

Robert Sherrin's

## A Matter of Time

When CBC-TV first broadcast *Home Fires* in November 1980, even Toronto critics had good things to say about it. In *The Globe and Mail*, Rick Groen accurately forecast the future of the series, noting that if Canadians enjoyed the drama of a Canadian family struggling to live in Canada at war, then the first eight segments of *Home Fires* would "multiply as surely as a concession from Neville Chamberlain." Many Canadians sampled the fare; many liked it - hence the production of five more one-hour shows to take Dr. Lowe and his family from 1941 through the middle years of World War II.

The sequel keeps the promises made by the original series. Dr. Lowe gets the chance to prove that he is as good as his word ("You can only let them push you so far") by reporting on benzene poisoning caused by an antiquated ventilation system in the plane factory where his daughter works, and more importantly for subsequent shows, by siding with the strikers there. His daughter Terry, still glowing and engaging but still too ingenuous to be true, matures a little by leading the wild-cat strike. Son Sydney also grows up some by contracting a bad case of Spring fever (a particularly severe, highly amusing strain marked by what seems to be terminal awkwardness). He falls for an evacuee of Great Britain, played by the charming and poised Emma Hewitt. Her fears for her family and friends in England are deepened by Terry's strike, for it occurs at precisely the same time as Nazi bombing of England escalates. Timing, as the title of the first show suggests (*A Matter of Time*), is part and parcel of the dramatic tensions of *Home Fires*. Those German bombs make the just strikers "saboteurs" and Dr. Lowe's support "sedition"; those bombs threaten Sydney's burgeoning love affair by pitting the political concerns of his sister against the emotional ones of his girlfriend. None of this is great entertainment nor is it deeply moving, but after the profound ups and downs of Sunday afternoon football and the latest exposé of institutional corruption parading as altruism on *60 Minutes*, *Home Fires* is a pleasure.

In *Home Fires*, the CBC has an engaging story and tells it well. That "well" is qualified praise, but praise nonetheless, for my first misgivings proved false. There was a visual cliché (a close-up of a ringing telephone for an anxious moment) and a verbal one ("Love... [pregnant pause]... there's that word again."). There was the first cut from the factory, a set faithfully captured in its variety and depth, to the Lowe home, a set so harshly lit that the humans stood out like figures in a colouring book. But these flaws - including the last one, which I used to think a trademark of CBC-TV drama - occurred early and passed quickly, and so the story unfolded without such distractions from its more entertaining aspects.

But one weakness, a weakness not unrelated to the story, persisted throughout *A Matter of Time*. Put simply, there is too much story-telling, too great a reliance on words. And it is not necessary given the skill of *Home Fires'* cast and the power of TV as a silent visual



● The family for which home fires burn

medium. Nor is it consistent with the readiness to trust the audience to put two and two together on other occasions; for example, at the very end when we realize what Terry Lowe does not - that the union triumph is but one little battle in a much longer, bigger war. Verbalizing what is visually clear flattens some of the show's finest dramatic moments. When the strikers have waited twenty-four hours in defiance of an ultimatum from their bosses, when they have waited part of another six minutes in defiance of an ultimatum from the Royal Canadian Armed Forces marshalled outside their plant, an audience knows from the clock, the faces, the postures, the action/inaction that waiting is difficult; we do not need to be told that, but we are. Instead of expanding the dramatic tension, the words explode it.

Despite all that, *Home Fires* is a good story well told. Comic moments and upbeat music remind us of the hopefulness which underlies the series as a whole and qualifies the most disturbing moral dilemmas the characters face. Some splendid ties on the men, some sexy informal jiving by the women on strike, and some curious artifacts (such as the old telephone I've mentioned or Stephenie's two-wheeler) suggest the world of the 1940's. The acting - that of the company, not that of any individual - is impressive. The interplay of Parkes, Yaroshevskaya, Crewson, Spence, and Moore is easy and confident; they create that crucial sense of a family bound together by some common understanding, some shared strength. This sets off

the sparkling performances of Suzette Couture as a feisty, outspoken activist for unionization and of Angus MacInnes as the self-righteous plant manager. His voice is important to one of a number of complex, satisfying dramatic moments: we hear his voice vainly ordering strikers back to work, while we listen to a personal conversation about causes and risks of striking and, most importantly, while we see anonymous workers stop their machines.

Like the original series, *A Matter of Time* whets the appetite for developments to come: Sydney's dilemma must be resolved; Terry's growth from innocence to experience must be furthered, just as her love life must be complicated by the dapper reporter who investigates the strike; Dr. Lowe must pay for supporting the "saboteurs" and his wife must show the value of her constant, quiet strength. Though the innocence, idealism, and dedication of *Home Fires* may now be extinct (or an endangered species at best), it is nice to think for an hour once a week that they are parts of our past. I'll tune in again, and again next year for more *Home Fires*.

Edward McGee ●

**A MATTER OF TIME** sc. Jim Purdy p. Duncan Lamb d. Robert Sherrin unit man. Bing Kwan post p. Harris Verge p.a. Alan Hausegger, Bill Spahik, Jeanette Solomcoe, Kathryn Buck p. co-or. Laurie Cook p. sec. Susan Procter tech. p. Gerry Lee design. Russell Chick cost. Astrid Janson make-up Daisy Bijac hair Anita Miles l.p. Doug Barnes, Gail Carr, Gerard Parkes, Kim Yaroshevskaya, Wendy Crewson, Peter Spence, Sheila Moore, Suzette Couture, Nancy Beatty, Tony Sheer, Booth Savage, Mary Vingoe, Emma Hewitt, Gini Metcalfe, Angus MacInnes, Gil Yaron, David Gardner, Bill Lake, John Kozak.

Eric Saretzky's

## A Private World

*A Private World*, an intimate look at The National Ballet School in Toronto, is South African filmmaker Eric Saretzky's hour-long homage to the artistry and dedication of young dancers-in-the-making. There is no question that the NBS is interesting material for a documentary because, by combining ballet with academic training, it is unique in North America. The fact that its graduates are dancing in 17 major companies around the world demonstrates its success.

According to Saretzky, however, the film is not meant to be a traditional documentary. "It's not a brochure, a pamphlet or a forum of opinion, because I wanted to convey the essence of the school through feeling rather than fact. A film can't have the detail of a magazine article. Words are spoken only if they don't intrude upon the images." Thus, *A Private World* is not an in depth study, much to the dismay of the dance critics who seem to have been expecting Saretzky, as he says, "to film what they might have wanted to see." As a result, the film has stirred up controversy in the dance world.

Saretzky comes to his first film with a background in photography, architecture, TV camera work and cinematography. He has had several photographic exhibits and it is probably success in this field which accounts for his keen eye that focuses in on the elements of dance - an arm in an attitude, the intricacies of putting on a toe shoe. Overall, the film is very beautiful to watch and repeated viewings have not diminished the impact of the many exquisite images. The emotional high-point of the film, so poignantly captured by Saretzky, is the long sequence devoted to the students rehearsing the second act of "Giselle" for their year-end recital. The tears of frustration, the nerve-racking tension, the delight when something goes right - in short, the agony and ecstasy of being a dancer - are all revealed under Saretzky's relentless camera. An audience cannot help but be moved.

For this writer, however, the film does have contentious points. Saretzky has interspersed footage of the school itself, much as the academic and ballet training, rehearsals and recitals, with teachers and graduates of the school in actual performances. On first viewing, these inserts are jarring. Following shots of a ballet class, we are suddenly greeted with Vanessa Harwood of The National Ballet whirling in a variation from "Le Corsaire". Saretzky justifies the performance sequences in the following: "These dances give all the activity of the school meaning because they answer the question, 'Where does all the training go?' They also show the range of dancing by people closely associated with the school."

Two original works were commissioned for the film. Susanna, the inter-

(cont. on p. 30)

Note: *A Private World* was awarded the special jury prize for documentary at the Chicago Film Festival this November. (Ed.)

# BOOKSHELF

## ART AND TECHNIQUES

**In Directing: The Television Commercials.** Bed Gradus, a top director of TV spots, shares his experience of many years. A thoroughly professional and exhaustive guide, his book covers the technical knowhow, as well as the sense of esthetics and the psychological attitudes required of the successful practitioner of the craft. Sponsored by the Directors Guild of America, this book is of invaluable assistance to students of the medium and an unequalled standard of reference to Gradus's colleagues (Hastings House \$26.95/\$16.95).

In the revised edition of **Professional Cameraman's Handbook**, Verne and Sylvia Carlson effectively describe the practical procedures of camera handling. Assembling, threading and troubleshooting are expertly discussed in this authoritative manual's treatment of the characteristics of a wide range of 35/16mm cameras and accessories, with the exception of hand-held cameras, i.e. those with less than 600 ft. capacity (Watson-Guptill \$21.95).

What animation aesthetics and techniques will be in the '80s is projected by Carl Macek in **The Art of Heavy Metal**. This abundantly illustrated book describes the production in Canada of *Heavy Metal*, the R-rated animation feature directed by Gerald Potterton. Extensive use of multiplane cameras, live action, models, reotoscoping, etc. resulted in a highly original and trend-setting film (NY Zoetrope, 31 E. 12 St., NYC 10003; \$9.95).

**In How to Read A Film** (revised edition), noted film scholar James Mon-

aco considers the impact on contemporary life of the psychological, social and political elements of film. His articulate and thoughtful arguments synthesize compellingly all the components of a complex medium (Oxford U. Press, \$25/\$11.95).

## ASPECTS OF CINEMA

Based on information collected by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the **1979 Annual Index to Motion Picture Credits** is an authoritative and complete record of films shown in Los Angeles during that year. Fully cross-indexed, this massive volume provides full data on the film, production personnel and cast. Issued by the Academy since 1934, it is now published by Greenwood Press, 88 Post Road W., Westport, CT 06880; \$150.

Using weekly Variety's extensive files, **Variety International Showbusiness Reference**, a large volume of basic reference value, skillfully edited by Mike Kaplan, offers a wealth of significant facts and cogent statistics on the film, television, stage and music fields of the past 75 years (Garland \$75).

American documentary films of the 1931-42 period are perceptively assessed by William Alexander in **Film On the Left**. His historic scrutiny, based on interviews with leading filmmakers, pinpoints the major trends of this committed genre and the social orientation of their authors (Princeton U. Press \$27.50/\$12.50).

In **Shock Value**, avant-garde director John Waters (*Polyester*, and the earlier, celebrated *Pink Flamingos*) offers a candid view of underground filmmak-

ing. It is a provocative, fascinating and hilarious autobiography, a spirited defense of bad taste that transcends itself to the point of normalcy and reveals a lively subculture of style and substance (Delta \$9.95).

A sweeping panorama of American films of the '30s, Robert Dooley's **From Scarlett To Scarface** is an engaging mixture of film history, popular culture and nostalgia. Thoroughly familiar with the industry, its leading personalities and memorable achievements, Dooley draws an exciting picture of the movies' Golden Days (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich \$25).

The musical Western is explored by David Rothel in his well-documented **The Singing Cowboys**, a tuneful survey that reveals a surprising number of excellent performers surrounding such stars as Roy Rogers and Gene Autry (A.S. Barnes \$10.95).

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Budd Schulberg's **Moving Pictures**, a candid evocation of Hollywood in the '20s and '30s, traces the career of his father, movie tycoon B.P. Schulberg. The era's cutthroat competition and gold rush atmosphere are vividly recaptured in this engrossing memoir, written by a uniquely well-placed inside witness to the momentous growth of the industry (Stein & Day \$16.95).

An unruffled view of the Hollywood scene during the last 60 years, **Starmaker** is producer Hal Wallis's revealing yet low-key perspective on the 200 films he made, the personalities he encountered, and the marking events of a distinguished career (Macmillan \$13.95).

The multitalented Woody Allen is perceptively scrutinized by Foster Hirsch in **Love, Sex, Death and the Meaning of Life**, a probe of Allen's ethnicity and environment, and his highly personal mixture of slapstick comedy and intellectual humor (McGraw-Hill \$5.95).

Lou Costello's daughter Chris (and Raymond Strait) narrate her father's life in **Lou's On First**, a tale of talent and hard work from a man who suffered from the repeated blows of heartbreaking misfortune (St. Martin's \$14.95). British actor John Mills reminisces engagingly in **Up In The Clouds, Gentlemen Please**, an unaffected, warm and occasionally ribald memoir of a successful and versatile career (Ticknor & Fields \$14.95). Jason Bondoroff's unauthorized biography, **Brooke**, presents a lively and intriguing portrait of Brooke Shields — a 15-year-old sex kitten or just an insecure teenager? (Zebra \$2.50).

In **Up and Down With Elvis Presley**, Marge Crumbaker and Gabe Ticker draw a colorful inside story of Presley's ambivalent association with Colonel Tom Parker, his manipulative manager (Putnam \$12.95). **All About Elvis** is an extensive compilation by Fred L. Worth and Steve D. Tamerius of practically everything that has been written about the legendary performer (Bantam \$3.95).

An encyclopedic survey by Scott Palmer, **Who's Who Of British Film Actors** includes some 1500 performers, mostly English but with a sprinkling of Commonwealth personalities. Vital statistics and credits are provided in this valuable reference work (Scarcrow \$27.50).

George L. George ●

## REVIEWS

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nationally-known teacher and choreographer, performs a long segment which, although it shows her artistry at an advanced age, lacks the sparkle and excitement which the footage of her flamenco class conveys. "Dedication" by graduate Ann Ditchburn raises more than a few eyebrows. A student, Sabina Alleman, and her teacher, Sergiu Stefanschi, dance a frankly erotic *pas de deux* in the empty stillness of a studio. Saretzky was unprepared for the ramifications of this ultimate schoolgirl fantasy. "I gave Ann the music, Ravel's "Sonata for Violin and Cello" and the idea about uncertainty in a young woman. I chose the dancers for their qualities. I didn't think of them as student or teacher!"

The so-called leisure sequences are questionable because they appear staged although Saretzky claims they are not. "That boy had a paper airplane in class. I just told him to throw it out the window. The girls told me they had pillow fights so they improvised one for me. I put in these parts for the kids who will be watching the film. They love them."

Also irritating are the many seemingly gratuitous shots of the changing seasons. Saretzky challenges this criticism. "Coming from South Africa, you can't help but see how the seasons influence life here, especially the huge intrusion of winter. For the rest of the world they have great significance. They affect the

nature of light, mood changes and they underline rhythms."

Perhaps Betty Oliphant, principal of the NBS, best sums up the thorny question of how to treat this documentary by saying that it calls for an emotional response on the part of the viewer rather than an intellectual one. As a documentary, however, the film is limited in its informational output. It allows the audience to watch the students of The National Ballet School mould their bodies in pursuit of their craft while never touching upon the inner politics of the institution.

Paula Citron ●

**A PRIVATE WORLD** p.d.cam. Eric Saretzky ed. Margaret van Eedewijk, Leslie Brown asst. to d. Joy Richards gaff. Jock Brandis light. Jim Plaxton asst. cam. Robert Holmes, Paul Dunlop, Carl Harvey, Lynn Rotin, Henning Schwartz 2nd asst. cam. Michael Torosian sd. Don Book, Anton Kwiatkowski, Don Latour, Ao Loo grip. David Hynes, Mark Manchester grip asst. Rodney Daw, Greg Pelchat, Ivan Petef, Tom Pinteric set asst. Patrick McEvoy st. man. Adrian Goldberg, George Carter sp. etc. Film Opticals add. re. Saretzky sd. trans. Larry Johnson, Chris Cooke 2nd asst. ed. David Coleman dub. mix. Terry Cooke sd. ed. Margaret van Eedewijk dancers Vanessa Harwood, Sabina Alleman, Sergiu Stefanschi, Claudia Moore, Robert Desrosiers, Susana, Karen Kain, Frank Augustyn, Anne Adair, Serge Lavoie, Jeffrey Kirk.

## INTERVIEW

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"Why do you want to do this? Everybody else wants to nail me to the wall so they can go to the Chemical Bank and discount it and make the film!"

Those companies which have dealt traditionally with Canada are somewhat familiar with the process but those who haven't find it shocking, and it is bad business practice. Why should we be put into the position of actually diminishing the potential protective benefits we can offer the unit holders because of the structure of the financing? It doesn't make any sense.

The second key element is going to be interim financing linked to the viability of the industry. We now have a situation where probably the only bank publicly stating that it is willing to participate in feature film interim financing is the Roymark (the Royal Bank).

We have to make the financial community realize that there are opportunities for it in terms of support for the film industry. And that hurdle we haven't leapt. If you buy a house and put 10% down, you can probably get a mortgage for the other 90%. If I buy a film and put 10% down, I probably can't get the other 90% financed because everyone knows what a house is worth and can evaluate it and decide if the risk is worthwhile, but you can't do that with film. That's our problem.

Ultimately, we have to establish the viability of film as a business first, and then move backwards into the financing

methods thereafter, and that means that we have to continue to finance the production of films in other ways. One way we have found in *Cross Country* has to do with the co-production environment. The official co-production treaties which Canada has are frankly viewed as complex vehicles which no one wants to become involved in. From my point of view, they're very well suited to the kinds of problems we face at the moment, because the countries with whom we have treaties don't tend to have our problems. They tend to have a greater degree of maturity in terms of how they view an asset, and what is tax shelterable, as well as the manner in which the money comes in. And so there's cash available from a co-producer which then reduces your need for interim financing, and so forth...

In general, I think the situation has bottomed out, for a couple of reasons. On the feature film front, I find a lot more rationality to what it is we're proposing to undertake and how it is we're proposing to undertake it. The budgets are smaller, the films are more reasonable. They have been more carefully thought through and vetted with the distribution community, so that we know they're viable. Then we have added to it the whole thing about pay-TV. While I don't think it will be a panacea, it is another element which adds to the impact which television production will have in the future.

Interview by Connie Tadros ●