

The 400 Blows

Film Review

Tad Zatlyn

1965

In *THE 400 BLOWS*, recent feature at the Varsity Theater, Francois Truffaut telescopes in on one small but very human subject, picking up the story almost at the height of its conflict, rather than methodically building up to it, which might very well have been the “soundest” way to attack the story. Free of the conventional straight jacket of getting in the proper exposition at the proper time, and also acting this exposition out, he is able to give us a greater human close-up. It is as if he were applying a zoom lens to the entire script. And at the final scene, which is the height of the close up, he frames on the face of the boy. Nothing is really resolved—as in life things seldom are.

Another aspect of Truffaut’s technique has been constant mixing of tragedy and comedy. It is probably here that his style becomes personalized, and the signature of a great film director is put on film. For it is the object of his technique to present the fullest view of life, and to do this he has had to economize on other details of story telling. This kind of selectivity becomes apparent in *THE 400 BLOWS* (but much more so in later films when, for example, he devotes at least a third of the film to scenes connected with the school adventures of his leading character, brilliantly portrayed by Jean-Paul Leaud). These scenes though, of course, part of the story line, really serve to delve deeper into personality. He has obviously found it more exciting to take his subject to the cinema and a puppet show than to flashback to an earlier, unhappy childhood. But in the midst of this comedy we are constantly aware that here is no Tom Sawyer, and things aren’t going to work out as we might have hoped.

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