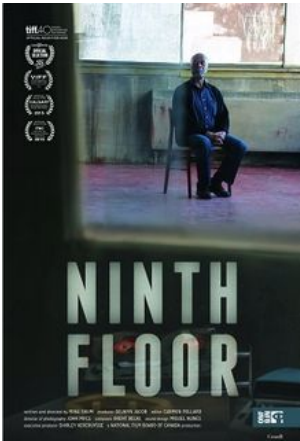


Ninth Floor

Written and Directed by Mina Shum

Produced by Selwyn Jacob for the National Film Board of Canada, 2015



Ninth Floor is a powerful film about an iconic event in Canadian racial history. Writer and director, Mina Shum, explores and exposes the emotions, impact and legacy of the Sir George Williams University Computer Riot of 1969.

The 1960s were a tumultuous decade of unrest and social change in North America. It was also a time of celebration for Canada with Expo 67 and the bringing together of nations from around the world. Into this milieu arrived Caribbean students attending Canadian universities, including Montreal's Sir George Williams University. Many of these students were Black, coming from a different culture and history than that of Canada. Anne Cools, who would become a member of the Canadian Senate, was one of these newly-arrived students. She recalled that she had no awareness of race while growing up in Barbados. In Montreal, she became very aware of being perceived as different. Caribbean students also learned of Canadian prejudices while trying to find housing. Trinidadian Bukka Rennie found that rental units were suddenly not available when the landlord saw him. Canada was not the welcoming place portrayed by Expo 67. Rennie notes in the film that, "Canadians are racist, but would apologize for being racist."

At Sir George Williams, Black students in the medical program also began to suspect that they were receiving different treatment than white students. It was most notable in the classes of Professor Perry Anderson. He would address white students by their first name, while Black students were addressed as Mister. They also felt that they had hit a "brick wall of failure" academically in Anderson's classes. This bias was confirmed when three students, two Black and one white, had the same answers on a lab test paper. The white student received a perfect 10. The two Black students each received a mark of 7. The test results made it clear that a complaint of racial bias needed to be made to the university's administration.

The film chronicles the Sir George Williams administration's actions, or rather a lack of actions, and the downward spiral of events as a result. Recordings show that staff had stereotypical views of Black Caribbean behaviour. The film makes it clear that the administration did not take the Caribbean students seriously. It took the university from April 1968 to January 1969 to set up a review panel. The panel quickly fell apart. A new one was attempted but for the students it was too little, much too late. They decided to occupy the university's computer lab until their demands were met. The lab was on the ninth floor at 1455 de Maisonneuve Boulevard West in downtown Montreal.

The film's creator, Mina Shum, does a masterful job of combining present day interviews with those involved with video of the actual events as they occurred. From the simple request for a review of a professor's marking, Shum shows the increasing frustration, tension and resulting demonstrations. Participants in the protest spread past the original small group of Sir George Williams Caribbean students.

Some of those featured in the interviews are Rosie Douglas, a McGill student who later became the Prime Minister of Dominica, and two Montrealers, Lynne Murray, an African Canadian, and Robert Hubsher, a Jewish Canadian. Murray was one of the many students arrested. Non-Black students were quickly released, while only Black students remained in custody. She recalls her police interrogation, carried out just as shown in the movies, and the police interrogator burning her with his cigarette. Hubsher recalls his run-in as a boy with Montreal police after being the victim of an anti-Semitic slur. He was taken to the police station as a result of the altercation, rather than the instigator of the incident. A sense of social justice guided both Murray's and Hubsher's actions. This was also the pillar of other 1960's movements such as the Anti-War Movement, Women's Liberation and Black Power. Social justice was also the nexus of the Sir George Williams protest.

Popular media of course portrayed the students as the villains. In the House of Commons, a Member of Parliament called to, "Send the Caribbean students back home." On the street, the language was not that restrained as the calls heard by the students were "send the n*****s back home." The "Just Society" that Canada should have been for the foreign students never materialized. The police riot squad was called into action at the university. Fires were mysteriously set in the computer lab after the back entrance had been blocked. Many students were beaten as they came out, charged and expelled from the country. The "Ninth Floor" shows the emotional impact

on the students. It also shows the historical importance of the events, especially in Trinidad and Tobago, the homeland of many of the students.

Last year I visited Trinidad and by chance met Lynne Murray. She had moved to the twin-island nation after marrying a Trinidadian. She was able to see the film last summer, so I asked for her thoughts. She wrote about the production, "My impression was that it was well done and it captured the true story in 82 minutes. The producer Selwyn Jacobs and director Mina Shum were able to show both sides of the coin, from not only the students involved, but also including the professor's son, the arresting police officers and the trial prosecutor. They also showed the diversity of the students by interviewing other students, (Jewish, Asian, etc.,) who were also involved." She also noted that, "I felt angry as I recalled the events 47 years ago. The beatings by the police, the incarceration, the long trials, the reaction of Montrealers both Black and white, it was not a nice scene. I was the only Black Canadian involved and arrested, and I had to constantly defend why I was there in a Caribbean protest, when I wasn't from the Caribbean. I always felt proud to take a stand for injustice and have done that all my life."

As in 1970, racism continues today. The film reminds us that people, like Lynne Murray and her fellow protesters, always need to take a stand against injustice.

The Ninth Floor is available from the National Film Board of Canada.

https://www.nfb.ca/film/ninth_floor/



Peter Meyler