Ralph Thomas' The Terry Fox Story

I didn't spend a lot of time following Terry Fox's run when it happened. The massive emotional manipulation of the event bothered me, and there had been a rather frightening series of articles published in Penthouse attacking the research practices of the American Cancer Society, so the idea of giving money to one of their branch plants was not particularly appealing. Almost more interesting than Terry himself seemed the remarkable emotional response that was being wrenched from the hearts of all emotionally blocked Ontarians, who took to Terry as if he were a cross between John-Roy Walton and Lassie, come home at last.

This by way of introduction, to show just how prepared I was for a very bad movie, to cynically park myself in the screening room and snarl viciously if anyone tried force-feeding me the milk of human kindness. Admittedly, there were good signs. Ralph Thomas, the director, is not a man easily suckerized. One need only look at the tough docudramas he produced at the CBC (especially Dying Up the Streets) and Ticket to Heaven to see someone with an immense distrust of pieties, conventional and otherwise. Michael Zelnicher, who plays Fox's best friend, Doug Alward, was insistant in conversation that they had made an effort to show Terry, warts and all.

Well, it works, because there are three stories that come together in the film. The first story, where the automatic emotional response comes in, is during the recreation of the public events that we all know so well — and, if we are Torontonians, lived through. The second story is the private Terry Fox, who seems to have been a major pain in the neck: an obsessive, physically-oriented, petulant monomaniac. When everyone is telling him that he's crazy to want to run across Canada, they not only seem eminently more rational, but they seem to be giving him good advice. One gets the feeling that being Doug Alward for the man on the road (Alward drove the van) must have been rather like being locked in a closet with an unstable badger. Of course, if it were the private life alone, one might react to Terry the same way we did to another recent handicapped hero in Canadian movies, Tom Sullivan, in the execrable If You Could See What I Hear. The third story, and the most important, is the real reason that Terry Fox worked as a national symbol. The story is not about his adolescent who died so that others might be cured, but of a single figure out on the highways. It is an elemental story of a human and an environment, and the doleful, mind-numbing, destiny-laden retelling of that image. It may be the best use of the Canadian landscape as a character that we have ever seen in a Canadian movie (Silence of the Noise and Another Hat in the Wind don't quite make it, and The Grey Fox is only a corner of the country). That story, of landscape and figure, is the most emotionally overpowering image in the entire film, and its sheer force as history and myth means that Thomas, not by nature a manipulative director, can let the story's force rise naturally from the characters and the image. One quivers in terror at the thought of what an emotional mugger like Mark Rydell (On Golden Pond) might have done, had he got his hands on this film.

The Terry Fox Story follows its hero from the day he discovers his cancer to the end of the run, where he learns of a new tumor in his lung and is sent home. It covers the relationship with his family, best friend, girlfriend, and Bill Vigars, the Cancer society representative.

Given that Terry Fox is in virtually every frame of the film, an enormous weight falls on Eric Fryer, the young Scabarierian who, like Fox, lost a leg to cancer and makes his acting debut here. It is, for someone who must have endured a similar experience to Fox (chemotherapy and learning to walk away from his often unpleasant humanity), and the tremendous waves of mass emotion that flowed toward him from the day he crossed the Ontario border to his near canonization at Toronto's City Hall. While it's hard to say if Fryer has the talent to go on and continue acting he has apparently landed a role in Home Fires, he is certainly a major discovery in terms of this film.

Thomas and producer Robert Cooper have been smart enough to surround Fryer with some of the best acting talent available. It is not necessary to speak of the awesome talent of Robert Duvall — anyone who has been to the movies in the past 20 years or so knows how good he is. But a few words are in order on Michael Zelnicher and Chris Makepeace, who plays a Terry's brother, Darrell. In a way, the most sympathetic character is the young jock-short, his glasses and hooded sweatshirts, Zelnicher projects an all-American image that Fox himself lacked the expressive tools to bring out what he was feeling — a great deal of the appeal was that this kid from B.C. obviously was sitting on top of an emotional volcano and struggling to articulate what he felt about his leg, his disease, and the tremendous waves of mass emotion that flowed toward him from the day he crossed the Ontario border to his near canonization at Toronto's City Hall. While it's hard to say if Fryer has the talent to go on and continue acting he has apparently landed a role in Home Fires, he is certainly a major discovery in terms of this film.

As for the rest of the cast, in uniformly good — special mention should be made of Elva Mai Hoover, who plays Terry's mother, and is thus saddled with one almost unplayable scene — and lends a sort of authenticity to the proceedings. The insistence on the Canadianness of the project comes through in large part because of the accents, like, intack, eh? While it may be rare to see a Canadian flag on-screen in a Canadian film in Toronto, it is even rarer to hear that constricted Ontario voice squeezing out through the emotionally clenched vocal cords of real Canadian actors.

The Terry Fox Story captures the heroism of its subject by refusing to shy away from his often unpleasant humanity, and that may be its remarkable achievement. It shows some aspect of the reality behind the myth (the most noble suicide of our time) without being wrenched from the hearts of anyone who is shunted to the sidelines in an emotionally stressful situation.

Alward is an interesting character in the film, because he seems to have no family, no friends save Terry, and nothing important to do with his life but drive the van for his friend. With his hair cut short, his glasses and hooded sweatshirts, Zelnicher projects an almost monkish asceticism into the character, simultaneously conveying the sense that he knows he is helping his best friend commit suicide, and being perfectly willing to help him, because he knows that he can do nothing to distract him.

It is also very pleasant to see Makepeace, a moist-eyed, worshipful wimp in films like Meatballs and The Last Chance, finally playing a character with a few smarts of his own. It may be the first time that he has actually been likeable on screen.

The cast of the Terry Fox Story is uniformly good — special mention should be made of Elva Mai Hoover, who plays Terry's mother, and is thus saddled with one almost unplayable scene — and lends a sort of authenticity to the proceedings. The insistence on the Canadianness of the project comes through in large part because of the accents, like, intack, eh? While it may be rare to see a Canadian flag on-screen in a Canadian film in Toronto, it is even rarer to hear that constricted Ontario voice squeezing out through the emotionally clenched vocal cords of real Canadian actors.