

# ROMERO

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committee

No doubt when they made *Romero*, the producers of this film did not realise just how topical it would be when it was launched on the circuits earlier this year. In some ways, the topicality is tragic, because *Romero* illustrates just how little things have progressed since March 24th, 1980, when Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated while celebrating afternoon mass in a hospital chapel.

The film was made by the Paulist Fathers production company, Paulist Pictures. The English-born Australian director John Duigan was enlisted to direct it.

Duigan has received critical acclaim in the past for his sensitive direction of films involving children and/or relationships. (*Mouth to Mouth* [1978], *Winter of our Dreams* [1981] *Far East* [1982], and the multi-award winner, *The Year My Voice Broke* [1987]).

In *Romero*, Duigan again concentrates on depicting the centrality of relationships in life. His Archbishop Romero is moved to take a stand because of his increasing involvement with the poor of El Salvador. Romero was no radical to begin with and many conservatives were pleased by his appointment as the archbishop in 1977. But once he was in office, Romero was exposed to influences from which he had been shielded up to then. The people who introduced Romero to the terrible injustices in El Salvador were the more radical priests. Romero was won to their side - which was the side of the poor - when these priests began to be murdered.

Duigan develops the relationship of Father Turllio Grande and Romero to illustrate the personal impact Grande's death had on Romero. Certainly they were friends, though it is questionable whether Grande was as closely involved with Romero as the film suggests. The massacre near the cathedral and the subsequent events represent historical licence. This particular massacre, in which Grande is depicted, actually oc-



curred two years after Grande's murder. It is also questionable whether there were children in the vehicle in which Father Grande and two parishioners were murdered. Certainly, the film sequence in which the killers allow the children to escape (though one has already been hit in the hail of bullets) provides a powerful contrast to the cold, calculated killings.

For Romero, it was Grande's death, less than a month after his installation as archbishop which provided the impetus to deny the government his support. The murder of the representatives of the poor continued throughout his archbishopric. It is thought that ten priests were killed and countless numbers exiled and tortured during the period 1977 to 1981.

The screenplay for *Romero* closely follows Romero's own writings and spoken words. Romero as "the voice of those who have no voice" reached the majority of the population through radio broadcasts. He explained the Bible's message for people today and did not hesitate to list and condemn the violence of the right and the left groups.

*Romero*, it seems to me, captures the essence of the man. Raul Julia provides a moving portrayal of Romero, and the depth of his portrayal is something even people who knew Romero have remarked on. His presence dominates the film, and indeed, none of the other of the other actors get much of look in beside him, although their roles are enriched by his presence. Thus, in the final analysis, one inevitably sees Julia's Romero is a Christ-figure, moving inexorably through his Gethsemane to his martyrdom.

On the other hand, perhaps that view is not so inevitable - perhaps only Christians with a reasonable

biblical knowledge would note the Christ parallel. This raises the question: is *Romero* the type of movie which would appeal to people without any particular Christian commitment, thus helping the mission of the Paulist Fathers? Well, perhaps, although it lacks those "common humanity-gut-wrenching" sequences which movies like *Salvador* specialised in. It would probably be more moving for those who would like to see the mission of the church portrayed to the general public. However one judges the portrayal, it does show that side of the Church which tries to defend the poor and contribute to the cause of social justice.

Another point that the film will make for those who are too clerically (or anti-) minded, is that it shows that the struggle did not begin with or end with *Romero*. One person is not the church, and those who murdered *Romero* made the same mistake of those who crucified Jesus - imagining that by removing one person, they could quell the movement that person represented. Every time the film is shown, *Romero* and all that he stood for, is resurrected, a far more terrible challenge to his killers than was the mere mortal whose life could so easily be snuffed out.

## Reviewing the Reviewers or

### "Romero and All the Jazz"

Perhaps ironically, I find more interest in the reviews of *Romero* than the film itself. It seems to be the type of movie which causes critics to avoid the actual subject of the story in favour of debating the nature of the film, the politics of El Salvador or other films which the reviewer has liked.

The first Australian review of *Romero* which I had the misfortune to read was by Barrett Hodsdon in *Filmnews*, (October 1989). Hodsdon attacks Duigan for making a simplistic film, which avoids the "complex historical background and socio-political forces that shaped the situation". Hodsdon's review however, is itself polemical simplicity supreme. It is full of "high ground" statements which ignore the subject of the film. Perhaps using the term "liberation theology" is Hodsdon's idea of a detailed religious analysis, but I would prefer to learn a bit more about the religious dimension and the significance of religion for *Romero*. Another aspect of the film which featured in a debate on the ABC's 2BL Terry Lane Show, concerned itself with the question of historical accuracy. I have already commented on some matters, but Terry Lane took up the argument of the notoriously right-wing Michael Barnard (*Age Review* 17.10.89) about the need for truth in films of this type, since their narrative style gives them a documentary look. I did not find the historical licence offensive or worrying. *Romero* is obviously a dramatised account, and I don't believe anyone would mistake it for a documentary.

Even Lynden Barber's reasoned review in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (12.10.89) contained a pointed comment: "Although the film was financed by the Catholic church, *Romero* thankfully steers clear of presenting a simple propaganda statement for the Church". Actually the Catholic Church only provided about eight percent of the film's budget and even if it had provided all the budget Duigan would probably still have been able to avoid depicting *Romero* as a kind of Central American Billy Graham propounding the mythical idea of a "simple gospel. Interestingly, Duigan has stated that his non-Catholic attitude (he is an agnostic) was valued by Fr Elwood Kieser, who as the producer wanted to make a film which would appeal to all people and not just Catholics. Perhaps Duigan's humanism impacts upon a secular world and enables those in the religious world to see the common face of humanity.

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