

More Locarno Reviews

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Der Vormund Und Sein Dichter

(The Guardian and His Poet)
(W. GERMAN-COLOR-DOCU)

Locarno, Aug. 5

A Telefilm Film Production, Munich, in collaboration with Bayerischer Rundfunk. Features entire cast. Written and directed by Percy Adlon, based on Carl Seelig's book "Wanderings with Robert Walser." Camera (color), Pitt Koeb; editing, Clara Fahy; production manager, Elconore Adlon. Reviewed at Locarno Film Festival (Market), Aug. 11, '81. Running time: 87 MINS.

Cast: Rolf Illig (Robert Walser), Horst Raabe (Carl Seelig)

"The Guardian and His Poet" was the first documentary feature made by Percy Adlon for both cinema and television: the 1978 production won him an Adolf Grimme tv-prize, crowning the talented documentarist's previous work on cultural and literary themes with a success he well deserved.

The "guardian" in the title refers to publisher and parttime scribe Carl Seelig, while the "poet" is the rediscovered Robert Walser, whom many critics rank in the same class with (if not exceeding) Hermann Hesse. In any case, since two prominent features have been made on Walser books — Peter Illenthal's "Jakob von Gunten" (West Germany, 1971) and Thomas Koerfer's "The Assistant" (Switzerland, 1977) — this sketch on the Swiss writer's last years makes for a fascinating addition to the literary film genre. It not only tells the uninformed viewer a great deal about a talented writer, but raises questions about the personality of a man believed to be an incurable schizophrenic for the last 23 years of his life in a mental hospital.

Walser (born in Biel on 15 April 1878) died in 1956 in Herisau while on an after-dinner walk, this time on a cold, wintry, snowy day. His legal guardian, Seelig, a successful publisher, visited the poet three years after he entered the clinic with a breakdown, in 1933, and he returned thereafter two or three times annually to go on long walks with the writer until Walser's death 20 years later. Why did the publisher religiously submit himself to long, wearisome tramps at an exhausting pace to "communicate" with an almost forgotten literary figure of the pre-First World War period? Why did he agree to be

come his legal guardian in the process? Was Robert Walser really mentally ill? Did Seelig, mediocre writer in his own right, sense he could find vicarious fame and a continuing fortune, via a biography on this odd personality?

Adlon, who researches his material down to the finest detail, assumes that the viewer will do some homework of his own. Little note is made of Walser's literary career and testament, nor of his intimate acquaintance with German literary figures. The emphasis is elsewhere — on his personality and the possibility that the writer-poet was playing possum as a schizophrenic. The regular encounters with Seelig — filmed against a bare, breathtakingly beautiful winter landscape — hint that there is a lot more to both the writer's story than is contained in the publisher's "Wanderings with Robert Walser" (the film's literary source).

Further, by both visiting the actual clinic in the Aargau area of central Switzerland to examine the records, and by filming in the immediate environs, documentarist Percy Adlon lets it be known from the start that several legends and myths about the poet are now best forgotten in the scholarly, but dubious, practice of "rediscovering" a prominent writer.

Adlon divides his film into separate, interconnected segments, titling sequences under "institution" and "walk" and numbering each in a chronological order. Although the years pass and the seasons change in the literary source, the time and place (Switzerland in winter) remains stylistically the same in the film's context. This is a "Kulturfilm" that deserves a slot in arthouse repertoires, docu fests, and German film weeks. —Höll.