Frederick Wiseman

Titicut Follies

Titicut Follies
Director: Frederick Wiseman
©/Production Company: Bridgewater Film Co. Inc.
Producer: Frederick Wiseman
Associate Producer: David Eames
Director of Photography: John Marshall
Editor: Frederick Wiseman
Associate Editor: Alyne Model
USA 1967©
84 mins
Digital 4K (restoration)

The screening on Wed 29 Oct will be introduced by Sandra Hebron, programme curator

Frederick Wiseman

Public Housing
Sun 26 Oct 17:15; Sat 29 Nov 14:20
Titicut Follies
Wed 29 Oct 18:10 (+ intro by Sandra Hebron, programme curator); Sun 9 Nov 12:30
High School
Sat 1 Nov 12:30; Thu 13 Nov 18:30 (+ discussion about Frederick Wiseman's aesthetics and approach with filmmaker Andrea Luka Zimmerman and curator Matthew Barrington)
Multi-Handicapped
Sun 2 Nov 15:10; Sat 15 Nov 17:45
Welfare
Sat 8 Nov 17:15; Sun 23 Nov 14:45

How does *Titicut Follies* stand up today? Its effect is still devastating. Were the film a muck-raking exposé, it might now seem merely a dated document. But Wiseman is beyond self-righteous anger or telling his audience what to think. The moral dimension he presents is far more complex, the conclusions he reaches far more unsettling.

'Titicut' is the Indian name for the area surrounding Bridgewater; 'Titicut Follies' is the name of the charity show put on by patients and guards that opens and closes the movie. A line of men stands on stage, dressed in clean white shirts, black bow ties and plumed marching band hats, singing 'Strike Up the Band'. The number goes smoothly and the guard who acts as Master of Ceremonies – a jolly Joe who appears later at an inmate's birthday party and entertains the men with an impromptu song and dance – encourages the audience to show their appreciation. But already something seems amiss. The stage lights give a ghostly cast to the faces, faces that in close-up are drawn and hollow, proceeding through a joyless ritual. It is the long-shot image, the image of the inmates as docile, obedient, obliging, that Bridgewater would like to present, but that image won't wash.

The show's cheery front is shattered with a cut to a group of new patients being admitted. Gathered in a large bare room, they are commanded to strip by the guards, who repeatedly bark the order before the men have time to comprehend or respond. Disoriented and fearful, they stand there naked, not knowing what will happen next. It's almost embarrassing to have to point out that their nakedness, so ballyhooed by the film's detractors in 1967, serves as a fitting metaphor for their emotional state: the unprotected quality of men stripped of their dignity, barely regarded as human beings.

The absence of dignity is visible in the conditions in which they live (a decrepit, dirty building with men isolated in dingy cells); in the care they're given (baths in tubs of filthy water); and most of all in the treatment they receive at the hands of the staff. The guards use their authority to taunt and abuse the men, as in Jim's case, but they are hardly the only guilty ones. Many of the doctors we see treat the men with their own brand of callousness. When one interviews a patient admitted for raping an 11-year-old girl, an inquiry into his mental state suddenly turns into an attempt to shame him. 'Why do you do this when you have a good wife?' the doctor asks. 'She must not have been giving you much sex satisfaction.' When the doctor recounts the patient's recent suicide attempts, the man says helplessly, 'I need help. I don't know where I can get it.' We can only share his feeling of hopelessness when the doctor answers, 'You get it here, I guess.'

In another sequence, an emaciated old man who hasn't eaten in two days is led naked to a room where the same doctor informs him that he has a choice of eating voluntarily or being force-fed. When he doesn't respond, four guards hold him down by twisting towels round his wrists and ankles while the doctor inserts a tube into his nose and down his throat. The doctor then stands on a chair and pours liquid down a funnel connected to the tube, all the while holding a cigarette in his mouth, the ash getting precariously longer. In the middle of the sequence, Wiseman cuts to a shot of the man being shaved meticulously a few days later, it takes a while for us to realise that we are watching a corpse being prepared for burial. The body is laid out in a coffin, dressed in an ill-fitting suit; better cared for, one might think, in death than in life.

Cinéma vérité was still a fairly new concept when Fred Wiseman made *Titicut Follies*, and the term now calls up the undifferentiated vagueness of films where there is no guiding intelligence at work. *Titicut Follies* shows what the technique

can accomplish in the hands of a discriminating sensibility. Wiseman may cut away from a scene, but he always returns to bring it to some sort of resolution, and what he cuts to usually makes what we have been watching resonate in some new way. He doesn't restrict us to one point of view – you may feel he has given you a chance to roam the corridors of Bridgewater and reach your own conclusions – but he shapes the material like a dramatist. The term *cinéma vérité* may have dated, but the film has not. I don't see how it could be any better made today.

What makes the deepest, most lasting impression is the texture which accumulates from the scenes of patients launching into incoherent harangues or staring blankly at the camera or even responding to it, like the old man who sings 'Chinatown, My Chinatown'. The graininess of the black and white captures the misery that hangs in the air and seems to emanate from the drab buildings. You emerge from the film in something like a state of low-level shock. Days later the atmosphere comes flooding back, and when it does what hits you are not the abuses Wiseman records, but the feeling of how dehumanised life is at Bridgewater, and how that dehumanisation is so familiar it has become banal. Even people who are doing their best to treat the inmates with some good humour and kindness, like the women who conduct an inmate's birthday party, can't prevail against the misery of the place.

In a few memorable scenes, we see the frustration of a young man who tries to buck Bridgewater. He was sent there from a state prison for a few days' observation, and the days have stretched into a year and a half. Now the young man wants to return to prison where, with the use of the library and other facilities available to him, he can prepare himself for life outside. He complains to a doctor that instead of therapy he is given drugs, but the doctor assures him that he is being cared for. If he were to return to prison he is told, he'd be back at Bridgewater by nightfall.

The patient has been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic and he is not without obvious problems – he believes that his food is being poisoned. But he is more lucid than any other patient we see, and no doctor chooses to answer his questions about how the aimless days at Bridgewater can take the place of the opportunities available in the prison he was taken from. In the film's most painful sequence, we see him appear before a review board. When he asks why he is given drugs instead of help, he is asked, in return, why he doesn't take his medicine. As his frustration grows, he becomes less coherent, accusing one doctor of wanting to harm him. 'Well, that's interesting logic,' the doctor says with a tight smile before guards lead the young man away. It's a bad joke when the doctor prescribes a higher dosage of tranquillisers to 'get the paranoid element under control'. Watching this sequence, you don't wonder why the doctor didn't object to it being shown, he's certain that what he's doing is in the patient's best interest.

How many times have we reacted to a crazy person coming on to a crowded bus or subway car by ignoring him? How does that reaction increase when one is surrounded, as are the people at Bridgewater, by irrational, incoherent, potentially dangerous men? The doctors' condescension, like the taunts of the guards is a form of the insulation we all avail ourselves of from time to time except that in the case of the doctors it has become a part of their uniform. It's far easier, and surely more comfortable to label the mentally ill as freaks or oddities or as something barely human, rather than to attempt to interact with them or acknowledge their humanity. The doctors' assertion of their professional status becomes another defence, another distancing technique at their disposal. The most upsetting thing about watching the film is that we cannot be sure that, in the same position, we would act differently.

Charles Taylor, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1998