

Nick Sheehan's
No Sad Songs

It's tough to knock a film which bills itself as "the first film in the world to document a community response to AIDS" without running the risk of being labeled a misanthrope or, even worse, a right-wing moralist (this particularly when the director mentions - almost onerously - before the screening that the film "is liked best by gays and liberal-minded straights").

But despite the intrinsic humanism of its subject, *No Sad Songs* fails to impart the emotional power it is striving for; while attempting to convey the tragedy of the disease and the determination of those working to combat it, the film gets bogged down by its own excesses and lack of focus.

The film's content is a potpourri of styles and intentions which resist unification. On an informative level, we have the comments of health care workers on the effect of AIDS on the community; narration (infrequently used) by Kate Reid quoting facts and statistics; and comments from gays on how the threat of AIDS has altered their lifestyles. On a humanistic level, the film presents the reflections of the disease's victims, their friends and relatives.

It is on the dramatic level, however, that the film is least effective and its style most disrupted. There are four dramatic sequences in the film - ranging from a monologue to the rhetoric of a fiery preacher - and while they are meant to reiterate and support the themes brought out in the other sections of the film, they instead jar the audience with their extravagance and sometimes-minimal relevance. For instance, short excerpts from playwright Sky Gilbert's *The Dressing Gown* are presented without introduction and thus have no meaningful context for those not "in the know." The zealous-preacher sequence - though mildly amusing in its suggestion that God created AIDS as a punishment for gays - is so overdone as to be almost trivial.

But the film's biggest mistake lies in its failure to fully exploit the intensity and poignancy created when Jim Black is on the screen. Black is a young man

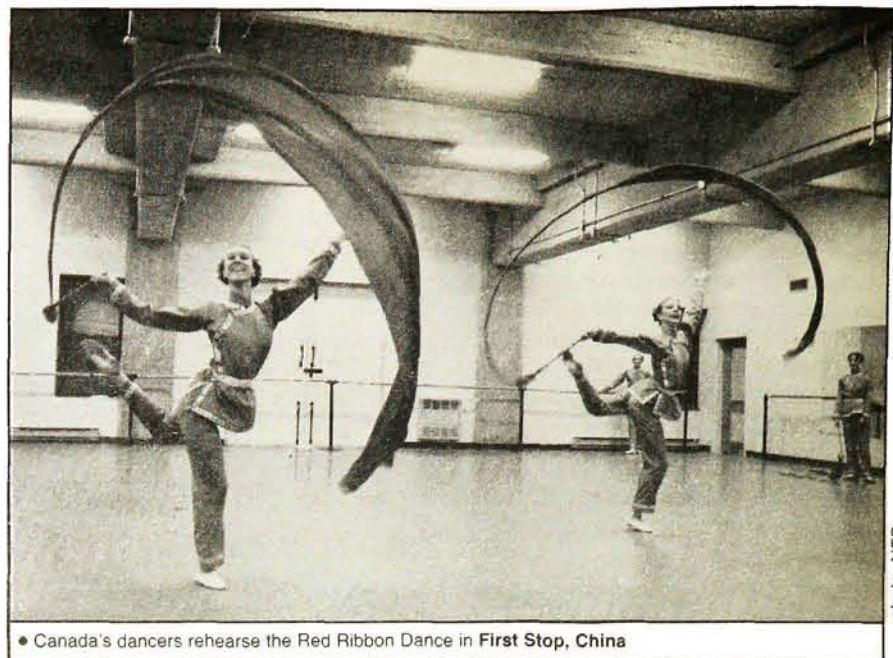
in Toronto suffering from AIDS whose spirit and commitment to life have not been crushed by the disease, but have instead been strengthened. Though ostensibly the film's 'center', Black has little screen time and here lies director Sheehan's greatest error. For Black's personal tragedy draws the audience to him in an emotional way that no one else in the film can match. He is intelligent and articulate, and it is his own personal epitaph - "Sing no sad songs for me, for I have found myself" - from which the film takes its title.

Black's epitaph, quietly voiced towards the end of the film, would have been a fitting conclusion for the film, but again Sheehan's reluctance to eliminate excess dispatched that notion. Instead, we get another 10 minutes of familiar material, including a woman's lengthy account of her brother's illness. Her story is in no way irrelevant or unmoving, but in the context of the film as a whole, its effect had already been achieved and further emphasis was unnecessary.

Finally, at the risk of sounding like a Production 101 instructor, two questions come to mind after seeing *No Sad Songs*: what is this film trying to say and to whom? It is all very fine and admirable to state that AIDS is a destructive and tragic disease which should be fought with every means available, but a film needs more than good intentions and gay in-jokes to sustain itself for over 60 minutes. *No Sad Songs* has both, but not enough else.

Linda Gorman

NO SAD SONGSd./p. Nick Sheehan exec.p. Kevin Orr d.o.p. Paul Mitchnick loc.sd. Clarke McCarron set des. Monte Douglas p.cons. Ron Mann ed. Mume Jan p.man. Sheryl Wright cam.asst. Michaelin MacDermott asst.ed. Alistair Gray mus. Allen Booth, David Woodhead narr. Kate Reid sd.mix. Mastertrack mix. Al Caruso neg.cut. Catherine Rankin lab. PFA titles MetaMedia stills David Rasmus, Sonja Mills p.assts. Gerard van Deelan, Susan Halpin, Charlotte Disher, Vicki Swan, Ewald Kroon, Duncan Roy, Jeff Marshall, Edi Smockum, Leonard Lopez, Rob Hutton, Kathy Smith, Paul Boyd, David Lynd, Armez, make-up Connie Brutto, Paula Weeks (The School of Makeup Arts) unit pub. Phil Shaw, Duncan MacLachlan Interviews with (in order of appearance): Evan Collins, Ken Johnson, Stephen Atkinson, John Allen Lee, John Vandermeer, Stefano Martin, George Hislop, Jim Black, Kevin Stacey, Kevin Orr, Gerald Hannon, Rick Behout, Chris Bearchell, John Bodis, Linda Boyd, Karsten Kossmann, Jeffrey Round, Harold Desmarais (Sister Atrocitata von Tasteless), James Church (Sister Celestial Gates), Neil Bartlett, Sky Gilbert, Matthew Shield, Robert Saunders, Dale McCarthy, Greg Lawrence, Catherine Hunt, Jim Bozyk, l.p. Ian Watson, David Roche, David MacLean, Henry Van Rijk, David Sereda, Joe Norman Shaw, Martha Cronen p.c. Cell Productions & The AIDS Committee of Toronto running time: 63 mins.



• Canada's dancers rehearse the Red Ribbon Dance in *First Stop, China*

John N. Smith's
First Stop, China

First Stop, China, John Smith's 90-minute NFB documentary of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens 1984 tour of the Orient, is a "road" picture with a difference. As the problems and obstacles confronting a large ballet company on its travels cannot be laughed away with the ease of a Hope or Crosby, producer/director Smith has elected to concentrate on fortitude in the face of adversity. The film could easily be subtitled *The Perils of Touring*. It is this uncompromising revelation of the rigors of touring which makes *First Stop, China* a worthwhile addition to dance filmography.

The tour required some hefty slogging - 40 performances covering 20 cities in eight countries over 10 weeks - and the result on film is a mood that grows progressively darker as the journey continues. Right from the beginning, Smith shows the collision between East and West; the first incident we see is the frustration encountered by lighting designer Nick Cernovitch as he attempts to set up his grid in a Peking theatre on antiquated Russian equipment. On the other hand, the technical difficulties are offset by the generosity of the Chinese hosts and the VIP treatment accorded the company. The China segment ends with the rapturous reception given Les Grands for their attempt at performing the notoriously difficult Red Ribbon Dance to honour their Chinese audiences, which is, the narrator tells us, akin to "a Bulgar company performing Shakespeare at Stratford."

However, by the end of the trip, the situation has reversed. In Japan Les Grands perform in state-of-the-art theatres, but the morale of the company has been severely tested by tension created by the Buddhist sect sponsoring the tour. Several company members are Buddhists and participate in an active recruitment campaign that divides the dancers into two camps. The only thing which brings them together is their dancing, and the film ends with the company members pouring out their

energy in their signature work, Tam Ti Delam, Brian Macdonald's homage to the French-Canadian spirit set to the music of Gilles Vigneault.

Although we do see the company at leisure, it is the hardships they endure that stand out: the daily class to keep in shape, putting up with stages without proper dance-floors, the injuries which constantly plague the dancers, the appalling orchestra in Singapore that maestro Vladimir Jelinek must work with, the fighting for rehearsal time, the arrogance of a Thai noblewoman at a benefit concert who treats the dancers as menials, the back-breaking grind of the Japan schedule of 12 cities in 21 days. With these segments Smith has built a *cinéma-vérité* look at life on the road, and one can only be in awe at the resilience of the company.

Enhancing the episodic nature of the film is Smith's use of contrast. Each *vérité* scene is followed by an excerpt from a performance, followed in turn by exterior shots representative of the country. As the music continues, the camera sweeps away from the dancers to corresponding movement abroad. For example, the dancers are seen performing James Kudelka's *In Paradisum* to Michael Baker's pulsating electronic score. Smith's cameras leave the movement on stage to focus on the scenery from a train window, shifting finally to crowded city streets and the Chinese at work. In each case, the music dovetails beautifully with the scene-at-hand. By the time the company arrives in Japan, Smith's choice of John Butler's *Othello* to a passionate Brahms score vividly underlines the tensions building within the company and the hard-driving images of the Japanese lifestyle. To capture this dichotomy of viewpoint, Smith used two different camera crews - one to film the stage performances and the scenes of the country, the other to film the documentary footage - and the result of the interwoven editing is to isolate the dancers from their exotic surroundings - the theme, for this writer, of the film.

Several quirky features about the film add to its fascination. For one thing, although the footage is the same, the English and French versions have subtly different narrations and texts, by Donald Brittain and Henri Bergeron respectively. Brittain's gritty voice speaks every sentence with an exclamation mark after it, as if the company is always

• The poignant, sadly under-used, Jim Black, star of *No Sads Songs*

