



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.

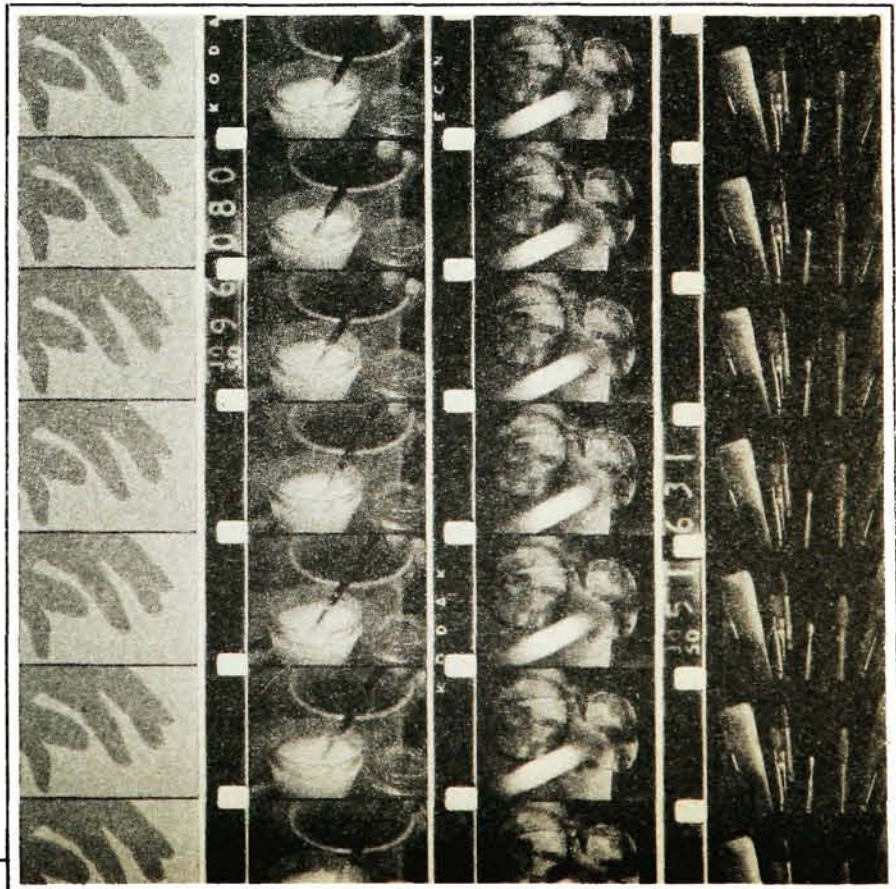
O'Farrell paints in the realist style. Tougas' film is about how relative all "realisms" are. The painting is seen not as a disembodied representation but as a process, an organic part of the creative act which produced it. As the film progresses the relationship between "realisms" multiply, asking us 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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