

An Exile's Pilgrimage To Chilean Shrines

BOOK REVIEW

CLANDESTINE IN CHILE: The Adventures of Miguel Littin, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Henry Holt, 116 pp., \$13.95.

By Elizabeth Hanly

EITHER THE DANGER or the longing gets you right away. "Clandestine in Chile" is set up as a heroic cloak-and-dagger, a Scarlet Pimpernel sort of adventure, but better. Miguel Littin was the most celebrated of Chile's film-makers before the Pinochet coup. Now some 13 years later he remains one of a select group of exiles absolutely forbidden to return home. Yet with the help of a make-up artist, two psychologists, and God knows how many members of the Chilean resistance, he not only slipped back into Chile in 1985 but managed to stay long enough to direct a feature-length film on how his land is weathering its dictator.

"Pin the tail on Pinochet," Littin's daughter calls to him as he boards the plane. Pretty compelling stuff even without Gabriel Garcia Marquez telling the story. As he explains in the preface, "the film behind the film" drew him to the project. Naturally enough, for all the Colombian Nobel Prize winner's themes are here. Fate, time, memory, certainly irony, both ravaging and glorious. And so the master of immediacy sat for hours with Littin pulling together this first-person chronicle. "Clandestine in Chile" couldn't miss. Yet it does.

At its best, probing the experience of exile requires pinning down emotions as elusive as they are demanding. How painful to watch oneself romanticize what had before been a vital life — yet how not to? How much more must be triggered when the exile returns home and feels still the exile, and all the more dispensable because meanwhile "the good fight," his dream, continues, but without him? Small wonder that Littin mumbles about such themes but keeps their impact at arm's length. Garcia Marquez, likewise, doesn't ask his hero for that kind of vulnerability. But without it, what happens to the promise of "the film behind the film"?

Littin knows that the Chile he remembers no longer exists. He says that he set out to rediscover it, but "Clandestine in Chile" never gives that impression. Always in Garcia Marquez's books, there's a hyper-lucid narrator of one sort or another at the center of a cacophony of hyperactive details. Everything is a bit of a process. This narrator can't quite bear that process. Instead he strains to find a context for his impressions much too quickly — to get home. And so not only is the story behind the story missing, but much of the story itself.

"Clandestine in Chile" is a pilgrimage to significant Chilean landmarks. Littin and his crew visit the mining towns in the north and south where Salvador Allende consolidated support for



Sophie Baker

Gabriel Garcia Marquez

his short-lived socialist presidency (overthrown by a coup in 1973). On some pretext they manage to film the plaza in Concepcion renamed by many Sebastian Acevedo, to honor the father who immolated himself there after pleading to the authorities to stop torturing his children. Another crew is able to photograph the strictly off-limits home of Chile's Nobel Laureate: Pablo Neruda. The barricades Pinochet's government constructed around it are by now carved full of the poet's verse. Whenever he can, especially in the Santiago ghettos, Littin asks about Allende. He tells stories of household shrines: safely hidden behind an image of the Virgin is another of Allende. He tells of children who couldn't possibly remember those years now leading the resistance. But the telling is almost always sketchy, the language too often simplistic.

Occasionally there's a glimpse of something more, when Littin describes some passers-by, for instance. "Each of them seemed to be alone in a strange city. Faces were blank, revealing nothing, not even fear." And a bit later, "Children had always gesticulated a great deal. Those in exile still do." These gems are usually thrown off in passing as the story weaves back and forth in time. Occasionally too, there's a chance for Garcia Marquez to develop the cutting-edge kind of quirks of his novels. Littin is fascinated by cops. False passport, false accent, false hair et al., he can't resist engaging in long conversations with any he sees. But it's far too easy to become impatient with him and his increasingly clumsy ambivalence about being found out. Littin is perhaps the least compelling of Garcia Marquez's heroes and this probably is because the writer has too much respect for his subject to really push and pull at him as he surely did the protagonist in "The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor," a far tighter nonfiction first person account. For all this chronicle's ambition, we're left in terrible long-shot, straining to see.

His films may be far richer. Several, including the one recently shot in Chile, will be presented as part of the Joe Papp Festival Latino in August at The Public Theater. ■

Elizabeth Hanly is a free-lance writ-