

Robert Sherrin's

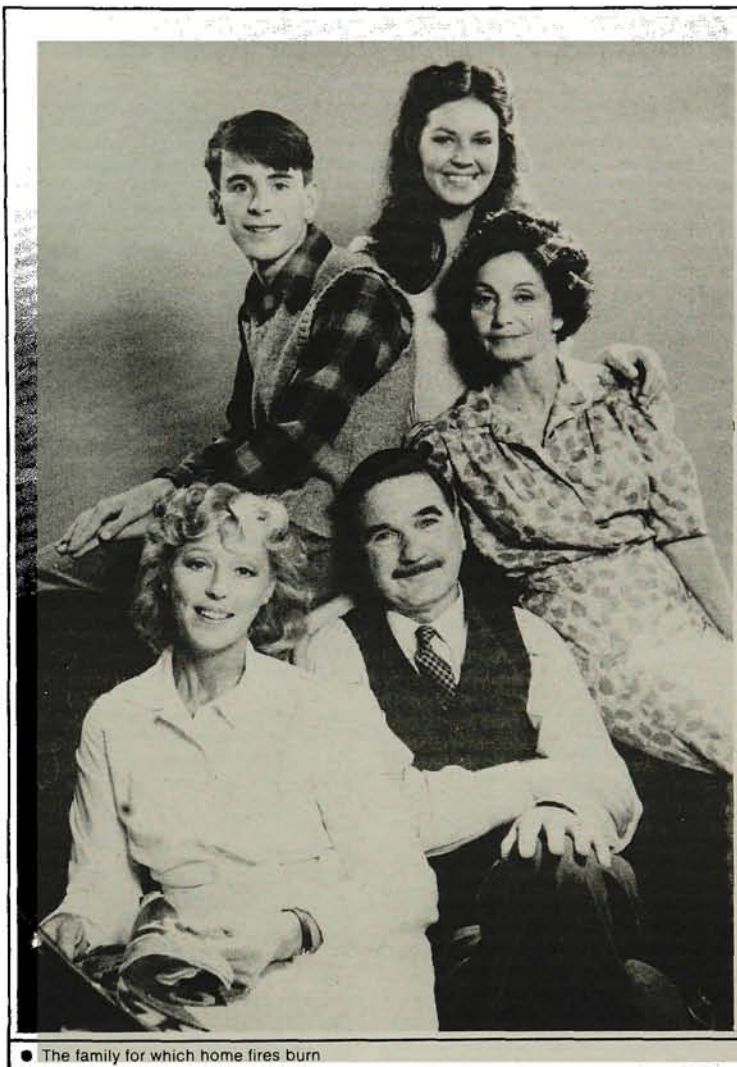
## A Matter of Time

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.)