Lewis Furey’s

Night Magic

Night Magic might have been a great film and musical, were it not for its music. Curiously it was directed by the same man who wrote the music, Lewis Furey, and his work behind the camera is flawless and fascinating. But in the end, Furey’s score defeats him and an audacious attempt at a rock-opera fantasy filmed on Montreal’s most famed strip of decadence, St. Lawrence Blvd, succeeds only as a showcase for the film’s director and his screenplay co-writer Leonard Cohen. As 94 minutes of entertainment, as a captivating movie, Night Magic works not as well. A Canadian musical is a relatively rare commodity, but Night Magic is especially noteworthy for the forum it offers two of the country’s most intriguing artists, Cohen and Furey. And although Night Magic is a simple tale, Cohen’s lyrics and Furey’s direction serve to make it refreshing and sufficiently complex.

The story is told in song, with only slight narration and dialogue. Cohen’s lyrics are up against the bulk of the script. A mine of wit, irreverence, candour, and a system of simplification of the revolutionary regime, is insightful as to the turmoil. Visited by three angels and mother of his child, fares less well.

Eddie Toussaint’s choreography is well-matched to the film. Stark, well-paced and evocative, it fits beautifully with the sets – the rooftops and sidewalks of St. Lawrence. The dancing of Frank Augustyn is similarly impressive – carefully controlled and understated, yet beautiful.

Night Magic is an interesting and original film and will best be remembered not as a curious musical but for Mancuso’s performance and Cohen’s lyrics. It should be seen loud.

David Sherman


Ron Levine & René DeCarufel’s

Bread and Puppet Theatre:
A Song for Nicaragua

“Time and again the American people are to be read about this life. There is no East-West conflict. There is a longstanding conflict between the United States and Nicaragua that goes back to before Marx’s Manifesto” – Padre Uriel Molina

What with a recent American court ruling upholding a 1983 U.S. Justice Department ruling that the National Film Board’s If You Love This Planet was “foreign propaganda,” here’s this year’s documentary contender, Bread and Puppet Theatre’s A Song for Nicaragua and its diatribe, for the Foreign Propaganda award.

A charmingly simple documentary of the old school (handheld camera, grain footage). Bread and Puppet Theatre, then based in New York City, has been at the forefront of alternative culture. Inspired by the rise of liberation theology throughout Latin America in the 1960s and 70s, Bread and Puppet now based in Glover, Vt. evolved as a mystical-political update of the medieval miracle play through an extraordinary use of tree-sized puppets.

The troupe’s tour of a modern miracle play about the nativity, crucifixion and resurrection of assassinated Salvadoran archbishop Oscar Romero informs the bulk of Montreal photographers Ron Levine and Rene DeCarufel’s hour-long documentary.

“Puppetry,” explains Bread and Puppet founder Peter Schumann, “is a simplification device. So, one might add, is cinema. And so too is revolution. A Song for Nicaragua thus becomes an ingenious meditation upon the triple system of simplification of the politics of revolutionary culture.

Nicaragua, whatever its particular reality (and an interview within the film with Padre Uriel Molina, one of many Catholic priests who have rallied to the revolutionary régime, is insightful as to that reality). Nicaragua has become a leading current site for the deployment of symbolic power, and so the power of symbols. And this whether one views Nicaragua as a revolutionary David against the Goliath of U.S. imperialism, as an underdeveloped and impoverished nation struggling out from under continued subjection by a militant consumer empire, or as a social laboratory for new popular cultural models of expression. Nicaragua today poses
Kirk Tougas' 
Return to Departure

Return to Departure is the name of a painting by Chi O'Farrell. Return to Departure: The Biography Of A Painting, Or Watching Pigment Dry and Other Realisms is a film by Kirk Tougas about the execution of O'Farrell's painting over a five-month period in 1979. It is a film not only about a painting, but about politics, lifestyles, love, cultural history, metaphysics, work, and other elements of the soil from which it emerges.

For 83 minutes, we see fragments of a 16" x 19" canvas, a brush applying paint, pigments being mixed on a glass palette, brushes being dipped, and other minutes of painterly activity – but, other than his hands, only a few glimpses of the artist himself. On the soundtrack, O'Farrell comments in detail about his work and life. Running counterpoint is a continuous background of radio talk and music.

O'Farrell paints in the realist style. Tougas' film is about how relative all "realisms" are. The painting is seen not as a disembodied representation but as a process, an organic part of the creative act which produced it. As the film progresses, the relationship between "realisms" multiply, asking us not to calculate their meanings but simply to experience them and discover what this microcosm may reveal about the process of creation, in art and in life. The entire film is shot in close-up. Tougas playfully teases our desire to see the artist at work more fully, see the extent of his studio, or hear a more coherent monologue. At moments the filmmaker's reticence is frustrating. But the rewards for our attention to such rigour are considerable; the film moves through the particulars of life and painting, and becomes, in a most honest way, universal.

Michael Dorland

BREAD AND PUPPET THEATRE: A Song for Nicaragua 

BREAD AND PUPPET THEATRE: A Song for Nicaragua is a cinematic and live performance that explores the connection between art and social justice. The piece is a visual and auditory journey through the history of Nicaragua, featuring interviews with artists and activists who have been involved in the struggle for peace and justice in the country. The performance combines live puppetry, dance, and music to create a powerful and immersive experience. The film was produced in collaboration with the National Film Board of Canada and features the voices of notable figures from the arts and activism, including Abbie Hoffman and Father Ernesto Molino. The film received widespread critical acclaim and was nominated for several awards, including the Canadian Screen Award for Best Documentary Feature.

Creation is a process of constant change. What makes Return to Departure so exciting is that Tougas sees creation happening all the time – not just when the brush is applied to the canvas. His framing, timing, phrasing of repetitive and varied actions, coalesce in images that evoke the ubiquity of the creative process. The product itself is almost incidental. When we are finally shown the completed painting, we are allowed to look at it only a few moments. Yet the painting's content resonates deeply with the multiplicity of subject – amazingly, since the filmmaker didn't know beforehand what the painting was going to be. The painting "Return to Departure" suggests a passage to the unknown: it is about "evolution, transition", according to the painter. And the process we witness is one of evolution.

Tougas is an extraordinarily sensitive filmmaker. His eye is alive to sensual detail, to the textures of pigment. He is almost characteristically minimal yet directs his few chosen elements with such clarity of purpose and in such resonant arrangements that the film acquires a remarkable simplicity.

The radio soundtrack at first gives the impression of the banal randomness of everyday life. Gradually its deliberate construction becomes apparent through subtle emphasis of its non-synchronous temporality. The artist's monologue is far more intimate than any one is likely to hear in a biographical film, and Tougas avoids the reductionist editing traditional in the documentary voice-over. It often seems as though we have become the privileged listeners on an interior monologue. This draws us into the painting's psycho-cultural matrix.

"Return to Departure" is a quest. The descriptive fragments we are given of his life and cultural milieu offer opportunities to interpret his activity and this painting in different contexts (e.g., Americans in Canada, post-60s uncertainty, art history, etc.). The point is not the interpretations themselves: rather, that this expressive process is part of larger evolving processes.