

Albert G. Nigrin: The Underground Interview (Part 2 of 2)

by Eddie Konczal

The Rutgers Film Co-op had already been in existence for twelve years when I discovered it in the spring of 1994, talked into attending a screening of *On the Waterfront* with a group of friends one unusually balmy evening in early April. Of course, I had seen the Film Co-op's simple yet bold fliers around the campus for years, but for some reason my interest had never before been piqued. Dozens of people of all ages packed into Milledoler Hall, as wall fans whirred and the projectionist battled to make the film's image fit onto a screen far too small for the occasion. As we fanned ourselves with photocopied film notes, a slim, curly-haired, mustachioed gentleman - who looked barely old enough to be a graduate student - was introducing the audience to the film's historical significance. *On the Waterfront*, we learned, was Elia Kazan's answer to those who ostracized him for 'naming names' during the anti-Communist witchhunt that seized Hollywood during the McCarthy era. Although the film itself was a bit of a letdown for me - the symbolism is heavy-handed at times, and I found it anticlimactic after Brando's "I coulda been a contender" speech - I knew I was reliving an important moment in the history of the cinema.

On the Waterfront never became one of my favorite films, but the experience of seeing a classic movie in a lecture hall on a warm spring evening is something I'll never forget. Since then, the Rutgers Film Co-op has always been there to stimulate my growing interest in movies that fall outside the mainstream. The film program has given me the opportunity to see the works of Welles, Hitchcock and Kubrick on the big screen. It's introduced me to the cinematic visions of Lars von Trier and Mike Leigh, to the significance of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and the dreamscapes of Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*. I might have missed modern sleeper classics like *Restoration*, *Dead Man*, *Persuasion* and *Gods and Monsters* - films too small and offbeat for the multiplexes - were it not for the film festival that never rests, but plugs away year after year on the campuses along the Raritan.

In addition to a whole bunch of great films, the Rutgers Film Co-op has introduced me to a unique and fascinating individual: Albert Gabriel Nigrin - the independent experimental filmmaker, lecturer at Rutgers, and curator of the Co-op, who I mistook for a graduate student some five years ago. Readers of the first part of this interview (*Underground Magazine*, Summer 1999) will know that Al Nigrin is a film artist first and foremost, creating several short experimental films each year that challenge the limits of cinematic expression. In the second half of our conversation, Al and I discussed his ongoing involvement in the Film Co-op, which he started back in 1982 with \$300 of his own money. As the film series has grown, drawing bigger audiences each year and expanding into venues such as New Brunswick's State Theatre, it has inevitably stolen from the time Al can spend working on his own projects. But it's clear that bringing the world of film to the New Brunswick community remains a rewarding experience for Nigrin.

The Underground: Let's talk about the Film Co-op.

Albert Gabriel Nigrin: Well, it's almost like I shot myself in the foot by doing the Co-op, because other curators don't want to give other curators shows. It's very competitive. On the one hand you know all the programmers, because they're colleagues; in some ways it's really easy to get a show. I also promote other people's work and I set up shows for them at other venues. "Oh, we did you already!" I say, "No, you didn't do *me*, that's just the show I put together for you of other people's work." I wear so many hats, that you need to educate them and say, "Look, these are not *my* films, these are films by other people, and I think they're important for you to show." It's a catch-22 situation.

The Underground: It seems that the Co-op is really filling a void here in Central Jersey, because there's no outlets for the types of films you show: art house films, experimental, foreign films..

AGN: There could be! But they don't want to lose money. It's a business to most theaters. They will only pick up the blockbuster art picture - God forbid if it ever had subtitles. That's what's so amazing about *Life is Beautiful*, [although] that film itself it a bit of fluff to me. I didn't really find it very stimulating. As

I Jew, I objected to the Holocaust sequences. I think [he] would have been blown away the first minute he said anything.

The Underground: The lack of realism (with regard to that particular topic) was somewhat unsettling.

AGN: And yet it's using reality as a base, and so you can't just completely say, "Oh well, nothing's going to happen." But it's based on his father's memoirs, so that's what's bizarre, and that's why I don't understand it.

I mean, it's nice in that sense that mainstream people will watch subtitled movies. But that's what we really need to have more of. But it seems like the industry is changing so big time that it's going to be really like the way the economy is. You're going to have a lot of people who are computer literate and a lot of people who are not, and the people who are not are going to be ghettoed. It's the same thing with movies: there'll be people who will upgrade to digital projectors, but the theatre owners don't want to do it because they'll have to spend all this money on projectors, just to accommodate the studios. If the studios build the projectors for them they'll probably do it. We'll be watching video in the movie theaters. And it'll be acceptable because the quality will be a little better than it is now. They say it rivals the images of what's out there, but I'm sorry, I haven't seen anything come close.

We built a steady audience, but we could be a lot better off. People see us as filling a void, but at the same time we have not grown. We've status quo-d in the last two or three years, and I'd like to have Jason [Currie, assistant at the Rutgers Film Co-op] as a full time helper, Ken [Orban, another assistant] too. And it's not that easy because we've reached a certain amount of people coming. This past semester was the most we've ever had for a season - about 6,000. The goal is to get 15,000 for the year. Well, a football game at Rutgers does that in, you know, one-third of a game or one game. So it's still not what it could be. I mean, can we get 50,000 people to come to this thing?

The Underground: So you would like to expand it beyond the level that you're at right now.

AGN: Right! The University has been very generous but limited in terms of its commitment. They're willing to give us what they've given us. But they won't give us any more. And corporations have been very generous and have been anteing up each year a little more, but it's not fast enough, and it's not enough. It's a token gesture. The way to do it is to get people to come, because people provide us with 75% of our income. We're never allowed any grants; those things dried up at the end of the 80's. We still get \$12,000 from the state, and the county, and then we get little grants here and there, for other projects. But it's labor intensive, and I need somebody to hold the fort while I go out and try raise money, and I can't do it by myself. I have a very supportive board, and they help too, but they're also maxed out. They work 9 to 5, and then what are they gonna do, spend their Saturdays and Sundays raising money? They do sometimes, but I can't expect them to do it every day.

Underground: What are some of the other goals that you have?

AGN: I think the goals are: to be able to establish the Co-op as a nationally recognized program; to really bring in more name people; and to really bring it up. I mean, you've seen the development of the program. Every three or four years we get more artists coming down, more people who donate their time and energy. That's definitely one of the things I'd like to do. I'd like to get a theatre going. You know, I think the State Theatre is nice, but we need to have our own space. One of the things we've talked about with the dean is to build a theatre on the campus.

The Underground: Is the Film Co-op unique among colleges, or are there other colleges that are doing what you're doing?

AGN: In no way are we unique. One thing I wanted to mention is we have something that other schools have had for years. Doc Films at the University of Chicago is the longest standing film society: student-

run, and they've been around since the turn of the century. Wisconsin also has a good program...mostly the Midwestern schools. The ironic thing is that the one at the University of Texas was shut down by the administration. I think we were against the current; we grew while everybody else was shrinking, so we've always gone against the grain.

The Underground: Do you see the Film Co-op participating in some of these multimedia festivals, analogous to what South by Southwest is doing, with bands, film...

AGN: Well, that's what we've been talking about with the folks from New Brunswick Underground and the music scene.

The Underground There have already been some shows at the Budapest Cocktail Lounge that have been tied in with Film Co-op events.

AGN: We've worked together and we're very interested in helping that along. I don't see it as happening overnight; I think it's a slow build. I think the South by Southwest thing has already kind of peaked; they did things too quickly, and I think it's gonna be tough for them to maintain where they are. So I'm for the slow build. And I think if the folks from New Brunswick Underground and the various entities think along those lines, I'm sure we'll be able to work together.

The Underground: What about the theatrical programming of the Film Co-op? How much of that is decided by you and your staff, and how much of it comes from demand?

AGN: I think your question answers itself. It's a complex process. People see me as curator, but as a curator you're a vessel, and you take in suggestions from far and wide. I have to be here for everybody. We're here to promote films. There's a programming committee that consists of staff, board members, and myself. And there's also a lot of feedback from participants: people that are part of the Co-op that come every week. One of our staunch supporters says, "Why don't you show Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria*?" So we did! Usually, if there are enough people that are asking for something, then I can say, well this is definitely something we should show. Another person said to me, why don't you show *Hasidism (A Life Apart)*, so we did. And got our first sellout at Scott Hall. That's opened my eyes to what communities will support film: the Jewish community; the Arab community is coming along nicely; we've been able to bring Indians out; Asian films do pretty well. It's a nice mix of an audience; [it's] not just Asian folks coming to see Asian movies. It's getting there. Where it'll go, who knows?

If somebody like the Robeson Centennial says, "Hey, we want you to do a film series for us, here's a few thousand dollars," of course we're going to do it. We will "prostitute" ourselves. But to be honest with you, I don't see it as prostituting because we had already shown [Robeson's] films before. And the only rationale for doing them again was that they underwrote us, so we felt we should show solidarity with them as well. [In November] we're doing "30 years of Gay Activism at Rutgers;" there's this huge conference they're doing in celebration. We've been asked to do the programming for that.

The idea is to educate as well to entertain. People think, "Oh, they just show weird movies." I don't think that's fair! I think we show just about everything. We've shown the *Wizard of Oz*; that's not a *weird* movie, it's considered a classic. We've shown *Citizen Kane*, that's numero uno on the all time list. So we're here to do a little bit of everything. We have an ongoing list where interns will recommend films, patrons; we look at that list, we see what's out there. If the prints are good we'll show them. There are certain films that I want to see that are on there because I want to see them, because that's one of the few things that I get out of this.

The Underground: What are the films that you feel are integral to anyone's appreciation of films? Films that you think *have* to be seen, the classics...

AGN: I'm kind of *auteur* driven. There's so many wonderful films that are now getting attention because of this AFI (American Film Institute) Top 100 list. But that list in itself is reducing what's out there. I

could say, yeah, you've got to see *Vertigo*, you've got to see *Citizen Kane*, you've got to see *2001*, you've got to see the Kubrick films, and the John Ford movies, and the Howard Hawks movies, and the Fritz Lang movies. But there's so many others, and the B-movies that people forget; there's not one horror movie by Val Lewton on the list! And his films are probably more influential than the *Frankensteins* and the *Draculas*! So our job is to make sure people recognize that there's more than the canon.

The Underground: And that's maybe the main mission of the Film Co-op?

AGN: Yeah, to make sure that people know that there's not just the stuff in the multiplexes. There is experimental film. [We did] a Brakhage retrospective. He's probably one of the most amazing filmmakers that's making films. He's still alive; he's made over 4,000 short films, from nine seconds to four hours long. And his films are dense and they're difficult, but they're beautiful. And they're handcrafted. You know, he'll probably be dead and then he'll be successful, he'll get his notoriety. You haven't heard of him; maybe you have...

The Underground: No.

AGN: Most people have not, and you're an educated person. It's the same thing with Maya Deren. They were the ones who were in the trenches. Maya Deren was the first [experimental filmmaker] who promoted her films, by touring, giving lectures... I follow the same mode. It's still a mission of enlightenment. You really need to let people know about these things.

I think we're all here to make the world a better place. And I see this as a way to give back to the community. The giving back is... people are always skeptical. They see your name in the paper, or they see your picture, and they think, "Gee, I don't want to see his face anymore. Why are they doing this?" I don't want that; in fact I try not to get them to do that whole thing. But they need that because that's how they sell papers. I'm more interested in trying to promote the films, so people can kind of get to travel the world through the film series, rather than having to leave the comfort of their own home.