Terence Maccartney-Filgate’s
Morley Callaghan
First Person Singular:

Morley Callaghan - First Person Singular is a documentary made by a master - Terence Maccartney-Filgate - in first-class form. Of course, he’s more than ably aided by his subject, Morley Callaghan, a runaway talker if ever there was one, whose reminiscences of his early life run by in breathless profusion.

Callaghan walks each day in the Toronto where he was born - Irish and Catholic - at the turn of the century. He remarks that he never felt different, and only later realized that he was born in an outpost of the British Empire.

In addition to Callaghan’s own voice, R.H. Thompson chronicles the early days, while the period is visualized only later realized that he was born in his student remarks that he never felt different, and an outpost of the British Empire.

R.H. Thompson chronicles the early days, while the period is visualized only later realized that he was born in an outpost of the British Empire. Thompson provides more personal glimpses. He is now 84, and still writing. He walks aggressively, incessantly, throughout the film - and talks the same way. The opinions, anecdotes, and ideas flow back and forth like the tides. The vitality leaps from the screen and rushes nonstop over the viewer. Indeed, if there’s a complaint, it’s that 48 minutes is not long enough, and the film is jam-packed with incident and movement. It should have been 90 minutes at least.

This is an effervescent look at one of Canada’s enduring literary figures, directed by an enduring filmmaker, Terence Maccartney-Filgate, a pioneer of the Candid Eye technique at the National Film Board in the ‘50s. Filgate displays all his formidable background and expertise in this fine example of a documentary that captures the flavour, merit and yes, ego of a leading Canadian writer, and a lot of details and tales of his early life. The weaving of the present-day with the past, the setting of the period, all skilfully blend to capture and enthral the imagination, so that the viewer is left wanting to know more about Morley Callaghan, to read or re-read his books, and perhaps to sit at his feet and hear more stories and reminiscences.

Pat Thompson •

Giuliano Montaldo’s
Control

Control is a well-intended television movie which raises the morality quotient of prime-time television. For this reason alone, this international co-production deserves a large audience. It should be seen.

Unfortunately, the script is not as developed as one would expect from Italian writer-pianist, a preeminent Canadian author now living in California. The screenplay starts slowly and ends abruptly: characterization is weak. One is left with the unresolved odyssey of 15 individuals who, after spending 20 days locked in a bomb shelter, emerge asking themselves why we can’t live with each other without fear and loathing?

Commendably, this question is clearly framed on prime-time television. A distinguished professor (Burt Lancaster) is employed by a politically motivated peace organization to lend his fine name to the publicity of a new state-of-the-art bomb shelter. The same international mix of 15 unwitting individuals are each offered $10,000 upon completion of a 20-day stay inside the luxury shelter and a $5,000 bonus if there are no early defectors.

We are not aware, however, that the prof is scheming to turn this publicity stunt into a gut-wrenching experiment in human behaviour by simulating a nuclear attack outside the shelter. He does this by means of phony television and radio transmissions and a hysterical cast of thousands clamoring to break into the bomb shelter and hog all the bunkbeds.

Our friendly castaways on this nuclear age Gilligan’s Island are in turn cast into a series of desperately predictable mini-misadventures in a weak attempt to profile and build character. The heating system overloads, (it gets really hot); the young son of peace activist Kate Nelligan disappears – “where’s Giligan?” – (worries a lot of people including his mom) and is eventually found alive (but really cold) in a secret bomb shelter morgue.

There are many such diversionary, time-killing subplots in which several relationships begin to fall to pieces. But only in one instance do two characters engage in a straightforward dialogue about the greater implications of living in a bomb shelter in 1987.

Controversial, but for dialogue; there is nothing else happening down there in the static grey concrete! An opportunity for subtle acting and bright writing. Missed. Here, we might have seen characterization at its best with the various actors adopting the different personae of the nuclear arms debate – the dove, the hawk, those who believe that building a super bomb shelter is fatalistic and those who say it is a wise precaution.

Instead, we get Ben Gazzara, who does not cease being Ben Gazzara (as we’ve come to know him) literally summing up the story for a reporter after emerging from the big bunker.

“You can’t escape nuclear war even in a bomb shelter,” says Gazzara.

The film ends on a freeze-frame of Lancaster’s best impersonation of the state of his character. Lancaster is another actor whose star status exceeds his acting skill. Overworn Hollywood faces are somewhat of a distraction that tend to obscure the characters they portray.

Mercifully, Lancaster appears only at the beginning and end of the program but it is cleverly suggested, halfway through the story, that the prof is behind the scenes and in control. His human subjects, under close observation, are by this time convinced that nuclear war is imminent.

Fear reigns, there is the inevitable moment of truth in which the 14 (there has been one defector) evenly divide amongst themselves into the saints (read: Gazzara, Nelligan and among others Kate Reid, whose acting skills are left unchallenged) and rogues. The saints vote with moral conscience to allow the clamoring unwashed into the antiseptic bomb shelter while the rogues vote with the survivalist instinct of the war-victim human being – to kill or be killed.

The rogues get the guns and thus their own way. They go out shooting (blanks) only to find the purging rays of the bright sunshine, the world in its perpetual state of pre-annihilation preparedness and Lancaster’s sullen (blank) face asking the television audience, “Would you attempt to save your neighbour if doing so jeopardized your own chances of survival?”

Commendably, the question is asked. Regrettably, no effort is made to help the viewer comes to terms with an answer.

Jean Chantale •


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