

Salvador's scope overshadows individual experience

By STEVE MILTON

The American film industry has never enjoyed a cordial relationship with political oppression, particularly when it is sponsored by the American government. In the past 10 years three major feature films have been produced depicting Americans trying to come to terms with South and Central American dictatorships, of which Oliver Stone's *Salvador* is the latest. Like *Under Fire* and *Missing*, *Salvador* must walk the thin line between offending American audiences by being overly forthright in its condemnation, and embellishing standard Hollywood plot devices to the point that the political events become mere background. Unfortunately, *Salvador* fails to achieve a satisfactory balance.

The film describes the experiences of real-life journalist Peter Boyle (James Woods) and his sidekick Doc (Jim Belushi) as they travel through El Salvador covering the guerilla war against the government in 1980. Although in

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actuality Boyle was a radio-reporter, in the film he is a photographer, enabling the audience to witness many of that year's atrocities firsthand. (1980 was a pivotal year in the American involvement in El Salvador due to the assassination of Archbishop Romero and the rape-murder of four American nuns.)

Yet, the film's loyalty to the truth actually impedes its capacity to tell the story of the American engagement in the country. The attention to detail with regard to the political events of the period is laudable—what is even less commendable is the belief that Boyle's boorish exploits would advance the audience's understanding of the gravity of these events.

The film depicts Boyle and his partner Doc as two refugees from a Hunter S. Thompson type novel determined to act out Fear and Loathing in El Salvador. Both are pill-popping drunkards who have little or no regard for anyone but themselves (at least initially), with Boyle recommending El Salvador on the basis of its cheap booze and cheaper women. As Boyle admits in a moment of candor, "Okay, I'm a fucking weasel."

It is difficult if not impossible to be attracted to these characters, despite their colourful denunciations of Yuppie life in the US (which is later recreated among the staff of the State department in El Salvador). Although likeability is not integral to recreating the journalist's experience, it is imperative in a film which is sufficiently critical of American foreign policy that the audience needs a sympathetic voice to make the critique palatable. Instead, the audience is distracted from the truly interesting political machinations afoot and is made to concentrate on the intricacies of Boyle's love affair with a local peasant woman.

This affair does have the advantage of illuminating how grand political events affect normal citizens, yet Boyle is portrayed as such an unsavory figure that the trials and tribulations of the American ambassador (whom we meet on a number of occasions) seem far more interesting and germane to advancing an understanding of the political situation.

Aside from these handicaps, the film labours under difficulties which are actually caused by the nature of its audience. Like films such as *The Killing Fields*, *Salvador* must attempt to depict an unthinkable violent world which seems sensational almost by definition from a North American perspective. Due to the tradition of gratuitous violence which is central to our visual media, it is always difficult to depict the scale of violence endemic to these countries. Thus a scene featuring a hillside covered by victims of right-wing death squads appears sensational and fails to generate the emotional impact which viewing the scene in person would provoke. The only film to evade this



HEY, THAT'S NOT FUNNY!In fact, little about Oliver Stone's *Salvador*, including its attempted humour, can be called amusing: It's not supposed to be. And yet, it's hardly provocative in its sensationalism, either.

conundrum has been *Missing* which deliberately limited the audience's exposure to dead bodies until a crucial scene when a familiar character is found, thereby bringing home the scope of the tragedy of all the corpses.

Clearly, there is a place for political feature films which are not merely poorly disguised docu-dramas. Part of the difficulty with films like *Salvador* is that by using journalists as their protagonists, the audience is led to witness as many pivotal political events as possible in an effort to set the political stage. In the process, however, the day-to-day experience of the inhabitants is lost, making the actual impact of

the events on people hard to capture.

It would be much more effective to abandon the omniscient eye of the journalist and restrict the vision to the main character(s) to a single piece of the action—this would portray the confusion and helplessness that people experience in such situations, and emphasize the emotional turmoil that they endure as a consequence. This would mitigate against the film's ability to serve as a primer for those unfamiliar with the political background of the country, yet the events' impact on people (ultimately the only real barometer of their importance) would be highlighted.

Innovative production tainted by Shakespeare's text

Toronto Free's open air Romeo and Juliet

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

Often, theatre is unsuccessful because a production does not live up to the text, or because a text has been interpreted in such a way as to obscure rather than illuminate the 'spirit' of the drama.

This year's *Dream in High Park*, a free production of *Romeo and Juliet* presented by Toronto Free Theatre, is quite the opposite. Director Guy Sprung's interpretation of Shakespeare's celebrated tragedy is (with minor exceptions) both innovative and enlightening. If there are any problems with this *Romeo and Juliet* they are Shakespeare's—in this case, it's the text which does not measure up to an excellent production.

This summer marks the fourth time Sprung and the Free Theatre have ventured into High Park's grassy amphitheatre to give Torontonians a free taste of professional theatre. And although things like lighting and the weather undoubtedly supply their share of technical problems, there are some invaluable benefits derived from *The Dream's* natural setting. With performances scheduled to begin at 8:15 each evening, twilight and nightfall coincide exactly with the first three acts of Shakespeare's play—it seems a small thing, but until you've experienced it for yourself, it's easy to underestimate the immediacy the natural setting lends to the drama.

And (at least) the first half of this year's *Romeo and Juliet* is mesmerizing. It seems that Sprung has profited from last year's rather unsuccessful staging of the same play. Stuart Hughes' Romeo is an infinite improvement over the self-conscious fidgeting of Paul Gross (last year's Romeo), and while Nicky Guadagni (Juliet) doesn't have the youth and beauty Olivia Hussey brought to Franco Zeffirelli's screen version, she's at least in the same general ballpark.

Indeed, Guadagni's Juliet may be the single brightest light among several outstanding performances; her soliloquies are beautifully understated, and she rises to the occasion consistently in a role which demands a deftness with the full range of human emotion. The balcony scene, following largely in the footsteps



'BILL, I TOLD YOU THOSE FINAL SCENES WERE WEAK' Nicky Guadagni as Juliet in Guy Sprung's High Park production of Shakespeare's classic teen sexploitation play.

of last year's effort, is again played for laughs but there is a sensitivity and gentleness in the humor that succeeds where its predecessor failed—we laugh with the lovers, with the hyperbole and wild fancy of young love. Hughes, for his part, plays off Guadagni beautifully, thriving in one of the most abused roles in Shakespeare.

As good as the leads are, the show is stolen (as it should be) by Henry Czerny's Mercutio. Czerny's bawdiness is in all cases amply justi-

fied by the text, and he lends an unexpected spontaneity to the famous Queen Mab speech. Mercutio is not, as some would have him, a 16th century Wildean wit—he is, in his own words, "a lusty gentleman," not to mention a slightly neurotic cynic. Czerny manages to give the role more than one original moment, making the most of the wealth of humor in his lines, adding slapstick to provide the necessary physicality. And he does all this while *staying within the text*—one can ask little more of an actor.

Sprung has chosen to stage the duelling scene between Mercutio and Tybalt almost playfully; neither of the feuding families' "first men" seem to be in any serious danger until the arrival of Romeo. Romeo is thus given added responsibility (if only as an unwitting ally of fate) for Mercutio's death, and his subsequent despair gains added depth and clarity.

This scene marks the high point of the production; unfortunately, it also marks the point where this relatively early Shakespearean text begins to fall apart. It is impossible (in my mind) to stop a significant part of the drama from dying with Mercutio while remaining true to Shakespeare's text. The late arrival of Friar Lawrence, though his speeches anchor much of the play's imagery, does little to compensate for Mercutio's loss, and any interest the intricacy of the remaining plot may hold for the audience is defeated by its improbability. Though there are a few fine moments, the last two acts, when taken as a whole, leave the audience feeling like the victims of a bad case of dramatic overkill.

The killing of Paris, though it ties up one of the plot's loose ends, still seems unnecessary and when old Montague stumbles in at the end with the news that Lady Montague has died in grieving for her son's banishment, it's difficult to keep from laughing. Sprung has made some adjustments to the play (the mime sequence which replaces the scene where the Capulets discover Juliet in her drugged state is one example), but he leaves you wondering why he did not make more.

Consequently, Shakespeare's "two hour's traffic" ends up being closer to three hours in length, and much of the early power is lost in the turgid pacing of the final scenes. As popular a play as *Romeo and Juliet* has become, the fact remains that (as iconoclastic as it sounds) it really *isn't that good*. The best things an audience can take from the play come most often in isolated scenes or speeches; as far as these go, Sprung's production has much to recommend, and little to apologize for.

Romeo and Juliet runs Tuesday through Sunday in High Park until August 15. Performances begin each evening at 8:15 and admission is free.