



## SCARED/SACRED

2004 105m *prod* Producers on Davie Pictures, NFB, *exp* Rina Fraticelli, *p* Cari Green, Harry Sutherland, Tracey Friesen, *d/sc/ph/ed/s* Velcrow Ripper.

*Scared/Sacred*, by B.C.-based documentary filmmaker Velcrow Ripper, is an alternately stirring and dispiriting film, as jangled and self-cancelling as the filmmaker's name, which feels like a pun about adhesion and tenacity that gives way to and then cancels out the violent deconstructivism of his surname.

A very long film—much longer, experientially speaking, than the 105 minutes it actually runs—*Scared/Sacred* is not, as the quaintly elided title might lead you to imagine, about being scared sacred—that is to say frightened into the reverential. Rather, it is about finding and touching a sense of the sacred, if it is to be found at all, which may somehow lurk at the very core of the horrendous, the cataclysmic, the unthinkable.

Photos by Velcrow Ripper, courtesy of the NFB



To this end, Ripper, who, raised as a Baha'i, assures the viewer that whereas when he was a child he used to "create his own dreams"

of suffering, that he is somehow more alert to suffering than the rest of us are. I found myself getting very impatient with him. At any rate, it's 1999, and Ripper finds himself progressively consumed by "an underlying sense of fear" that he can't shake, even fantasizing—

(which I find hard to believe), now his "subconscious is running the show," and his dreams, he tells us in a particularly sanctimonious drone that is irritating at the beginning of the film and grows steadily more irritating as it progresses, "are getting darker and darker." Ripper has this annoying tendency to make you feel that fear and grief are his own special province, that he's a virtuoso

at night, airplanes cutting through the cloudy firmament, birds leaving the bare, blasted branches of trees and flapping off into the sky in slow motion—all of these far too well-trod cinematic moments—superbly, movingly, somehow endlessly evading the clichés in which his script so fulsomely trades. His cutting, too, is clean and satisfying. And his poignant fades-to-black really are fades, emotionally speaking, and not just a kind of depletion of the image. Sometimes you feel that people never come to understand what they're really good at. If only Velcrow Ripper had hired a writer and a narrator.

The film settles down into an epic journey devoted to searching for unhappiness in all the right places. It begins by revisiting the horrifying chemical disaster caused by a valve rupture at the Union Carbide pesticide factory in

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disgracefully, I'd say—that he's locked in a boxcar and on his way to a concentration camp.

Having said all this, it should also be noted, right about now, that Ripper, who photographed his film as well writing and directing it, is a superlative cinematographer. He

films ruined cities, anguished faces, beatific Buddhas, sinister skies, lambent rivers at dawn and at twilight, grinning children, passing trains

Bhopal, India in 1984. Here the "sacred moment" imbedded within the disaster that killed 8,000 people outright and slowly killed many more thereafter, turns out to be the beauty of the collective spirit that galvanized the survivors and resulted in a clinic for holistically treating the damaged and traumatized people of the town. All well and good.

The anguishing but rather rearguard horror of Bhopal (though, yes, it must be acknowledged that evil, like rust, never sleeps) gives way to a visit to Angkor Wat and an upsetting replay of the demonic Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. "I find myself questioning my journey," Ripper intones annoyingly, his sentimentality growing

moister and more febrile with every upsetting revelation. "What kind of person would travel the world in search of these places?" A lot of unkind answers spring to mind.

His mood brightens as he wanders the archeological wonders of Angkor Wat ("There's no place like this"). You begin to wonder if he knows how this stupendous place actually came into being? After a lesson in Cambodian land-mine detection, Ripper shifts focus to Bosnia where he visits a married couple who are artists and who kept right on making art through the worst days of the siege of Sarajevo (the sacred in the scared, see?), and then returns to London, buys a car, and "begins racing around Europe, a day in Auschwitz, a

half-day in Flanders fields... a quick miracle at Lourdes..." until his video camera is stolen, after which his car too is stolen. Which is perhaps nothing more than divine retribution for his having made human suffering the stuff of dilettantism.

Ripper is not without self-knowledge. He does pause at this point, to declare himself a "tourist of darkness." I do wish he didn't sound quite so proud of it. Anyway, he then studies Sufism in Turkey, Tibetan Buddhism in India (he has his shoes stolen), skitters through Hiroshima, learns to "breathe in the suffering of the world's victims in the form of a dark cloud" and, contrariwise, to "breathe out compassion." This helps him withstand the beauty and bravery of

a visit with the Revolutionary Afghan Women's Association (where, by the way, he becomes elaborately fearful of being shot), the anguish of 9/11 back in North America, the deprivations of an Afghan refugee camp in Palestine, and a really heart-searching, uplifting sojourn with gentle and fiercely intelligent Christian Palestinian parents in Bethlehem whose children have been killed by Israeli car bombs ("Your genes change; what are you going to do with the rest of your life?").

"I've seen with stark clarity," says Ripper, "the pain that is everywhere..." The pain serves an ameliorative purpose, though. It allows him "to see each face as my own." Which is a lot, I suppose.

**Gary Michael Dault**

## WHAT REMAINS OF US

2004 77m *prod* Nomadik Films, NFB, *p* Yves Bisailon, François Prévost, *d/sc/ph* François Prévost, Hugo Latulippe, *ed* Annie Jean, *s* François B. Senneville, *mus* Kalsang Dolma, Tenzin Gonpo, Jamyang, Yungchen Lhamo, René Lussier, Techung; *with* Kalsang Dolma (narrator), Dalai Lama (as himself).

Two firsts, or two new potential beginnings, open *What Remains of Us*. Kalsang Dolma, a Tibetan-born woman living in Montreal, prepares to return to the native land she has not seen since early childhood. But her imminent journey is more than one of rediscovery and self-exploration. She has procured a videotaped message of hope from the Dalai Lama—Tibet's spiritual and political leader who went into exile in India in 1959 after China's invasion of his country in 1950—and aims to show it to the Tibetan people the only way she can—covertly.

During the 40 years plus the Tibetan people have not seen their Dalai Lama, Dolma narrates, over 1.2 million Tibetans have been executed by Chinese authorities, who laid claim to the mountain-nestled "Rooftop of the World" not only by physical force but by the sheer power of numbers—more Chinese than Tibetans now comprise a population of 2.7 million. Dolma's mission, and by proxy that of Hugo Latulippe and François Prévost, the film's directors, is multifold: to re-expose the people

to their leader; to observe, through their reactions to the recorded message, to what extent the Dalai Lama still figures in their lives; and to provide a context for what they observe in Tibet.

The context was perhaps the filmmakers' easiest choice for inclusion and also the easiest to absorb, if only because Tibet has received international attention for decades. Archival images of the 1988 riots and monks burning themselves in protest are iconic; making Tibet a symbol for human rights atrocities proliferating around the globe. Accompanying this chronicle of abuse and repression is the inaction on the part of international organizations. Dolma finds and reads a letter the Dalai Lama wrote to the UN on November 24, 1950, pleading in vain for help on behalf of his people.

With the plight of Tibetans embedded in the topography of popular and mass culture in the West, the filmmakers faced an interesting challenge—how to humanize a struggle that is abstractly understood, and for most of us watching the film, so far away? Or, inversely, how to delve into the larger issues suggested by the people and scenes captured on film? After all, the presentation of ideas and concepts is not a natural but an extrapolated capacity of cinema. NFB founder John Grierson began an illustrious tradition of documentary in this country on the premise that film can and should—by the use of voice-over—educate, inform and provide an ideological guide. At the other end of the spectrum are the observational documentaries—a technique also initiated by the NFB with lightweight cameras and portable synch-sound



Kalsang Dolma

Photos by François Prévost, courtesy of the NFB