



John Stoddart

Collaborations with the pioneering choreographer Merce Cunningham have established CHARLES ATLAS as one of America's freshest filmmakers. His new docufantasy *Hail The New Puritan* opens C4's upcoming dance season and promises a treat for lovers of the bizarre. Starting with a surreal dream sequence, it follows a semi-imaginary day in the life of dancer Michael Clark, interspersed with performances and culminating in the extravagant burlesque of *Taboo: Stranger, indeed, than fiction*. Story p22.

THE FACE

Photo John Stebbins



THOSE PERSONS fortunate enough to have previewed Charles Atlas' remarkable day-in-the-life doculantasy of dancer Michael Clark, *Hail The New Puritan* (C4 May 21) have come away more than a little excited. "The French have said it's too decadent, some people think it's arty, even Michael was overwhelmed," says the amiable six foot Yank, more used to carrying a camera than the universe on his shoulders. "Personally, I see it as a kind of Rorschach test." Even without it's pomier moments there's enough in this 90 minute, £150,000 film to turn controversy mangers a-quiver. For starters: weird scenes in Taboo where social snogging becomes a big musical production starring Leigh Bowery, Trojan, et al; the wonderful Gaby Agis freemoving all over the place; a seminar with The Fall and a scratch interview with Clark in a 'Beat Me, Whip Me, Fuck Me' T-shirt. "It's very consciously dated," says Atlas, "a time capsule of a certain period and context in London that's now gone." Though satisfied that *Hail...* is the closest he's come to blending "everything I want in a film: narrative, psychology, dance, flights of fancy", even Atlas is shocked at just how much he's managed to get away with considering the prime-time slot. He himself has snipped out a dubious dildo sequence and more X-rated shenanigans to avoid "late-night cloistering", sequences which he fully intends to reinstate for later Festival and cinema screenings. "Contemporary Dance was getting very boring and respectable until Michael came along and made it

disreputable again," he says, "but his work is ingenious (sic), a natural out-growth of his life and surroundings, though underneath it all is that rare classically achieved purity." This you see in his final piece when, stripped of clothes and posturing, Clark delivers a beautiful solo to Elvis' "Are You Lonesome Tonight". Atlas came to London in '63 with camera at the ready convinced of the dancer's "world class status" and attracted by his "angelic-devilish" character split. Indeed, reflects the filmmaker, Clark could only have happened in London. "New York is joyless, people are only interested in their careers, work and sex." And Atlas should know having spent 13 years there, lighting, designing and filming the work of the great choreographer Merce Cunningham to considerable acclaim. Several of his films now reside in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection, although when he joined Cunningham in the early Seventies he was less than a novice. He'd never been to film school, studying instead the camera choreography of Ophuis, Welles, musical kings Danen and Charles Walters and NY independents like Warhol, Jack Smith and Stan Brackidge by paying once and sitting twice through the programme. Despite an all-outing false start with a commercial movie company, the impulse to make films persisted. And finally, yes, just like the "world's most perfectly built human being", his real name is Charles Atlas. "That's been a little hard to live up to," he chuckles. But in the Dance/Film world, he's been putting up a pretty magnificent challenge. Elissa Van Patten