

STARweek

MAGAZINE



RUNAWAY

This is a young teen
adrift in a world of vice
and crime on Toronto streets,
one of thousands like her
discovered by CBC cameras

September 5 to 12
TV Features and Listings



DoubleTake

By SUSAN KASTNER

Cameras don't lie as they reveal sad lives of our street kids

How true is a documentary? How much are events affected by the camera?

Does the camera inevitably turn "real" people into actors?

How do you know your subjects aren't just acting, or staging events for the camera?

The producers of *Runaways — 24 Hours In The Street* tend, not surprisingly, to be defensive on these contentious points. Howard Bernstein, David Sobelman and Lon Appelby have wrestled with those questions from the moment they began planning their two-hour film about Canada's street children.

Short, filthy words

"Just get us the kids as they are. Show us how a kid lives through 24 hours in the street," executive producer Bernstein briefed his camera crews.

There would be no cutaways to cover up edits, he promised. The 24-hour clock ticking on the screen would "prove that what you're seeing is true, and that it happened at exactly this time."

He is adamant that the story will be shown through the children's eyes, told in their own words.

"Are we going with the language?" one producer asks after seeing a sample clip in which the words are mostly short and filthy.

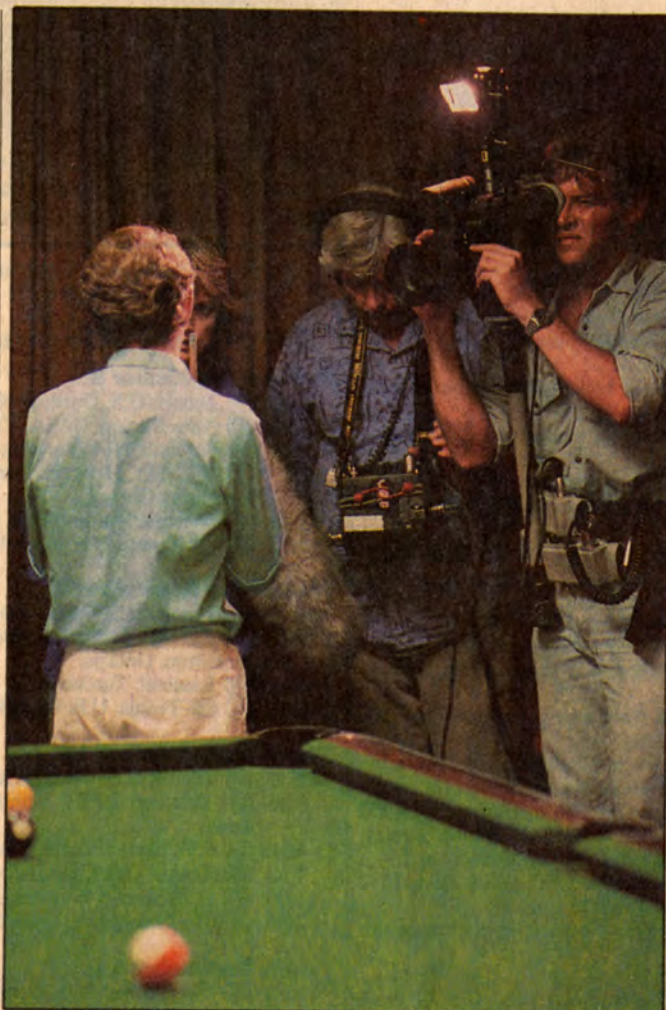
"We wouldn't have a show if we didn't," Bernstein says.

The wall of the CBC production office was covered with pictures of faces, very young, in spite of the tough hair and clothes, the blank or defiant eyes.

Articulate street kids, ones willing and able to communicate on camera, were chosen over inarticulate ones.

But nothing was "rehearsed;" no words were put into anyone's mouth.

The fact is that getting them



A male hooker pulls no punches in talking about his life on the streets as CBC cameras roll 24 hours for documentary

to talk was not as hard as you might think. They're starving for attention.

On Grosvenor St., during the Toronto dry run, a thin, chatty youth bikes over to the camera crew.

"Hey, my brother hustles on this street, so do I. But my clients are mostly women. Older women. I don't do guys that much anymore." He follows the crew for the better part of an hour, talking all the way, discouraged that they don't ask him to appear on camera.

A boy coming out of a gay

bar in a lane behind Yonge St. pulls at the soundman's sleeve. "Hey, do you pay people to talk on TV? You don't pay? Well, hey, you want to hear my story anyway? I got a great story."

A black male hooker volunteers the tale of his "severe sexual abuse" in a foster home. A tipsy teenage transsexual plays at being coy, then gives a 15-minute interview under the fire escape she calls home.

The camera compels you to go beyond what is being said. A teenage girl pregnant for the second time — she gave up her

first baby — tells an interviewer, "I never went (hooking) on the streets. I couldn't picture myself." But the camera catches her eyes sliding away as she says it.

The camera takes you past the teenagers' defiance, their attempts to shock, their answers filled with the jargon of social agencies and police — their main contact with the adult world.

Eager to shoot up

And the camera forces you to acknowledge that the 18-year-old Vancouver prostitute really does shoot heroin into her veins every day. She is willing, even eager, to do it on camera.

Frankie, the glib young hooker from Toronto, performs his solicitation speech so effectively for the viewer because he says those words to prospective customers every week.

All along the route of the dry run, kids whistle and wave and shout to be on film.

No question, the pull of media is strong and seductive.

Frankie, his bangs freshly bleached, wearing a straw hat with fuschia ribbon, tipped at a cocky angle, is all excited.

"You mean this is gonna be in the papers too? Hey, this is amazing! We're only street kids!"

He is revelling in all the attention and, yes, he is playing to the camera. But neither he, nor any of the others, are fabricating the truth of their lives.

If some of the teenagers are seduced by the illusion that they are now media stars instead of juvenile hookers, thieves and addicts, we must not be sidetracked by their illusion.

The events they let the camera witness are the real stuff of their days.

The truth that *Runaways* documents is out in the street for anyone who cares enough to see.