

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



photo: NFB