



## 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.

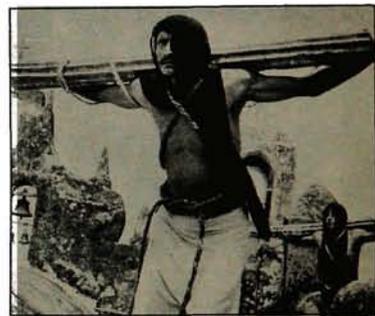
The famous symbolic image of the three lions — sleeping, walking and aroused — from *Battleship Potemkin*, rendered through the medium of water-colour sketches, is used as a stepping-stone to a discovery of Eisenstein's editing techniques and his passion for montage. This in turn is related to the type 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.



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