

REVIEWS

Ralph Thomas' The Terry Fox Story

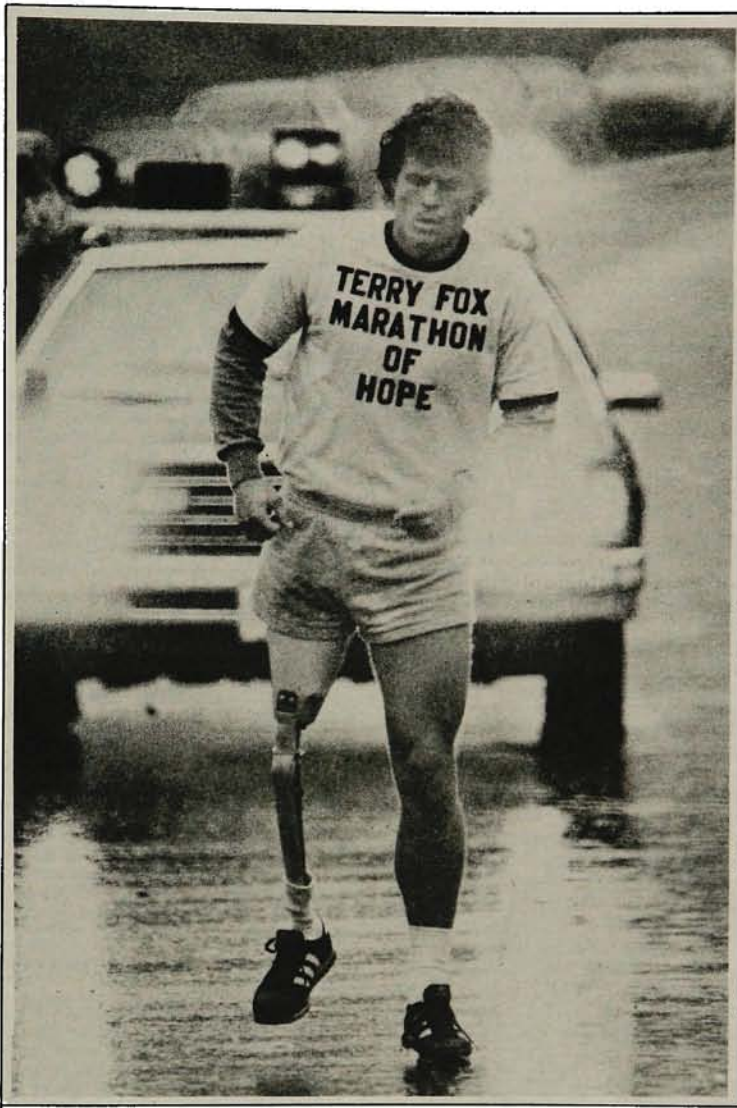
I didn't spend a lot of time following Terry Fox's run when it happened. The massive emotional manipulation of the event bothered me, and there had been a rather frightening series of articles published in Penthouse attacking the research practices of the American Cancer Society, so the idea of giving money to one of their branch plants was not particularly appealing. Almost more interesting than Terry himself seemed the remarkable emotional response that was being wrenched from the hearts of stolid, emotionally blocked Ontarians, who took to Terry as if he were a cross between John-Boy Walton and Lassie, come home at last.

This by way of introduction, to show just how prepared I was for a very bad movie, to cynically park myself in the screening room and snarl viciously if anyone tried force-feeding me the milk of human kindness. Admittedly, there were good signs. Ralph Thomas, the director, is not a man easily suckered. One need only look at the tough docudramas he produced at the CBC (especially *Drying Up the Streets*) and *Ticket to Heaven* to see someone with an immense distrust of pieties, conventional and otherwise. Michael Zelnicker, who plays Fox's best friend, Doug Alward, was insistent in conversation that they had made an effort to show Terry, warts and all.

Well, it works, because there are three stories that come together in the film. The first story, where the automatic emotional response comes in, is during the recreation of the public events that we all know so well – and, if we are Torontonians, lived through. The second story is the private Terry Fox, who seems to have been a major pain in the neck: an obsessive, physically-oriented, petulant monomaniac. When everyone is telling him that he's crazy to want to run across Canada, they not only seem eminently more rational, but they seem to be giving him good advice. One gets the feeling that being Doug Alward for the months on the road (Alward drove the van) must have been rather like being locked in a closet with an unstable badger. Of course, if it were the private life alone, one might react to Terry the same way we did to another recent handicapped hero in Canadian movies, Tom Sullivan, in the execrable *If You Could See What I Hear*.

The third story, and the most important, is the real reason that Terry Fox worked as a national symbol. The story is not about this adolescent who died so that others might be cured, but of a single figure out on the highways. It is an elemental story of a human and an environment, and the desolate, mind-numbing loneliness of that image. It may be the best use of the Canadian landscape as a character that we have ever seen in a Canadian movie (*Silence of the North* and *Who Has Seen the Wind* don't quite make it, and *The Grey Fox* is only a corner of the country).

That story, of landscape and figure, is the most emotionally overpowering image in the entire film, and its sheer force



● A petulant monomaniac turned national legend: Eric Fryer in *The Terry Fox Story*

as history and myth means that Thomas, not by nature a manipulative director, can let the story's force rise naturally from the characters and the images. One quivers in terror at the thought of what an emotional mugger like Mark Rydell (*On Golden Pond*) might have done, had he got his hands on this film.

The Terry Fox Story follows its hero from the day he discovers his cancer to the end of the run, where he learns of a new tumor in his lung and is sent home. It covers the relationship with his family, best friend, girlfriend, and Bill Vigers, the Cancer society representative.

Given that Terry Fox is in virtually every frame of the film, an enormous weight falls on Eric Fryer, the young Scarberian who, like Fox, lost a leg to cancer and makes his acting debut here. It is, for someone who must have endured a similar experience to Fox (chemotherapy and learning to walk again), no doubt an emotionally traumatic role as well as one that was physically killing. The first time I saw the film, it seemed that Fryer had an obvious emotional connection with the character he was playing, but that he lacked the acting tools to really give it full expression. The second time through, Fryer seemed more appropriate, as the realization came that Fox himself lacked the expressive tools to bring out what he

was feeling – a great deal of the appeal was that this kid from B.C. obviously was sitting on top of an emotional volcano and struggling to articulate what he felt about his leg, his disease, and the tremendous waves of mass emotion that flowed toward him from the day he crossed the Ontario border to his near canonization at Toronto's City Hall. While it's hard to say if Fryer has the talent to go on and continue acting (he has apparently landed a role in *Home Fires*), he is certainly a major discovery in terms of this film.

Thomas and producer Robert Cooper have been smart enough to surround Fryer with some of the best acting talent available. It is not necessary to speak of the awesome talent of Robert Duvall – anyone who has been to the movies in the past 20 years or so knows how good he is. But a few words are in order on Michael Zelnicker and Chris Makepeace (who plays Terry's brother, Darrell). In a way, the most sympathetic character is Doug Alward. It is not easy for the average person to imagine achieving an impossible task against a crippling handicap. Most people avoid thinking about handicaps, for the simple reason that it is too strong a reminder of the terrible fragility of the human body. Yet it is rather easy to connect with someone who is shunted to the sidelines in an

emotionally stressful situation.

Alward is an interesting character in the film, because he seems to have no family, no friends save Terry, and nothing important to do with his life but drive the van for his friend. With his hair cut jock-short, his glasses and hooded sweatshirts, Zelnicker projects an almost monkish asceticism into the character, simultaneously conveying the sense that he knows he is helping his best friend commit suicide, and being perfectly willing to help him, because he knows that he can do nothing to dissuade him.

It is also very pleasant to see Makepeace, a moist-eyed, worshipful wimp in films like *Meatballs* and *The Last Chase*, finally playing a character with a few smarts of his own. It may be the first time that he has actually been likeable on screen.

The rest of the cast is uniformly good – special mention should be made of Elva Mai Hoover, who plays Terry's mother, and is thus saddled with one almost unplayable scene – and lends a sort of authenticity to the proceedings. The insistence on the Canadianness of the project comes through in large part because all the actors appear with their accents, like, intact, eh? While it may be rare to see a Canadian flag on-screen in a Canadian film, or to hear Toronto referred to as Toronto, it is even rarer to hear that constricted Ontario voice squeezing out through the emotionally clenched vocal cords of real Canadian actors.

The Terry Fox Story captures the heroism of its subject by refusing to shy away from his often unpleasant humanity, and that may be its remarkable achievement. It shows some aspect of the reality behind the myth (the most noble suicide of our time) without betraying the innately heroic aspect of the myth.

John Harkness ●

THE TERRY FOX STORY d. Ralph L. Thomas p. Robert Cooper sc. Edward Hume story John Kastner & Rose Kastner exec. p. Gursten I. Rosenfeld & Michael A. Levine assoc. p. John Eckert d.o.p. Richard Ciupka art d. Gavin Mitchell ed. Ron Wisman casting Canadian Casting Associates music Bill Conti p. man. Joyce Kozy King unit loc. man. Otta Hanus 1st a. d. Bill Corcoran asst. d. Bruce Moriarty. Kim Winther, Jacques Hubert, Hagan Beggs asst. art d. Rolf Harvey cam. op. Andy Chmura 1st asst. cam. Neil Seal 2nd asst. cam. Kerry Smart Steadicam op. Ted Churchill ed. rec. Bruce Carwardine boom Glen Gauthier sd. ed. Jon Hopkins re-rec. Joe Grimaldi set dec. Mark Freeborn asst. set dec. Paul Harding props master Dan Wladyka asst. prop. master George Farrell ward. Lynda Kempasst. ward. Erla Lank make-up Michele Burke hair Malcolm Tanner gaffer Steve Ferrier best boy John Forjans key grip Michael Kohne grip James Kohne driver captain Brian O'Hara craft service Debbie Beers gen. op. Mike Beer extras Karen Pike & Linda Egan unit publicist Marlee Novak p. assts. Carole Riback, Kelly Makin sc. sup. Sarah Grahame p. acc't. Ann Fitzgerald p. co-ord. Deborah Zwickler asst. to the p. Marlee Novak asst. ed. Bryon White Foley ed. Terry Burke music ed. Steven A. Hope asst. sd. ed. Richard Kelly stills Lawrie Baskin p.c. Robert Cooper Production in assoc. with H.B.O. and CTV with the participation of Superchannel. dist. Astral Films/Twentieth Century-Fox. 35mm colour running time: 98 mins. L.p. Robert Duvall, Eric Fryer, Chris Makepeace, Rosalind Chao, Michael Zelnicker, Elva Mai Hoover, Frank Adamson, Marie McCann, B.H. Thomson, Saul Rubinek, Chuck Shanata, Clyde Rose, Patrick Watson, Austin Davis, Matt Craven, Dorothy Wyatt, Steven Hunter, Robert Des Roches, Jayne Foster, Karen Racicot, Howie Siegel, Laura Vickers, Gary Darycott, Gary Baker, Wayne Brace, Barry Greene, Al Coombs, Lori Chodos, Laurie Oberdin, Jaclyn Stevens, Ian Heath, Brian Kaulback, Murray Lowry, Susan Payne.