Papa Loko speaks of his seven years in prison during the Duvalier regime. "To endure torture one must have faith in the future," he says, recalling his days in Fort Dimanche where 30,000 people died. In Haiti, the future is now, and there is a clean-up underway. Tahani Rached’s film, Rends-moi mon pays, documents it. A symbolic scene reveals the slow chipping away of an enormous stone sculpture which reads, “Vive President Duvalier.” Men back in the sun. Fine, white, stone dust was on Duvalier’s hit list. His voice-over narrates that the country’s agriculture needs aid from other countries. Arms are not needed. He believes that the police/army must disband: his family talks about the threats they pose – how they might kill you for your TV.

The film observes, it does not investigate the post-Duvalier administrative, social, and economic power relationships. If it did, we would have a greater insight into the transitional period. Instead, Rached has used Flavien’s voyages throughout Haiti as the film’s motivating force. His voice-over narration describes his respect for the people who have survived. He recognizes that there is at least a generation’s work to be done before they will come close to their dreams.

Flavien, like many other returned exiles, is insecure about his position in Haiti. He returns to Cayes, the city of his birth, and talks to one of the medical doctors in that region. Ideally, Flavien would like to practise his psychiatric profession there. But the area is so impoverished that the 60,000 can barely make a living at their work. Furthermore, there seems to be little demand for a visiting psychiatrist when the people’s needs are met by local voodoo healers.

Flavien confronts the dilemma facing many Haitians at this point in their history: the desire to return to the homeland and partake in their country’s revolution. Like with their recent past, Flavien’s family and practice are in Canada. He now searches for his place in Haiti.

By focusing on only one man’s journey and search for answers, the film neglects the larger, critical issues confronting contemporary Haiti. For example, it does not address the Haitian communities outside of Haiti, which participated in the Haitian revolution. What are their strategies? The confines of the film’s narrative structure preclude examination of other popular revolutions which could offer lessons or examples.

Portraits like Rends-moi mon pays confirm the spirit of the people and celebrate their victory with them. Beyond the dance is the dream. But before that dream can be realized there is much work to be done. Rached’s film shies away from this hard, work-oriented reality – because it’s too overwhelming to face?

Patricia Kearns

RENDS-MOI MON PAYS, directed by Tahani Rached, is on at the Cinémathèque. 16 mm running time 51 min. 2 sec.

Helen Doyle’s

Le Rêve de voler

Trapeze artists acting out a kind of theatre of allegory, limbs akimbo between reality and dream, mythology and song?

Yes! It all seems to work in this delicious and amazing little film by burgeoning young filmmaker Helen Doyle. Le Rêve de voler, carrying that rarely seen label of 'documentary-fiction', takes us through the creative and physical process of a theatrical company of trapeze-artists, molding and performing a highly stylized airborne choreography in which fabulous beings and symbolic winged creatures struggle for liberation, coexistence and the triumph of life over death.

The film is distinctly split into two parts. First, the painstaking preparation – young people training for the demanding art of trapeze. Difficult movements tried, missed, tried again until gotten right; performing dangerous stunts high above ground and without a net. They share insights and the creative process as they sit in circles, discussing their strategies. The confines of the people’s work, their calloused, straining flesh, the way they are lit and photographed, reflect a firm grip on reality.

Then there is the performance: highly stylized, shot in grandiolesque visuals, full of theatrical and cinematic effects, lyrical and surrealistic. All is soft fluttering of wings, bright with the interplay of colour. The grace of the aerial ballet is stunning.

In the production, a wandering, sightless ‘poet’ sings their mythic song, but it is Doyle’s direction that renders the ode cinematic. Her background in video may be responsible for the film’s TV-generation pace, with quick-cuts and a preference for style over substance, but it is quite the force de fer nonetheless. Its single greatest flaw, the difficult melding of the two parts, tends to emphasize the pitfall of jumping straight from a narrative firmly anchored in reality to one of fantasy, where we must suspend the real world for one that is artistically artificial. When watching a ballet, for example, the audience does not wish to know the difficulty of its staging, or the physical preparation of the dancers, or the reasons for the selection of the story. All that is perhaps ‘interesting’, but it detracts from the perfection of the moment, the ecstasy of the dance.

Though this film may sound esoteric in nature, full of strangeness and cryptic imagery, its effect is actually quite simple and straightforward – like the myths it is loosely based on. If the language of mysticism was born in pre-rational cultures to explain complex issues in simple terms, then Le Rêve de voler speaks that language to a 20th-century video generation. That does so well is all that really matters.

André Guy Arsenault