

REVIEWS OF SHORT FILMS

Toller

d. Pen Densham, **John Watson**, **ph.** Pen Densham, **asst. ph.** Robert New, **Chris Slagter**, **ed.** John Watson, **production team** Nancy Falconer, Elizabeth Grogan, Martin Harbury, Barbara Sears, Winston Upshall, **post production team** David Appleby, Patrick Drummond, Robert Grieve, Hannele Halm, Erika Schmidt, **m.** Fred Mollin, **titles** Ken Mimura, **p.c.** Insight Production Inc. 1976, with the assistance of Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, Canadian Figure Skating Association, Branch of Canadian Figure Skating Association of Ontario Section, Noranda Mines Ltd., **col.** 16mm, **running time** 52 min.

Toller Cranston does two very visible things – dancing on ice and painting exotic pictures – and he does them with extraordinary flair. **Toller**, by Pen Densham and John Watson of Insight Productions (Toronto), is a showcase for the man and his talents which displays exceptional flair of its own. It made a dashing and exhilarating hour of television, and I hope CTV paid a decent price for it.

Toller the man is in some ways an elusive subject for a film, being an unusually self-absorbed person, intensely focused on the rigor and fineness of his work. With a fey, inscrutable manner, he talks revealingly about himself, yet confides very little. He dwells behind masks – a quality which the film expresses very tellingly by photographing him through a self-portrait which he is painting on glass. As we watch, his individual features disappear behind that distant, ancient gaze which all the figures in his paintings wear.

Toller's paintings endlessly elaborate a world of faëry, peopled by remote, pale-visaged lords and ladies, red-haired, with heavy-lidded eyes, like Queen Elizabeth in old age, transported on magical barques festooned with weeds and human souls. Reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelites and Symbolists, his pictures have an obsessive, formalistic, and ultimately



rather mechanical quality. One by one, they are hauntingly rich and exotic, but taken together they exhibit what begins to seem like a mindless reduplication of decorative motif.

The film eventually, and quite justifiably, concentrates on Toller's skating performances, both competitive and theatrical. In championship competitions, the sophistication of his balletic routines often loses him as much favor with the judges as it gains with the audience. A central episode in the film is the world championship at Colorado Springs, which yields both triumph and bitter disappointment. Toller and one of his rivals both speak of the intense concentration of will and imagination that goes into these five-minute, all-out displays of virtuosity. Toller himself characteristically insists that his own judgment of his performances is the most exacting of all.

In rendering the impact of Toller's purely theatrical skating, Densham and Watson regale the audience with a cinematic tour de force. No ring-side spectator will ever see Toller dance and leap and run and swoop with anything like the same immediacy that the film conveys. Using two or even three cameras, prismatic lenses, coloured spotlights and the possibilities of slow motion, the photography is wonderfully fluid, swift and dramatic. Watson's editing is highly mannered, perhaps even intrusive in its brilliant rapidity, but exceedingly skilful.

Toller is a film with several endings. Like that *Beyond the Fringe*

routine in which a concert pianist struggles to extricate himself from a labyrinth of musical climaxes, the movie whirls into one finale after another, without managing to strike a final chord and let go. With such beautiful material, it must certainly have been difficult to cry "Hold, enough!"

Robert Fothergill

Miguel's Navidad

d: George Mendeluk, **ph:** Harry Makin, **ed:** Martin Pepler, **l.p.:** Ahvi, Roberto Contreras, **p:** George Mendeluk, **assoc. p.:** Linda Sorensen, **p. man:** Sergio Guillen, **p.c.:** Ko Zak Productions Inc., **col.:** 16 mm, **dist:** Faroun Films Ltd., **narr:** Ricardo Montalban, **running time:** 25 minutes.

Had the balance between initiative and inspiration been more carefully measured, George Mendeluk's half-hour film for children **Miguel's Navidad** might have been a damn good little film. Shot on location in Mexico, using local actors and crew (except Mendeluk who produced and directed and Harry Makin, director of photography), there are many visually rewarding scenes in the film: the bustling town market and its puppet stand, the old church bell with Miguel ringing it, the curious peasant faces. Though the Mexican setting and characters give the film a definite charm, and may even appear exotic to the child's eye, they cannot cover for an ill-conceived script.

It seems obvious that a film for children has more chance of succeeding if it leaves no room for confusion as to what is happening; that the simple, straightforward story is least apt to confuse. Unfortunately, many filmmakers working in the children's genre make the mistake of equating simple with boring.

Miguel's Navidad loses much of its intensity precisely because it is thematically and structurally overpowering. The second in a trilogy (**The Christmas Tree** was reviewed in **Cinema Canada** Dec., 1975) it is the story of a mute boy, Miguel, who receives the most precious of gifts

for Christmas – his voice. Ricardo Montalban narrates, telling how Miguel had refused to speak out of remorse for the loss of his fisherman father who drowned one Christmas Eve, how several years later, the boy's dog had run away from him just as he was preparing for another Christmas. The climax of the film, when the dog returns to Miguel and the child shouts out its name, Navi-dad!, is a genuine high moment.



'Miguel' running down the street

What Mendeluk was trying to do was to wrap the old themes of the Christmas story, its messages of life and love, in a new set of clothes. He almost succeeded, but I couldn't help but feel the details of his script camouflage those aspects of the traditional Mexican Christmas that are so fascinating. The dream sequence, for instance, in which two cloaked figures are seen riding a donkey down a dusty road, seemed heavy-handed and out of place. The pinata ceremony comes at the end of the film and is unexplained. Surely its significance is lost on those children viewing it for the first time.

If Mendeluk had searched out the humor and festive feeling that accompanies the Christmas season anywhere in the world, if he'd looked to the obvious to embellish his theme (What, no tree, no gifts?) he'd have found more of the magic that is the child's Christmas. He'd have made his film and done something special with it too.

Joan Irving

Expansion

d: David Leach, **sc:** David Leach, **ph:** Phil Earnshaw, **ed:** David Leach, **m:** Peter Anson, Al Mattes, **l.p.:** Carolyn Shaffer, Louise Garfield, **p:** David Leach, **col:** 16mm, **running time:** 5½ minutes.

By its very nature, dance seems a perfect subject for film. The abstraction of an idea into its visual equivalent, the use of space and movement in space, creating patterns by both its absence and presence, the whole concept of time as essential to all aspects of the art, and rhythm as the binding and unifying element – all these seem to indicate dance should translate into film with ease.

That impression, of course, is a fallacy, and one that many a filmmaker falls prey to. Dance not only doesn't translate easily into film, it defies the medium. Three-dimensional space, reduced to a flat screen, loses depth and significance. The molding effect of shapes passing before and behind each other flattens out and, without various three-dimensional aids like objects in the foreground or background to amplify the effects of distance, the viewer becomes easily bored with monotonous movements on a single plane, neither defining space nor apparently using much of it.

Thus when one finds a filmmaker who achieves a lovely transition of dance ideas into film, no matter how short the film or condensed its statement, one feels a small celebration coming on.

David Leach's second attempt* at making a film based on dance is a brief five minutes 30 seconds long. Framed in an introductory and closing shot of an audience, distracting to some, but part of his overall plan, we are offered two female dancers, two poster-colored ladies, whose steps and rhythms have been restructured through editing by Leach into a visual filmic dance.

Called **Expansion**, the film genuinely does expand the dance. At the beginning the dancers, marvellous in their colors, one in blue tights with a pale green leotard, the other in burgundy tights with a leotard that is almost tangerine, form geometric patterns with each other while the percussive sounds created by two musicians from the Music Gallery add a

delightful dingle-dongle patter to the black surrounding the dancers' forms.

The in-camera choreography expresses a controlled yet free-moving patterning in these Godardian colors, with a gradual build-up of movement and distancing until a sudden punctuating zoom, spectacularly well used, suddenly sends the figures into the distance, and begins a new movement.

Dissolves, overlapping images, variations in proportion, and fast, exciting, unfamiliar percussive sounds expand the filmed dance steps into a widened experience. Finally, the mood breaks and softer, looser sounds accompany multiple imagery and a series of open gestures and emotionally freer movements. As a conclusion, Leach imposes over the final scenes of the dance the members of the introductory audience arising and moving as if dancing also. This attempt to indicate the movement of the dance idea into the heads of the viewers is more intellectual than satisfactory. The audience on film is not so much a link between us, the film audience, and the dancers on film, as an uncomfortable depiction of "us" or "audience" which cannot relate physically to ourselves, and simply adds another stage of distance between us and the dancers. The concept of this ultimate "expansion" is commendable, but its attempted depiction is unfortunately a little awkward and confusing.

The dancers were Carolyn Shaffer and Louise Garfield, and though they choreographed their own work, their dance cannot be said to have been filmed so much as they were dancing objects which Leach has used to successfully create a feeling of dance on film.

Natalie Edwards

* Leach's previous work, a 10-minute experiment with dancers Connie Moker, Sally Schweider and Val Sonstegard, photographed the three dancers in musical and rhythmical continuity, while their background shifted from street to beach to hall, rather like Keaton's background in the famous **Sherlock Jr.**

Potters at Work

d. Marty Gross, sc. Marty Gross, ph. Hideaki Kobayashi, J.S.C., ed. Marty Gross, sd. ed. Gary Oppenheimer, sd. rec. Koji Ohta, p. Marty Gross, p. manager. Mutsu International, Tokyo, col. 16mm, 1976, running time 28 minutes, dist. Viking Films Limited

Potters at Work is that rare thing – a documentary crafted as attentively and delicately as a hand-wrought bowl. Small wonder, since the man who put it together, in addition to being a filmmaker with one prize-winning film – ...as we are, his first film – already to his credit, is a potter in his own right. Marty Gross has a strong background in Japanese art and his new film represents an attempt to reveal something of the spirit he sees operating in and behind the Japanese craft of pottery.

As the title itself implies, Gross is less concerned with the finished products of the potters' labors than with the entire field, the rhythm of daily circumstances out of which they emerge and draw their meaning. From such a vantage point, he expresses a vision of creativity radically different from Western conceptions of art and art-making. Instead of the solitary grandeur of the unique art object, transcendent, unrooted in any specific time or place, instead of the rampaging individuality of the artist, his imaginative freedom at odds with any commitment outside the self – we are presented with a small world of startling harmony and interconnection where being and doing, self and community flow indistinguishably together. And the measure of Gross' sensitivity to and immersion in his subject can be seen in the extent to which the integrity of his film, the final inseparability of *what* we are being shown from *how* we are being shown it, mirrors the unity of the life-stream he is portraying.

The film is divided into four discrete segments: 1) the firing of the kiln at night, in the village of Koishibara; 2) the digging and pounding of clay at Onda, a neighboring village; 3) a villager training his 12-year-old son at home in the ancient craft; 4) another family making pots and carrying the finished ones out to dry in the sun. This structure and the fading in and out of the sections serves both to intensify the almost luminous clarity of the individual episodes and to

draw attention to the "negative space" from which they appear; as if each vignette were thrown up as an item of perception, a haiku out of a continuous ground of being, the dark screen. Thus, while concentrating explicitly on a particular range of activities, Gross manages, at the same time, to direct us towards a sense of the larger life-contexts in which they have their true location. No mean feat this – to avoid the usual Western dichotomous "either/or", to achieve inclusion without exclusion, focus without fragmentation.

We are told nothing. No narrative accompanies the visual images, no musical track molds our emotional responses. There is, after all, nothing to add to the sheer experience that is embodied in the film. In the first section we see and hear the flames roaring in the kiln around the pots. In the second section we watch the *kara-usu*, primitive machines for pounding the clay whose slow but logical action holds a bizarre and hypnotic beauty, and whose rich music of incredibly variegated grunts, bellows and wheezes seems the complaint of some crude, prehistoric work animal. Everything is on a



Marty Gross watching over the production

human scale in this place, accessible, comprehensible – even the technology. In counterpoint to the heavy pounders moves the figure of an old man fetching clay from a streambed in two baskets slung over his shoulder by a rope.

In the third and fourth sections the pots of the novice and those of the skilled workers emerge out of a swirl of circumstantial sounds – words of direction and conversation, the slap of a hand against clay, footsteps, the groan of the wheel. One's dominant impressions are of grace, control, astonishing fluidity. There is one moment in the final section when the

flow seems suddenly interrupted, the harmony extinguished: a great many pots have been placed in the sun and a sudden storm threatens to wreck them all. The camera focuses from inside the storage room on the doorway as the Ohta family and their apprentices erupt into frantic activity, dashing out into the rain to rescue the pots, precariously balanced on long thin trays of wood. What happens here is amazing – as the camera watches fixedly, it seems almost relentlessly, the apparently random movements of individuals in and out of the narrow doorway slowly resolve themselves into a formal pattern. The ancient habits of discipline and co-operation which energize the lives of these people reveal themselves to us in the aesthetic design their interaction assumes on the screen. Life in art, art in life.

Katherine Gilday

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Charles Champlin
L.A. Times **CALENDAR**
November 28, 1976

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Arthur Knight
The Hollywood Reporter
November 5, 1976

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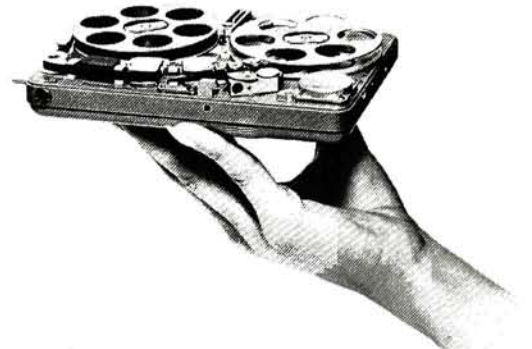
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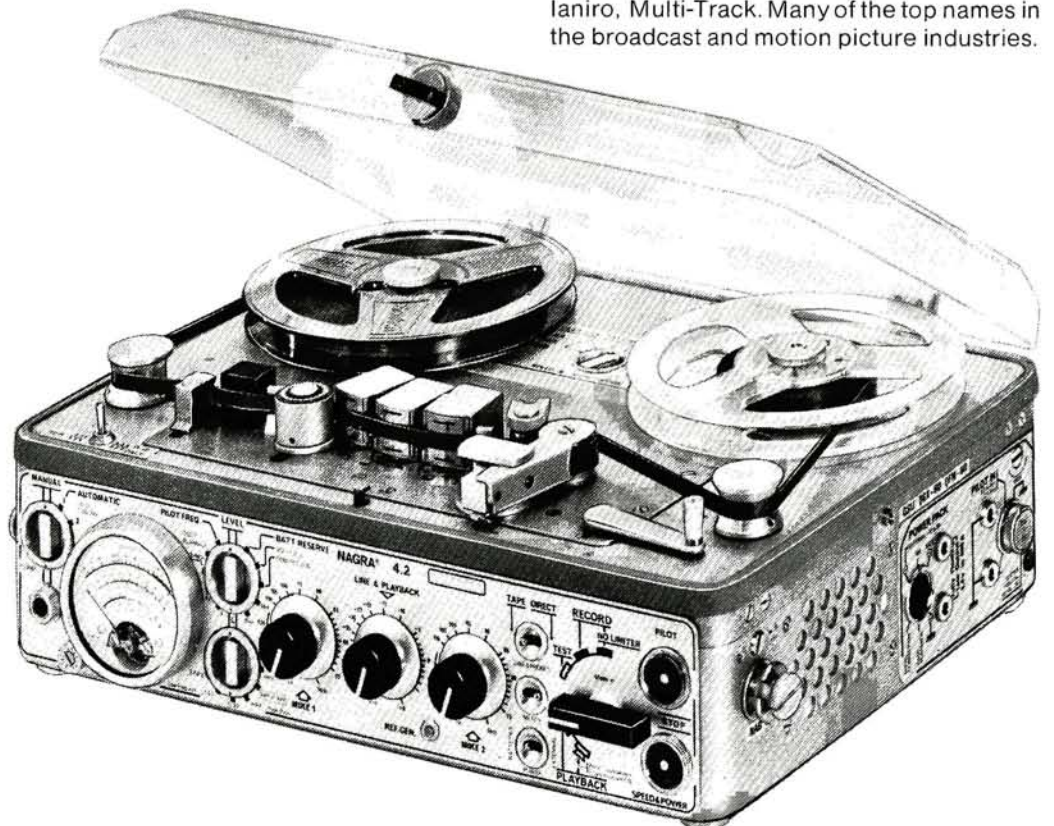
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