

want them is in peoples' bedrooms. But, thanks to tabloid TV, the talk shows and newsmagazines like this, the bedroom seems to be the hottest beat in TV journalism.

The format implications of *PrimeTime Live* are a bit different. This is a show enthralled with government authority, condescending to anyone not part of the Washington elite, contemptuous of common folk and bloated with its own sense of importance (see accompanying story). Diane Sawyer, who has refined crossing her legs and holding a pencil into the signifier of female competence, and Sam Donaldson, who does a lot of grimacing and chest-puffing, ooze self-satisfaction and a

TELEVISION

palpable level of deadly rivalry. You can almost hear her thinking, "I'm so much smoother," while he thinks, "I'm much more seasoned and smarter." There's real chemistry here: they can barely keep from choking each other on camera.

The gimmick on this show is that it airs live and has a studio audience. This is supposed to make it seem more spontaneous than its competitors, and the promise is held out to viewers that maybe Sam or Diane will produce some good bloopers. As Diane puts it, "No parachutes here." Sam then tells us that "we're going to work with our studio audience, not as Phil or Oprah do—they are terrific shows," he lies, "but that's not us." He promises the show will be more like an on-air town meeting.

Their first guest is Thomas Root, the Washington, D.C., lawyer, gun collector and aviator who was fished out of the water near the Bahamas with a gunshot wound in his gut and a team of investigators on his butt.



Why this guy was given a podium is anybody's guess, especially since the interview was constructed so he could deny a host of charges. "Have you ever been involved in drugs or drug sales?" probed Diane in her best schoolmarm tone. What's he going to say? Sure, I deal drugs. By the way, need some toot? It was all like that. These two pose as hard-nosed investigative reporters, unafraid of the tough questions. But by using such a ham-handed interviewing approach, they learn nothing new and simply provide a forum for

denial.

Everybody is president: Next we learned that Sam and Diane were going to "let" us be president. First, Chris Wallace provided a "background report" on the August hostage crisis. Then "we" were brought into a strategy session between former CIA director Stansfield Turner and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Noel Koch about whether a hostage rescue mission in Beirut was a feasible option. Then members of the studio audience, serving as surrogates for all of us at home, were supposed to stand up and say what they would do about the hostage situation if they were president.

Sam quickly turned this into a yes no dilemma: would anyone in the audience use force against the terrorists? Anyone who wanted to move beyond the narrow boundaries of this question was cut off. And, as you can imagine, those audience members who spoke couldn't come up with anything better than what Bush was doing.

Donaldson kept goading the audience—wouldn't *anyone* use force?—until one young man said yes, providing Donaldson with the opportunity he was seeking. He lectured, self-importantly, "I was there the day when Ronald Reagan met the families of the hostages, and it so moved him that many people believe it was right there that he decided to sign on to an arms-for-hostages plan."

So Sam Donaldson, the man who was constantly promoting himself as the major thorn in Reagan's side, the one journalist who wouldn't take Deaver-style news management lying down, now rehabilitates the Iran-contra scandal by chalking it up to Reagan's deeply felt, teary-eyed empathy with other good Americans. Later we had to listen to Donaldson reminisce about how, despite the constant constraints on him, Reagan "made being president look easy.... He was so good at all of those things in the Rose Garden." Hmmm.

The effect of this "we're gonna let you be president" gambit is to reinforce the elitism that already enshrouds and protects Washington decision-makers. The show pretends that the studio audience has been as well briefed as Bush (when, of course, there's plenty the former head of the CIA knows that we don't) and then shows that regular Americans can't come close to being thoughtful, sophisticated or competent in such a situation. We're better off deferring to our betters and thinking simplistically in terms of force no force.

Anything can happen, and doesn't: One thing was also clear about this portion of the show—Donaldson doesn't know how to work with a studio audience and the segment was a disaster. He and Sawyer are more comfortable when they're in complete control, or when they're talking to government officials. In subsequent shows, the studio audience was completely ig-

nored and has only been "worked with" once again, in a discussion about whether Pete Rose should or should not be banned from baseball. So much for electronic town meetings.

The hype for the second show read, "Watch two of television's most daring journalists work without a net." The text continued, "Anything can happen on live television." As we watched with baited breath, the plunge occurred! Diane's hoop earring fell out of her ear before millions. At the end of the next show, she cooed proudly, "I kept my earrings on tonight," to which Donaldson snarled sardonically, "That's terrific." He needn't have been so shirty: the falling earring was

light, sifting unglamorously through government documents and committee reports. The Sam-and-Diane approach, which hinges on asking the unanswerable question before millions, suggests that when you get the inevitable public denial, you've done your job as a reporter and can do no more. The whole notion of what's possible in journalism becomes narrowed and deeply compromised.

The best thing about this show is how often we get to see Sam Donaldson soil himself in public. On the first show, prompted by the film *When Harry Met Sally* and reflecting on male-vs.-female friendships, Donaldson informed the audience that "men often *can* have very

Both *PrimeTime Live* and *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* extend another repellent trend in electronic journalism: the display of troubled or unusual people as freaks for us "normal" people to gawk at, pity, judge and distance ourselves from.

the most exciting moment on the show.

On the third show, Sam and Diane interviewed Dan Quayle. Once again, under the guise of investigative journalism, we got such stupid and flat-footed questions as, "Is your wife smarter than you are?" It's true, they did get Quayle to say things like, "I stand by all the misstatements that I've made." But still, the pose these two assume distorts what constitutes decent investigative reporting. Little of value is ever exposed by asking someone questions on national television that, if answered honestly, would lead to criminal indictment, loss of one's job, or divorce.

Real investigative journalism occurs, most often, away from the spot-

light, sifting unglamorously through government documents and committee reports. The Sam-and-Diane approach, which hinges on asking the unanswerable question before millions, suggests that when you get the inevitable public denial, you've done your job as a reporter and can do no more. The whole notion of what's possible in journalism becomes narrowed and deeply compromised.

The lure of the lurid: Both *PrimeTime Live* and *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* extend another repellent trend in electronic journalism: the display of troubled or unusual people as freaks for us "normal" people to gawk at, pity, judge and distance ourselves from. The pretense, again, is usually some daring investigative report, usually of some institution that houses the physically or mentally disabled.

These exposés are hyped as if they were scary but entertaining horror movies. Inevitably they begin with the following warning: "The footage we are about to see is very graphic." Posing as the voice of sober journalistic responsibility, this is really the voice of the carnival barker, luring us into the tent to see what lies suspended in the formaldehyde. Now it's not that the inhumane treatment these people receive shouldn't be exposed. It's the way it's done, in a highly lurid fashion that invariably violates the victims' privacy and objectifies them as features in some haunted house that we, the audience, can ride through briefly and then flee.

It is the increasing and often frantic insistence that news *must* be entertaining (rather than informative, thought-provoking or educational) that fuels the ongoing degradation of non-fiction television. Even as they seek, through dramatic recreations or audience participation, to increase a sense of viewer involvement, these shows really encourage a vicarious, temporary and ersatz connection to the world, and especially to the world of politics. That world is best left to informed elites while we stay in the cabaret distracted by an anomalous and fast-moving parade of the gorgeous pursuing and probing the grotesque.

Meanwhile, genuine scandals (the S&L bailout, the HUD giveaways) that demonstrate how deeply corrupt the government has become when it comes to rewarding and protecting entrenched economic interests—are ignored. It is infotainment like this—enamored of its own gimmicks, top-heavy with overpaid, complacent stars and more concerned with style and form than substance—that continues to erode what final shreds of integrity might be left in electronic journalism. ■
Susan J. Douglas is a frequent contributor to *In These Times*.

Television violence, con and con

Whether in prison (as I am currently) or in the "free world"—you may soon be turning the tube to your favorite cop program. But what is billed as just entertainment is selling political ideology too: authority is always right, law and order, protect the status quo, the myth of "justice" in the "criminal justice" system.

Television does not make children violent. Television violence makes children passive. Television tends to teach children to look to authorities to keep order in the world (see accompanying story).

A good example of these anti-people politics is the violation of people's constitutional rights by television cops. In any random week a viewer will find many clear constitutional violations—brutalizing people, performing illegal searches and seizures of property and not advis-

ing people of their rights.

Scores of citizens uninvolved in the crime under investigation are roughed up, shaken down or harassed—by police. Homes, offices and cars are broken into regularly—by police. With a sixth sense that only scriptwriters can generate, every such invasion of personal privacy turns up the real, and usually demented, criminal, or is justified because the victim was probably guilty of some crime anyway. Honest, law-abiding citizens are miraculously never hurt by these methods.

The message we are getting is that authority is never wrong. The desired image is of a paternalistic great society in which all law enforcement agents are properly motivated and their opponents are drug dealers, crazies and un-American weirdos. It is clearly not good to criticize the institutions of the

country.

This violence by authorities, such as the violence of individual cops, or teachers, is accepted as the solution to social problems. Television gives us no examples of how to solve problems by trusting and learning from other people and getting together to change things.

We don't think that television has the power over us to determine how we think and act. But it seems pretty clear that its message is not in our interests—to make things better—but instead to keep things the way they are. The next time you tune in to your favorite cop show, check it out to see whose interests are served.

—Adam Starchild

(Adam Starchild is serving 10 years for tax fraud at the federal prison in Sandstone, Minn. He is author of numerous books and articles, primarily on business.)

South Africa

Continued from page 9

is the economy, which has been wracked by an inflation rate of nearly 16 percent and an unemployment rate that in some regions is as high as 56 percent. South Africa is also being starved of foreign capital. Last year there was a net capital outflow of about \$3 billion, while the foreign exchange crisis has been compounded by a falling South African rand. The ANC and internal anti-apartheid groups are pressuring foreign banks not to extend short-term loans that are due to be renegotiated next year. "It's getting through to the Nats that sanctions are working, the pressure is working," said Mike Daly, chief economist for Southern Life, one of the country's largest financial firms.

But at home, an opposing, if not equal, pressure on de Klerk is his own constituency, particularly his police force, which under the state of emergency has held an especially powerful position in the government. Since early this year, the National Party has shown signs of bowing to international pressure at the expense of the power of the "securocrats," which former President P.W. Botha built into a formidable force in the government.

Is a disgruntled police force now trying to use the Defiance Campaign to win back lost ground? Political activists and commentators here think there is evidence to show that, in some cases, the police have deliberately provoked violence in order to stamp out opposition.

De Klerk is making a concerted effort to be above the fray," commented Boesak. "He is trying to appear as amenable as possible, while at the same time his police open water cannons on protesters and mercilessly beat up people, including young children." It clearly would not have suited the image of the new leader to be seen on newscasts around the world against a backdrop of bloodied black protesters.

The escalating police violence has not only marginalized the election but has also dimmed hopes of postelection negotiations, or even the release of Nelson Mandela, which has become the yardstick of reform for George Bush and Margaret Thatcher. It is difficult to imagine how talks with black leaders can get underway when their followers are still nursing injuries because they dared to protest openly in the streets of Stellenbosch, or go to whites-only beaches, or hold prayer services.

Pippa Green is a Cape Town journalist.

CALENDAR

Use the Calendar to announce conferences, lectures, films, events, etc. The cost is \$25.00 for one insertion, \$35.00 for two insertions and \$15.00 for each additional insert, for copy of 50 words or less (additional words are 50¢ each). Payment must accompany your announcement, and should be sent to the attention of ITT Calendar.

NEW YORK

September 10-16

THE NEW YORK MARXIST SCHOOL
SUNDAY, Sept. 10—Ghosts of Law (art opening), Bob Dombrowski, 6 p.m.
MONDAY, Sept. 11—International Grass-Roots Organizing, German Young Democrats, 6 p.m.
SATURDAY, Sept. 16—On Puerto Rican Independence; Mildred Colon, Victor Vasquez and Agustin Lao; 8 p.m.

All events take place at the Brecht Forum, 79 Leonard St. (five blocks below Canal, between Church and Broadway). Unless otherwise listed, admission is \$5. For information call (212) 941-0332. Classes begin October 2.

October 26-29

GRASS-ROOTS COMMUNICATIONS for Democratic Social, Cultural and Political Change. Union for Democratic Communications 1989 Conference and Annual Meeting. Hunter and Marymount Manhattan College, New York City. Information: Mark Schulman, City College of New York, Shepard Hall 16, New York, NY 10031, (212) 690-6741.

AMES, IOWA

September 17-20

"Critiques of Capitalist Agriculture. Speakers: Michael Perelman on Farming for Profit, S.K. Thorat on the Green Revolution in Asia, Merle Hanson on Progressive Farm Movements, Susan Mann on Patriarchy and Agriculture. For information contact Tony Smith, (515) 294-3341.

SEATTLE

September 23

The Seattle Rainforest Action Group and other co-sponsors present The Lacandone Rainforest Project Conference, "A Common Destiny," from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Daybreak Star Cultural Center in Discovery Park. The future of the Mayan Lacandone, whose lives are intimately linked to the land, rests with the future of their rainforests. Although part of their homeland is a designated biological reserve, much has already been destroyed, and what remains is seriously threatened from deforestation. Conference goals include educating the public about the Lacandone culture and exploring ways to help in preserving their forests. Bringing together the Lacandone and six Northwest Indian tribes, this conference will be a unique experience for the audience and the Lacandone leaders, who have never before left their forest homeland. Pre-registration is strongly encouraged. For information contact The Lacandone Rainforest Project, P.O. Box 95967, Seattle, WA 98145; Lisa Dabek, (206) 547-2378, or Kurt Russo, (206) 647-6258.

CHICAGO

September 23

Illinois Labor History Society presents "Writers as Workers," a symposium examining the literary and political significance of the WPA Writers' Project in Illinois, which created the famous *WPA Guide to Illinois* in 1939. Among the working writers attending the 50th anniversary reunion are Studs Terkel, Margaret Walker, Maridel LeSeur, Franklin Folsom, Sam Ross, Marion Knoblauch Franc and Dave Peltz. Top-flight scholars Jerre Mangione, Alan Wald, Douglas Wixson, Michael Anania, Lorraine Brown, Neil Harris and J. Fred MacDonald will participate. The event takes place at the Newberry Library of Chicago (60 W. Walton St.) from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The symposium is co-sponsored with the cooperation of READ ILLINOIS, a program of the Illinois State Library and the Secretary of State, Jim Edgar. For information contact: Alan Harris Stein, Project Director, or Leslie F. Orear, I.L.H.S. President, at (312) 663-4107.

September 23

CHICAGO DSA presents a memorial celebration of Michael Harrington's life and works on Saturday, 12 noon at ACTWU Hall, 333 S. Ashland. Invited guests include Rev. Jim Gorman, Roberta Lynch, Carl Shier, Studs Terkel and William Julius Wilson. Call 384-0327 for information. Parking available at the Hall.

LOVELAND, OHIO

October 6-8

Grailville presents *The Earth is Our Mother and North America is Our Home* with featured speakers Lynn Crow, M.A.; Deborah Lee, M.S. and Audrey Schomer, B.A. An opportunity to share and celebrate with people who care about the Earth; to learn more about natural technologies, art and world-view; to forage, prepare and eat wild foods; to explore what it means to be "at home" in North America. We will share ideas, music, songs, dance, storytelling, prayer and ritual. Cost: \$125 for the weekend. For information and registration, write or call: Grailville Programs, 932 O'Bannonville Rd., Loveland, OH 45140, (513) 683-2340.

INDIANA, PA

October 18-20

IUP Symposium, "Searching for New Horizons: The University at the Gateway of the 21st Century." Speakers include Bernard Harleston, Stanley Aronowitz, Nathan Glazer, Bobby Seale, David Noble and Philip Altbach. Contact: Irwin Marcus, History Department, IUP, Indiana, PA 15705, (412) 357-2237 or 2284.

WASHINGTON, DC

Fall 1989

The Washington School Fall Program of Politics, Ideas and Culture. *Evening Courses* beginning October 11: *Drug Policy and the Latin American Cocaine Industry*, *Safeguarding Abortion Rights*, *Beyond 20th Century Politics*, *What's Wrong With This Picture? The Black Character in Mainstream Film*, *Internationalism Today*. *Special Events*: October 27: Poet, essayist and playwright June Jordan; November 30: *Philosopher of education* Henry Giroux; December 15: Theologian and social critic Cornel West. The Continuing Education Program of The Institute for Policy Studies, 1601 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20009, (202) 234-9382.

Lightning

Continued from page 24

have no one to blame but yourself.") And there are the unemployed steelworkers of Braddock, who keep breathing through the narrative with demonstrations, meetings and community work but who can't seem to rally enough support to get the steel mills reopened.

Most of all, it's about the precarious link between individual and community in an America captivated by media images and fame.

Truth in fiction: *Lightning over Braddock* defies description as either documentary or fiction. It's surely about Buba and Braddock; it uses real TV clips, footage from his earlier films as illustration, and a deadpan personal narrative by Buba himself.

But a good part of the film is scripted, including scenes that look documentary. For instance, at a demonstration to protest the closing of a steel mill, a woman points approvingly to someone she says is filming the protest for Talking Heads. "Finally, sophisticated media people who know how to tell story are getting involved," she tells Buba. "Your subjectivity may be poetic and well-intentioned, but it's probably provincial." (Buba says that, although the scene itself is scripted, the dialogue

is straight from a conversation he overheard at a cocktail party.) Videotape from local TV interviews with Buba is overlaid with his own commentary; outtakes slyly show how TV turns reality into a sound bite.

The film also borrows freely from the world of Hollywood movies. Sal stars in vignettes referring to epics like *Gandhi* and *The Godfather*—a commentary on Sal's grandiose dreams. Jimmy Roy puts nostalgia in a frame as he sings, Las Vegas nightclub-style, the film's campy theme song—"Braddock, City of Magic...Where Have You Gone?"—framed in a semidemolished factory doorway.

"I mixed fiction and documentary because I wanted the viewers to be in doubt about what was real and what wasn't, instead of just sitting there and being a good consumer," says Buba. Some of the devices work better than others, but because it's loaded with rich characters and played for homemade humor, *Lightning over Braddock* keeps audiences both unsettled and entertained.

Irony and idealism: The central character, Buba himself, is also a persona, exemplifying the way our fantasies penetrate our realities. This character is Buba as idealistic naïf, a guy who worries about things like getting into heaven and discovering, not St. Peter, but Sacco and Vanzetti at the gates. He's a guy

who obsessively patches together his own little piece of fame while the town around him collapses.

"I wanted the audience to be annoyed with me," Buba explains. "I wanted the audience to ask, 'Why isn't he doing more on the important issues? Why does he want to make a Hollywood film?'"

Lightning over Braddock finally brought Buba to Hollywood, but not for his Big Break. In Los Angeles he ran into an old neighbor from Braddock, now an industry scriptwriter and director. The guy is thinking about making a mainstream movie, *Braddock*, a prospect that raised Buba's hackles. He finally decides a Hollywood movie would only provide more material for his own films and would bring money into the town.

"When you go out there, you do get these really weird ideas, though," he says. "Maybe I should do a horror film about a steel company president who gets caught inside the mill after it's shut down and attacked by a Freddy Kruger-type character in revenge for people losing their jobs. It could have all kinds of sequel possibilities—Freddy could go after Frank Lorenzo next."

Who knows? Sacco and Vanzetti at the gate might like that.

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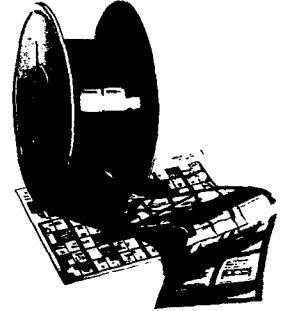
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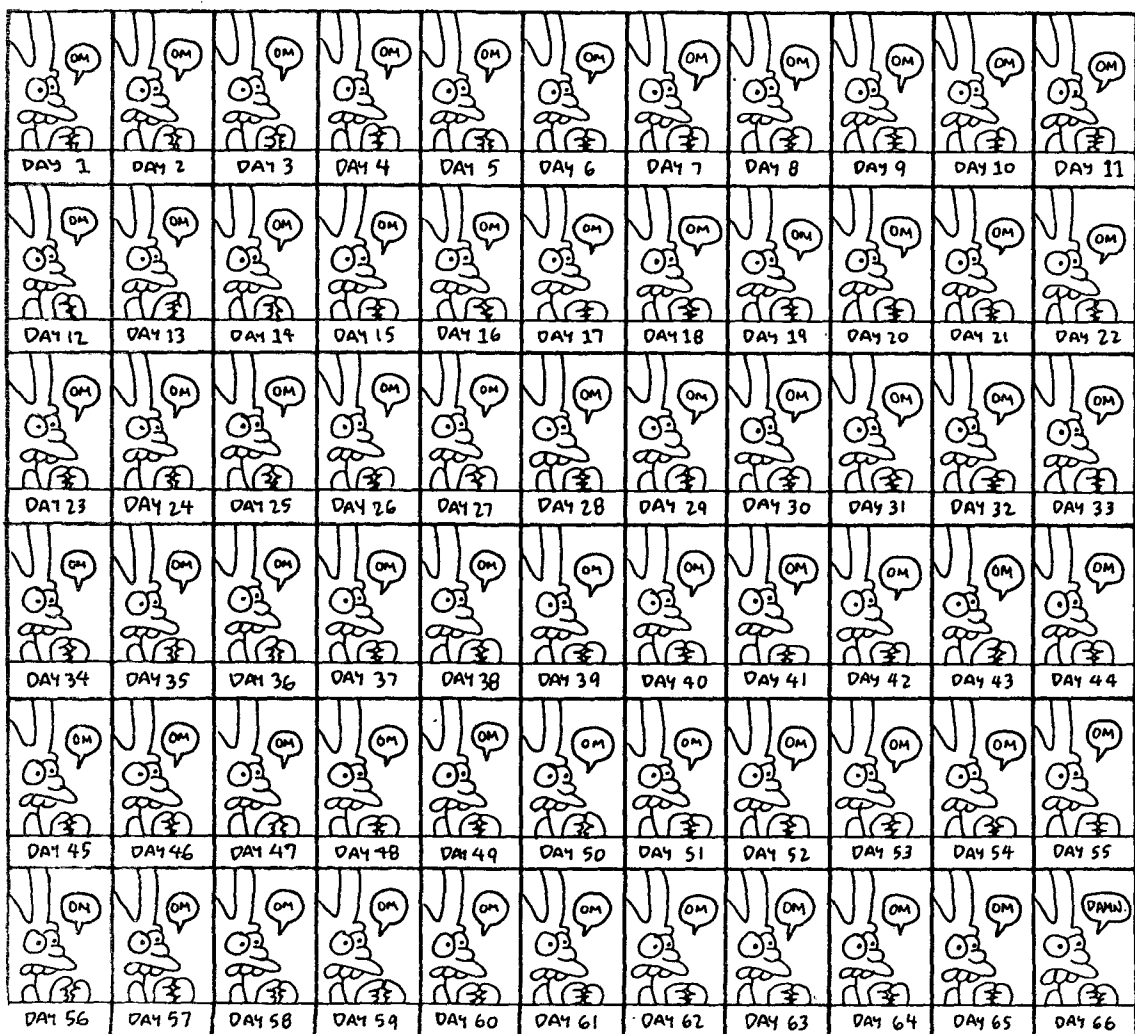
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By Pat Aufderheide

NEAR THE END OF HIS 14TH FILM AND first feature, *Lightning over Braddock: A Rustbowl Fantasy*, filmmaker Tony Buba goes to confession. The priest—a figure from his Italian Catholic childhood in steeltown Braddock, Pa.—asks him his most grievous sin.

"I want to make a Hollywood musical!" blurts out Buba.

And for Buba, that probably is a sin, even though *Lightning over Braddock* does have a musical episode. But it takes place in an abandoned steel factory. The robotized workers' chants make clear that the Pittsburgh of, say, *Flashdance* was on another planet.

Midway through the film, workers at a local newspaper party to "Jumpin' Jack Flash," played on the accordion. But there's no sound. Rights to the song would have cost \$15,000—three times the annual income of the average Braddock resident.

Buba asks us to sing along ourselves and explains in voiceover: "What if, when I get to heaven, instead of St. Peter at the gate, it's Sacco and Vanzetti? And they say, 'You paid \$15,000 for a song instead of spending that money for political organizing?' I wouldn't get in."

Buba is an independent filmmaker who dates from the days when the term "indie" connoted "socially conscious." A decade ago, when Glenn Silber (now with *60 Minutes*) was making *The War at Home* about the history of anti-war protest, Buba was making movies about his hometown, in the heart of the Rustbowl.

He still is.

"A lot of documentary filmmakers jump from one subject to another," Buba told *In These Times*. "You could call it left-wing ambulance chasing." No one will accuse Buba of that, not even the Buba-persona of this film, who dreams of the Big Break.

Rustbowl record: Braddock was once known as Pittsburgh's shopping center. Its main street is now called "Plywood Avenue" because of all the boarded-up buildings. Buba's documentaries chronicle—though that was not his original intention—the decline of Braddock. They also chronicle—though that was not his intention either—the decline of an era in socially conscious filmmaking and the rise of Buba's reputation as an offbeat filmmaker.

Working for years in grant-starved obscurity, Buba has finally won fame for the idiosyncratic *Lightning over Braddock*, which debuted in major cities this spring to positive (if sometimes perplexed) reviews and is now available on videotape, along with a collection of his shorts assembled as "The Braddock Chronicles" (from Zeitgeist Films, 200 Waverly Place, #1, New York, NY 10014).

Buba has been called "Braddock's Boswell," though the image he renders may not always be the one Braddock residents expect. His films all have a home-movie quality and an appreciation for the idiosyncratic in daily life that typifies the films of Errol Morris (*Gates of Heaven*, *The Thin Blue Line*). And they have the zest for the grotesque-in-the-ordinary that was displayed in the award-winning Australian documentary *Cane Toads*. (Or maybe it's the kind of grotesque that Buba learned while working on the horror films of George Romero, another Pittsburgh-area filmmaker.)

From Rustville to Tinseltown



Documentary maker Tony Buba goes sort of Hollywood in *Lightning over Braddock*.

In *J. Roy: New and Used Furniture*, Buba introduced us to a Braddock entrepreneur who's failed at 12 businesses and is busy teaching would-be entrepreneurs self-confidence. *Sweet Sal* is a portrait of wiry, engaging street hustler Sal Caru, whose cocky patter breaks down at the end of the film when he visits his father's grave. *The Mill Hunk Herald* is a trip inside a Steel Valley workers' magazine, which looks like raw material for a Bruce Springsteen song.

As Buba has continued to make movies about Braddock, he's become a local celebrity, and so have his subjects—especially the volatile Sal. That's not what he expected. He thought he was making movies that would mobilize the masses, or at least, as he says, "raise consciousness." He's won plenty of film festival awards, a Guggenheim grant and lavish praise from renowned German filmmaker Werner

Herzog. But he hasn't gotten rich and still pays the rent by making industrial videos and taking occasional teaching jobs.

Fame and fantasy: Now, in *Lightning over Braddock*, Buba turns his camera on a subject that epitomizes the contradictions in Braddock today: himself, the media figure of a place slipping right off the map of America. The title is a funky reference to *Lightning over Water*, Wim Wenders "metafiction" about a filmmaker—Nicholas Ray—dying of cancer.

Lightning over Braddock is self-reflexive in the most fashionable, postmodern way. And it's also reflexive in the more old-fashioned sense of looking critically at our lives. At the center is not just the story of Tony Buba, hometown filmmaker, but the question of how to find the real when your expectations are loaded with fantasy. Buba's asking us to ask ourselves about fame, failure and the flyover zone

under America's bicoastal media image.

This is a story, on one level, about a director (Buba) trying to make a movie with a temperamental actor in poor health (Sal) whose fights with the director keep screwing up the story. While Buba is haplessly struggling to make his documentaries, he gets offered a chance at the big break—a Hollywood script starring himself and Sal. Trying to make that happen, though, precipitates a crisis between the director and his star.

At another level, it's a story about the fantasies that keep people in the Rustbowl from getting control over their own lives, from making themselves the subject of their own movie. There's Buba's fantasy—Hollywood! There's Sal's fantasy of becoming a famous actor. There's Jimmy Roy's fantasy of finally making it in business. (He keeps telling people, "You

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