performances clearly situate the film's male presence—conspicuous in its near-absence—as an insidious one. Aside from the boy at film's end and an unexplained doctor whom Iris spies administering a shot to a girl, the only real male figure is Bianca's silhouetted admirer. His voyeuristic role casts a shadow over the entirety of *Innocence*, not only by reflecting back to viewers their own relationship to the film's sometimes unsettling images, but also by haunting the film's diegesis. All the time Hadzihalilovic gives the sense that someone or something is watching the girls along with us—she carefully limits point-of-view shots and keeps at an icy remove with her camera, as if wishing not to disturb fragile

creatures in their cages (another of the film's motifs).

That the girls' only spectator is male, and that he remains disturbingly abstracted, is of significance and works within the narrative's oneiric logic: up to the performance the girls have been primarily groomed for display and observation. The unidentifiable man's privileged, distanced position and powerful, unmet gaze parallels the viewer's own; the girls' public objectification and commodification, as well as Nadja's dread at having to take part in it, directly result from this voyeuristic relationship.

While the fetishistic iconography of *Innocence* has given certain detractors ammunition with which to level charges of borderline exploitation and titillation at Hadzihalilovic, the director has infused her film with a subversive reading of spectatorial identification that renders such charges—charges that emphasize the visibility of pre-pubescent girls while conveniently ignoring or missing the critical, self-reflexive mode of representation—ultimately shallow.

But *Innocence* never fully condemns institutions of social adaptation either, instead sticking to its oblique strategies until the last image. Certainly, the nightly performances—as with the death of Laura, the breakdown of Miss Eva, and the escape of Alice—directly stem from the school's authoritarian pressures and objectifying practices. And yet, once on the 'outside,' Bianca's future looks practically sunny. Even as she and fellow graduates walk insignificant beneath oppressive institutional buildings, they find time to frolic in another body of water, this time a public fountain where Bianca shares glances with a same-age boy who has ventured into the fountain for a stray ball.

*Innocence's* last moments are rapturous—the two flirt under a jet of water as the camera cranes upward and is soon inundated by a bubbling stream, a shot that clearly mirrors the beginning. But is it meant ironically? Bianca's encounter with a member of the opposite sex might be interpreted as a confirmation of her defeat at the hands of conformity—she unthinkingly acts out the 'healthy' scenario she was bred for. But the opposite could also be inferred. Contending with the dark ambience of the rest of Hadzihalilovic's film, the end of *Innocence* (but not, necessarily, of innocence) grants Bianca a potential for discovery and independence—earlier she had thrown the rose and a pink glove found on a theater seat into the devouring pond—beyond the stifling training to which she clings.

A relatively abrupt reversal of *Innocence's* overall tone, the scene bares an uncomfortable trace of resignation to the power and persuasion of authority, even as it accords with the film's flaunting of conventional analysis. It's an ambivalent conclusion fitting for a debut as mysterious as it is palpable.—**Michael Joshua Rowin** ■

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