

Martin Duckworth's

Return To Dresden

It is the evening of February 13, 1945, and a crowd begins to gather in the Semper, the showpiece opera-house in the centre of the lovely and ancient German city of Dresden. Tonight's opera is *Der Freischutz* by the German Romantic writer and composer Carl Maria von Weber. *Der Freischutz* means "the marksman" in German and he is Max, a hunter who must prove his shooting skills before his prince before he can fulfill his dream of marrying his beloved. Like Faust before him, Max makes a pact with the devil, called Samiel. Samiel agrees to have seven magic bullets cast that are guaranteed to find their target *provided he* can choose one of the targets. Max's Faustian bargain, of course, backfires and his betrothed is shot by one of the bullets. After the applause had died down the audience went home — not knowing that it would be 40 years before that opera, or any other, would again be seen in the city of Dresden.

That night, in two separate waves, Allied Lancaster bombers deluged the city in perhaps the most sustained single bombing attack of all time. The resulting firestorm destroyed a beautiful, and almost totally unarmed, unprepared, and unprotected German city. The number of civilian casualties will never be known. At the time Dresden was full to overflowing with refugees from many parts of the disintegrating Third Reich. Although the authorities have found records of some 35,000 Dresden residents who perished, it is likely that

over 100,000 refugees also died that night.

In the postwar era this event has marked the thought and conscience of many people; for example, Kurt Vonnegut's well-known novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*, made into a film by director George Roy Hill. For me it has a personal significance. My mother arrived in Dresden as a refugee on Feb. 14, the morning after the bombing. Another person who for some time has dwelled on those events is Halifax resident "Giff" Gifford, founder and national president of the Veterans for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament. On the night of Feb. 13, when the residents of Dresden were making their way home from the opera and my mother was running away from boarding school with her girlfriend, Giff was sitting in the navigator's seat of a Lancaster en route across the English channel as part of the second wave of Allied bombers.

It is Feb. 13, 1985 and Giff Gifford is once again returning to Dresden, this time under different circumstances. A train slowly brings him to the centre of the city while he and Sylvia MacDonald, his companion, admire the beautiful vistas of the reconstructed city which he helped to level. After years of meticulous reconstruction, the Semper is once again the splendid palace of culture that it once was and, for the first time in four decades, it will once again host an opera: *Der Freischutz*. Like Max's bride who miraculously recovers from her wounds, Dresden has been reborn.

Since the destruction, there have been annual memorial services in Dresden at 10:00 pm, every Feb. 13. This year representatives from around the world, from the war-ravaged cities of Coventry, Rotterdam, and Stalingrad, have come to mourn and celebrate with the people of Dresden. Tonight Giff Gifford, and the veterans and organization which he represents, have come to make amends and try to establish a rela-

tionship of trust and understanding which may help to heal some of the old wounds. Like the phoenix of the Semper, he hopes that from these ashes a new friendship can emerge.

It is now Feb. 13, 1986, 41 years since the bombs fell. It is 8:00 pm in Halifax (midnight in Dresden; two hours after the memorial service) and we are gathered in an auditorium to see the first screening of Martin Duckworth's newest film, **Return to Dresden**. Sitting with us are Giff Gifford, Sylvia MacDonald, and the director himself. The above events are what we see as the film begins and what draws us into the moving chronicle of a man's commitment to peace and to building a new dialogue between people which will help to maintain it. It is the goal of the peace movement to create person-to-person bonds and understanding that crosses east-west frontiers and reach beyond the political considerations and imperatives of the governments of our respective nations. These are the ideological underpinnings of the peace movement and its activists such as Giff Gifford, and this film is eloquent in representing their concerns and activities.

The film also articulately blends documentary footage of the visit with the literary and artistic vision of *Der Freischutz*. The evil of the devil Samiel and the casting of the seven magic bullets is interwoven as metaphor into the tale of the hell that descended upon Dresden. The film, however, is less clear in representing what this gesture of returning to Dresden means in terms of a real contribution toward peace. In discussion following the film, Duckworth discussed his hope to film footage with the unofficial "dissident" peace movement in East Germany, which he has so far been prevented from doing. This is not brought out in the film, however, and thus the picture of the east-west rapport is a little more rosy than might

perhaps be the case. The point is important since it touches upon one of the fundamental stumbling blocks of the peace movement — and one which it seldom addresses — namely, that the "unofficial" peace movement in the east is banned and suppressed.

After the screening I overheard a woman saying she wanted to see more films which showed the east bloc countries in a sympathetic light: "It's ridiculous, this concept of them as an evil empire. They're just like us. We have to make people in Canada understand that." Noble sentiments, which are echoed in the film, but gloss over some very important political differences; ones which, if we are truly concerned with justice, morality and peace, we cannot afford to forget.

So it is likely that the release of **Return to Dresden** will create some debate even now in Canada many years after the events in the film took place. In today's international situation when the strategic defence initiative ("Star Wars"), disarmament proposals, nuclear tests, and future Reagan-Gorbachev summits are daily in the spotlight of world-media and public opinion, this film highlights some important issues of the past with very direct relevance to the future.

Christopher Majka •

RETURN TO DRESDEN d. Martin Duckworth p. Jacques Vallée cam. Jean-Pierre Lachapelle loc.sd. Richard Besse asst.cam. Serge Lafortune loc.man Peter Zacher interp. Sabine Haferland narr. Earl Pennington, Frances Hyland. The poem "Peace on Earth" was written in 1886 by Conrad Ferdinand Meyer and rendered into English by Allan Brown "Der Freischutz" was recorded on video-tape by GDR Television ed. Martin Duckworth sd.ed. Alain Sauvé re-rec Michel Descombes, André Gagnon. sd.efx. Viateur Paiement trans. Robert Gray, Dagmar Gueissaz Teufel. Archival sources NFB of Canada, Radio Canada, Dresden Phototek, GDR Film Archives. unit admin. Jacqueline Rivest assts. Joanne Carrière, Gaëtan Martel, Carol Smith p.c. The National Film Board of Canada, with special thanks to the Chester Educational Foundation 16mm, colour, running time: 28 mins.

• Return To Dresden: the city's born-again opera house



Jean-Claude Lord's

Toby McTeague

In a film industry whose origins come out of the documentary, the Canadian fiction film is still something of an anomaly. *Toby*, the latest feature by Jean-Claude Lord, stays clear of documentary tendencies and struggles with that most elusive of fictional characters, the Hero — and this in a country where heroism in fiction, particularly in fiction films, is viewed with a mixture of skepticism and awkwardness. As a result, in *Toby*, skepticism enters via references to feminism, the breakdown of the family and the treatment of Indians in Northern Quebec, though none of these conflicts are allowed to detract from the universal qualities of the hero. And awkwardness stems not so much from the inability of Canadians to deal with heroes as from the natural rejection of formulaic American heroes in films such as *Rocky*, *Rambo*, etc.

Filmed entirely in the Lac Saint-Jean region, *Toby* effectively captures the awesome natural beauty of the landscape. The dog-sledding sequences are strung together in a stunning montage of valleys and forests. In the same style as Jean Baudin's *Mario* (1984), Jean-Claude Lord manipulates the landscape narratively, instead of relying on its pictorial beauty as mere decorative inserts.

In addition to formalistic similarities, both *Mario* and *Toby* depict familial relations between males and the unbalancing of these relations by female "outsiders." While *Mario* creates an increasingly imaginative world between

the two brothers, *Toby* remains superficial in its depiction of father-son and sibling relations. But considering that *Toby* is intended for children and young adolescents, it is not surprising to find that depth of character has been sacrificed to an action-oriented storyline.

Toby's father, Tom (a dead ringer for *Miami Vice's* Don Johnston), is a National Champion Dog Sledder but the family has since fallen on hard times. If he doesn't win the next Championship race, Tom will be forced to sell his home and his dogs to Crowe, owner of Crowe's Nest Bar. No explanation is given to how or why Crowe has become such a powerful influence. As the personification of evil, Crowe wears a fur coat and a moustache, but he stops short of working as a part-time seal hunter. Following an airplane accident, Tom is unable to race and the family's future rests on young Toby (Yannick Bisson) and his revolutionary new dog-sled, "Toby's Flyer." More than win the race money, Toby must also earn the respect of his father; his younger brother, Sam; his new teacher, Jenny; and his first girlfriend, Sarah.

As a veteran director whose films include *Bingo* (1973), *Panique* (1977) and *Visiting Hours* (1981), Lord has been described by some Québécois film critics as "the most American-styled of our directors." If films like *Bingo* or *Toby* are any indication, Lord's "American" approach to filmmaking derives mostly from the films' content and narrative structure. The films are superficial and entertaining, while the stories are a dynamic blend of comedy and drama that avoid dealing with deeper issues (such as motivation). Whether American or Canadian, the narrative structure of a heroic story will always depict the same series of demoralizing personal events, physical and mental restoration and, finally, victory. And whether the climax features a car-chase or a dog-sled race, the stylistic ap-

proach is identical: fast-paced editing and a thumping musical score.

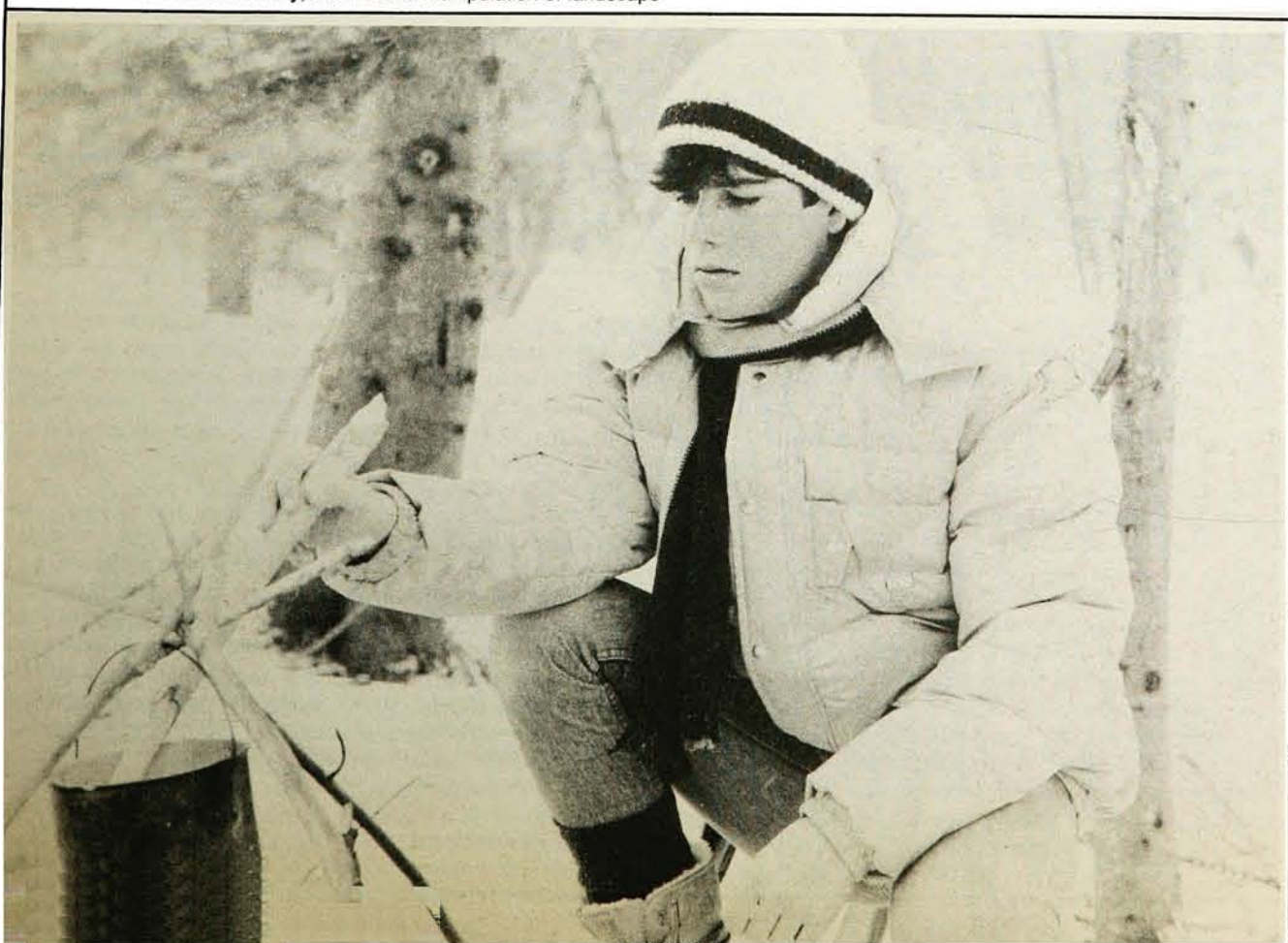
An English version of *Toby* played a couple of weeks in Montreal and the surrounding area. A dubbed French version opened March 21 in Montreal and has so far been more successful. (The English version of *Toby* opened in Ontario during Easter weekend and audience figures are pending.)

Québécois features with adolescent themes increasingly appear to be the way to success. Since 1984, Jean Beaudin's *Mario*, Micheline Lanctôt's *Sonatine*, André Melançon's *La Guerre des tuques*, and Michael Rubbo's *Operation beurre de pinottes* have all succeeded either with critics or audiences. In the absence of audience figures in *Toby's* case, it may still be possible to say that, in either language, the film is stilted and the characters lack depth.

Ed Matthews •

TOBY d. Jean-Claude Lord p. Nicolas Clermont exec.p. Pieter Kroonenburg, David J. Patterson sc. Jeff Maguire, Djordje Milicevic, Jamie Brown, from a story by Maguire and Milicevic asst to p. Julie Allan d.o.p. René Verzier art d. Jocelyn Joly asst.art d. Raymond Dupuis mus.comp. Claude Demers ed. Yves Langlois p.man. Wendy Grean loc.man. François Sylvestre 1st a.d. David Hood 2nd a.d. Anne Murphy 3rd a.d. Tommy Groszman cont. Marie Lahaye 1st asst.cam. Paul Gravel 2nd asst.cam. Marteen Kroonenburg sd. Patrick Rousseau boom Véronique Gabillaud stunt coord. Jérôme Tiberghien key grip Serge Grenier grips Greg Schmidt, Michel Bertrand best boy Claude Fortier, Jean-Paul Houle elect. Jean Trudeau, Yvan Bernard props Ronald Fauteux set dec. Marc Fiquet on-set props Simaon Lahaye sp.efx. Bill Orr cost.des. Michèle Hamel cost. Blanche Boileau dresser Fabienne April hair Bob Pritchett make-up Gillian Chandler 2nd unit cam. Douglas Kiefer 2nd unit cam. cost. Bert Tougas, Michel Bernier stills Piroška Mihalka asst.ed. Janet Lazare sd.efx.concept. André Galbrant sd.ed./dia. Danuta Klis asst.sd.ed. Hélène Crépeau, Pierre Béland mixers Michel Descombes, André Gagnon dog sleds Judy & Bryan Pearce trainer Raymond Ducasse l.p. Yannick Bisson, Winston Rekert, Andrew Bednarski, Stéphanie Morgenstern, Timothy Webber, Liliane Clune, Evan Adams, George Clutesci, Hamish McEwan, Tom Rack, Anthony Levinson, Mark Kulik, Joanna Vanicola, Doug Price, Ian Finlay p.c. Filmline International Inc dist. Ciné 360 Inc 35mm colour, running time: 95 minutes

• Lead Yannick Bisson in *Toby*, an effective manipulation of landscape



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