

Lewis Furey's

Night Magic

Night Magic might have been a great film and musical, were it not for its music. Curiously it was directed by the same man who wrote the music, Lewis Furey, and his work behind the camera is flawless and fascinating. But in the end, Furey's score defeats him and an audacious attempt at a rock-opera fantasy filmed on Montreal's most famed strip of decadence, St. Lawrence Blvd., succeeds only as a showcase for the film's director and his screenplay co-writer Leonard Cohen. As 94 minutes of entertainment, as a captivating movie, **Night Magic** works not as well.

A Canadian musical is a relatively rare commodity, but **Night Magic** is especially noteworthy for the forum it gives two of the country's most intriguing artists, Cohen and Furey. And although **Night Magic** is a simple tale, Cohen's lyrics and Furey's direction serve to make it refreshing and sufficiently complex.

The story is told in song, with only slight narration and dialogue. Cohen's lyrics make up the bulk of the script. A mine of wit, irreverence, candour, Cohen's words long to be savoured. But they come at the speed of a bass drum and with all the elements of the film that deserve attention — dance, sets, performance — a fundamental part of **Night Magic's** magic is lost. Cohen is best digested at one's own speed. Or with the option of laying the needle down for another listen.

Furey's music, on the other hand, tends to obscure rather than enhance.

The crispness and control he exhibits behind the camera seems to disappear in the score. Perhaps one is either a Furey fan or not, but his stuttered, almost tango-like rhythms, and his quiverous vocals become tiresome. Worse, halfway through the picture the score becomes redundant, almost aggravating.

As a director, Furey's performance is more stimulating. The film is a fantasy that flits from scene to scene, playfully crossing and recrossing the thread of reality. Here Furey displays a keenly light touch and it works surprisingly well.

Nick Mancuso deserves kudos for his role as the leading, if heavily tormented, light of a travelling musical that has just hit Montreal. His screen presence as a man tortured by desire and doubt, is impressive. In a role where words are few, he has pulled off a powerful and emotional performance. Carole Laure as his angel-wife, woman of his dreams and mother of his child, fares less well. She spends a lot of time skulking behind staircases and chimneys. Her dancing is seductive but as the riveting ingénue, a role she perfected in earlier films, she is not quite up to scratch. Here, Laure comes off immensely less memorable than her leading man.

Mancuso's Michael is on the prowl for fulfillment, happiness, peace of mind. Neither the show nor its unexpected success is enough to dampen the turmoil. Visited by three angels and granted anything he wants simply for the asking, he succeeds only in bringing on greater destruction. If there's an answer to the question does the showman's life provide too little or does the showman demand too much, **Night Magic** points toward the latter.

Eddie Toussaint's choreography is well-matched to the film. Stark, well-

paced and evocative, it fits beautifully with the sets — the rooftops and sidewalks of St. Lawrence. The dancing of Frank Augustyn is similarly impressive — carefully controlled and understated, yet beautiful.

Night Magic is an interesting and original film and will best be remembered not as a curious musical but for Mancuso's performance and Cohen's lyrics. It should be seen loud.

David Sherman •

NIGHT MAGIC exec. p. Stephen J. Roth, Michelle de Broca p. Robert Lantos, James T. Kaufman d. Lewis Furey sc. Lewis Furey, Leonard Cohen music Lewis Furey lyrics Leonard Cohen d.o.p. Philippe Rousselot choreographer Eddy Toussaint p. man. Daniel Louis art d. François Séguin film ed. Michel Arcand prod. exec. Andras Hamori sd. Yvon Benoit cost. des. Michelle Cerf 1st asst. d. Jacques Wilbrod Benoit 2nd asst. d. Monique Maranda unit man. Denis Normandea unit loc. man. Blair Roth asst. choreographer Jean-Marc Lebeau lip-sync supervisor Zander Ary choir master Gilbert Patenaude cast. Nadia Rona, Vera Miller, Elite Productions props Patrice Bengle asst. props Ian Lavoie prop buyer P. Karen Langshaw set dec. Dean Eilertson ward. Martine Fontaine art d. Tina Boden make-up Micheline Trépanier Foisy hair Danielle Vuarin gaffer Kevin O'Connell elec. Jean-Marc Hébert, Marc Charlebois, Bernard Arseneau key grip Robert Lapiere Jr. grip Philippe Palu, André Ouellet 1st asst. cam. Michel Girard 2nd asst. cam. Michel Bernier cam. appr. Howard Schrier sd. asst. Esther Auger asst. ed. Alain Belhumeur, Teresa de Luca, Catherine Martin exec. prod. asst. Kris Michaels asst. d. Marge Bruineman stills Ronald S. Diamond asst. prod. Lucie Bouliane, Guy Normandea, Alain Bougie asst. admin. Jean Pelletier l.p. Nick Mancuso, Carole Laure, Stéphane Audran, Jean Carmet, Frank Augustyn, Louis Robitaille, Anik Bissonnette, Jean-Marc Lebeau, Jean-Hughes Rochette, Lyne Tremblay, Danielle Godin, Barbara Harris, Catherine Greenway, Michelle Stennett, Sophie Bissonnette, Jean-Marie Benoit, Carlyle Miller, Don Alias, Margarita Stocker, Micheline Giard, Yolande Husaruk, Joan Henney, Nathalie Buisson, Brigitte Vallette, France Deslauriers p.r. David Novek Associates unit pub. Martine Provost, Kevin Tierney, David Novek Associates p.c. RSL Entertainment Corp. **Night Magic** in a Canada-France coproduction, produced with the participation of Telefilm Canada, TFI, the Canada-France fund for the promotion of coproductions, the Société générale du cinéma, Radio-Canada and the Skyld Group. dist. (US & Can.) Spectrafilm, (Qué.) Vivafilm. colour 35mm running time: 94 mins.

Ron Levine & René DeCarufel's

Bread and Puppet Theatre: A Song for Nicaragua

"The first thing I would tell the American people is to read about our history. There is no East-West conflict. There is a longstanding conflict between the United States and Nicaragua that goes back to before Marx's Manifesto" — Padre Uriel Molina

What with a recent American court decision upholding a 1983 U.S. Justice Department ruling that the National Film Board's **If You Love This Planet** was "foreign propaganda," here's this year's documentary contender, produced with the NFB's assistance, for the Foreign Propaganda award.

A charmingly simple documentary of the old school (handheld camera, grainy footage), **Bread and Puppet theatre: A song for Nicaragua** is a metaphorical account of a Vermont-based radical theatre troupe's tour of Nicaragua in January 1985.

Since the 1960s, Bread and Puppet Theatre, then based in New York City, has been at the forefront of alternative culture. Inspired by the rise of liberation theology throughout Latin America in the '60s and '70s, Bread and Puppet, now based in Glover, Vt., evolved a mystico-political update of the medieval miracle play through an extraordinary use of tree-sized puppets.

The troupe's tour of a modern miracle play about the nativity, crucifixion and resurrection of assassinated Salvadorean archbishop Oscar Romero informs the bulk of Montreal photographers Ron Levine and René DeCarufel's hour-long documentary.

"Puppetry," explains Bread and Puppet founder Peter Schumann, 52, "is a simplification device." So, one might add, is cinema. And so too is revolution. **A Song for Nicaragua** thus becomes an ingenious meditation upon the triple system of simplification of the politics of revolutionary culture.

Nicaragua, whatever its particular reality (and an interview within the film with Padre Uriel Molina, one of many Catholic priests who have rallied to the revolutionary régime, is insightful as to that reality), Nicaragua has become a leading current site for the deployment of symbolic power, and so the power of symbols. And this whether one views Nicaragua as a revolutionary David against the Goliath of U.S. imperialism, as an underdeveloped and impoverished nation struggling out from under continued subjection by a militant consumer empire, or as a social laboratory for new popular cultural models of expression. Nicaragua today poses

• **Night Magic:** Nick Mancuso is simply outstanding, while Carole Laure plays the angel-wife



photo: Ron Levine



once again all the questions of the relationship between politics/culture on the one hand and the popular imagination on the other.

But these are ancient questions, and one of the extraordinarily fortunate aspects of this documentary is that it manages to lay bare these fundamental elements in the constitution of popular culture. And in a country deeply impregnated with an almost medieval religiosity, Catholicism is the popular culture. Here, for instance, the story of the nativity is still true. Here, images, political or religious, rediscover the iconic simplicity that gave medieval art its immediacy. Here, images are real.

Thus their proliferation, whether on the colourful wall-posters throughout the villages of Nicaragua; on the bullet-scarred streets of downtown Managua; or Bread and Puppet's powerfully stark use of puppetry. It's the reality of the power of religious imagery that, I would argue, accounts for the numbers of Nicaraguan priests who support the Sandinistas, whether it's the Minister of Culture, poet and priest Father Ernesto Cardenal, who appears in the film in an unfortunately barely audible discussion with Bread and Puppet founder Schumann, or the articulate Father Molino. Or in the presence of American cultural activists like Abbie Hoffman who appears in the film to announce that Nicaragua "is the most exciting experiment in human living in the world right now."

A Song for Nicaragua also shows a very keen awareness of the political dimensions of imagery by capturing the rapt faces of the Nicaraguan audiences at the spectacular 'resurrection' of the Archbishop Romero puppet; and above all, for a sequence on the iconography of the American flag.

A group of Americans visit Managua and as part of the trip stand, holding

candles, in vigil before the U.S. Embassy which looks like nothing if not its equivalent in Saigon. The crowd pauses in silence before the barred and padlocked gates, like Poles did during Solidarity before the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk. DeCarufel's camera zooms in between the treetops on the embassy grounds and focuses on Old Glory in a lingering long shot of The Flag that fills the entire screen for several seconds.

It's this grasp of symbolic subject matter throughout as well as a later montage of newspaper headlines and political cartoons about Nicaragua, that lifts *A Song for Nicaragua* out of being just a respectable 'road' documentary into a political film of distinction that's likely to find ready audiences either on PBS or American college campus film circuits.

Since Grierson and the NFB's wartime *World In Action* newsreels, (some) Canadian films have over the years attempted to tell Americans about the world they inhabit but which, as Latin American novelist Carlos Fuentes recently put it, they so poorly understand. *A Song for Nicaragua* is very much in this 'foreign propaganda' tradition — no mean feat for two first-time filmmakers.

Michael Dorland •

BREAD AND PUPPET THEATRE: A

Song for Nicaragua d./cam. and sd. Ron Levine René DeCarufel ed. John Brooke sc.,narr. Susan Green add.narr. John Brooke, Noel Lacayo, Marcia Novoa Guandique mus. Bread and Puppet Band, Cutumay Camones add.mus. Rick Vincent, Peter Schumann, Ron Seltzer trans. Noel Lacayo, Theresa Garcia Moreno title gfx. Nathalie Cloutier title ill. Peter Schumann sd.mix PFA Labs, Toronto neg.cut. Pierre Compte Archival photos of Romero courtesy Sygma Photo Agency, NY assoc.p. René DeCarufel à. Ron Levine p.c. Synchronicity Productions (514) 932-8069, produced with the assistance of the National Film Board of Canada (Aid to the private sector program. Colour. 16mm. running time: 58 mins.

Kirk Tougas'

Return to Departure

"Return to Departure" is the name of a painting by Chi O'Farrell. *Return to Departure: The Biography Of A Painting, Or Watching Pigment Dry and Other Realisms* is a film by Kirk Tougas about the execution of O'Farrell's painting over a five-month period in 1979. It is a film not only about a painting, but about politics, lifestyles, love, cultural history, metaphysics, work, and other elements of the soil from which art emerges.

For 83 minutes, we see fragments of a 16" x 19" canvas, a brush applying paint, pigments being mixed on a glass palette, brushes being dipped, and other minutiae of painterly activity — but, other than his hands, only a few glimpses of the artist himself. On the soundtrack, O'Farrell comments in detail about his work and life. Running counterpoint is a continuous background of radio talk and music.

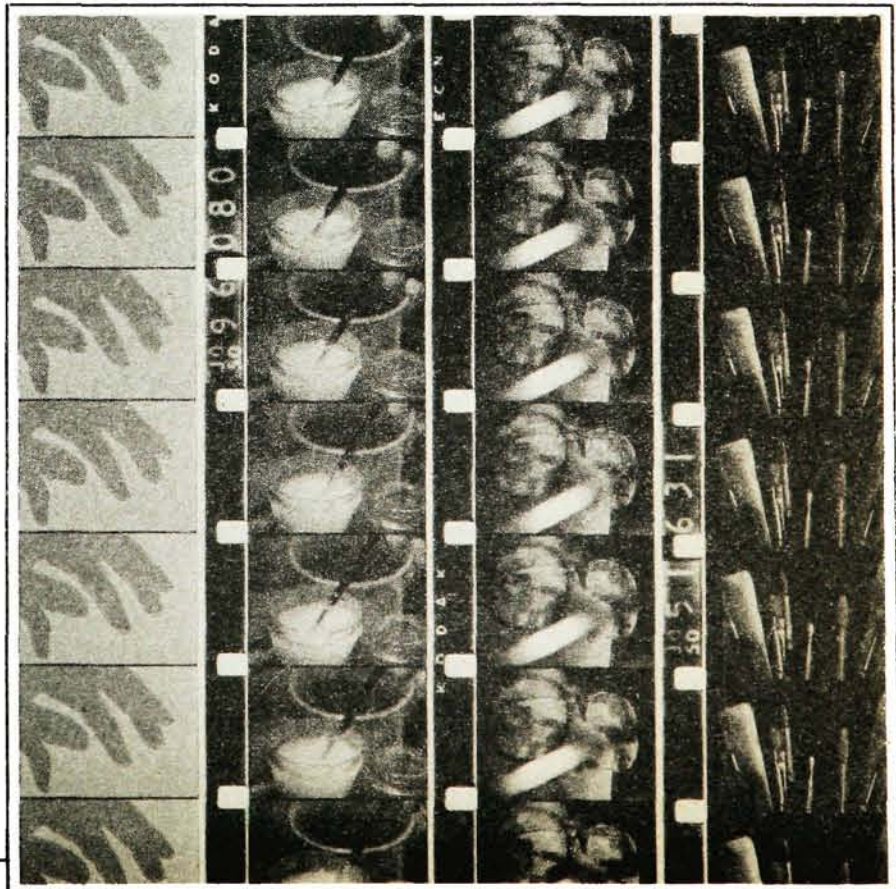
O'Farrell paints in the realist style. Tougas' film is about how relative all "realisms" are. The painting is seen not as a disembodied representation but as a process, an organic part of the creative act which produced it. As the film progresses the relationship between "realisms" multiply, asking us not to calculate their meanings but simply to experience them and discover what this microcosm may reveal about the process of creation, in art and in life. The entire film is shot in close-up. Tougas playfully teases our desire to see the artist at work more fully, see the extent of his studio, or hear a more coherent account of his biography. At moments the filmmaker's reticence is frustrating. But the rewards for our attention to such rigour are considerable; the film moves through the particulars of life and painting and becomes, in a most honest way, universal.

Creation is a process of constant change. What makes *Return to Departure* so exciting is that Tougas sees creation happening all the time — not just when the brush is applied to the canvas. His framing, timing, phrasing of repetitive and varied actions, coalesce in images that evoke the ubiquity of the creative process. The product itself is almost incidental. When we are finally shown the completed painting, we are allowed to look at it only a few moments.

Yet the painting's content resonates deeply with the film's true subject — amazingly, since the filmmaker didn't know beforehand what the painting was going to be. The painting "Return to Departure" suggests a passage to the unknown: it is about "evolution...transition", according to the painter. And the process we witness is one of evolution.

Tougas is an extraordinarily sensitive filmmaker. His eye is alive to sensual detail, to the textures of pigment. He is almost perversely minimal yet directs his few chosen elements with such clarity of purpose and in such resonant arrangements that the film acquires a richness belying its apparent simplicity.

The radio soundtrack at first gives the impression of the banal randomness of everyday life. Gradually its deliberate construction becomes apparent through subtle emphasis of its non-synchronous temporality. The artist's monologue is far more intimate than any one is likely to hear in a biographical film, and Tougas avoids the reductionist editing traditional in the documentary voice-over. It often seems as though we become the privileged listeners-in on an interior monologue. This draws us into the painting's psycho-cultural matrix. O'Farrell describes painting as "a quest." The descriptive fragments we are given of his life and cultural milieu offer opportunities to interpret his activity and this painting in different contexts (e.g., Americans in Canada, post-60s uncertainty, art history, etc.) The point is not the interpretations themselves; rather, that this expressive process is part of larger evolving processes.



The visual absence of the painter prevents his valorization. How many films about art have been honest enough to focus on an unknown artist rather than a personality? Yet Tougas obviously has great respect for O'Farrell. The film suggests that commitment is primary for the creator, who must enter into a relationship which often seems painful and interminable. (This film was begun in 1979 and completed in 1986).

To top it off, *Return to Departure* effortlessly functions as a documentary about the techniques and history of egg tempera painting. So a paradox emerges: *Return to Departure* demystifies the process of painting, but uncovers a deeper mystery in the process. This is mirrored by the eponymous painting, which depicts an event seen only in shadow, like the artist's reflection that we see in the windows. The film, with its paradoxical title, is, in fact, about paradox – the paradox of the realist image. O'Farrell says that when he paints he "leaves off with the real and ends up with an expression that represents the real...knowing that it's an illusion." Tougas describes the audience's activity as "the Realism of Watching Pigment Dry" (to paraphrase his title), but at the film's end we zoom in to the painted canvas. The optical effect enlarges the film's grain, reminding us of another realism, the realism of film itself, another "illusion that represents the real." Many documentaries about art-making aspire to being artistically descriptive. *Return to Departure* has the courage to speak to us *within* an aesthetic experience, offering discovery rather than descriptions. In comparison, it makes most films about art-making seem timid and superficial.

Amnon Buchbinder •

RETURN TO DEPARTURE images and soundscape Kirk Tougas sd. mix. Paul Sharpe. Barry Jones col., 16mm running time: 83 mins. dist. Canadian Filmmakers Distribution West (604) 684-3014 lp. Chi O'Farrell.

Dan Petrie's
Half A Lifetime

First Choice*Superchannel aired Stephen Metcalfe's play *Half A Lifetime*, which he adapted to a TV-hour format, in August. Essentially a one-set set-piece, its theatrical origin proves to be an asset in transference to the small screen.

While the four male characters are each identified on leaving work, their

meeting place – the basement recreation room – effectively contains, highlights and permits a close scrutiny of the quartet gathered together for a regular session of poker. The buddies since high school days meet at Toby's place – he's a quiet, thoughtful teacher, who provides a comfortable hang-out with beer, nuts, and a promise of home-made chili later. Sam the insurance salesman, though talkative and lively, is somewhat edgy and inclined to ulcers. Bart, the overweight, loud and rough cut-up, looks back at his football triumphs, and dreams of living in the backwoods of Vermont. J.J. is a police officer whose work and personal life has left him despondent and doubting, and it is his proposed solution to this problem that forces the group to take a long, hard

look at their lives and aspirations.

There's a lot of shooting the breeze, reminiscences, pipe-dreams for the future, physical horseplay and, what the Ontario Film Review Board dearly loves to call "coarse language." Three members of the group spend some time waiting for J.J. to make up the foursome, and it's then that the hidden regrets and dreams begin to surface. There's a lot of noise, pummelling, chasing and a little ping-pong thrown in, and an air of juvenile naivety tends to prevail and become a mite tedious. J.J.'s arrival, and his proposed illegal solution to all their individual woes, precipitates a period of sober thought.

In this atmosphere of male-bonding, women don't come off too well – in fact, attitudes seem to be positively old-hat. The overwhelming feeling is that the men are only let out with the "permission" of their wives, who feel safe in knowing where they are. The wives tell each other everything about the marriages, and the husbands can have no secrets. And the solution to J.J.'s crisis is a big group hug...

The performances are well-meshed, regardless of whether you care about any of the characters portrayed. Gary Busey, the blue-collar worker trapped in his ordinary life, who waits for the football season to come around, is first-rate. Saul Rubinek follows him closely with his nervy grasp of Sam's character. Nick Mancuso as Toby and Keith Carradine as J.J. have their lesser moments.

Dan Petrie directs in his usual workmanlike manner, but there's not too much room to manoeuvre in this obvious adaptation from a stage play. Michel Brault's camerawork is, as always, a joy to savour.

Pat Thompson •



• *Half A Lifetime*: Nick Mancuso as Toby, Saul Rubinek as Sam

HALF A LIFETIME d. Dan Petrie exec. p. Lou Stroller p. Stewart Harding sc. Stephen Metcalfe d.o.p. Michel Brault sd. Patrick Rousseau a.d. Charles Dunlop mus. John Mills-Cockell lp. Nick Mancuso, Saul Rubinek, Gary Busey, Keith Carradine running time: 50 mins. (approx.).

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