



Writer Douglas Penick and animator Ishu Patel of *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Speaking of Death

by Mark Farmer

I'm sitting in *The Daily Grind* with Ishu Patel and Douglas Penick, animator and writer respectively for *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. We're talking about Buddhism, death, hospitals, death, animation, death.... But not being put off by death is the name of the game with Patel and Penick. Life and death may be bugbears for us in the west, but not everyone in the world thinks that way. Patel grew up in India, especially in small villages, where birth and death don't just happen in hospitals.

"I remember seeing my sister born and I was something like four years old. I looked at my sister and I said 'Eeeee! What's this? Where did she come from!?' But death is the same way. We [in the west] hide those two things," says Patel. "Another thing I notice is as soon as a person gets ill or terminally ill, from then on until death it's almost like a business. There's lots of business involved: the doctors, the funeral homes, the limousines and the flowers.... It's a huge business. You look at the film — death is not a business. It's just a way of life. Nobody's paid to do anything."

The film follows Stanjin, a 96-year-old Tibetan man and Bruce, a San Franciscan, barely middle-aged, with only six months to live. While Stanjin slides gracefully toward his second century, respected and surrounded by family in his home, Bruce slowly wastes away in a hospice for the dying. For Penick, that's the mixed blessing of hospitals.

"The mysteries take place there: birth and death. Nobody sees death anymore, where it used to be very common. When people are born at home and die at home, you see all those things," he says. "You go to the hospital, and people come in and say 'you're looking good.' Now you know you're dying. You are supposed to be dying, so [people say] you're supposed to be a good sport. In other words, 'shut up!'"

Penick has studied the "Tibetan Book of the Dead" for

twenty-five years, much of that time with Tibetan teachers. Not only did he write the narration for the film, but he acted as consultant for it. His wish for westerners watching the film is for them to become more comfortable with the process of dying.

"I'd wish for one to have confidence when one dies that the situation won't be entirely unfamiliar and the things one brings [to life] won't be entirely lost, so people will be less frightened about dying," he says. "The trouble with the book is that the imagery is very, very strong but it's also very cultural," including nine-eyed demons springing out of one's imagination and being reincarnated as a wild pig. Reincarnation might be an exotic, foreign notion in the west, but as Patel points out, for hundreds of millions of Asians, it's old hat.

"In India nobody ever told us people were gone forever. We always believed that they would exist somewhere in some form, and that was easy to take, because then you don't feel bad about it. And that's what the book says too. That's why you show compassion to other forms of life, because you think it could be one of you there. Death was never a problem. Even today, it's never bothered me. My father died about ten years ago and it was very simple for me to come to terms with. It never upset me at all," he says.

It may be a simple case of misplaced priorities, or maybe it's impossible to transplant one culture's values to another's. Despite that there are millions of people who have never set foot in the Orient, who believe in Buddhism and practice it daily. Hundreds of them live in Halifax alone.

Penick would hardly blend into a crowd in Tibet, with his blond hair and fair skin, but he obviously believes deeply in Buddhism and the book, and he gets the last word in here.

"It's natural to have concerns about what is beyond this life or what is the meaning of this life, and to say the meaning of this life is your biological process and your economic process and maybe your psychological process... is pathetic.

Tibetan book of the Dead

by Mark Farmer

I've never called a film beautiful before, so here goes... *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a beautiful film, not only for its photography, but its simplicity, depth and clarity. The colours are sharp and vibrant, the background music tasteful and subdued, the sound impeccable, and at the end you're left with a quiet sense of calm — the goal of the "Tibetan Book of the Dead."

The book is a guide for the departed soul in the land of death and it is read every day for 49 days after death. Tibetan buddhists

believe consciousness lingers between death and reincarnation for 49 days, and during this time the soul is capable of hearing. The book doesn't mourn the dead, but encourages them, coaxes them, strengthens them in their journey from one life to another.

"Oh son of noble family, now is the time for you to seek a path. You are not alone in leaving this world. Everyone who has come before you has died. You can no longer stay here.... Now I will abandon clinging to this body and this world. I will go forward. I will abandon fear and terror and I will recognize whatever appears as a projection of my own mind."

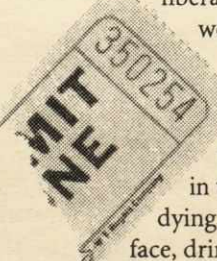
Imagine narrator Leonard Cohen reciting that in his deep, rich baritone rumble and you'll begin to understand how this film can hypnotize. He instills each word with a weight and meaning few others could, but somehow I kept waiting

for him to break into a chorus of "I am a Hotel...."

Tibetan Book of the Dead was shot in two parts. Part I is a documentary describing the book, tracing the funeral of an old man and briefly showing the book's use in a San Francisco hospice for the dying. Part II dramatizes the soul's journey, using Ishu Patel's unique plasticine animation to animate the man's soul as it struggles to recognize the gods and demons it sees as projections of its own mind. If it is successful, the soul may then recognize its own essential nature, thus becoming free of confusion and fear.

Part II also follows a Tibetan priest and his student as they travel to a man's funeral to read the book. Both parts quote liberally from the book, and both feature — here's that word again — the 'beautiful' Tibetan scenery, clear and magnificent. That alone is worth the price of admission.

There's such hope, such encouragement, for the Tibetans people in death. You can even see it in the eyes of Bruce, a patient in the hospice for the dying, as his unblinking eyes stare out of his skeletal face, drinking in the book's words as they're recited to him. Hearing this makes all our daily distractions and preoccupations seem so meaningless, especially when we look at death as "a failure and an enemy and an error of the universe."



FILM FEST FRENZY

A journey into the strange and wonderful world of Buddhism, writers, music, animators, actors and the New World.

The Box Office Shuffle

by Mark Farmer

Dance Me Outside, based on the W.P. Kinsella novel, is a Film Fest big-gun, the kind they put in the front of their programme with a big photo and "Gala" scribbled on top.

One big selling point for the film is the almost-exclusively native cast. Another is director Bruce McDonald, whom you may remember as the guy with the hilariously twisted sense of humour behind *Roadkill* and *Highway 61*.

Unfortunately there's not enough of that wicked humour in *Dance Me Outside*, a decent but unextraordinary film.

The film opens with McDonald's trademark highway shot. A crowd approaches Silas, who offers the bird a smoke. The crowd declines with a caw and flaps away...very cool — but that's about as cool as it gets.

The first half of the film is rather mundane. Silas (Robert O'Neil) and Frank Fencpost (Adam Beach) hang around, get drunk on cigarettes. Silas's white brother-in-law Robert (Robert O'Neil) asks "So where are the babies?" and domestic life plods on.

Then one of the reserve army of characters kills a native on the night of male rites taken out for a night of male rites so his wife can get pregnant with the help from her old flame.

What ensues is the funniest part of the film as Silas and Frank take Robert out for a bogus initiation ceremony, complete with "cerial brew" and animal name cho ("I am the walrus," proclaims Silas) and turns the evening into a series of equally bogus corporate seminars where grown men eat to the bush, paint themselves, and find their inner warrior where corporate

America got the idea.

The film starts getting suspenseful when the killer gets out of jail. Silas, Frank and their deputies decide 'whitey' would be better off without his life and make plans to help him lose it. Adam Beach is great — in a goofy way — as Frank, and he's the best actor of the lot. Unfortunately many of the other actors could use some polish, including lead Ryan Black.

Dance Me Outside has its strengths, such as suspense, a whodunit ending and a healthy sense of humour — all wrapped up in a mix of native music, rock and roll and even Amazing Grace on the bagpipes. But McDonald would have done well to dig deeper into native culture and let his sense of humour run wild. Not a bad film, but don't expect fireworks. B

Dance Me Outside will be released in October 1994.

Festival Facts:

- 125 films
- From 11 countries
- 10 locations
- 8 galas
- 14 days
- 35 special guests
- 25 staff members
- 11 major sponsors

Special thanks to Valerie Mansour at the Film Festival for mousing my every request for information.

Rock 'n Roll, y'know?

by Mark Farmer

"Do you think women are thinking something?" asks Frank Fencpost in *Dance Me Outside*. That's the same sort of blunt, affable line you'd expect from Adam Beach, who plays Frank as a goofy, relaxed leisure-King. That's not a bad description of Beach, either.

"Sure Frank can be a goof, and that's all a lot of people see him as, but he is also this guy who is always doing something different," says Beach. "I'm not any closer to Frank than I am to Squanto. There's a little of each of them in me."

Beach is easy to get along with and he's got a jack-o'-lantern grin that splits his face from ear to ear every few seconds. Unfortunately I interviewed him over the phone, and it sounds like Beach has had a rough night. I can't imagine him grinning too much at this point. He's speaking in a whisper my tape recorder can barely pick up and it takes some effort to keep his brain on track, but the affable young man I saw at Monday's gala opening is there underneath the haze. I know this because every few seconds he throws in the phrase "Rock 'n roll, y'know?"

Mindful of the Disney press agent in the room with him, I ask him about their production of *Squanto: A Warrior's Tale* and the message it has for children.

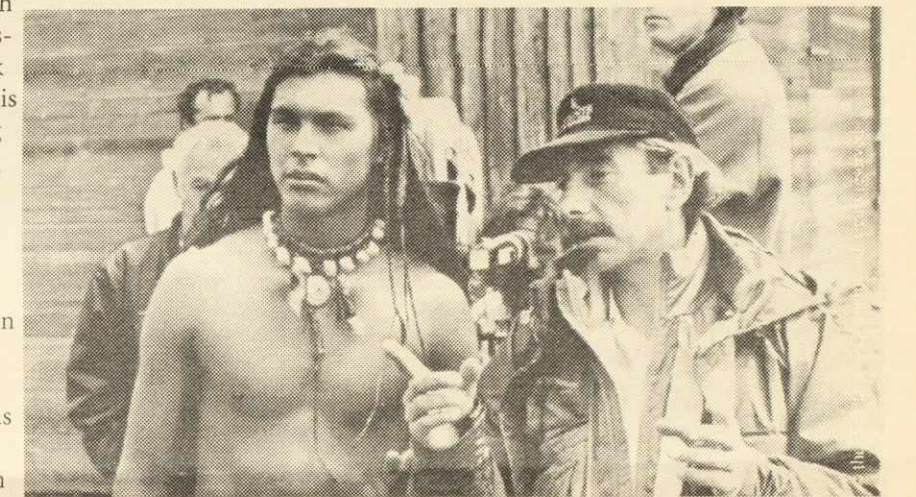
"Squanto's close to my heart. It can reach out to the younger children, to teach them to explore. A lot of children are going to look at *Squanto* and learn to explore, I hope. Hopefully too, I'll be carrying that message to the next generation of native children, and all children for that matter, as a sort of inspirational message," he says.

And speaking of messages, Beach had to deliver a lot of his lines in Micmac, the native language closest to *Squanto's* Patuxet, now extinct. "Micmac's one of the

toughest languages to learn, but the Micmacs did just great teaching me the language. It was fun, but a lot of work. And in fact we had a lot of help from the Micmacs the whole time we were making *Squanto*," he says.

Beach is fading fast, so I switch topics to the recent bloom of Hollywood movies with native actors, especially in positive roles. *Dances With Wolves* may have started the trend, but since then we've seen *Thunderheart* and *Geronimo*, documentaries such as *Incident at Oglala* and TV shows such as *North of 60* and *Northern Exposure*. Beach says native productions such as these are here to stay.

"A lot of people think of them as flavour of the month, but they're not going to die out, because of films like *Squanto* and the others. They're here to stay," he says. They're here to stay at least as far as Beach's career is



Adam Beach and director Xavier Koller on the set of *Squanto*.

concerned; in mid-October he'll be spending a month on the set of *North of 60*, filming four episodes. After that he's got a film with James Caan. And after that?

"I'd like to travel for a while, to Europe, you know, to see the world! Maybe move to the South of France... Who knows? Maybe take it easy for a while."

Take it easy, Mr. Beach. Rock 'n roll, y'know?

A Warrior's Tale

by Mark Farmer

I think there should be native drummers at every movie opening — it might have saved *Passenger 57*. It was an original way to start *Squanto: A Warrior's Tale*, which almost sold out the Oxford Theatre Monday night for its gala opening. The audience stood at attention for the Micmac honour song, their version of a national anthem, and proceeded to a twenty-minute love-in for the director, star and cast.

Then we got down to the serious business of being entertained. First of all, understand that *Squanto* is a Disney film and therefore family entertainment. It's not going to shake up your conception of history or natives, but it is a good introduction to native culture for children and entertaining for adults.

Squanto was shot in Louisbourg, Nova Scotia, after a long search for suitable locations. It seems Louisbourg is one of the only places in North America that can pass for a 17th-century town without having the modern world intrude. The producers relied on native talent to flesh out the production, and they also used Micmac to represent Patuxet, *Squanto's* now-extinct tongue.

More than *Dance Me Outside*, *Squanto* goes into the

good and bad sides of whites and natives. There's the white knight, Brother Daniel (Mandy Patinkin), who takes a wounded and confused *Squanto* in after his escape from the English. On the other hand, there's Sir George, the evil Englishman who wants to use *Squanto* for bear-baiting and cheap entertainment.

On the native side there's *Squanto*, played by Adam Beach, who overcomes his hatred in order to make peace with the English. Then there's his foil, Epenow, who has no qualms about taking revenge on the English for their crimes.

To the director's credit, he doesn't pooch-pooch Epenow for wanting revenge — they let him justify it. Epenow gives his reasons for revenge and *Squanto* gives his for peace.

Too bad that the film glosses over 300 years of oppression with a happy Thanksgiving scene of whites and natives living in harmony under *Squanto's* peace treaty. They mention the fact that the treaty collapsed some 50 years later, but that doesn't go very far towards showing the millions of natives who were wiped out in North America.

The film's well-shot, funny, and Disney delivers with the entertainment value you expect. Like I said, a good way to introduce kids to native culture, and it'll hold the adults' interest, too. B+

Squanto: A Warrior's Tale will be released October 28.

SQUANTO: A WARRIOR'S TALE
Xavier Koller
Atlantic Film Festival