

## How the filming of "Asylum" came about

Richard W. Adams

**Editor's Note** - This April 21st, as part of the *Frames of Mind Mental Health Film Series*, the film *Asylum* (Directed by Peter Robinson) will be screened at 7:30 pm at the Pacific Cinematheque theatre. In brief, *Asylum* was filmed over 6 weeks in 1971 and captures the day-to-day life of a unique residence for "mentally troubled" individuals established in London, UK, by the late radical psychiatrist R.D.Laing & colleagues.

The April 21st program will include a postscreening discussion with Dr. Andrew Feldmar (a local psychologist and Laing's student and friend) and Mr. Richard Adams. Mr. Adams, who lives in New York, was *Asylum's* cameraman and editor and what follows is his invited contribution to this newsletter - a very personal account of his involvement in the making of a remarkable film. To meet Richard and Andrew and to view a unique documentary, please join us April 21st.

In early 1970 a frequent partner of mine on film projects, the late Peter Robinson, was introduced by his wife to R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self* and *The Politics of Experience*. He was overwhelmed -- and determined, successfully, to contact Laing and persuade the famous "anti-psychiatrist" to let us film him discussing his work and his views on traditional treatments for schizophrenia. The result was a pair of short films called *Psychiatry and Violence* and *Breathing and Running* -- as well as Laing's blessing on Peter's wish to make a film about the therapeutic community that Laing had launched six years earlier on a five-year lease at Kingsley Hall, and which now was located in three condemned rowhouses in London's Archway district. In early 1971, Peter and I returned to London to film Laing offering some opening remarks for the proposed film, and to visit the community, with film equipment, to see whether the residents would take to us and give us *their* blessing.

Peter Beverly Robinson was one of several talented children of a colorfully prominent Canadian family, had been an R.C.A.F. fighter pilot over Dunkirk, survived getting shot down over France, showed great talent as a painter, moved to New York City, where as an actor he won minor parts in major Broadway plays, and then got into documentary filmmaking. When I met him he was production manager on a three-screen film project called *To Be Alive!* that became a hit of the 1964 New York World's Fair, won an Oscar, and was shown again at the Montreal Expo in 1967.

I had always felt comfortable working with Peter, but on seeing some murky black-and-white silent footage shot at Kingsley Hall, and hearing Peter's thumbnail sketches of some of the more bizarre residents, and knowing that at least two television crews had been thrown out or denied permission, and reading *The Politics of Experience*, and

having somnambulated wistfully through the 1960s as an utter square, I felt I was simply not hip enough to be the cameraman on such a project. But then my unconscious was startled by a far more personal encounter with Laing than I'd have thought possible. I had been reading *The Divided Self* in preparation for the filming, and one night I dreamt the door to my bedroom was opened and in peeked R.D.Laing himself. It was probably then that I began to feel a certain claim of my own on the project.

So on our second trip to London we filmed Laing explaining briefly the origin of his therapeutic community. He had apparently felt some embarrassment on seeing in the first two films his degree of unselfconscious glee in recounting primitive approaches to mental illness in the past. So he spoke this time with an uncharacteristically somber, dour mien. And then we spent an afternoon and an evening visiting the Archway community and giving the residents a chance to size us up. I was relieved that so many were so friendly and that some of the behaviors were only slightly and unthreateningly strange. I was more anxious about the apparent lack of activity throughout the day than about the heavy smell of incense in some of the rooms.

What would there be to film?, I wondered. As a sort of test for both us and them, and in order



*Laing and Adams on subsequent U.S. tour*

to be able to include a glimpse of Laing himself before his departure for a year's retreat in India, we filmed a smaller group in discussion, with Laing a characteristically passive presence (offering nothing but one magnificently sardonic smile that is itself worth the price of admission). I can't remember whether a vote was taken that night or the next day, but several residents came right out and said they liked us. Permission was soon granted, and before long it was no longer "us and them".

I think what had softened the corners of the square in me and prepared me best not to feel threatened was a short spate of Jungian dream analysis that had made me feel simultaneously more in tune with myself and more empathetic

toward those more troubled. I believe all three of us on that small crew - Peter as producer/director, William Steele as sound recordist and second cameraman (now a successful photographer), and I as cameraman/editor - were deeply touched by the experience, each in a different way.

What the first half of the film does is expose the viewer to some of the same disquiet and ambiguity that a visitor might feel, not knowing who the "patients" are and who the doctors. By the time a pillar of society bursts in (so to speak) to fetch his son for the holidays, one may have become sufficiently attuned to the spirit of the community to be able to observe "normal behavior" from a new perspective. The second half of the film, introduced by Laing again as he gives his, the community's, and the film's definition of "Asylum" as "a safe place to be", offers more comfortably articulated explanations of how the Archway Community worked.

It was not a treatment center but simply a residence, like Kingsley Hall, affording a haven from both mental hospitals and dysfunctional families. When it comes to harmony and longevity I suspect it fared as well as most counter-cultural communes of the 60s and 70s. It was a place where neurotic Americans and Canadians who had discovered

Laing could try to find themselves, where more severely "disturbed" Brits on the National Health could afford the rent and out-patient therapy, and where one who felt the need (like the legendary Mary Barnes from Kingsley Hall), could "let oneself go" into a tunnel of madness from which one might emerge more whole in the end. Voluntary medication was encouraged but there were no men in white coats maintaining order through needles. It was an experiment that demanded massive personal commitment, and several years later one of the therapists admitted that it was an overwhelming task to attempt without some recourse to medication.

What I feel strongly as a mere layman is that the community as captured in the film demonstrates in vividly human terms that medication, by the same token, cannot work without a context of strong interpersonal support. That may be a truism, but a number of younger graduates of psychiatric training have told me after recent screenings of *ASYLUM* that the field is beginning to recognize that with the success of chemical treatments, the interpersonal element has tended to be underrated, but is now being re-appreciated. It is my belief that in its own way, *ASYLUM* is a reminder of one of the most important contributions of R.D.Laing's controversial legacy.