

Jacqueline Levitin's

Eva: Guerrillera

El Salvador, 1974. A truck bounces along a country road. The man and woman inside glance nervously at each other. The woman pulls a gun from the basket on her lap and jams in the cartridge...

The opening scene of Jacqueline Levitin's new feature film *Eva Guerrillera* shows a guerrilla attack on a government institution. Although the early action of the film gives a good account of some of the aspects of guerrilla warfare in El Salvador, the intent of the film is not to present a comprehensive critique of the brutal American-backed paramilitary forces. Instead the film gives a feminist account of the revolutionary process.

Documentation of the participation of women in the guerrilla armies of Central America is scarce. Margaret Randall is one of the few (English-speaking) writers to attempt such an analysis. *Eva Guerrillera* reads much like a screenplay of Randall's book *Sandino's Daughters - Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*. (In fact, for her own research, Levitin interviewed some of the women who appear in Randall's book.)

Eva (Angela Roa) is a fictionalized portrait of a young Salvadorean guerrilla fighter. While in Montreal, trying to recruit support for the FDR-FMLN (Democratic Revolutionary Front), Eva is interviewed by Louise (Carmen Ferland), a

Canadian journalist researching female militancy. Through interview sessions with Louise, Eva's story - her active role in the struggle - is reconstructed.

It is ironic that the process of the Salvadorean revolution itself created the conditions that made it possible for women to break with the past and mobilize to demand full equality: that war brings freedom to the 'second sex'. *Eva Guerrillera* successfully presents this paradox. Although Levitin documents women's gains in the revolutionary army, she is careful *not* to overestimate them.

The role of women in Salvadorean society - their relationships as mothers, wives and daughters - altered as women became active participants in the revolution. The film accurately depicts the emerging feminist consciousness of the guerrillas, and their inevitable clash with machismo. In one scene, Eva talks about the pressure placed on women fighters to have *compañeros* (lovers). Women are expected to become sexually involved (to openly assert their femininity?). When Eva rejects the advances of one comrade, he accuses her of acting bourgeois. His anger and frustration at Eva's coolness is essentially a display of societal resistance to the changing male-female roles and class structures.

Motherhood is a recurring theme throughout the film. Pregnancy and children pose a problem for female fighters. Not only does pregnancy limit women physically, but women are usually faced with the sole responsibility of raising the children. Rather than take a less demanding administrative role, Eva chooses to terminate her pregnancy. Her abortion estranges Ramon, her *compañero*, who assumes she will have his child.

As the film progresses, it is apparent that the involvement of women in the

struggle institutes a paradigmatic shift in the traditional attitudes of men. Women's equality is reflected in the sympathetic nature of Eva's subsequent lover Daniel, Marta's (Eva's cousin) strong role, both as mother and revolutionary leader, and a scene near the end of the film in which a couple publicly debates the support each should provide for their forthcoming child.

Although *Eva Guerrillera* offers positive examples of women's advanced status in society, Levitin is quick to point out some of the limitations. In El Salvador, the general struggle for freedom and women's emancipation are inseparable. Louise raises the obvious question: "Have you (Eva) thought about what happens after the war?" The question shows remarkable insight into the plight of women in Latin American countries and goes beyond the parameters of Randall's text. Some of the gains women have achieved during the resistance phase are lost after the war. For example, in Nicaragua, although many women hold positions in the Sandinista government, they have been completely removed from the military forces. (During the insurgency, over 30 percent of the army was comprised of women.)

The dialogue between Louise and Eva serves to emphasize the dichotomy between the Salvadorean and Canadian women's movements. Whereas Louise casually remarks that she is too busy for a family, Eva's decision to remain childless has left obvious emotional scars. As Eva recounts the death of her second lover Daniel, her loneliness, and perhaps guilt in not having a child, resonates through the film. In a country like Canada, Eva states, there is no reason not to have a family.

The major stumbling-block of the film lies in its attempt to step outside the por-

trait genre by introducing elements that are usually associated with a social issues documentary. In a sequence of clips, three mothers (Nicaraguan) talk about their own reactions upon learning of their daughters' revolutionary activities. These commentaries baldly interrupt the narrative flow. In another sequence, Louise makes reference to her trip to Algeria and her meetings with female revolutionaries there. Unfortunately, the obvious connection between Eva and the Algerian *guerrillera* is only briefly dealt with, and we never got Eva's response. Is she disinterested?

Levitin's motive for introducing these brief biographies is commendable - she is suggesting a collective political basis in women's experiences. However, these sequences are reduced to condensed information bleeps and are never fully developed to be effective. Perhaps their aesthetic shock value would have been extremely powerful had the editing pace been slower, and the collective theme integrated more fully into the whole filmic text. As it stands, the audience is unable to absorb the significance of these links, and I am left wondering if the effect was merely a wistful desire by Levitin to simulate through film Randall's literary style. (Randall juxtaposes interviews with revolutionary leaders, with interviews with their mothers, or people with whom they were close to.)

Eva Guerrillera is reminiscent of Cuban post-revolutionary cinema (Humberto Solas' *Manuela*, for example) Levitin has also managed to stretch the notion of what is political so as to include issues usually hidden and dismissed as personal. Yet, as Solas points out in interviews, social issues concerning women - the problem of *machismo* - undermines a woman's chances for self-fulfillment, but feed a whole subculture of underdevelopment.

That recurring flaw in low-budget productions - non-professional acting - unfortunately resurfaces in this film. The relationship between Eva and Louise never develops. The characters are stunted by the wooden performances of Carmen Ferland and Angela Roa (Roa's acting improves in the Spanish-speaking scenes). The strength of the script, however, keeps this film afloat. *Eva Guerrillera* is a well-researched socio-political inquiry into the lives of female guerrilla fighters. It is a film that asks all the right questions.

Karen Mazurkewich •

EVA: GUERRILLERA p./d./sc. Jacqueline Levitin cam. Jean-Charles Tremblay Asst. cam. German Gutierrez art d. Karine Lepp orig. m. Barry Gould sd. Juan Gutierrez boom Catherine Van Der Donk ed. Herve Kerlann, Jacqueline Levitin sd. ed. Richard Comeau prod. Soleil Films prod. man. Monique Crouillere sc. Marie-Christine Harvey art d. (Nicaragua) Anna Fuerstenberg chief elec. Kevin O'Leary elec. Don Terry 2nd a. d. Carla Nemirow l. p. Angela Roa, Carmen Ferland, Luis Lautaro Ruiz, Mendoza, Valentin Castillo Lopez, Gerardo Molineros Dormus, Jose Ricardo Centeno, Rosario Perez Hernandez, Felix Pena, Gloria Calero Morgen, Jose Manuel Poyela Robles, Gabriel Cosog, Roger Sanchez, Ciro Cesar, Rosa Maria Maute Salazar, Daniel Lemus, Juan Ramon Misango distrib. Film Transit. Inc. (International) and CineQuebec colour 16mm running time 80 minutes

• Angela Roa armed for the guerrilla

