

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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