

Sergei Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico*, newly edited by Grigori Alexandrov, is ready for distribution in Canada. Two film reviews follow. The first, written by filmmaker Philip Hudsmith, is on this version of *Que Viva Mexico*. The second is on Hudsmith's own film, Eisenstein's *Mexico*, which traces the route of the great Russian filmmaker and reconstitutes his spiritual journey.

Mexico

DOUBLE TAKE

TAKE ONE

Better late than never

by Philip E. Hudsmith

Que Viva Mexico! was a cause celebre back in the thirties. Conceived as an epic poem about the Mexican Spirit by the famous Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein, it became a tragedy with tears when Eisenstein's backer Upton Sinclair, the left-wing author, halted production and refused to let the Russian genius edit his film; instead, he let Hollywood's favourite Tarzan producer, Sol Lessor, put out a travesty called *Thunder Over Mexico*. Much thunder echoed around Sinclair's ears after the premiere at New York's Rialto cinema, and miles of ink and paper have since been expended on the aborted movie. The ensuing furore did little good for Sinclair's reputation. Eisenstein, of course, was heartbroken.

Eisenstein (who made such memorable films as *Battleship Potemkin*, *Strike*, and *Ten Days That Shook The World*) never did get to lay hands on his rich material again. But almost everybody else did, including Eisenstein's biographer Marie Seton. The results were all pretty mediocre and none of them did very much for art, poetry or the Mexican Spirit. Long after the deaths of Eisenstein and Tisse, Grigori Alexandrov brooded alone in Moscow, waiting for Upton Sinclair to die so that he could get his hands on the remainder of the material and complete the film. Finally in 1973 the State Film Fund of the USSR purchased what was left of the footage from the Museum of Modern Art where it was being preserved under Sinclair's strict edict that it was never to go to Russia. Fortunately for Alexandrov, Sinclair shuffled off his mortal coil in 1968.

There is a school of thought which maintains that if a film director dies, the film should be abandoned and nobody should attempt to complete it. This is a ridiculous precept of course, because studios usually have a lot of money wrapped up in any film. For reasons of financial solvency they are unlikely to leave it on the shelf out of deference to a dead man. A thankless task awaited Alexandrov in his attempt to complete Eisenstein's film, because he was in one of those damned-if-you-do and damned-

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● above Eduard Tisse, Eisenstein (holding fan) and Co. on location in Mexico other photos production stills from *Que Viva Mexico* (also used in *Eisenstein's Mexico*) courtesy of Lilly Library, Indiana, Mexico

if-you-don't situations. Alexandrov, however, is obviously a man of courage. For, with only the scraps left at the bottom of the barrel to work with, he had the temerity to go ahead anyway. His efforts have given us a substantial glimpse of what Eisenstein's dream might have been.

Basically Alexandrov constructed his film close to the lines of the scenario he and Eisenstein completed in 1930. There are of course gaps where material is missing, such as an episode about the soldaderas who followed their soldier husbands into battle under Pancho Villa. The bullfight story called "Fiesta" also leaves a lot to be desired: if it was intended to impress bullfight fans it misses by a mile and is at times badly edited. Whoever heard of a downed picador placing the banderillas (brightly coloured barbed sticks) to impress his lady love? This episode is also incomplete in that it lacks the "Our Lord of Chalma" sequence, which Eisenstein had intended to use to interweave reality with the metaphysical.

The prologue and the "Sandunga" story (about the matriarchal system in tropical Tehuantepec and the necklace of gold coins that is actually a woman's dowry—a hangover from the days when British engineers were attempting to build the Tehuantepec Railway and the Tehuanas refused to accept paper money), are well done. "La Sandunga" is the song of Tehuantepec, and the sequence captures the feeling so well-

expressed by a local poet when he wrote:

*When the longed for day is here
When Death's agony with stiff,
compassionate fingers,
Closes at last, my eyes,
Play the Sandunga and if I do not
awaken
To its plaintive sound
Let me sleep on, for I shall be dead.*

The epilogue is as good as Alexandrov could have made it with the footage that was left to him. It is still possible to see the big wheels of laughter, as Eisenstein called them, making the empty eye sockets of cardboard skulls wink "as if to say that death is an empty box through which the vortex of life will always force its way no matter what."

On the negative side is a lacklustre narrative which is informative at the wrong time. When you really want to know something it is painfully silent. This may be a fault of the translation from the Russian. The music too is ill-conceived, and practically non-stop throughout. It seems to be largely the Russian concept of what Mexican music should sound like. The "Sandunga" though, as indicated before, is extremely memorable and lingers in the mind long after the credit titles have rolled. One wonders why heavy electronic music was used for the prologue when the Eisenstein-Alexandrov scenario specifically calls for "the quaint rhythm



of the drums of the Yucatan music, and the high-pitched Maya song" to accompany the funeral procession.

On the plus side are Eisenstein's staggeringly beautiful foreground compositions and his use of the triangle motif throughout, obviously inspired by the volcanoes and pyramids of Mexico. There is also Eduard Tisse's matchless exterior photography to marvel at. From the cinematographer's point of view *Que Viva Mexico!* is a joy to watch. This part of the original dream for the film was realized widely, boldly and significantly. But as one watches the magnificent vistas unfold, it is impossible not to wonder what Eisenstein would have done with his magnificent footage.

All in all, there is much to admire in *Que Viva Mexico!* But most important is the praise due to Grigori Alexandrov for his valiant attempt to give life and form to his friend's long-lost dream. In the precarious world of film many scripts never get past the producer's waste basket, and it is encouraging to know that a film can still be completed after fifty years of waiting. Canadian filmmakers with unborn masterpieces wasting away in desk drawers can surely take heart from Alexandrov's example. Persistence and patience do, eventually, pay off. ●

Que Viva Mexico!

d. Sergei M. Eisenstein sc. Sergei M. Eisenstein, Grigori Alexandrov d.o.p. Eduard Tisse ed. Grigori Alexandrov p.c. State Film Fund U.S.S.R. dist. Frank Taylor Films Inc. & Creative Exposure.