Dan Petrie's
Half A Lifetime

First Choice Superchannel aired Stephen Metcalfe's play Half A Lifetime, which he adapted to a TV-hour format, in August. Essentially a one-set piece, its theatrical origins prove to be an asset in transference to the small screen.

While the four male characters are each identified on leaving work, their meeting place — the basement recreation room — effectively contains, highlights and permits a close scrutiny of the quartet gathered together for a regular session of poker. The buddies since high school days meet at Toby's place — he's a quiet, thoughtful teacher, who provides a comfortable hang-out with beer, nuts, and a promise of homemade chili later. Sam the insurance salesman, though talkative and lively, is somewhat edgy and inclined to ulcers. Bart, the overweight, loud and rough cut-up, looks back at his football triumphs, and dreams of living in the backwoods of Vermont. J.J. is a police officer whose work and personal life has led him dependent and doubting, and he is his proposed solution to this problem that forces the group to take a long, hard look at their lives and aspirations.

There's a lot of shooting the breeze, reminiscences, pipe-dreams for the future, physical horseplay and, what the Ontario Film Review Board dearly loves to call "coarse language." Three members of the group spend some time waiting for J.J. to make up the foursome, and it's then that the hidden regrets and dreams begin to surface. There's a lot of noise, pummelling, chasing and a little ping-pong thrown in, and an air of juvenile naivety tends to prevail and become a mite tedious. J.J.'s arrival, and his proposed illegal solution to all their individual woes, precipitates a period of sober thought.

In this atmosphere of male-bonding, women don't come off too well — in fact, attitudes seem to be positively old-fashioned. The overwhelming feeling is that the men are only let out with the "permission" of their wives, who feel safe in knowing where they are. The wives tell each other everything about the marriages, and the husbands can have no secrets. And the solution to J.J.'s crisis is a big group hug.

The performances are well-meshed, regardless of whether you care about any of the characters portrayed. Gary Busey, the blue-collar worker trapped in his ordinary life, who waits for the football season to come around, is first-rate. Saul Rubinek follows him closely with his nerdy grasp of Sam's character. Nick Mancuso as Toby, and Keith Carradine as J.J. have their lesser moments.

Dan Petrie directs in his usual workmanlike manner, but there's not too much room to manoeuvre in this obvious adaptation from a stage play. Michel Brault's camerawork is, as always, a joy to savour.

Pat Thompson


The visual absence of the painter prevents his valorization. How many films about art have been honest enough to focus on an unknown artist rather than a personality? Yet Tougas obviously has great respect for O'Farrell. The film suggests that commitment is primary for the creator, who must enter into a relationship which often seems painful and interminable. (This film was begun in 1979 and completed in 1986.)

To top it off, Return to Departure effortlessly functions as a documentary about the techniques and history of egg tempera painting. So a paradox emerges: Return to Departure demystifies the process of painting, but uncovers a deeper mystery in the process. This is mirrored by the eponymous painting, which depicts an event seen only in shadow, like the artist's reflection that we see in the windows. The film, with its paradoxical title, is, in fact, about the paradox — the paradox of the realist image. O'Farrell says that when he paints he "leaves off with the real and ends up with an expression that represents the real, knowing that it's an illusion." Tougas describes the audience's reaction to the painting as a "leaves off with the real and emerges: Return to Departure images and soundtrack Kirk Tougas sd. mix Paul Sharp b. sound Mike uncovering a deeper mystery in the process.

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