

Film: 'Frida,' Tribute To Mexican Artist

NYT
2/17/85

By WALTER GOODMAN

FRIDA KAHLO'S death in 1954 at the age of 47 caused no great stir in the United States. In her native Mexico, however, she had been a celebrity. At least within radical political and artistic circles. About a year before, the first major exhibit of her paintings had been shown at Mexico City's Gallery of Contemporary Art. And for decades before that, she had been widely known as the somewhat flamboyant wife of Diego Rivera and as his comrade in Communist causes. "Frida," the Mexican movie that opens at Film Forum today, is an affectionate and affecting tribute to a colorful woman.

The director, Paul Leduc, shapes a series of bright tableaux, out of chronological order but flowing elegantly in a sort of order of the spirit. Playing Kahlo, Ofelia Medina grows older and younger scene by scene, as the movie drifts forward and backward in time. Now she is berating Rivera for enjoying an affair with her sister; now, much younger, she is in an energetic pillow fight with the sister and their father; now she is screaming during a miscarriage. Orientation is provided by references to the Spanish Civil War, the rise of Hitler, the dropping of the atom bomb.

Kahlo's existence, as pictured here, was one of painting and pain, of political and sexual passion. The pain began with a terrible bus accident, graphically dramatized, when she was 18. Her spine was fractured, her pelvis crushed, one foot broken. A few months before her death, her right leg had to be amputated. Confined often to bed or wheelchair, she surrounded herself with mirrors; her self-portraits grew out of those stretches of self-scrutiny. Many of them express physical pain, sometimes in a surreal way.

Yet she was anything but homebound. We see her marching behind the hammer and sickle through 20 years of political demonstrations. She appears also to have had the strength for several love affairs, with women as well as men.

There is little dialogue; the episodes speak eloquently without it. Some of them, accompanied by popular or folk music, sing. In one lovely sequence, Kahlo seems to float about her room in her wheelchair to the accompaniment of a happy tune. When dialogue is employed, as in an argument with a Stalinist painter, David Siqueiros, over the hospitality she and Rivera gave to the exiled Leon Trotsky, the language is stiff. Trotsky was one of Kahlo's conquests, which seems to have interfered only briefly with her adoration of Stalin. (The program at Film Forum begins with five minutes of home movies of Trotsky in Mexico, being visited by Kahlo and Diego Rivera. Nothing much happens, but the glimpse offers an opportunity to compare the look of the real Kahlo with the Kahlo re-created by



Ofelia Medina in "Frida."

A Flamboyant Artist

FRIDA, directed by Paul Leduc; in Spanish with English subtitles; director of photography, Angel Goded; produced by Manuel Barbachano Ponce; released by New Yorker Films. At the Film Forum, 37 Watts Street. Running time: 106 minutes. This film has no rating.

Frida	Ofelia Medina
Diego Rivera	Juan José Gurrrola
Trotsky	Max Kerkow

Ms. Medina. The resemblance is remarkable, even to the mustache.)

"Frida" does not try to be a biography. (That is available in Hayden Herrera's 1983 book, "Frida.") What Mr. Leduc and Ms. Medina do is open up a life to us in the way that Kahlo herself attempted in her art. Whatever the real Kahlo was like, in their movie, she is vibrant.