

OFF-SCREEN

Exile's Return

By Elizabeth Hanly

It was in 1976 that they began tear-gassing her performances and threatening to blow up her home. Norma Aleandro is hardly Argentina's La Pasionaria, but as the enormously popular First Lady of Argentine cinema and theater, her opinions were continually sought by the press. In gross terms she's a better informed, more tempered Jane Fonda, on record for criticizing Fidel as well as Pinochet, although certainly she wouldn't equate the two. These contradictions made her intolerable, she thinks, to the junta and its tentacles. The last note read, "We'd prefer not to kill you, give us a choice."

Five years of exile began that night, first in Uruguay, then in Spain, until finally Norma felt, for all the welcome, she "couldn't live with as little mercy" as she found there. Argentina's terror was so arbitrary the authorities had burned all her films, yet she was allowed to come quietly back in 1981. Film, TV, and radio were verboten, but not theater—that's how sure the military were of their own class. When she accepted the Argentine equivalent of the Tony the same year, live TV coverage blanched, right off the air. Even last year, democracy finally in bloom, Aleandro received death threats while shooting *The Official Story*. Whenever I visited her, a Hello Kitty purse fat with family passports and IDs would be close at hand. She says, "We'll need such a long time to know again we have rights."

Norma is far more beautiful than she appears in *Official Story*, where she effectively loses herself as an insulated, yes-ma'am history prof gradually coming alive to Argentina's pain and shame. First-time director Luis Puenzo had written the screenplay for her, re-



fusing to consider any other actress—these were still pre-Malvinas days. Then, abruptly, the military was so busy scrambling out the back door that everything became possible again, even, Puenzo hoped, restoring Argentina's cinema to its pre-Peron world-class luminosity. The project would become the first Argentine film in 25 years to be

accepted for competition at Cannes. For all *Official Story's* success now—awards on three continents—at its inception the film was a mad dream, at best to be shot in 16mm and at enormous risk.

In considering one woman's crisis, Puenzo is also exploring its backdrop, the great Argentine silence about the

military years. "Despite that silence," Norma says, "and all its luxurious justifications, these themes won't let us go. They have almost a life of their own. Argentina wants to be finished with that time. Audiences are bored with it. Still, 90 per cent of our current theater, our film, our literature explores the repression and the *desaparecidos*. Much of it is the worst kind of voyeurism, people making a business of disaster. But some is an opportunity for a collective meditation. I wonder, is it even possible, alone, to come to terms with all that passed here?"

And it's not over yet. What makes Norma extraordinary is her grace with that and the amount of life she manages continually to engender. It was New Year's Eve; gardenias were everywhere in the apartment she and her husband, Eduardo, share in Buenos Aires. It was too hot to wear shoes, steamier than usual even for B.A. A bit of poking around and Norma found the silver goblets—splendid ones, with ripe torso stems. Of necessity, finger and thumb lingered on breast and buttocks. Eduardo, a psychoanalyst, loved that. She calls him El Capitán and insists she's the crew. They go off, sometimes for days, on a slender schooner rebuilt a plank at a time by him, over years. Now they were telling stories, some of the sights they'd seen during Norma's exile. There was the old man on his box in Hyde Park, for instance. Between laughing and crying they recalled the dignity of his ramblings—and the freedom. In an hour, with finely understated comedic gestures, Norma created fully a dozen characters of every age. She is always watching, working, filing away mannerisms, details, then in a blink transforming them into memories, not hers but yours—no wonder half of Buenos Aires calls her friend.

In New York, a tiny pre-Columbian man watches over me, a gift from Norma Aleandro. He looks down with joy and wonder at an erection easily twice his height; Norma's smile is a lot like his. Just a bit wiser. ■