

FILM REVIEWS

REVIEWS OF SHORT FILMS

The Tar Sands

d: Peter Pearson, sc: Peter Pearson, Peter Rowe, Ralph L. Thomas, ph: Ken Gregg, ed: Myrtle Virgo, m: Eric Robertson, lp: Kenneth Welsh, Ken Pough, Mavor Moore, p: Ralph Thomas, p.c: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1976, col: 16mm, Running time: 57 minutes.

"Explosive, political drama, zeroing in on powerbrokering by the international petroleum industry. The dramatic story of negotiations and confrontations between major oil industries and the governments of Canada, Alberta and Ontario, that climax with the Canadian taxpayer putting up nearly two billion dollars to ensure the development of the Athabasca Tar Sands. Provocative, contemporary drama."

So said the CBC publicity blurb. And then, to top things off, precisely because of its "explosive, political" nature, the film could not be shown by the CBC TV network.

That was last year. And it was a shame, really, since the other four segments of the CBC *For the Record* series, of which it was a part (and which were written about in these pages, No 36), proved that television films can be intelligent, gripping, worthwhile.

One could be pardoned, then, for looking forward to something special when it was learned (almost by accident) that Peter Pearson's **The Tar**

Sands would indeed be shown, finally, and some nine months behind schedule, on Monday night, September 12, 1977.

For once, surrounding events and advance publicity did not lead us down the well-trod garden path. **The Tar Sands** is, indeed, a dynamic and important film, one that enlightens, arouses - and raises a number of crucial moral problems centering on our society and on the mass media.

At one level, of special interest to *aficionados* of the Canadian cinema, **The Tar Sands** marks another high spot in the career of Peter Pearson, who, when at his best, is one of our major film directors. It has become abundantly clear that when Pearson works within the limitations imposed by television, the results verge on the brilliant. **Saul Alinsky, Best Damn Fiddler, The Insurance Man, Kathy Karuks**, and now **The Tar Sands**, are TV dramas of the highest order. More accurately, they are television *films* of real merit.

The Tar Sands was shown on nation-wide television on Sept. 12, 1977. By late September, the premier of Alberta, Peter Lougheed, had filed a suit against the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation charging "damages to character and reputation". The suit was for \$2,250,000. No date has been set for the hearing.

Pearson's two commercial features, **Paperback Hero** and **Only God Knows**, however, tell quite another story. Now is obviously not the time to go into an analysis of the disparity that exists between Pearson's movie films and his TV films. But I can't resist trotting out a two-bit superficial conjecture that may bear following up. Quite possibly it has something to do with Pearson's divided cultural/academic heritage.

Pearson's university days were spent majoring in Political Science and Economics. Whatever it is that he learned in the hallowed halls of the University of Toronto, it seems to have stuck. So much so that of all of Canada's English-speaking film directors, Pearson is surely the most sensitive to politico/economic issues: he has insight, and a solid measure of mastery. That is what permits him to reduce terribly complex issues to their main lines, and to express their dramatic tensions in terms that go straight to an audience.

A look at Pearson's television record shows just how successful he has been when he allows the social issues to be the warp and woof of the drama, that against and through which the human characters play out their story.

But Pearson also spent a few years at that famed Roman film school, the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia. The experience, undoubtedly enriching in helping him to master the essential skills, may well have sown the seeds of future difficulties, or at least of ambitions difficult to realize. Imagine a young man drinking deep of the intoxicating glories of the Italian cinema of the '60's. Well, it is difficult to become a sort of WASP Fellini, especially when surrounded by those Toronto critics.

Even if **Paperback Hero** did not try to emulate the aesthetic opulence of the Italians, still, in its focussing on the lost hero and his environment, and in its striving for certain aesthetic effects, it failed to be convincing, and it neglected precisely those areas that give Pearson's films their greatest strength.

Not so in **The Tar Sands**. With this film we are more resolutely than ever in true Pearson territory, where the horizon stretches out to social, political, economic, vistas. The probing is such that it is difficult to call to mind any other fiction that has, in any comparable measure, dared to reveal issues, manoeuvrings, and motivations as clearly, and done it as grippingly.

In any enterprise of this kind, to be sure, the script writing is of supreme importance. Full marks have to go to Pearson himself, and to his

Film Credit Abbreviations: d., Director; asst. d., Assistant Director; sc., Script; adapt., Adaptation; dial., Dialogue; ph., Photography; sp. ph. eff., Special Photographic Effects; ed., Editor; sup. ed., Supervising Editor; sd., Sound; sd. ed., Sound Editor; sd. rec., Sound Recording; p. des., Production Designer; a.d., Art Director; set dec., Set Decorator; m., Music; m.d., Music Director; cost., Costumes; choreo., Choreography; lp., Leading Players; exec. p., Executive Producer; p., Producer; assoc. p., Associate Producer; p. sup., Production Supervisor; p. man., Production Manager; p.c., Production Company; col., Colour Process; dist., Distributors; narr., Narration.

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fellow writers, Peter Rowe and Ralph L. Thomas, producer of the entire *For the Record* series. Their combined skill and intelligence in boiling down an enormous amount of tricky, dangerous material into a clear and sharp "true fiction" is nothing short of remarkable. Clear-cut issues emerge as a fascinating line-up of characters, some "real" and some invented (but with their basis, we are assured, in "reality"), become organic parts of a pattern that ultimately reveals who and where the power is in Canada. The focus is on the Athabasca Tar Sands wheeler-dealing, but the depth of field goes far beyond.

Motivations are dramatized, names are named: the "real" Premier of Alberta, Peter Lougheed (beautifully played by Kenneth Welsh), and Frank Spraggins, the "real" negotiator for Syncrude, that amalgamation of Gulf Oil, Imperial Oil, and the rest, and others, including Ottawa's Donald MacDonald. The script, with brilliant succinctness, but never at the cost of sacrificing warm, human touches, structures back room plotting, private conversations, and official round table negotiating in a driving, smoothly flowing narrative that never lets up in interest.

But the final credit has to go to Pearson *qua* film director. There is a basic artistic humility to his approach; and no one will ever point to **The Tar Sands** as a brilliant exercise in daring film form creativity. Quite to the contrary; Pearson's film adopts a style that is by now all but done to death, very comfortable – and maybe too comfortable and unchallenging for our TV viewing habits. It is neat, sparse, and it has been seen before.

However, what might be a tired old format comes to life because the *content* is so important, so dramatic in itself, and so in-felt by the director. **The Tar Sands** formal structure all but disappears behind its own anonymity. Its role is merely to reveal, to make clear, to permit the central screaming reality to touch the viewer.

In that sense, the film is immensely successful, never sacrificing the tone of objective but involved observation to flashy, facile effects. In other words, Pearson is willing to play the role of reporter rather than that of artist on his own aesthetic trip. All must exist only in function of the issues and drama of his film.

Issues is one thing. But **The Tar Sands** would hardly be a richly human drama if the human equation, the characters in their perplexity, their conniving, or their anguish and hope, were sacrificed to the dictates of a *Thesis*. Well, they are not; and this is one of the great strengths in Peter Pearson's work. He always feels for the individual. We are touched, we care for those living creations before us. The great socio-economic issues somehow are incarnated in these breathing, complex, recognizable human beings. Pearson, in short, seems to have pulled off that most difficult of feats, striking the ideal balance between clear idea, and flesh-and-blood people. They become organically one.

It is Peter Lougheed who elicits Pearson's most sympathetic interest. Lougheed, that is, and the fictional character, Willard Alexander (beautifully acted by Ken Pough), who is a composite of the Lougheed advisers who were against the deal. One is made to understand Lougheed's ambition and the tightrope he must walk, his aspirations for Alberta, and his desire to create jobs, stimulate the economy, and reap the huge oil profits for his province. But one is appalled at the growing recognition of another reality. Syncrude Canada Ltd., and the multinationals who constitute it, alone have the power and clout to take over the Tar Sands development. Development, yes, and money for the people, but only on their terms. Their all-devouring criterion is further profit for the shareholders, and more monopolistic control of energy for the oil companies.

Pearson does not paint a gentle portrait of the oil negotiators. We see them in the bargaining sessions, at times hearty and silken, at times blatantly ruthless. Their demands are outrageous to anyone who is not dedicated to the ideal of immensely bloated self profit. And Lougheed, who has played the game, is caught. Concession follows upon concession, as Syncrude obtains everything it demands, and more – to the tune of two billion dollars, new ground rules to ensure its profits, etc.

At the end, a beaten Lougheed, still trying to hope to come out on top in the long range, faces his TV audience to proclaim his hard fought "victory" for the people of Alberta. And we are left – one hopes – wondering about certain aspects of our society and its power structures.

The Tar Sands was conceived as a movie made for TV – but by Monday, Sept. 12 it had become full-fledged, 100% TV at its best, steeped in immediacy and relevance. The living moment breathed controversy, and the viewer knew it. Sure enough, next day Peter Lougheed announced that he was suing the CBC for defamation of character! And a few days later, Shell Oil declared that it, too intends to develop the Athabasca Tar Sands. These oil chaps do not scare easily.

The touchiness of the situation was underlined by the CBC's ever-so-discreet treatment of the Monday night showing. Here in Montreal, for example, the *Gazette* and the *Star* did not even have the preempting in their daily listings. And the film was suspiciously short for an hour-long slot. Could someone have been at work with the scissors on the most offending passages, as well as secretly hoping that no one would watch the film?

But there was more. This viewer, thanks to **The Tar Sands**, was actually wafted back in time. I can remember, in Quebec, back in the Old Days, before the Present Age of Enlightenment, what happened around a very few very special movies of some doctrinal import. Likely as not, a Bishop or a Cardinal would appear (on film) before the movie, to tell us how to appreciate it, what was correct, what was not. Well, at least in the present instance, the CBC was not to be found wanting. There was Barbara Frum, in her most earnest mode of high-seriousness, explaining to us that this film was a fiction, but based on fact, and revealing which characters were real, and which invented, and so on. Barbara kept returning to the word fiction, but always with reassurances about the film's essential veracity. Barbara, righteously and rightly beloved of all us liberals, came back at the end, to guide us and warn us anew.

One certainly cannot blame the CBC, but the moral problems raised by this kind of film were by no means solved by Barbara's interventions. Like most of the viewers, I am no expert on the Tar Sands question, and I had no way of judging what was fiction, what was fact. I trusted the film because I trust Peter and Ralph – and Barbara; and I happen to share their concern. But was I seeing the truth? Was this an over-simplified, tendentious, but unfair hatchet job, or was it a brilliant popularization of

the essential "truth" of the matter? The film itself gave the viewer precious little freedom at that level.

A good reportorial essay, say, or a good teaching situation, or a good "straight" documentary, can, by the very formats which they employ, do a fine job of honest, objective exploration of a question, issue, situation, making the nuances, revealing the sources, admitting where fact yields to conjecture, and so on. But can a drama, growing out of this fascinating mix of fact and fiction, respect the viewer, allowing him or her to decide, at least up to a point? The form used in **The Tar Sands** implicitly claims that it is re-creating the *truth*. That is the assumption shared by the storyteller and his audience. And that audience's emotions were being manipulated by events and people without any built-in guideline as to where reality began and ended.

The moral problem remains: where is the media responsibility towards the viewer in all of this?

On the other hand — and here one owns up to espousing contradictory positions — one wants to cheer, to congratulate the CBC and Thomas and Pearson for their courage and integrity. It is difficult to think of any other country in the world, capitalistic or socialistic or whatever that would permit a national network to air a drama so critical of the *real* Power Centre of that society. True, television has at times played a major role in reshaping mass thinking. One need but mention the U.S. and Vietnam, or Watergate. But almost always, TV is the dominant-system reinforcer. And particularly in the field of drama, it serves as a sort of kept lady of entertainment, whose job it is to lull the masses, preventing them from questioning the essential status quo. Above all it must not be critical of the wielders of *real* power.

The Tar Sands is a startling exception. It is a salutary call to consciousness, and, ultimately, to conscience. This drama really does dare to identify the people and the issues: there is no escape. And it asks the question that TV rarely asks: how long can we tolerate the amassing of power, and the abuse that goes with it, by groups such as Syncrude? The stakes could not be higher, and the CBC, however hesitantly, has dared to take the gamble.

Ruberg

d: Alar Kivilo, **ph:** Kivilo, **ed:** Kivilo, **m:** Sibelius (text and sound, Ao Loo), **p:** Harri Kivilo, **p. asst.:** Mark Teose, Lembitu Ristsoo, Valve Kivilo, **p.c.:** Alar Kivilo Production Company, **col.:** 16mm, **narr.:** Ao Loo, Eva Varangu, Vello Salo, **running time:** 28 minutes.

It's difficult enough to be a good person, harder yet to show one in his life time, and hardest of all to make his worthy acts and excellent intentions seem interesting to film audiences who are continually excited by all the various and fascinating aspects of evil.

Alar Kivilo and his father Harri have been wise, therefore, in showing us some of their fellow Estonian, Ruberg's, life, to begin their 28 minute documentary with some intriguing shots of the man as an artist, making his highly original leather paintings.

These, however, follow a prologue in which we have an inkling of the character of both Ruberg and the film, as Alar's sensitive lensing shows us a small figure of a man approaching slowly through a pastoral scene of peace and loveliness, while underneath, the strains of Sibelius add to the holy reverential feeling, and a respectful voice intones the words of an Iroquois prayer concerning love and respect for the harmonies and balance of nature.

Between this beginning, and the final shots, in which we see Ruberg skiing off into the distance while a poetic prayer to "make me wise" is spoken, we are shown various scenes of Ruberg's work and interests.

First, the leather painting. Here, in a section that could easily stand alone, the bird sounds, forest sights, rustic life, and devotion to nature create an atmosphere at one with the artist, as he rubs blues and yellows into softened leather stretched over stone. "Every rock has its own face," in Ruberg's words, "God has filled them with meaning; beauty is



Marc Gervais

Ruberg with Estonian Children

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holy." And, as the work progresses from what appears a hopeless mess to a deeply grooved, almost living reconstruction, or rather creation, of a rooted, branched and vibrant tree, we listen with openness to the simple unsophisticated beliefs of Ruberg as he speaks of the greater artistic value resulting from the simpler and more primitive handling of the work, or of the "late afternoon sun, which blesses my work", or of the responsibility of the artist for the feelings he arouses in his viewers.

But now the film progresses to Ruberg's other talent, and it is here while we observe him teaching marksmanship (for patience, discipline, self control); or helping blind children feel his paintings (he used to teach the handicapped); or instructing incredibly beautiful nursery school children (Estonian-blond cherubs, all); or demon-fire-lit at night, leading young Estonians into an exciting lesson about their country's mythology and ethnic rites; or finally, in a wintry-white fur-treed loveliness, working with water-colors on an easel made of propped-up skis, trying to capture the crystal patterns of frost, the sometimes overpowering Sibelius, and the unrelenting goodness and dedication of all his acts, begin to take their toll.

Is a sense of humor the work of the devil? Where is the man with whom we erring, stumbling humans can connect? We long for a tiny accident, a joke, a trivial moment, or a hint of unstructured passion to alleviate the organized, productive, methodical worthiness of it all; something to connect us with the humanness of the man, instead of just impressing us with his humanity.

Nevertheless, it is a commendable first film, and since both father and son Kivilo are well aware that perhaps it is a little overwritten, the strains of Finlandia a mite overpowering, and the goodness perhaps just a touch too unrelieved, the prospects for their next films are very good indeed.

They would like to capture the flavor of the life of other minority groups in this vast mosaic nation. Learning from this first experience in which, with a tiny budget (\$7000), and the donated services of Estonian friends, they have produced a professional, marketable and sincere film, they should in fact be perfectly equipped to do so.

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