

## AID FOR WHOSE BENEFIT

This documentary on El Salvador, recently seen on CBC's *Man Alive*, is designed for television audiences, says producer Mary Armstrong and "for use by non-governmental agencies in their attempts to encourage Canadians to take notice of our role in the Third World."

Broadcaster Roy Bonisteel gives some pertinent background, stating that \$8 million in aid for El Salvador from this country was cut off, but now this bilateral aid has been resumed.

John Graham, of the Dept. of External Affairs, speaks from his desk, and gives two reasons for the resumption:

- (1) the democratic election, a fair election vetted by Canadians and,
- (2) the decline in human rights abuses.

The other side of the coin is Brian Murphy, representing a non-government agency working with partner agencies in El Salvador, talking of repressive government policies, with human rights lawyer Karen Parker, saying the situation has changed – but not necessarily for the better. She says sharply that "everyone is looking for bodies", and now government troops attack villages and kill civilians and say, "That is war; civilians get killed..."

The faces of the population, imposed over images of the countryside, paint a horrifically moving verbal picture. A woman, anonymous for fear of reprisal from the armed forces, talks of bombs every day, of everyone being afraid, and of travelling to get food that the army will not let them take back to their villages. She says simply, "Children and old people suffer – people are hungry and starving."

Because of the bombing of the civilian population, half a million people are refugees in their own country. At a camp managed by the Catholic Church, Audrey Nemsil, a nun from Calgary, speaks emotionally about people being brought in trucks "like animals or produce."

Apparently with the advice of Ameri-

can advisors, the El Salvadorian army has launched a new offensive – it distributes food each week, along with doses of psychological warnings and pamphlets dropped from 'planes. People are given food in return for fighting alongside the army. To improve its image, the armed forces provides clowns and a brass band with the handouts, and there's a pinata for the children, "brought by the clowns" says a little girl, "and the armed forces" adds a soldier and instructs her to shout it loudly for the cameras.

After seven years of civil war, one million peasants are displaced, and unemployment is about 60 per cent of the so-called "active economic population". Workers and peasants joined together in a Federation of Unions after the devaluation of the currency and a 100 per cent increase in the price of goods. The Federation is in opposition to the government and its members fear assassination.

The documentary notes that El Salvador is receiving more aid per capita from the U.S. than any other country in the world, but it has made no difference to illiteracy or disease. The \$8 million in aid from Canada is not going to have much effect, it is political and moral support to the government of El Salvador – but the American government is going to make the decisions. A priest, who appears throughout the film, states that the real failure of the Duarte government is that it has not been able to bring peace to the country.

The best summary is at the end of the film when a group of peasants say – and a voice-over translates their simple statements – "Any money from the United States goes to the president who spends it on the war...why don't they invest this money in US, the peasants, so that we can grow more food?...we want peace, we want to work."

A straightforward reporting of both sides, with a number of 'talking heads'

who feel strongly one way or the other, interspersed with comments from workers and peasants, with voice-over translation. A low-key, heartfelt look at a drawn-out civil war in a small country where the worker and peasant population suffer disastrously for a doctrine they do not fully comprehend or, indeed, desire.

p./d. Mary Armstrong, assoc.p. David Pollock, cam. Rene Pauck, ed. Howard Goldberg, narr. Roy Bonisteel, 27 mins. Col. Cinefort Inc., 3603 Saint-Laurent, Montréal. (514) 289-9477.

## SEASONS ON THE WATER

A fiction film directed to families and, in particular, to children in order to give them an idea of how other Canadians relate to their work.

Billy sits on a rock gazing out over the ocean at Petty Harbour, Newfoundland. His sister Heather says they must be the only children in this fishing village not to have been on the sea, and it's because of something that happened a long time ago. Their father has his own boat, and mother works in the office of the fish plant.

Billy and his pals, with Heather tagging along, go off to get cod tongues and discuss what they will write about their holidays when back at school. Heather says her piece will describe going out in a boat with her father, and one lad remarks, "It's not fiction, you know!" So Heather makes a bet that she *will* go out on the sea, and works on a plan. She wants her father to come to her school and talk about his fishing and she, of course, will require firsthand knowledge! Father says a firm No, and persists when his wife tries to persuade him, saying, "It's been 10 years..."

There's a social gathering at their

house, with a fiddler and singing, and Billy sneaks some liquor out to his friends, but father catches him. In a stilted conversation, the husband says to his wife, "Why do I feel I have to discourage my children from this life?"

Father and son sit in the fishing boat at night – there, long gazes at each other plus meaningful pauses. Father rows off and Billy says, after (another) long pause, "I don't want to fish, Dad." At the end, Heather hangs around the dock wearing a lifejacket as her father approaches his boat. More measured looks, Billy hovers nearby, and one assumes that Heather gets her way...

What kindly things can be said about this naive little film? Writer Sharon Smith won a Moonsail Award for the script at the second Atlantic Festival Atlantique, and one wonders why. The dialogue for children isn't bad, but the adults come across as extremely stilted and uncomfortable. And the combination of snail's pace direction, and lots of looks and pauses, induces a soporific state only about 10 minutes into the story.

And the plot points are not too clear – the "something" that happened a long time ago, which prevents the father from taking his children out on the water, seems to be the fact that he was once lost in the fog and was scared. It probably was terrifying, but the limp presentation makes it seem ho-hum. And then there's the tiny effort to drag in feminism in that (maybe) Heather has inherited her father's love of the sea and may take over, but here again it is weakly suggested.

It's good to see short films of working lives in other parts of the country, and shot on actual locations, but they need to be sharper than this one, and better scripted.

exec.p. Mary Armstrong, Barry Cowling, p. Mary Armstrong, Shelagh Mackenzie, Sharon Smith, d. John Doyle, sc. Sharon Smith, cam. Rodney Gibbons, ed. Derek Norman, l.p. Jane Gibson (Heather), Adam McGrath (Billy), Cathy Jones (Joan), Rick Boland (Mark), 26 mins. Col. Cinefort Inc., Montreal/National Film Board.

Pat Thompson •

## MINI REVIEWS

by Pat Thompson

## VIDEO TALES

by Geoffrey Shea

We probably share a general idea about what can be included under the rubric "Video Art": abstracts, non-linear narratives, semiological analyses, social documentaries, video-performance, video-installation, etc. But let's leave the question of "What" for the time being, and take a look at some of the recent evolutions in "Where".

Artist-run centres (a.k.a. parallel galleries) have been the mainstay of video exhibition since artists started using the medium a quarter of a century ago. These centres developed as exhibition venues for non-commodity art of all kinds. They arose out of a need for alternatives to the industry venues: museums and commercial galleries on the one hand, television and theatres on the

other. The premise was: art is part of our living culture, and should not be dominated by market-driven considerations.

However, video's presence in the galleries has begun to wane, just at a time when 'increased exposure' has become the order of the day. After years of maintaining and surviving in these arenas of cultural discourse, producers are beginning to show signs of discontent with the limited, sometimes minuscule, audiences, and the centres themselves are finding it difficult to make a commitment to ongoing, comprehensive screening series.

This condition is exacerbated by the re-emergence of conservative value systems, and artists are feeling understandably defensive about 'ivory tower' innuendos. Arts councils, for example, are putting more and more emphasis on the profile their supported projects can achieve, as they adopt the same definition of success as the demographically oriented mainstream media. From this perceived position of weakness artists are formulating several responses.

One is to adopt an 'anti-them' conception of 'us,' rallying the community in an attempt to reestablish or surpass funding

levels of years gone by. (One hard-working example is the nascent Artist's Union.) Another is to begin legitimizing oneself in 'their' terms. Like Jean Cocteau accepting a membership in the bourgeois *Academie française*, this is often done under the guise of parody, critical analysis or subversion.

An expanding audience is feasible and desirable. The artist desires to 'create' an ideal viewer; to provide the public not with what it does want (cf. television), but with what it should want (cf. video art). So efforts to increase the audience for video art are laudable, if intention, context and meaning can still be transmitted. Creating a cultural hype around the work is not enough, and if alternative film and video makers could generate the same kind of interest as mainstream