Peter Rowe & Corinne Farago's Micronesia: The Winds of Change

A few seconds into this film and you know you're in for an hour not quite like anything you've seen before. That's because Micronesia is not quite like any place you can imagine. Picture thatched huts and a giant replica of Ronald Reagan. Or inhabitants of a seemingly paradisiacal locale who suffer radiation burns and sickness from a nuclear winter graveyard for this fleet, a place under attack by Imperial ships sunk by the Allied forces. The Japanese navy was ravaged just off the island of Truk, with more than 60 Imperial ships still on the Allen Seaplane. Today Truk Lagoon is an eerie underwater graveyard for this fleet, a place where divers come to witness the untouched past.

Soon after the war, the United States began pouring millions of American dollars into the Micronesian islands, not just for its military and nuclear presence, but also for food stamps, alcohol, and all the trappings of a southern California lifestyle. While some Micronians still squat on dirt floors, the men wearing loin cloths, the women in grass skirts, many others now watch Laverne & Shirley and Charlie's Angels on colour TV sets in their huts. The filmmakers have captured the visual extremes of this society, where the process of cultural colonization mixes space-age technology with shell-age tradition. While the inhabitants seem to hunger for, or at least accept, much of Yankee culture and the economic effects of the American presence, they are subject to the gross undersides of that presence: nuclear radiation. Since 1946, 66 atomic and hydrogen bombs have been detonated in the Marshall atolls of Micronesia. As well, the lagoons are target sites for ICBMs fired from Vandenburg Air Force Base in California. The effects of the atomic blasts which began on the Bikini atoll have proven far more serious than was ever imagined: brain tumors, radiation burns, fall-out sickness.

There are hundreds of stories to tell about Micronesia, says director Peter Rowe, "but we had only an hour." Micronesia: The Winds of Change focuses on those aspects of the locale which best give us a feel for its incredible diversity and the ironies of its situation. World War II footage from the National Archives in Washington and the De

partment of Defense in Canada is visually fascinating in its own right, and shows us the pounding these islands took because of their strategic location. In a way, this material is an appropriate metaphor for everything else we see in the film: a society ravaged by colonization.

We also see some resistance to the U.S. invasion, especially on the island of Yap where inhabitants foster their traditional ways and continue growing their own excellent food crops, staying off welfare, food stamps and the supermarket. As well, there is some growing resistance to the nuclear operations on the islands.

Given the incredible social-political problems of Micronesia, it's understandable that the filmmakers provide us with some moments of visual/emotional relief. This usually takes the form of underwater sequences; for example, we see celebrated cinematographer Al Giddings at work filming the sunken fleet in Truk Lagoon. At another point in the documentary, there are shots of traditional fishermen spearing their prey. The languid feel of such scenes is somehow soothing in the midst of the challenging and ironic visuals shot on land.

Micronesia: The Winds of Change was filmed on the islands of Yap, Puluam, Guam, Truk and Saipan. The filmmakers convey the sense that there is much more to be learned about, from Micronesia - and that this documentary, though generally fast-paced and filled with information, is merely the beginning of discovery. What I perhaps admire most about the film is its sensitivity to the people and their situation. Even though the film is filled with the ironic, there is never a sense that the filmmakers are ridiculing or being patronizing to their subject. Rather, it is as though they sympathize with and can understand the plight of Microennsians, having come from a country that also experiences, to a lesser degree, the effects of U.S. imperialism. The film has won the Special Jury Prize at the Houston International Film Festival. It deserves widespread viewing and praise.

Joyce Nelson

Paul Jay's Here's To The Cowboy

Snapshots Motion Pictures has been making a name for itself in sports documentaries. The latest work by filmmaking team Joan Hutton and Paul Jay is Here's To the Cowboy, an intimate portrait of life on the Canadian professional rodeo circuit. It's a terrific film, very earthy and colourful, humorous and poignant, with undisguised affection for rodeo sports and the cowboys themselves.

Filmed at big and small rodeos in Alberta, including the Calgary and the Ponoka stampedes, Here's to the Cowboy shows us both the glittering hoopla and the gritty hard work involved in being a rodeo rider. Like the cowboys themselves, who are devoted to "keeping a tradition alive," the style of this film is pleasantly instructive. We learn what's involved in the judging and the participation in events like calf roping, steer wrestling, riding a bucking bronco, riding a mean bull. The finer points of technique are explained, along with plenty of examples. By taking us close in on the action and giving us an insider's perspective, the film conveys the attractive and genuine horseback profession which clearly lies not in the money but in the way of life.

The physicality of the rodeo is almost more personalize the subject. Here's to the Cowboy is beautifully structured around the figure of Tom Erickson, a young cowboy up-and-coming in the professional rodeo. We see him compete in various events, truck around from one small town to another on the circuit (what the cowboys call the road), doing all they can to make a name for themselves, and in one interesting scene he meets with his hero, Tommy Bews. The two riders, one seasoned and the other youthful, sit in the back of a pickup and ping their hat to the appreciative crowd, the gesture has a subtle poignancy, as though the old order is making way for the new within the continuity of a tradition.

Everything about this film is geared to creating the textures and flavour of the rodeo. The rodeo does what documentaries do best: it immerses us in a way of life sensuously. So that we see heightened colours and contours, the sound of shoes on the stage of the rodeo, the flash of a silver belt buckle (prizes for events) close-up in the mud of the arena. And the camera work is always fresh and the difference in the resulting feel of the film, especially the slow-motion shots of various rodeo events. As a viewer, you will find yourself reacting physically, with a kind of sympathetic gut reaction to the strenuous manoeuvres involved in rodeo sports.

The original country & western music by Ivan Daines and Larry Barmekeyer is perfect for underscoring moments of humour and pain and for creating atmosphere. The voice-over narration is written and delivered in a folksy "down-home" style that rings sincere.

Contrary to what might be expected, there are no cliches or sentimentalities in this film. Here's to the Cowboy is filled with delightful surprises, fresh angles on an interesting subject, and straight-forward respect for the lifestyle. The film is generating lots of interest. It has already been shown on CBC's sports anthology - "Sports in Week-end" and been sold to London Weekend Television. This film is definitely a winner.

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