

FILM REVIEWS

Donald Brittain's

THE CHAMPIONS

d: Donald Brittain, sc: Donald Brittain, ph: Andreas Poulsson, ed: Steven Kellar, Ted Remerowski, sd: mix: Michel Descombes, Jean-Pierre Joutel, sd. ed. Bernard Bordeleau, sd. rec. Claude Hazanavicius, exec. p. Peter Katadotis, p: Donald Brittain (NFB), Janet Leisner (CBC), p.c. National Film Board/Canadian Broadcasting Corp., col:16mm, dist: NFB, Television Distribution only, CBC, narr: Donald Brittain, running time: 2x60 minutes, year: 1978.

"Politicians should be like Trappists in monasteries. The only words they are permitted to say to each other are 'brother, one day we must die.'"

Pierre Trudeau in *The Champions*

If anyone has any questions about the differences between television and film, *The Champions* provides many of the answers. Television gives us history in dribs and drabs — what happened yesterday and what might happen tomorrow. The current affairs shows give us the sensationalized gleanings behind the nightly news, delving with short, quick thrusts into a scandal here and a human interest story there. Very little in the enormous deluge of what we see, hear and read helps us make sense of this flood of information. *The Champions* uses television as its raw material. The events and the footage are familiar, but the structure of the film helps us put the jigsaw pieces of history into a pattern which makes some sort of sense. It's like Grierson's often-quoted aphorism, "everything in this world is art, it's just a question of getting it into the right order."

Using a sensational selection of stock footage and interviews with the people who knew them, *The Champions* traces the parallel careers of Pierre Elliot Trudeau and René Lévesque. It has long been a fine debating point among historians whether it is men who shape history, or history that



Lévesque interviewing other champions

forms its own leaders. What would have happened to our world if Napoleon had been shipwrecked on his way to France, or Hitler had drowned in a vat of wallpaper glue? One is tempted by this film to ask what this country would be like without Trudeau and Lévesque. As the title suggests, they are the champions of their respective causes, "defenders on the final battleground — the fiercest and most noble warriors." The film shows the political evolution of these two men, an evolution which has led us step by inevitable step to the cheek-to-jowl standoff which Canadians now find themselves in. If we are getting a history lesson in this film, it is a history lesson personified. It is the stuff of great drama.

Donald Brittain is at the peak of his forces when he is making films about people. Film-biography is his medium and he can spin out masterpieces with both live and dead heroes. *Volcano*, about novelist Malcolm Lowry, *Never a Backward Step*, about newspaper magnate Lord Thomson, and *Bethune* number not only among his best films, but also among the best films ever pro-

duced at the National Film Board. Even in films like *Memorandum* about Nazi death camps, Brittain personifies abstract ideas into the breathing reality of the lives of individuals. Trudeau and Lévesque should have been a piece of cake for him. In a sense, they were. As with other Brittain films, we get all the gossip, and our heroes are deftly reduced to human proportions. We find that Lévesque regularly skipped classes at university to play poker with his pals Robert Cliche and Jean Marchand. We discover that Trudeau was careful to dress inappropriately; when a suit and tie were called for, he would show up in shorts and sandals. Basically, however, we really get to know these two only in terms of their political evolution. This is not a film about the private men and, in a way, it is too bad. Brittain seemed to have the material to give us some insight into the make-up of the champions but the glimpses are brief and, in terms of Brittain's other flesh and blood portraits, depressingly one-dimensional.

As pictures of two political animals, however, *The Champions* remains remarkably objective. We are

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shown both leaders, complete with warts, and no one is likely to be swayed one way or the other. But Brittain is not neutral in the debate raging around him. He is afraid of the passions of nationalism and, like Trudeau is concerned with the idea that once it starts, nobody can say in what extremes it will end. His hard-hitting description of Duplessis sums up his attitudes: "Maurice Duplessis ran Québec as a piece of private property. At his peak, he controlled not only the police, but the newspapers, the universities, and the Church itself. He was a narrow, conservative, French Canadian nationalist, and to promote this, he stuffed ballot boxes and broke heads." Lévesque, albeit by democratic means, has been given the "awesome weapons of power." The statue of Duplessis is unveiled and sits in a place of honor in front of the legislature buildings. Quebecers now live under "majority rule with a vengeance."

Much of the fun of watching *The Champions* comes from its use of the old footage. A lot of it is loaded with irony. We see Lévesque in his early career as television commentator hosting the first trans-Canada television hook-up. He introduces "our" Queen Elizabeth who says that "the rising generation clearly shows that, French or English, we all belong to one great Canadian family." In a sequence which was on television in 1964, we see Trudeau, the lowly law professor, interviewing cabinet minister Lévesque on the disorder which his fledgling separatist ideas could create. "We live in a social and political context," said Trudeau, "where the forces of authority have traditionally behaved in a very authoritarian way." A different form of prophecy comes from a 1967 interview with newspaperman Claude Ryan. Lévesque had just committed what then seemed to be political suicide by trying to get the Liberal party to adopt a separatist platform. "He is dead now," said Ryan with a smile "but watch him in five to ten years from now."

With his deft scissors and wry narration, Brittain has made recent Canadian history into some sort of Tolstoyian soap opera. The characters who hold the fate of the country in their hands all seem to have grown

up together, and their lives are intertwined. The politicians and their stars grow and wane but history irrevocably marches on, symbolized and actualized in the figures of these two leaders. "It is not really a battle between the emotional and the rational man. Both minds are brilliant, both souls are passionate and there is a fine rage in each. Both are glad that, at last, it has come to this time of confronta-

tion. They are, in a sense, prisoners of each other. And this will be their final battle."

Ronald Blumer

Note. Part one of this film was shown on CBC television Sunday, Feb. 5th and part two on the following day. The film version of this film will be available from NFB offices in June of this year.

SHORT FILM REVIEWS

TAKE YOUR MARK

d: Michael Savoie, Peter Shatalow, ph: Michael Savoie, additional ph: Mark Irwin, Ray Burley, ed: Peter Shatalow, ass't camera: Greg Farrow, m: John Mills Cockell, p: Michael Savoie, Peter Shatalow, p.c.: Cedar Films Inc., 1977, dist: Cedar Films Inc., Running time: 25 minutes.

Take Your Mark is a documentary on Steven Pickell, a world-ranked Canadian swimmer who is a key part of Canada's swimming plans for the 1980 Olympics.

The film, produced and directed by Michael Savoie and Peter Shatalow, also highlights Deryk Snelling, a former British army physical-training instructor who coached Canada's national swim team at the Munich and Montreal Olympics.

The film's editing, by Shatalow, alternates a judicious selection of fast cuts in the action sequences with interviews which are strong enough in their content to enable the viewer to identify at once with Snelling as the mentor-coach and Pickell as the young athlete. In fact, one spends the rest of the film figuring out what makes each of them tick.

Snelling, whom sports writers have dubbed the Vince Lombardi of swim-



Steven Pickell and Deryk Snelling in training.