

Research provides bonus for filmmaker

By CORINNE ABATT

Just like a painting or a sculpture, once a film is completed and shown publicly, it takes on a life of its own.

This came from Shelby Newhouse, founder-owner of Shama Corp., a Birmingham-based film company.

Newhouse and his staff recently finished "The Age of Steel," the film story of the Diego Rivera murals (frescoes) at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

It is being shown at 12:30 p.m. daily in the museum lecture hall in conjunction with the exhibition "The Rouge: The Image of Industry in the Art of Charles Sheeler and Diego Rivera."

The exhibition and film are part of the Ford Motor Co. 75th anniversary celebration. The film was commissioned by the Ford Motor Co. Fund and will be shown on Channel 2 (WJBK) at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Sept. 1.

NEWHOUSE, a local resident for 22 years, has long been associated with Detroit area media as a radio announcer and filmmaker.

To tell the story and explore the art was a challenge he welcomed.

Considering the completed film, Newhouse said, "I have a good feeling about it. You can't ever be satisfied—that would be impossible. When you make films you are always making compromises, but, still, I have a good feeling about this one."

The compromises stem from operating within a budget no matter how extensive or limited. Newhouse, who said, "When I am here, the company's here," decides the approach to the subject, basic structure, script, actors, sets, sound, music—the opening, closing and all the time in between. He produces, researches, writes and directs.

"There are too many variables and too few constants, but that's what makes it an exciting art form," he commented.

While Newhouse makes the decisions and runs the show, he isn't alone. For "The Age of Steel," Robert Hurdley was cameraman, Christa Kindt was film editor, and Dana Newhouse, a composition major at Eastman School of Music, did the score for his father's film.

Fortunately for today's audiences, Edsel Ford, who commissioned and paid for the Rivera works, also had the making of the murals filmed. That black and white film is part of the 30-minute new one, which also includes narration of the extensive notes Rivera made while working at the museum.

Linda Downs, curator of education at the museum, worked closely with the filmmakers, supplying information and resources as well as representing the museum's viewpoint.

She went on location to Massachusetts with the film crew when they visited Ernst Halberstadt, Rivera's assistant on the Detroit project.

Halberstadt recalled that Rivera paid \$12 him a week. He asked for a \$6 raise and was refused until he questioned, "How will it look with me walking in front of the museum with a sign saying 'Rivera unfair to labor'?"

The raise was granted, for Rivera was known internationally as being sympathetic to the plight of the worker.

In fact, controversy simmered as Rivera worked on the murals and broke into a boil when they were completed.

Newhouse said the objections were that Rivera was a Communist who showed the capitalists grinding down on the workers. Some viewers consid-

ered the murals blasphemous and read the vaccination panel as a take-off on the Holy Family with the baby as Jesus and the nurse as Mary. Others called the work obscene because some of the women were undraped.

Explaining these objections, Newhouse said, "I am convinced that he (Rivera) was a revolutionary, but within the context of the Mexican Revolution. He related to and sympathized with peasants and workers, although he wasn't born into that group."

"I would classify him as a humanist, and as a consequence, he was a disappointment to the Russians. When he went there he didn't paint a thing because he refused to paint what they told him to."

Aside from the actual art, Newhouse said there were also claims that Edsel Ford had attempted to have a permanent Ford Motor Co. ad placed on the institute walls.

THE ATTACKS came from women's groups, religious groups, government officials and artists who thought it was a mistake to hire one from an American artist.

The strongest defenders of the murals were the automotive workers themselves. They were used in from the plants to see the art and they reacted enthusiastically. Rivera spent a lot of time at the Rouge plant before he began his work and the defending workers were testimony to his realism.

There were petitions drawn up and signed by thousands of automotive workers defending the frescoes, physically if necessary," Newhouse said.

The other defending group was a newly organized People's Museum Association with George Pierrat as volunteer public relations person.

When the mural controversy broke,

Edsel Ford sent his chief public relations officer, Fred Black, to see what the problem was. Black later took over the presidency of the association which was committed to combating the image of the art museum as belonging to the wealthy.

Describing Edsel Ford as "truly a gentleman, a radical departure from his father," Newhouse said Ford's reaction to the criticism was given in a single statement, "It's my gift to the city."

The implication being the city could decide what to do about the artwork. Unlike New York City, Detroit elected to keep the murals in tact.

After Rivera finished his work here, he went to New York City to do frescoes for Rockefeller Center. These were removed from the walls before the public had a chance to see them on the grounds that they were too blatant a statement about capitalism.

One of the highlights of the exhibition will be a panel discussion on Wednesday, Sept. 20, when Halberstadt and two other volunteer assistants will meet for the first time in 47 years. Lucienne Bloch Dimitroff and Stephen Pope Dimitroff met during the project and later married. Dimitroff was an automobile worker in Flint who wanted to be an artist. He gave up his job to work as a volunteer on the murals. Halberstadt said Dimitroff came close to starving in the process.

While the film company was visiting Halberstadt in Massachusetts, the artist called Dimitroff in California and talked with him for the first time since the days in 1932 here with Rivera.

"It sounded as though they had been together just a few hours before," Newhouse said.

Newhouse can't foresee what backgrounds the film audience will bring, what feelings they may have about the

murals, the artist or the controversy. That's what he meant about the film having a life of its own.

But he is sure it's one of the most interesting films he has made and may be among the most widely seen.

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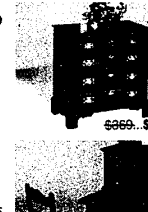
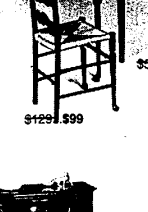
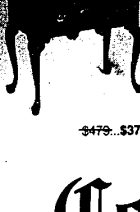
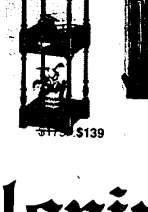
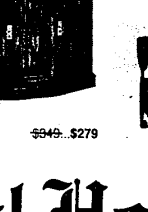
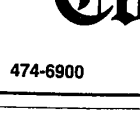
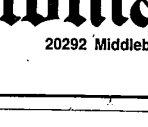
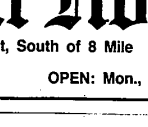
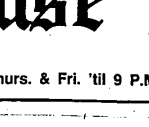
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