

This Edition: Art in Chicago

Windy City Times

Volume 2, Number 50

Chicago's Gay and Lesbian Newsweekly

September 10, 1987

Cinema

'Frida'

By Sarah Craig

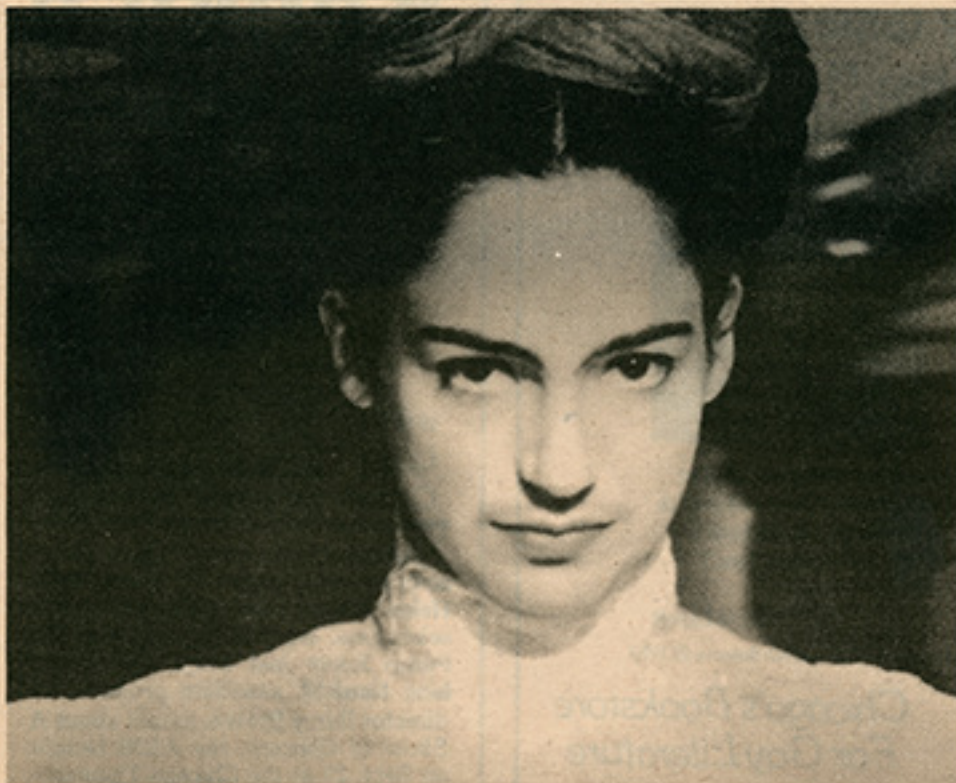
Frida. Directed by Paul Leduc; in Spanish (and other languages), subtitled in English. Running time: 108 min.

The life of Frida Kahlo was marked with an intensity unknown to most: she fell ardently in love—with men, with women, with political causes; she suffered excruciating agonies from the effects of a severe accident in her youth, from physical limitations imposed by polio, and from repeated miscarriages (not abortions, as the film's subtitle has mistakenly translated the term). Yet, Frida's life was surrounded by, immersed in, suffused with, an intensity of beauty. This is what is best about this film biography, and also what is worst.

Frida was a painter; her work became well-known and highly-prized both in her native Mexico and in the United States during her lifetime. Not unlike her famous husband, muralist Diego Rivera, she drew upon populist and folkloric themes in her work. Her strongest paintings, however, are self-portraits depicting the agony of her individual existence. These works are reminiscent of the style of another Iberian-heritage artist, Salvador Dali; like Dali, Frida employed surrealistic distortions of the human form.

Open wounds, broken spines, and bleeding hearts portray her pain and sorrow. They are symbols, not unlike the traditional representation of Sacred Heart of Jesus, to express her interior life; similarly, images superimposed on her self-portrait's foreheads represent what she is thinking. In the words of biographer Hayden Herrera, "She took the insides of her body out, and presented them as symbols of feeling."

So it is with the film. Lushly detailed scenes present vignettes from Frida's life. The scenes are evoked in a dreamy, non-linear sequence, as Frida lies, slowly dying, in bed. She remembers her childhood, and her father playing at puppets and telling his daughters the story of the Mexican Revolution. She recalls the many pro-Communist rallies she attended, and the marches through the streets of Mexico City—she carrying sloganed placards, Diego Rivera pushing her wheelchair over the rutted cobblestones. She remembers Leon Trotsky, who spent some of his time in exile at the artists' home. And she remembers the love affairs, the tempestuous emotional involvements, the purely sensual flings.



Ofelia Medina in 'Frida.'

Everything is beautifully arranged and beautifully photographed; to some extent this is authentic because Frida, her husband, and many of their friends were devoted to the creation of beauty. However, the film is relentless in its studied lushness and stunning colors; everything is beautiful; Frida's clothes are beautiful; Frida's home is beautiful; dinner with Trotsky is beautiful; but even her trip to the hospital to have one of her legs removed is beautiful. Sometimes we see Frida twisted with pain; while the sight of agony certainly is not beautiful in and of itself, in this film it is nonetheless beautifully staged. That is offensive and makes the film's overall beauty ring false—as well as calling into question the validity of Frida's suffering.

Frida, her husband, and her artist

friends were passionately devoted to the cause of Communism and the empowerment of the Mexican people. For some, the cause was merely the fashionable thing; their commitment was more posing and dilettantism than true compassion for the campesinas. Frida, however, was known to be generous with her time, energy, and resources. Because the film depicts the sufferings of the downtrodden peasants as bloodless, colorful and—yes—beautiful, the film not only exploits the peasants in its own way but calls into question the depth of Frida's commitment—making her seem a dilettante as well.

One more example: Frida loved many women during her life. The film reduces that part of her to a pair of scenes, one of which is a deliberate manipulation of

her female nurse in order to extract a dose of pain-killing drugs. Paul Leduc's film gives the lie to Frida's honest passions.

And that is the final betrayal: with its almost unrelenting emphasis on Frida's love affairs (including her sometimes dependent addiction to the affection of Diego Rivera), the film obscures Frida's identity as an individual. Her politics and her art are presented almost as secondary to her romances and her jealous rage.

In several ways, this film is analogous to *Kiss of the Spider Woman*: the actions of the characters cannot be explained without an understanding of the political context, but the repressive politics in question are kept almost entirely off the screen; and the undeniable skill of the directors, designers and cinematographers serves to romanticize the admittedly excellent characterizations of the actors into unbelievability. It is like Frida's attempt to decorate her starkly functional back-brace: all the beauty in the world could not deny the medical reality of that brace, and the attempts to prettify it only make it more cold and more terrible by contrast.

Frida runs through September at Facets Multimedia, 1517 W. Fullerton; call 281-4114 for showtimes.

Theater

Continued from page 24

Joshua Witt (Willie) play the phlegmatic husbands in appropriately undersexed British fashion, and John Chandon is cool and suave as the much anticipated (he doesn't appear until Act III) Maurice.

The actors pull off their roles with aplomb. Curt Columbus' staging lets them inhabit the singular set with authentic domesticity, and the handsome room in Piper Hall holds them all as if revealing charming ghosts from its past.