Martin Duckworth's
Return To Dresden

It is the evening of February 13, 1945, and a crowd begins to gather in the Semper, the showpiece opera-house in the centre of the lovely and ancient German city of Dresden. Tonight's opera is Der Freischutz by the German Romantic writer and composer Carl Maria von Weber. Der Freischutz means "the marksman" in German and he is Max, a hunter who must prove his shooting skills before his prince before he can fulfill his dream of marrying his betrothed. Another person for whom some time has dwelled on those events is Halifax resident "Giff" Gifford, founder and national president of the Veterans for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament. On the night of Feb. 13, when the residents of Dresden were making their way home from the opera and my mother was running away from boarding school with her girlfriend, Giff was sitting in the navigator's seat of a Lancaster en route across the English channel as part of the second wave of Allied bombers.

It is Feb. 13, 1985 and Giff Gifford is once again returning to Dresden, this time under different circumstances. A train slowly brings him to the centre of the city while he and Sylvia MacDonald, his companion, admire the beautiful vistas of the reconstructed city which he helped to level. After years of meticulous reconstruction, the Semper is once again the splendid palace of culture that it once was and, for the first time in four decades, it will once again host an opera: Der Freischutz. Like Max's bride who miraculously recovers from her wounds, Dresden has been reborn.

Since the destruction, there have been annual memorial services in Dresden at 10:00 pm, every Feb. 13. This year representatives from around the world, from the war-ravaged cities of Coventry, Rotterdam, and Stalingrad, have come to mourn and celebrate with the people of Dresden. Tonight Giff Gifford, and the veterans and organization which he represents, have come to make amends and try to establish a relationship of trust and understanding which may help to heal some of the old wounds. Like the phoenix of the Semper, he hopes that from these ashes a new friendship can emerge.

It is now Feb. 13, 1986, 41 years since the bombs fell. It is 8:00 pm in Halifax (midnight in Dresden, two hours after the memorial service) and we are gathered in an auditorium to see the first screening of Martin Duckworth's newest film, Return to Dresden. Sitting with us are Giff Gifford, Sylvia MacDonald, and the director himself. The above events are what we see as the film begins and what draws us into the moving chronicle of a man's commitment to peace and to building a new dialogue between people which will help to maintain it. It is the goal of the peace movement to create person-to-person bonds and understanding that crosses east-west frontiers and reach beyond the political considerations and imperatives of the governments of our respective nations. These are the ideological underpinnings of the peace movement and its activists such as Giff Gifford, and this film is eloquent in representing their concerns and activities.

The film also artificiately blends documentary footage of the visit with the literary and artistic vision of Der Freischutz. The evil of the devil Samiel and the casting of the seven magic bullets is interwoven as metaphor into the tale of the hell that descended upon Dresden. The film, however, is less clear in representing what this gesture of returning to Dresden means in terms of a real contribution toward peace. In discussion following the film, Duckworth discussed his hope to film footage with conscience and activities.

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The point is that since it touches upon one of the fundamental stumbling blocks of the peace movement — and one which it seldom addresses — namely, that the "unofficial" peace movement in the east is banned and suppressed.

After the screening I overheard a woman saying she wanted to see more films which showed the east bloc countries in a sympathetic light. "It's ridiculous, this concept of them as an evil empire. They're just like us. We have to make people in Canada understand that. Noble sentiments, which are echoed in the film, but gloss over some very important political differences; ones which, if we are truly concerned with justice, morality and peace, we cannot afford to forget.

So it is likely that the release of Return to Dresden will create some debate even now in Canada many years after the events in the film took place. In today's international situation when the strategic defence initiative ("Star Wars"), disarmament proposals, nuclear tests, and future Reagan-Gorbachev summits are daily in the spotlight of world-media and public opinion, this film highlights some important issues of the past with very direct relevance to the future.

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