

Arts & Entertainment

'The Witness' caught in bureaucracy of truth-makers



The character Virag contemplates suicide in a scene from "The Witness."

By Eric Peterson

A dikekeeper who wants to mind his own business is the main character of a fine satire on the ways of a bureaucracy of terror. "The Witness," a Hungarian film by Peter Basco, ends tonight at the Sheldon Film Theater; screenings are at 7 and 9.

The film is a lot like Franz Kafka's *The Trial*; there are the same inexplicable

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charges and reprieves — above all there is the same ironic wit.

The tone of the film is established at the very beginning with some scenes of the dikekeeper Jozsef Pelikan where he should and wants to be in the country, with his dog, doing his work. The colors of the

sky and the Danube are muted and beautiful. His dog runs to a slogan carved in the earth "Long live our great and wise leader," and pisses on it.

He doesn't know it, but Pelikan has already been marked by Fate — or by the bureaucracy, which here amounts to the same thing — for something different: He is to be the star witness against a former comrade accused of treason.

"Not even if you crucify me!" he yells when he is first approached with the idea.

The pelican, which according to legend would pierce itself in order to feed its young with its own blood, is an old symbol of Christ's sacrifice. And the bureaucracy doesn't hesitate to accept the sacrifice of its own Pelikan.

The film is set in 1949, when food was scarce in Hungary, and Pelikan regretfully

decides to kill his pig Desiree, who is kept in the cellar. It is illegal for anyone, even a Communist party member like Pelikan, to own a pig, and he tries to mask the pig's dying squeals by having his family sing anthems.

He sees an old friend, comrade Daniel, whose life he saved during the war, and finds that the shadow of something he can't quite put his finger on has come between them. The friend, against whom he will later be pressured to testify, is a big-shot now, a government minister, who talks of Mood Reports and believes in them. When he falls in the river trying to catch a catfish, they laugh about it, but the minister is serious when he says, "You saw nothing, you heard nothing."

People like Daniel have come to believe that they in fact do *make* the truth; his enemy Virag says anything can be "wiped away" from the official record, and when that happens, the offense ceases to exist.

There is an absurd gallery of rogues in this bureaucracy. General Bastion is at the top of the heap, and looks a lot like the late Brezhnev. There is the same pomposity (he yells "Treason!" when a bunch of noisy kids is let in the same swimming pool) heavy cheeks and a uniform heavy with medals.

Virag is a world-weary, mouse-like man who looks like E.M. Forster; he seems to drift languidly toward the grave, threatening to shoot himself if Pelikan won't testify against Comrade Daniel.

Much of the film is a comic repetition: Pelikan kills a pig, or lets kids swim with a general, or does something else wrong; he is arrested by untalkative types in a big black car; he is taken to prison, where he shares a cell with a fascist collaborator-torturer and a priest resentful about the lost church lands; and he is suddenly released for no apparent reason.

A few days later he will be picked up by the black car again and taken to talk to Virag. There he will be soothed by the oily bureaucrat and told of the great things he

will do for the state; the maid, who wears a delicate white apron over her spartan uniform, will grimly bring in a roast pig or baked fish of frightening size, and he will be given a new job.

Perhaps the best scene in the movie shows how badly Pelikan mismanages each new task. He is put in charge of an amusement park and socializes it; the tunnel of horrors now has a Socialist Ghost Train, which goes past a leering blue mask of Karl Marx and scary exhibits of the "spectre haunting Europe," which Marx warned capitalists of, and some proletarians who have "nothing to lose but their chains," which they clank dolefully. Comrade Bastion faints at the sight of his own unlovely visage, the last spook in the tunnel.

It seems surprising that the Hungarian government let such a wide-open satire of socialist bureaucracy be made. At every point and in a hundred amusing ways, we are told that the emperor has no clothes. The bureaucrats believe, simply enough, that if they say something is so it is so. And so the now discredited minister Daniel wasn't trying to catch a fish, but communicating with frogmen out to kill the big guy. A lemon isn't a lemon, but a Hungarian orange.

Pelikan feels guilty that people think his orange growing experiment actually succeeded, and all he had to show for it is a lemon which the general eats with a straight, or only slightly skewed, face. Virag tells him to look at the results: The scientists are happy with their medals, the masses are happy to celebrate, and the capitalistic West would be shaking with fear at the new development.

Virag's made logic leads him to accuse Pelikan of leaving the truth trodden underfoot when he won't tell lies about his old friend. And years later, when both have gray hair and Pelikan has forgotten his catechism at the big trial and the dike has broken, Virag still wonders why his service to the truth hasn't earned more gratitude from the people who ride the streetcar with him.

Fogbound Nielsen still asking 'Who won the Super Bowl?'

By Pat Clark

Last week: Spinoff, a member of the Video Nostra, was unable to give Nielsen an explanation of the goals of the little-known TV-terrorist organization. Nielsen missed his first Super Bowl telecast since the inception of the annual football-and-hype extravaganza, as he mysteriously fell sound asleep after eating a TV dinner prepared by Spinoff.

In a vaguely related item, the rest of the Nielsen family has divined that Nielsen is missing. They put the search for him in the hands of the three big commercial television networks.

The Scene: St. Dinista Hospital and Video Game Arcade. Spinoff has taken Nielsen to this staid medical arts palace after the untimely and suspicious-looking sleeping spell that overcame Nielsen during the Super Bowl pre-game show.

"Hsprbwlstdyeh?" the groggy Nielsen said between yawns. Even in his fogbound state, he realized that nobody would

television set. He guessed he was in a hospital, because not only was the television set bolted to a support near the ceiling, but the person between himself and the set was wearing a labcoat and listening to his heartbeat through a stethoscope.

"Well, I seem to be fine," the doctor said, moving the sensor on the stethoscope from his own chest to Nielsen's. "Let's see how you're doing."

"You're going to be OK," Spinoff said in the encouraging way people talk when they don't think you're going to be OK. "Dr. Donahue said it was a very routine poisoning." She pointed to indicate to Nielsen that the labcoated gentleman listening to Nielsen's waltz-tempo heartbeat was the aforementioned Dr. Donahue.

"I assure you we have the finest care and latest equipment available," Donahue said. "You name it: Pac-Man, Galaxians, Donkey Kong, Centipede, and next week, a brand new kidney dialysis machine."

"I had to do it," Spinoff blurted suddenly, grabbing Nielsen painfully by the arm. "Antenna was planning to kill you and I had to get you out of there."

"Me?" Nielsen said, surprised at his own enunciation.

He looked at Dr. Donahue, who had taken off the labcoat to reveal an academic-looking brown sport coat with leather elbow patches. He pulled a hand-held microphone out of his equipment bag.

"Does television violence beget real-life violence?" the gray-haired medicine man said to no one in particular.

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understand whatever it was that he had just said. He could tell his mind was getting clearer by the second, though, and in the meantime he guessed he could play it by ear.

He could see that there were two people hovering over him. One was Spinoff, and the other was blocking his view of the

Tape of seven area bands: Good music can be local too

By David Creamer

At last, an attempt has been made to make some of Lincoln's young and innovative musical talents better known and more accessible to the listening public.

Jim Jones, co-editor and publisher of Capitol Punishment magazine, put out what he terms "the first audio version"

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of the publication about four weeks ago.

This is a cassette tape of 24 songs by seven Lincoln-area bands, including The Click, Rapid Vapid, Hymn To Joy, Twisted Justice, Pogrom, Cartoon Pupils and Holiday.

Side one begins with three songs from The Click. The first is "Intuition," followed by "Egypt" and "Construction," which both have charming little guitar licks by Rick Morris.

The members of The Click — Sara Kovanda on vocals and keyboards, Rick Morris on guitar, Steve Warsocki on bass, and Tim Drelischarz on drums — have been together for more than two years now and have recently released a four-song EP.

For those who have never heard them, The Click is an exciting and talented band that resembles no other on the local circuit.

When trying to describe The Click's sound in terms of another group, the best

way would probably be to call them a band sounding similar to the Pretenders with a more noticeable keyboard.

Rapid Vapid, a band together for about three months at the time this tape came out, follows The Click with four fast-paced songs that thrust a message into the ears of the listener in a style similar to Black Flag's. This band makes a definite statement about different aspects of life and society. Each of the four songs they recorded — "C.P.B.," "Schleich's Song," "Insanity," and "Schleich's Song II." This last song, for example, deals with the merits of death and killing one's self.

Rapid Vapid is a five-member band composed of Patti C. and Andy Davis on vocals, Dan Kelly on drums, Liz Lang on bass, and Steve Schleich on guitar.

The third band on the tape, Hymn to Joy, has been together for about six months and has already developed a very distinct style.

The first song, "Fine Home Design," is a song that relies heavily on keyboards. The tune has a modern sound with an almost echoing drum in the background.

The second song, "Sleepless Nights," is a simple composition with a strong guitar, complemented by the keyboard. The lyrics to both songs are poetic, but not to the point of rhyming. Overall, this is enjoyable original material.

Hymn To Joy is composed of John Fynbu on vocals, Steve Hinrichs on guitar, Dan Hoffman on keyboards, Dennis Hoffman on bass, Phil Judt on drums, and Jeff Runnings on keyboards and guitar.

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