

Abuse

US : 1982 : dir. Arthur J Bressan Jr : ? min
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:
[Raphael Sbarge](#).....
 Richard Ryder

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ € Z ⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
3636a	2½	2	0	1,383	- - - 3 7	No	unseen

NAMBLA Bulletin vol. 4/5 (June '83) media note:

"Most of what Arthur J Bressan Jr knows about child abuse [*sic*] is on the screen in his film "ABUSE", which was shown to a receptive audience at the San Francisco International Film Festival. Known as the maker of "GAY USA" and two pornos, "PASSING STRANGERS" and "FORBIDDEN LETTERS", Artie says ours was the first festival to accept his film, after turndowns from New York, L.A. and Chicago. "It gets to be a real bummer..." He feels that closeted gays on the selection committees kept him out of the other festivals: "The gay thing pushed some buttons in people. That's the way it is."

Destined to be controversial, "ABUSE" is a love story between a 14-year old abused child [*sic*] (Raphael Sbarge) and a 32-year old student filmmaker (Richard Ryder). Bressan notes that Hawaii is the first state to lower the age of consent to 14, "and the world has not collapsed". He predicts that other States will follow suit¹. As for any thought that his 14-year old hero is too young, Bressan says "I was nine when I first had sex with a man by choice... I wish there had been an organisation then that had picnics for older men and younger boys".

Sbarge was 15 when he made "ABUSE"; now he's 18 and still pursuing an acting career. He's done a picture called "RISKY BUSINESS" for Warner Brothers and is up for a small part in a new version of "A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE" with Ann-Margaret. Sbarge was not abused [*sic*] as a child. Artie says "Neither was I". To those who would say a child is better off

dead than gay, Bressan responds "It would be better for any of the 4000 kids who were buried last year if they'd gotten away - no matter what kind of hornet's nest they got into: drugs, hustling.. "

He says he doesn't know of any studies of the S/M scene to see whether former abused [*sic*] children are drawn to it and, if so, whether on the dominant side for revenge or the passive side for - continuity? Despite the documentary look of much of "ABUSE", Artie says he staged everything, including person-in-the-street interviews and instances of abuse [*sic*] in a public playground. The burning sequence in the film was shot using "two dollars worth of pigskin" over the actor's real skin. The five or six kinds of physical abuse [*sic*] shown in the movie are, Bressan says, practically the entire repertoire: "Most abusive parents [*sic*] are not very imaginative. "

"ABUSE" has already opened in New York and been booked in a couple of other cities. Bressan, who lived here for ten years, says he hopes a San Francisco run will be announced soon. He's realistic enough to know there are few cities in the US where "ABUSE" will ever be shown, but it won't take much to recoup the \$27,000 investment. "

NAMBLA Bulletin vol. 4/8 - October '83 - media note:

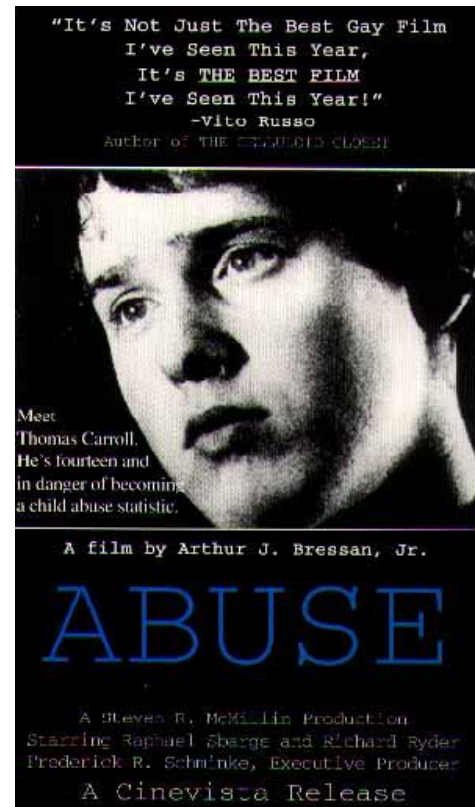
"The Sentinel reports Artie Bressan's low-budget film "ABUSE" made Variety's Top 50 Box Office list. That's quite a showing for a non-generic film that was turned away by 35 distributors..."

¹ an uncannily inaccurate forecast

NOW YOU SEE IT - Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film - note:

"...**"ABUSE"** (USA 1982 Arthur Bressan), which, through the character of a film-maker trying to make a film on the subject of child abuse [sic], contrasts the vicious parental abuse [sic] of a boy with gay so-called abuse."

[no listing in "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996", "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "Screening the Sexes - Homosexuality in the Movies", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]



Quel surprise – that this title should be absent from every published film reference work I've consulted bar one, and that only in a footnote. While the steady drip-drip-drip of other "child abuse" TV movies, soaps and "investigative reports" has continued unabated for twenty years. No further information currently available then. The film has been buried in quicklime.

It is not pedantry on my part to reject the term "abuse" altogether. No word in the English language has been more overworked and misappropriated in recent years. The Experts speak to us now of "alcohol abuse" (= drunkenness), of "substance abuse" (= glue-sniffing), of "tobacco abuse", "satanic abuse", "racial abuse", "spouse abuse", "animal abuse" and, of course, not forgetting "sexual abuse". The proliferation of this word – and the uncompromising mentality behind it - has served to stifle debate, suppress separate evaluation of separate issues, and deny the possibility of contradiction. The Japanese, no doubt, are guilty of "whale abuse" and the Brazilians of "rainforest abuse".

For thousands of years, generation upon generation of parents and teachers have slapped and beaten their children, viewing this not only as their right but their solemn moral duty. But place the rubberstamp of "abuse" upon it, and it becomes at once an unthinkable violation - without by extension criticising the family or school, which institutions for centuries fervently practised it. By the same fundamentalist rationale, all child labour becomes exploitation, all zoos cruel to animals, all men potential rapists, all narcotics evil.

But the most celebrated "abuse" of all, the one which screams at us from the headlines more than all the rest together, is "child abuse". The term implicitly encompasses neglect, "child-battering", forcible rape, caning in schools, supplying beer or cigarettes to children, psychological humiliation, incest, forcible sweatshop labour, spanking, infanticide, nude photography, and any form of sexual contact prior to an arbitrary and constantly shifting "age of consent" (which takes no account whatever of the actual age of puberty).

"Child abuse" means any or all of these things, and is as damning an indictment today as the words "terrorism" and "communism" ever were. But any catch-all term which groups together such disparate phenomena, making no distinction as to degree, is worse than useless, precludes discussion, and has the smack about it of another overworked and sinister word: "heretic". For these reasons I repudiate the word "abuse" implicitly. Rubber stamps are no substitute for reasoned analysis.

As to the film "**ABUSE**", while not unique, it is an attempt to make on film an argument that has been made repeatedly elsewhere to little discernible effect, so it is scarcely surprising that even gay film festivals have shied away from screening it, whereas it would have enjoyed a far wider release, and been bought for television, had it toed the received line. By attempting to distinguish adolescent homosexuality and pæderasty from violence to children, it has broken one of the strictest canons of current received wisdom, and even sailed perilously close to criminal prosecution. Such arguments are not to be made in public.

Two comparable films would be Frank Vitale's "**MONTREAL MAIN**" ('74), an independent Canadian production about an affair between a 12-year old boy and a 30-year old bisexual artist/photographer involved in an alternative commune on Montreal's Main Street, and "**POSTCARDS FROM AMERICA**", in which an AIDS activist recalls his own childhood, early awareness of homosexuality, and maltreatment by his father and the men who first approached him for sex. The latter film, indeed, by intercutting these experiences, only helps to further muddy the distinction between early sexual activity and a general history of being bullied, so that arguably the gay identity which emerges is not (as the film supposes) in despite of his negative experience of men, but because of it. "**ABUSE**", from the description given, at least does not make that fundamentally self-refuting connection. That is why it, and "**MONTREAL MAIN**", will never be broadcast by Channel 4, but "**POSTCARDS FROM AMERICA**" was.

See subject index under **CRUELTY / NEGLECT / MALTREATMENT, SEX & SEXUALITY** and **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS**.



Arthur J. Bressan