

Documentary filmmaker examines institutions

"My feeling is that if (my) films do anything, they may contribute information that people might not otherwise have, and may suggest things that some people may not otherwise think about."

Frederick Wiseman
Documentary Explorations

The impact of filmmaker Frederick Wiseman's films originates with the exposure of American life he provides. Wiseman never editorializes toward one political solution, whether rightist or leftist.

Wiseman will be a guest of the Sheldon Film Theatre this week in conjunction with the screening

of several of his award winning films. Thursday and Friday he will introduce his films and hold discussion sessions after the 7 p.m. showings in the Sheldon Art Gallery auditorium.

Wiseman's films deal with public, tax supported institutions: a state hospital for the criminally insane, a police department, a high school, a city hospital, a juvenile court.

Critic Stephen Mamber has said of the films, "We see the government at its point of direct impact, revealing the immensity of problems and the quality of response. Wiseman makes ethnographic films turn

inward: cultural investigations for a society that takes few steps between the offices and the suburb."

Wiseman's films are not objective *cinema verite*. Wiseman likes to say they are documents of his experience as a filmmaker at the particular institutions. To the viewer, however they seem a very thorough investigation, done simply and directly, of each institution.

The films are never staged, Wiseman said, and the people and situations are real and frequently poignant. The sound tracks are actual records of conversations and encounters between different individuals involved.

'Conrack'
is mush,
but great
mush

greg lukow
key grip

Conrack is director Martin Ritt's third "black film" of the past few years. He did *The Great White Hope* in 1971 and came out last year with the popular *Sounder*. *Sounder* was supposed to be a film that finally dealt intelligently with blacks, but it was little more than good sentimentality and owed much of competence to its near perfect cast.

In *Conrack*, Ritt is still pouring on the sentiment but he loses any claim to making an intelligent film about blacks. Although he retains his skill in audience capturing entertainment, he is now a surgeon operating with baseball gloves.

Based on a true story, *Conrack* is really Pat Conroy (Jon Voight), a young white schoolteacher who leaves his world to teach a group of poor, backward black children on an isolated island off the South Carolina coast. The kids are so ignorant they can't even say Conroy's name correctly, let alone read, add two and two or know what country they live in.

But Voight takes their education to task with all the crusading enthusiasm of a freewheeling messiah. Telling us that he grew up a bigot, he jostles, cavorts and

sweet talks with them as if to tell the world, and the audience, how much he digs these deprived tots.

The kids are fun to watch and Ritt did wonders with their performances, but in the long run, they are little more than cartoon characters. They are a mass of slow, noisy, illiterate stereotypes like something out of Bill Cosby's *Fat Albert* comedy. When *Conrack* first arrives at their dumpy little school, they sit around like bumps on logs, wide eyed and open mouthed.

But Ritt shows us that all they need to wake them up is the lovable *Conrack*. When the gospel according to *Conrack* has worked its way into their heads, the kids know yoga positions and who Babe Ruth and Rimsky-Korsokoff are, but nothing that will really help them in the world outside their island.

Inevitably, *Conrack's* antics lead to his firing by a kind but stodgy old Southern superintendent, and this leads to the film's most overbearing moment: when *Conracks* rents a van and loud-speaker and rides through town denouncing the old Southern prejudices and advocating his new freedom.

Still, Voight's role is a joy to watch and the first really good performance of the new movie season. And the film contains several genuine moments among all the stereotyped stickiness.

Conrack is a movie that surrounds itself with a serious problem and never deals with it. All we are left with is the dumb-cuteness of the black students and the selfless heroics of the white man who brought a brief period of job into their empty lives.

The important thing, then, is that it is a movie that advances considerably the recent trend away from "meaningful," problem pictures in favor of sure fire, almost old-fashioned entertainment. The cycle probably began with *Sounder* and continued this year with successes like *Paper Moon*, *The Sting* and *The Way We Were*, a picture no different in spirit than the Betty Davis-Joan Crawford weepers of the '40s.

Conrack would not have been made in 1970, but could have in the golden days of the '30s and '40s when Hollywood knew how to make great sentimentality. This movie is mushy, but it's great mush and it has a heart.

half frames

There aren't too many films on campus or television this week, but the films of Frederick Wiseman are particularly promising.

Tuesday
Law and Order, Sheldon Gallery Auditorium, 3 and 7 p.m., admission \$1.25. Law and Order is an award winning documentary dealing with problems of a corrupt legal system and with police, the men who have chosen to be responsible for the control of human waywardness. It's a hard hitting film.

Wednesday
High School, Sheldon Gallery Auditorium, 3 and 7 p.m., admission \$1.25. This unstaged piece of cinema runs the gamut of problems in the U.S. high school, from bad teachers, stifling student-counselor encounters, student boredom, teacher boredom, to the futility of individuality, as well as showing good teachers and excited students.

Thursday
The Contractor, ETV, 7:30 p.m. David Storey's play explores the relationship of three generations of the working class in today's changing Great Britain.

Thursday
Hospital, Sheldon Gallery Auditorium, 3 and 7 p.m., admission \$1.25. Wiseman examines a large urban medical center as a focal point of human society. The fast, efficient teamwork of compassionate doctors, nurses, aides and policemen is seen to be stymied when human comfort and care are at the mercy of the bureaucracy and inefficiency of supposedly cooperating social and medical agencies.

Friday
The Magellan Penguin, ETV, 5:30 p.m. The extinction of the Magellan Penguin by man is the subject of this fascinating documentary.

Friday
Bad Times on Gold Mountain, ETV, 11 p.m. This documentary reports on some of the troubling elements of life in San Francisco's Chinatown.

Friday
Essene, Sheldon Gallery Auditorium, 3 and 7 p.m., admission \$1.25. Wiseman's film deals with the lives of a group of monks who reside in a nearly self-sufficient monastic community. Visually, *Essene* is the most consciously creative of Wiseman's

films.

Juvenile Court, Sheldon Gallery Auditorium, 3 and 7 p.m., admission \$1.25. Wiseman has filmed day to day episodes that typify the treatment of juvenile offenders, from their arrests and initial processing to the final disposition of their cases in a municipal juvenile court. This is a powerful film, and Wiseman has

used admirable restraint in its editing.

Sunday
Two Communities, ETV, 7:30 p.m. This film looks at the religious fervor of American youth as the program takes viewers to the Mt. Baldy Zen Center, 60 miles west of Los Angeles, and the community of Agape, in the heart of San Francisco's Mission District.

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FILM-MAKERS' SHOWCASE

The Films of Frederick Wiseman



"Frederick Wiseman encourages concern for the quality of life in America through a deft combination of relevant subject matter and an appropriately mosaic-like structure. His films deal with public tax-supported institutions: a city hospital, a police department, a high school and the juvenile courts. We see government at its point of direct impact, revealing the immensity of the problems and the quality of the response. Wiseman makes ethnographic films turned inward: cultural investigations for a society that takes few steps between the offices and the suburb." (The New Documentaries of Frederick Wiseman) by Stephen Mamber, (Dinema)

Schedule:

LAW AND ORDER-Tuesday, April 9
HIGH SCHOOL-Wednesday, April 10
HOSPITAL-Thursday, April 11
ESSENE-Friday, April 12
JUVENILE COURT-Saturday, April 13

Screenings each day at 3 and 7 p.m.
Admission \$1.25

Mr. Wiseman will be speaking at the Sheldon Theatre after the seven o'clock screenings of HOSPITAL and ESSENE on April 11 and 12. There will be a workshop Friday, April 12 at 9:30 to 12:30 with Mr. Wiseman in the Gallery Theatre. The workshop will be free and open to any interested persons.