

Sergei Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico*, newly edited by Grigori Alexandrov, is ready for distribution in Canada. Two film reviews follow. The first, written by filmmaker Philip Hudsmith, is on this version of *Que Viva Mexico*. The second is on Hudsmith's own film, Eisenstein's *Mexico*, which traces the route of the great Russian filmmaker and reconstitutes his spiritual journey.

Mexico

DOUBLE TAKE

TAKE ONE

Better late than never

by Philip E. Hudsmith

Que Viva Mexico! was a cause celebre back in the thirties. Conceived as an epic poem about the Mexican Spirit by the famous Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein, it became a tragedy with tears when Eisenstein's backer Upton Sinclair, the left-wing author, halted production and refused to let the Russian genius edit his film; instead, he let Hollywood's favourite Tarzan producer, Sol Lessor, put out a travesty called *Thunder Over Mexico*. Much thunder echoed around Sinclair's ears after the premiere at New York's Rialto cinema, and miles of ink and paper have since been expended on the aborted movie. The ensuing furore did little good for Sinclair's reputation. Eisenstein, of course, was heartbroken.

Eisenstein (who made such memorable films as *Battleship Potemkin*, *Strike*, and *Ten Days That Shook The World*) never did get to lay hands on his rich material again. But almost everybody else did, including Eisenstein's biographer Marie Seton. The results were all pretty mediocre and none of them did very much for art, poetry or the Mexican Spirit. Long after the deaths of Eisenstein and Tisse, Grigori Alexandrov brooded alone in Moscow, waiting for Upton Sinclair to die so that he could get his hands on the remainder of the material and complete the film. Finally in 1973 the State Film Fund of the USSR purchased what was left of the footage from the Museum of Modern Art where it was being preserved under Sinclair's strict edict that it was never to go to Russia. Fortunately for Alexandrov, Sinclair shuffled off his mortal coil in 1968.

There is a school of thought which maintains that if a film director dies, the film should be abandoned and nobody should attempt to complete it. This is a ridiculous precept of course, because studios usually have a lot of money wrapped up in any film. For reasons of financial solvency they are unlikely to leave it on the shelf out of deference to a dead man. A thankless task awaited Alexandrov in his attempt to complete Eisenstein's film, because he was in one of those damned-if-you-do and damned-

Philip Hudsmith is an independent filmmaker, author and songwriter. He has produced several of his own features including, Tahiti Mon Amour, Eisenstein's Mexico, Journey to Hong Kong, and Apollo and the Aquanauts.



● above Eduard Tisse, Eisenstein (holding fan) and Co. on location in Mexico other photos production stills from *Que Viva Mexico* (also used in *Eisenstein's Mexico*) courtesy of Lilly Library, Indiana, Mexico

if-you-don't situations. Alexandrov, however, is obviously a man of courage. For, with only the scraps left at the bottom of the barrel to work with, he had the temerity to go ahead anyway. His efforts have given us a substantial glimpse of what Eisenstein's dream might have been.

Basically Alexandrov constructed his film close to the lines of the scenario he and Eisenstein completed in 1930. There are of course gaps where material is missing, such as an episode about the soldaderas who followed their soldier husbands into battle under Pancho Villa. The bullfight story called "Fiesta" also leaves a lot to be desired: if it was intended to impress bullfight fans it misses by a mile and is at times badly edited. Whoever heard of a downed picador placing the banderillas (brightly coloured barbed sticks) to impress his lady love? This episode is also incomplete in that it lacks the "Our Lord of Chalma" sequence, which Eisenstein had intended to use to interweave reality with the metaphysical.

The prologue and the "Sandunga" story (about the matriarchal system in tropical Tehuantepec and the necklace of gold coins that is actually a woman's dowry—a hangover from the days when British engineers were attempting to build the Tehuantepec Railway and the Tehuanas refused to accept paper money), are well done. "La Sandunga" is the song of Tehuantepec, and the sequence captures the feeling so well-

expressed by a local poet when he wrote:

*When the longed for day is here
When Death's agony with stiff,
compassionate fingers,
Closes at last, my eyes,
Play the Sandunga and if I do not
awaken
To its plaintive sound
Let me sleep on, for I shall be dead.*

The epilogue is as good as Alexandrov could have made it with the footage that was left to him. It is still possible to see the big wheels of laughter, as Eisenstein called them, making the empty eye sockets of cardboard skulls wink "as if to say that death is an empty box through which the vortex of life will always force its way no matter what."

On the negative side is a lacklustre narrative which is informative at the wrong time. When you really want to know something it is painfully silent. This may be a fault of the translation from the Russian. The music too is ill-conceived, and practically non-stop throughout. It seems to be largely the Russian concept of what Mexican music should sound like. The "Sandunga" though, as indicated before, is extremely memorable and lingers in the mind long after the credit titles have rolled. One wonders why heavy electronic music was used for the prologue when the Eisenstein-Alexandrov scenario specifically calls for "the quaint rhythm



of the drums of the Yucatan music, and the high-pitched Maya song" to accompany the funeral procession.

On the plus side are Eisenstein's staggeringly beautiful foreground compositions and his use of the triangle motif throughout, obviously inspired by the volcanoes and pyramids of Mexico. There is also Eduard Tisse's matchless exterior photography to marvel at. From the cinematographer's point of view *Que Viva Mexico!* is a joy to watch. This part of the original dream for the film was realized widely, boldly and significantly. But as one watches the magnificent vistas unfold, it is impossible not to wonder what Eisenstein would have done with his magnificent footage.

All in all, there is much to admire in *Que Viva Mexico!* But most important is the praise due to Grigori Alexandrov for his valiant attempt to give life and form to his friend's long-lost dream. In the precarious world of film many scripts never get past the producer's waste basket, and it is encouraging to know that a film can still be completed after fifty years of waiting. Canadian filmmakers with unborn masterpieces wasting away in desk drawers can surely take heart from Alexandrov's example. Persistence and patience do, eventually, pay off. ●

Que Viva Mexico!

d. Sergei M. Eisenstein sc. Sergei M. Eisenstein, Grigori Alexandrov d.o.p. Eduard Tisse ed. Grigori Alexandrov p.c. State Film Fund U.S.S.R. dist. Frank Taylor Films Inc. & Creative Exposure.



TAKE TWO

Mañana never comes

by Rudy Wrench

Que Viva Mexico! has been a problem to film people ever since America's favourite left-wing novelist, Upton Sinclair, got worried about the mazuma that was being spent on S.M. Eisenstein's Montezuma epic, and pulled the plug. It all happened way back when in the thirties.

Since that unhappy time, more has been written about *Que Viva Mexico!* than any other film, finished or unfinished, with the possible exceptions of Melies' *Trip to the Moon*, Griffith's *Intolerance* and Gance's *Napoleon*. It seems that Eisenstein, the Russian film director (who startled the world with *Potemkin*) got fed up writing film scripts for Paramount and wanted to get away from it all. Browsing over some books in a Hollywood bookstore, he decided to head for Mexico, and found a backer in Sinclair.

It took him, so the legend goes, a couple of months of drifting all over the place before he came up with an "I Love Mexico" script that made his backers chortle as they imagined themselves turning cartwheels all the way to the bank. Needless to say, they gave Eisenstein the go-ahead, and in his own inimitable style the famous Russian churned mile after mile through a hand-turned camera, and filled hundreds of cans with unusual compositions and striking pictures of Mexicans at work, play, in bondage, and exhibiting a religious fervour that was the direct legacy of the Conquistadors who visited the country back in the 1500s.

When his backers pulled out, Eisenstein returned to Russia. Worse was to come when no one would let him edit the film he had shot — while everybody else was allowed to do what he liked with it.

The director was not the only one upset by the fate of his film — which was never completed. Sympathetic to Eisenstein's problem, Philip Hudsmith crossed the Rio Grande and started back-tracking along the Russian's trail to see if he could discover a few clues. The result was the film *Eisenstein's Mexico*, dedicated to Anita Brenner and the Mexican Spirit. (Brenner was the lady who temp-

ted Eisenstein to stray beneath the border in the first place with a book called *Idols Behind Altars*. Her book described how Catholic altars were built on Aztec Pyramids. This practice apparently caused considerable confusion among the natives who lived unhappily ever after because they couldn't make up their minds which type of sacrifice they preferred — Aztec or Christian.)

Unlike Eisenstein, Hudsmith got to edit his film, and stoically endured the agonies common to most filmmakers who try to get their films to the screen. The subject matter in Hudsmith's film is unusual. Most moviegoers are accustomed to seeing *finished* films. Hudsmith, on the other hand, shows us, in part, how Eisenstein's film was *not* made.

The film begins in an eerie dead world — much as Eisenstein's film was supposed to begin. Ghostly footsteps of a sacrificial victim move upwards to the top of a pyramid, a knife falls, and pyramid and gargoyles turn red, suggesting the blood that has flowed down their sides. A wind echoes hauntingly, reminding us that we are in the past. After the titles, more ruins follow and some of the places where Eisenstein filmed his prologue are seen. Some images from his film are shown, but these are stills: surprisingly, Hudsmith does not use any of Eisenstein's actual footage, only stills, drawings and paintings. The stills are well chosen and include many we have not seen before of Eisenstein at work on his film. With one exception the drawings are well done and add colour. The exception is a close-up of Eisenstein smiling. It is clumsily executed, and the smile seems incongruous at the moment it appears, be-

cause it coincides with some fairly melancholy subject matter.

The famous symbolic image of the three lions — sleeping, walking and aroused — from *Battleship Potemkin*, rendered through the medium of water-colour sketches, is used as a stepping-stone to a discovery of Eisenstein's editing techniques and his passion for montage. This in turn is related to the type of symbolic imagery Eisenstein had planned to use, giving the viewer an insight into what his film might have looked like.

Hudsmith also uses photographs or drawings of certain famous people who speak in the film. Familiar Film Board photographs of John Grierson accompany Grierson's critical assessment of Eisenstein's abilities as a filmmaker. This is logical enough, but some viewers may be unaware of Grierson's own prestige as a filmmaker and critic. An introduction, or at least a name subtitle would have helped. (Perhaps this could be rectified in future prints.) Structurally *Eisenstein's Mexico* is sound. Hudsmith appears to have found the ideal shape for the exposition of his material. It provides an excellent overview of the problems encountered by a famous film director making a film in a foreign country. When treating the various stories Eisenstein had woven into the fabric of his screenplay, Hudsmith gives them a different order. He lets them evolve out of their new context. Instead of attempting yet another reconstruction of *Que Viva Mexico!* Hudsmith concentrates on the Russian's creative ideas about Mexicans and their culture.

These days too many Canadian films rely on rapid cutting to get their messages across. Hudsmith occasionally also

wanders off into some frenetic montage patterns of his own. But towards the end the pace slows down and the film becomes purely contemplative. As the various threads of the intellectual arguments presented come together we begin to realize just how great a tragedy the loss of this particular film was to Eisenstein. We are also led to reflect upon the possibility that the world has lost an extremely valuable work of art which would have offered a unique look at the Mexican soul and its part in the scheme of things. Regrettably, for some great artists and their work, *manana* never comes.

EISENSTEIN'S MEXICO d./sc./p./d.o.p. Philip Hudsmith additional photog. Bob Fresco art James E. Smith, Anthony Westbrook fotomation David Adolphus narrator Derek Best voices Peter Losovic (Sergei M. Eisenstein), Ralph Brunjes (John Grierson), Frank Demsar (Lev Kuleshov), Delip Mirchandani (Santa Anna, Juarez, Augustin Aragon Leiva) stills British Film Institute, Lilly Library/Indiana University, National Film Board quotation from "Sergei Eisenstein" (biography), permission from Marie Seton. Produced with the assistance of the Ontario Arts Council p.c. Hudsmith Productions (1978) running time 50 min. dist. Frank Taylor Films Inc. in collaboration with Creative Exposure.



Rudy Wrench is an independent filmmaker, free-lance writer and photographer. His films include *Blizzard*, *Sequences*, *The Film Craft Series (NFB)* and *Full Circle (NFB)*.