

Director explores fantasy, reality in documentary

David Thompson

"We are all novelists, that is, we have a habit of writing fictional futures for ourselves, although perhaps today we incline more to put ourselves into a film."

John Fowles

The line between fiction and reality is a thin one, and German film maker Wim Wenders hops back and forth across it in his film *Lightning Over Water*. The film is a creative jumbling of reality and fiction that is, if not always clear, fascinating in its incoherence.

Wenders, along with Rainer Werner Fassbinder and a few others, has nudged German cinema into the eyes of American viewers. He lives in New York City, and he will be visiting Lincoln Thursday through Saturday.

While he is here he will be participating in the Sheldon Film Theater's Film/Video Showcase of his work. A different film of his will be shown each night, and Wenders will speak at the evening screenings. Saturday's screening will be of *Lightning Over Water*, Wenders' most recent film.

The film is sure to be the crowning point of the series, because in it Wenders brilliantly examines the delicate point at which fictional situations become true stories. The film is about the death of American film director Nicholas Ray, known for such classics as *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Lusty Men*.

Documentary film

Lightning Over Water could be called a documentary because Ray plays himself in the film, living his own death from cancer for the camera. Wenders, a friend of Ray's, also plays himself in the film, jumping back and forth between a man who must watch his friend die and an



Courtesy of Sheldon Film Theater

Wim Wenders and Nicholas Ray confer as friends and artists in *Lightning Over Water*.

zes that Ray is a film maker. His life has been an attempt to represent reality on film, and now he is fading into the unknown expanses beyond space and screen. Wenders feels this on finishing the film. "Let me go on making the film in my dreams," he says. "The camera will always be there."

Reality confusing

For some viewers the haphazard jumbling of the video camera around the room may seem bothersome, they may feel at times as if they are watching someone making a home movie while they trip over the furniture. They may also be annoyed by the jumps from film to video, from dream to waking, from acted scene to natural situation. But Wenders is making a point about the confusion of reality. He says in the film that attempts to make reality seem sharp, clear and simple are "the result of pure fear."

Lightning Over Water carries into the fifth dimension the idea of juxtapositioning reality with unreality, an idea first introduced to American audiences in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. If the other films in the series are of this caliber of originality, spending four days in the Sheldon Film Theater may not be a bad idea. "Are there times when representation is art or is not art, when reality is fantasy or not fantasy?" Ray asks in the film. *Lightning Over Water* is an intriguing exploration of that question, and shows us that no one really knows the answer.



Movie Review

artist who wants to catch the death of another artist on film, making it live on its own as a work of art. Wenders is unsure of his two roles and expresses apprehension to Ray about making the film. "I was worried I might be attracted by your weakness. If I were I would have to leave you. That would be betraying you," he says.

The separation between Wenders the friend and Wenders the director is made clear through Wender's juxtapositioning of film and video. When his relationship with Ray changes, the quality of the picture changes and the viewer sees the switch.

But when Ray and Wenders begin giving each other suggestions on how they should say their lines, the picture flashes to the grainy unreality of video. The video camera takes in everything that was pushed out of the film camera's viewfinder, and we see that Wenders and Ray were not alone after all. The cameramen, director's assistants and gaffers all stand around them. We may have thought the friendly bedside discussion was real, but we didn't see the microphone that hovered just out of our view.

Shares directing

This confusion of realities is not the only point of the film, however. It is also about "a man who wants to bring himself all together before he dies, a regaining of self-esteem," says Ray. Ray shares directorial credit with Wenders for *Lightning Over Water*. The film is his attempt to regain his self respect by working with the art form that he loved.

One gets an inkling of what Ray means in one scene where he stands next to the screen on which a film of himself is being shown. On the screen is a well-built active man chatting with a student, while the silhouette of the bystander is a gaunt, balding man, staring at who he once was and can never be again.

In another scene Ray is directing an actor in a play. "Freedom was not what I wanted, but a way out," the actor says, Ray's eyes glisten with the hint of tears.

The scene is made especially poignant when one reali-

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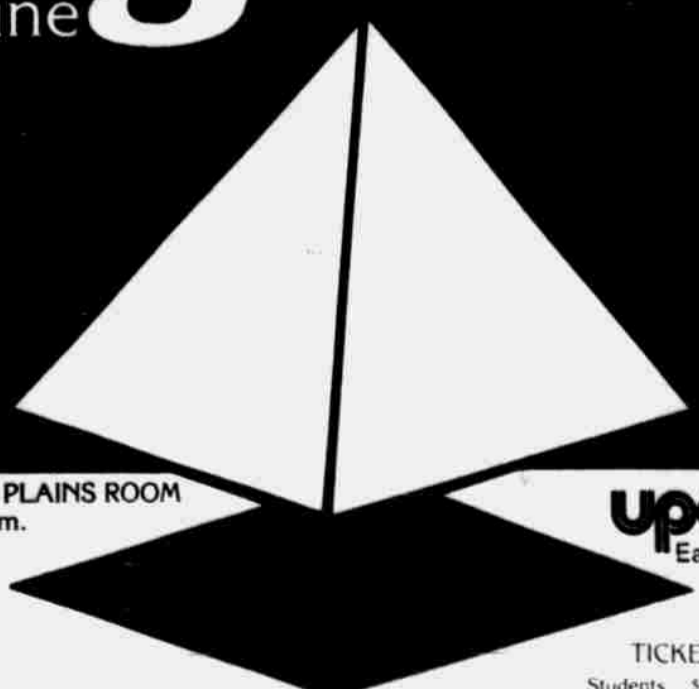
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