

RUBY and RATA

CAST AND CREW

director GAYLENE PRESTON producers ROBIN LAING, GAYLENE PRESTON
screenplay GRAEME TETLEY editor PAUL SUTORIUS music JONATHAN
CRAYFORD cinematographer LEON NARBY designer ROBERT GILLIES
key cast: YVONNE LAWEY, VANESSA RARE, LEE METE-KINGI
SIMON BARNETT

A PRESTON*LAING PRODUCTION
in association with the New Zealand Film Commission

SYNOPSIS

Ruby, who is eighty-three has just failed her driving test. She is worried about her increasing capacity to cope with life, and arranges with the help of her nephew, to let the flat in the bottom of her house to a tenant who will be available to assist her. She specifies a business women and an Anglican, and Rata, suavely dressed and talking of her job with a large finance company seems ideals. However, she neglects to mention that she has a son, Willie, in trouble with social welfare, and that her job with the finance company is that of cleaner. Ruby becomes disillusioned with her tenant very quickly, and Rata's involvement with a rock band, The Apocalypse, makes things worse. However, she sees in Willie a possible source for the help she needs, and by a mixture of bribery (chocolate fish) and blackmail (she helps him when he is caught shoplifting) makes him her slave. This causes tension between Willie and his mother who remains on bad terms with Ruby, despite the help she has given the old lady when she has an accident.

Rata has problems of her own with her career as a singer with The Apocalypse – they want her to provide them with a sound system at the price of acceptance. She rather hopes that Ruby's nephew, who boasts about his family's wealth, might provide this, especially as he arranged an engagement for the band to play at.

Willie, torn between helping Ruby who is holding a party and going to hear Rata sing, runs away. He is found and returned in time for both he and Ruby to attend Rata's gig, which is less than successful. On their return home, Ruby falls and injures herself. In hospital her nephew urges her to sell her house and move into pensioner housing. She however signs her house over to Willie, and the film ends with Ruby, Rata and Willie choosing a tenant for the flat downstairs.

DISCUSSION POINTS

The following questions can be viewed as useful in English (fifth form?), transition education, social studies, taha maori and film studies. They have been conceived to provide teachers with a few ideas to initiate discussion; naturally teachers will see many other creative ways to achieve the same end!

1. An important theme in this film is age. What does it suggest about the condition of being old? (think in particular of the driving test scene, the bathroom scene, the hospital). Remember that Ruby is not the only character – there are the women on the bench outside the shop.
2. What does the film suggest about the relationship between the old and the young? Can you identify scenes where this is represented? Ruby and Rata have a hostile relationship, but Ruby and Willie find it easier to come to some kind of accommodation. Why? What scenes treat this question?

3. Ruby and Rata are both women who are trying to cope with life alone – in Ruby's case in old age, in Rata's, as a single parent. Does this film suggest any similarities between their characters, situations or individual resources?
4. What is the role of Ruby's nephew in the film? Is he represented as a sympathetic character or a jerk? Do we know as much about his motivations as we do about other characters? How are they displayed?
5. What function do the minor characters fulfil? (the women outside the dairy, the Indian shopkeeper, the band members) Think about the scenes they appear in. How do they contribute to the main story?
6. Ruby and Rata display obvious differences in terms of class and race – middle and working class, Pakeha and Maori. How does the film ask you to think about these issues? How much of the initial antagonism between the two women is linked with these differences? They are reconciled in the end, is this suggesting something about the possibility of overcoming divisions in New Zealand society?
7. RUBY AND RATA is set in Auckland. What picture of the city are we presented with? List the outdoor locations and think about how they contribute to the film's atmosphere. Ruby's house is the setting for much of the action. How would you describe it? How does it contribute to our knowledge of Ruby's character? How does the upstairs (Ruby's) contrast with downstairs (Rata and Willie). What is the significance of this contrast?
8. List the things that RUBY AND RATA shows you about present day life in urban New Zealand. Do you think that the writer of the film got it wrong at all? (is the picture you get a true accurate one as you see it?)
9. Is the setting (the place and the situations) anything like the community you come from? What similarities and what differences are there between your "patch" and that of RUBY AND RATA?
10. Write a different ending to the story. Ruby falls and injures herself – and then what happens? Make it as plausible as the film's ending but quite different.
11. Think about the way music is used in the film – both background and in the scenes where the band is performing. Choose a scene and describe how the music adds to or modifies your experience of the action.
12. The scenes in the department of social welfare are shot in a certain way. We rarely see the face of the man she is talking to. We just hear his voice. What is the effect of this technique? What other film techniques are used in these scenes to construct atmosphere? What kind of acting techniques?