

Documentary depicts true horror of rebel's struggle

By ALEX PATTERSON

In 1982 a small camera crew ventured from the American west coast to the battle zones of the civil war in El Salvador to live with and record the activities of the anti-government rebels. The result is Frank Christopher's extraordinary feature-length documentary, *In the Name of the People*. The film, narrated by Martin Sheen, received its Canadian premiere May 22 at the Music Hall on Danforth Avenue.

The rebels of this tiny country have captured the interest of the world because of the David and Goliath situation pitting these dirt-poor farmers against an army funded largely by Washington. Their story will spread even further if this film gets the wider distribution it deserves.

In 1980, the Archbishop of San Salvador, one of the highest-placed figures in their Roman Catholic church, was assassinated by a right-wing squad while he celebrated Mass. This, the film tells us, backfired for the regime, since it convinced many of the uncommitted to join the insurgents. Military repression then intensified, and the university was closed down, though not before many students and faculty were murdered. Since then the civil war has killed over 40,000 El Salvadoreans. *In the Name of the People* uses stock news footage for the historical background information, then proceeds to take us into the secret camp of the freedom fighters, located on a bank of an extinct volcano outside of San Salvador, to meet some astonishingly brave people.

The filmmakers show the guerrillas teaching the illiterate to

read and write, dressing wounds and repairing damaged munitions. Among them is a doctor from California—a former fighter pilot disillusioned by his experiences in Viet Nam—who is the first medic most of the peasants have ever seen. The rebels try to maintain a normal village life, realizing all the while that each day could be their last. This does not prevent a young couple from marrying, in a service conducted by Ramon, the leader of the camp. The other insurgents stand saluting with their rifles pointing heavenward during the wedding ceremony. After, a Central American folk group plays, and couples dance with M-16s slung over their shoulders.

The most harrowing of the many short interviews the film contains is with a 12-year-old boy named Nico. He is one of a group of pre-adolescents who delivers messages from one camp to another. He tells us that he joined the revolution after he watched soldiers put two bullets through his mother's head. Against his father's will, he left home to offer his services to Ramon and the *campaneros*. He has already been into combat with a weapon. He is not sentimental and he knows exactly what he's doing.

In the film's final segment, the group risks leaving their camp in the hills for an assault on army strongholds in the capital. For this sequence, the cameramen deserve not only an Academy Award, but also a Purple Heart. At times the camera is not more than two feet from the line of fire. One rebel is killed and another uses a hooked branch to try to pull the body back into a safe

zone behind a wall. The branch is not quite long enough, and each time the *campanero* ventures around the corner to try and retrieve his dead friend, the shooting resumes. They are so impoverished that they need the dead man's bullets and boots to continue the fight.

In the time it took the director and editor Frank Christopher to complete *In the Name of the People*, most of its subjects had been killed by the government. The film ends with footage of the villagers holding a moment of silence for their friends who fell in this and other battles. Then Christopher cuts to shots of the film's "stars" who died after the crew left El Salvador, including the man with the hooked branch, the leader Ramon, and the groom from the wedding scene. The audience moaned audibly as the reality of the horror was brought home to them. No one can come away from this film unmoved. Pan American Films of San Diego has given us a documentary that opens the eyes as it wrenches the gut. Let us hope that its first Canadian screening is not its last.

Brooks mocks suburban junk culture

By ALEX PATTERSON

It seems that comedian Albert Brooks is finally finding movie-goers who share his quirky sense of humor. *Lost In America* is the first of his films to have had a first run of more than two weeks. Now in its third month, this latest entry to the "road movie" genre has moved from the Towne to Yorkdale and other suburban screens.

It tells the story of a highly successful, upwardly-mobile couple leading lives of quiet desperation in a quarter-million dollar house in Los Angeles. He's a six-digit creative director of a large advertising firm, driving a Saab turbo and planning on moving up to a Mercedes.

But, when his expected promotion falls through, he convinces his wife to "drop out of society" and go in search of America in a 30-foot mobile home, "just like in Easy Rider."

As in his first two films, Brooks himself plays the lead, as the whining, spoiled man-child David. His wife Linda (Julie Hagerty) is not quite as pretentious, but equally deluded to agree to his silly dreams of writing, painting and "touching Indians" for the rest of their lives while living out of a Winnebago.

On the road from California to Arizona, Brooks finds many opportunities to ridicule (in his uniquely subtle way) these aging hippies "roughing it" with a nest egg of almost \$200,000 to protect them. Brooks is unparalleled at getting to the formica heart of the shallow, self-important characters he assigns to himself.

In Julie Hagerty he has finally found a leading lady who is both a foil for his persona's egocentrism and a talented comedienne in her own right. Her transformation into a compulsive gambling zombie during their night in Las Vegas is a scene-stealer and extremely funny.

It is also the turning point in the story, since she manages to lose all but \$802 of their savings while her husband sleeps across two heart-shaped beds in an outrageously tacky "junior bridal suite." After this, the couple's naive West Coast babble about "finding themselves" and "just being" comes to an abrupt end as a reality suddenly imposes itself upon them. Having become used to essentially false existences, this rude awakening stresses their marriage to the breaking point.

Along the way, Brooks manages to work in another of the telephone conversations which were part of his schtick back in the early '70s when he was a stand-up comic. They are a recurring image in his work which explores the difficulty of communication experienced by his very modern, very facile characters.

Although essentially a satirist, he knows the self-doubts and emptiness of the American upper middle class as well as Edward Albee did when he wrote *A Delicate Balance*. The director emphasizes this with his framing and picture compositions; we can see the bland angularity of modern offices and are led down fluorescent corridors with elaborate tracking shots.

The most revolutionary aspect of Brooks' comedies is his ability to turn material that is almost docu-drama in its attention to the trivia of the everyday into something devastatingly funny. His style of humor is so understated and indirect that the casual viewer might have trouble knowing when to laugh. His comedy is of that rare species that actually gets funnier with repeated viewings, and his insightful mocking of suburban junk culture is in a class by itself. *Lost In America* may not be as fully realized a piece as his outstanding debut *Real Life*. His first two films were critical successes but box office failures. One can only hope that this will find him the wider audience he deserves, and revive interest in his earlier works.



ANDREW PEPPER

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