

Michael Anderson's

Sword of Gideon

Aside from a few strange lapses, *Sword of Gideon* is a highly interesting and complex two-part made-for-TV movie jointly produced by Alliance Entertainment Corporation and CTV. A tight plot-line, fascinating characterizations, and depth of themes make this production quite distinguished, and perhaps especially because of a certain level of political risk-taking central to its project.

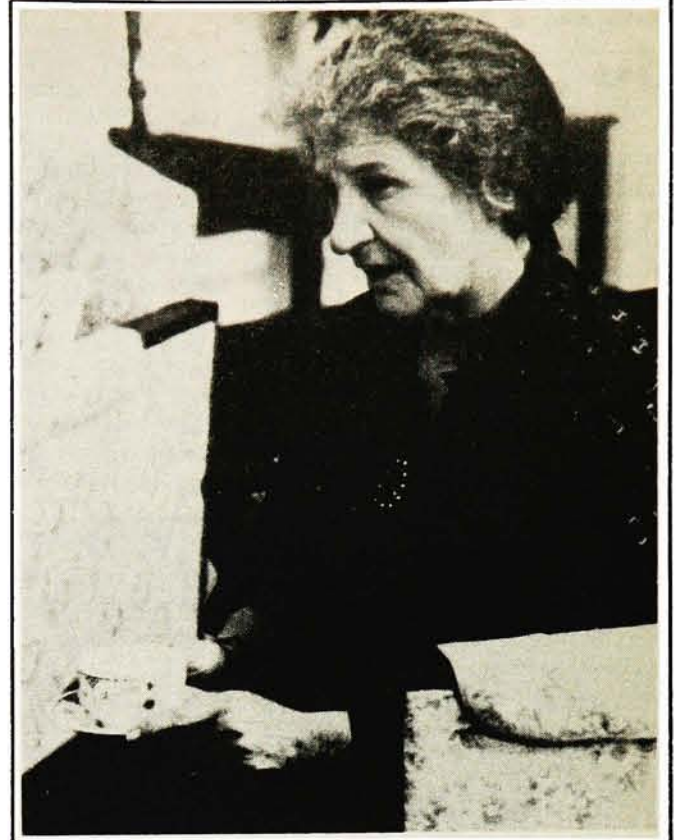
A key problem in mainstream treatments of 'terrorism' is that we usually learn nothing about the root causes behind the so-called 'terrorist' acts. Instead, 'terrorists' tend to be depicted by the media as insane anomalies whose actions have no origins in political/historical conditions. This severing of 'terrorism' from its root causes allows for virtually no understanding of the real conditions that give rise to extreme acts, which then (quite usefully) appear to be wanton, unprovoked eruptions of madness. Arguably, the crucial questions about 'terrorism' center around such things as: which groups get labeled as 'terrorist' and which do not (and why?); what are the political/historical conditions that provoke 'illegitimate' violence; where and how does legitimized power operate such that those on its furthest margins are driven to brutal acts? Without any consideration of such deeper issues, the mainstream can easily characterize 'terrorists' as germ-like entities to be eradicated by the most efficient means — a mindset summarized in one American movie by the memorable line: "You're the disease and I'm the cure."

To its credit, *Sword of Gideon* goes some way toward confronting this simplistic mindset by addressing the first question raised above: the arbitrariness of the label 'terrorist' as applied to one group but not another. "You're not terrorists, you're not them," Israeli Secret Service recruiter Samuels (Rod Steiger) tells his hand-picked five-man hit-squad hired to avenge the deaths of Israeli athletes in Munich in 1972. The movie thus begins with the central structural opposition: 'terrorists'/hit squad, with the latter term given the full endorsement of Golda Meir (Colleen Dewhurst) 'herself.'

In the course of four television-hours, that central opposition is gradually transformed into another reflecting the moral development of the central character. Avner (beautifully played by Steven Bauer). As he leads the five-man hit-squad in its acts of revenge, seeing the human consequences in both the families of those he has killed and those of his own team, Avner comes to question the role he has taken on. The central structural opposition at work in the film becomes that of assassins/Israeli army, with Avner quitting Samuels' or- This assassin's progress is marked by



• Leslie Hope and Steven Bauer fight acts of wanton savagery



• Colleen Dewhurst as Golda Meir

moments of extreme tension, especially involving that weapon-of-choice in '80s TV: the bomb. At least four times in the course of the movie a bomb erupts on-screen to blow up a restaurant, a car, an apartment, and finally (and most spectacularly) the hit-squad explosives expert himself (played by Michael York). This scene, brilliantly structured to catch the audience off-guard, is perhaps the most horrific of all, and in focussing it around a character we have come to like, the film further drives home its theme of the uselessness of vengeance. The overall structure of the film is to follow each murder by the hit-squad with the murder of one of their own. The killing becomes visually more graphic with each assassination, as though gradually moving us from abstraction to physical confrontation with the grisly results of the motive of revenge. Similarly, Avner himself moves closer and closer to physical contact with the dead, until finally, with the death of squad member Hans, he tenderly holds the body close to himself. This physical progression coincides with his moral growth and decision to refuse to work for Samuels, despite the repercussions.

A sub-theme for this development in Avner is his relationship with three different father-figures: his birth father (John Hirsch), Samuels, and Poppa (French contact and friend of his own father). In each case, Avner must come to terms with the older man in order to find his own stance in the world. This theme coincides with the Old Testament motifs in the film, especially the eye-for-an-eye morality which has instigated the forming of the Israeli hit-squad. In coming to terms with the Father (various aspects of the patriarchy) and also becoming a father himself, Avner quite literally becomes his own man in the course of the film, abandoning to eventually rejoin the army.

doing the rigid sense of 'duty' and patriotism that Samuels thinks will keep him under his thumb: a subservience dependent on financial rewards. As Poppa, the French contact, has earlier stated: "Almost everyone will do something for a price." Avner becomes that exception.

Sword of Gideon is a rich work that lingers in the mind, in part because of the sensitivity in the acting and the depth in the script (by Chris Bryant, based on the novel by George Jonas), but also because of the provocative nature of the questions it raises. As CTV's Arthur Weinthal, vice-president of programming, has stated: "That same thing done as an American production would have looked different. There would have been a different attitude and it would have produced a different editorial point of view." While one could argue that the nature of spectacle (especially destruction-as-spectacle) ties this movie into an American mainstream, that tie is, in a sense, subverted by the growth of the main character who moves out of adolescent Clint Eastwood-style fantasies of himself that fit with revenge, and into a moral position that has been painfully gained.

Director Michael Anderson has a tendency to want to here recreate his *Around the World in Eighty Days* by an incessant globe-hopping among some eight different countries, and there is at least one moment that is badly acted (the female 'terrorist' who, with two bullets in her chest, manages to retrieve her notes and toss them into the flames and then, a bit later, sit up and spit in Avner's face). But such lapses are forgivable. Others are more problematic.

Having defied Samuels, Avner ("the most-wanted-man in Europe" because of his assassinations) is presumably without protection and thus entirely vulnerable to attempts on his own life and those of his wife and child. This as-

pect of his difficult choice is entirely avoided by the film — perhaps because, living in New York, he is apparently safe from 'terrorist' revenge? Instead, the film neatly makes an ellipsis to later scenes of Avner back in Israel, having rejoined the Israeli army for the Yom Kippur war. More problematic, however, is the final intertitle that closes the production. Before the end-credits roll, we read that governments struggle to find "the near impossible — a civilized response to acts of wanton savagery". Arguably, the word-choice here contradicts the moral impetus of the movie itself. "Wanton savagery" carries the meaning of *unprovoked* violence, but Avner himself seems to have come to understand that each act of vengeance provokes a vengeful response, that "If we keep taking an eye for an eye, soon the whole world will be blind". Presumably, he has learned that behind any act of savagery by one side there has been a preceding act of savagery by the other, with vengeance stretching back through history in a terrible chain that is not 'wanton' but is, rather, the past itself bearing its awful fruit. And here we begin to see that the transformation of the 'territories'/hit-squad opposition to the assassins/army opposition raises questions that are equally disturbing, if unexamined here.

Joyce Nelson •

SWORD OF GIDEON p. Robert Lantos d. Michael Anderson exec. p. Denis Héroux. John Kemeny sc. Chris Bryant d.o.p. Claude Agostini prod. design. Trevor Williams ed. Ron Wisman prod. man. Joyce Kozy King prod. sup/Israel Zvi Spielmann cam. Allen Smith sd. Claude Hazanavicius cost. design. Laurie Drew cast. dir. Lynn Stalmaster. Clare Walker cast. Montreal Ginette D'Amico stunt co-ord Dwayne McLean lp. Steven Bauer, Rod Steiger, Colleen Dewhurst, Michael York, Robert Joy, Laurent Malet, Peter Dvorsky, Leslie Hope, John Hirsch, Lino Ventura, Cyrielle Claire, Linda Griffiths, Eric Gaudry, Audy Levy, Hrant Alianak, Daniel Alfie, Neil Kroetch, David Zatouti, Septimiu Sever, Gregory Tal, Arthur Grossner, Danette Mackay, Israel Rubinchik. TV mini-series that aired on CTV and HBO and had different running times for each.