Mañana never comes

by Rudy Wrench

Que Viva Mexico! is a problem to film people ever since America's favourite left-wing novelist, Upton Sinclair, got worried about the mazuma that was being spent on S. M. Eisenstein's The Fall of the House of Upton. He temped to Anita Brenner and the Mexican Montezuma epic, and pulled the plug. It was being spent on S. M. Eisenstein's problem, Philip Hudsmith crossed the border in the first place with a book called Idols Behind Altars. Her book described how Catholic altars were built on Aztec Pyramids. This practice apparently caused considerable confusion among the natives who lived unhappily ever after because they couldn't make up their minds which type of sacrifice they preferred - Aztec or Christian.

Unlike Eisenstein, Hudsmith got to edit his film, and stoically endured the agonies common to most filmmakers who try to get their films to the screen. The subject matter in Hudsmith's film is unusual. Most movies are accustomed to seeing finished films. Hudsmith, on the other hand, shows us, in part, how Eisenstein's film was not made.

The film begins in an eerie dead world - much as Eisenstein's film was supposed to begin. Ghostly footsteps of a sacrificial victim move upwards to the top of a pyramid, a knife falls, and pyramid and gargoyles turn red, suggesting the blood that has flowed down their sides. A wind echoes hauntingly, reminding us that we are in the past. After the titles, more ruins follow and some of the places where Eisenstein filmed his prologue are seen. Some images from his film are shown, but these are stills: surprisingly, Hudsmith does not use any of Eisenstein's actual drawings and paintings. The stills are well chosen and include many we have not seen before of Eisenstein at work on his film. With one exception, the drawings are well done and add colour. The exception is a close-up of Eisenstein smiling. It is clumsily executed, and the smile seems incongruous at the moment it appears.

Hudsmith also uses photographs or drawings of certain famous people who speak in the film. Familiar Film Board photographs of John Grierson accompany Grierson's critical assessment of Eisenstein's abilities as a filmmaker. This is logical enough, but some viewers may be unaware of Grierson's own prestige as a filmmaker and critic. An introduction, or at least a name subtitle would have helped. Perhaps this could be rectified in future prints. Structurally Eisenstein's Mexico is sound. Hudsmith appears to have found the ideal shape for the exposition of his material. It provides an excellent overview of the problems encountered by a famous film director making a film in a foreign country. When treating the various stories Eisenstein had woven into the fabric of his screenplay, Hudsmith gives them a different order. He lets them evolve out of their new context. Instead of attempting yet another reconstruction of Que Viva Mexico! Hudsmith concentrates on the Russian's creative ideas about Mexicans and their culture.

These days too many Canadian films rely on rapid cutting to get their messages across. Hudsmith occasionally also waders off into some frenetic montage patterns of his own. But towards the end the pace slows down and the film becomes purely contemplative. As the various threads of the intellectual arguments presented come together we begin to realize just how great a tragedy the loss of this particular film was to Eisenstein. We are also led to reflect upon the possibility that the world has lost an extremely valuable work of art which would have offered a unique look at the Mexican soul and its part in the scheme of things. Regrettably, for some great artists and their work, manana never comes.


Rudy Wrench is an independent filmmaker, free-lance writer and photographer. His films include Blizzard, Sequences, The Film Craft Series (NFB) and Full Circle (NFB).