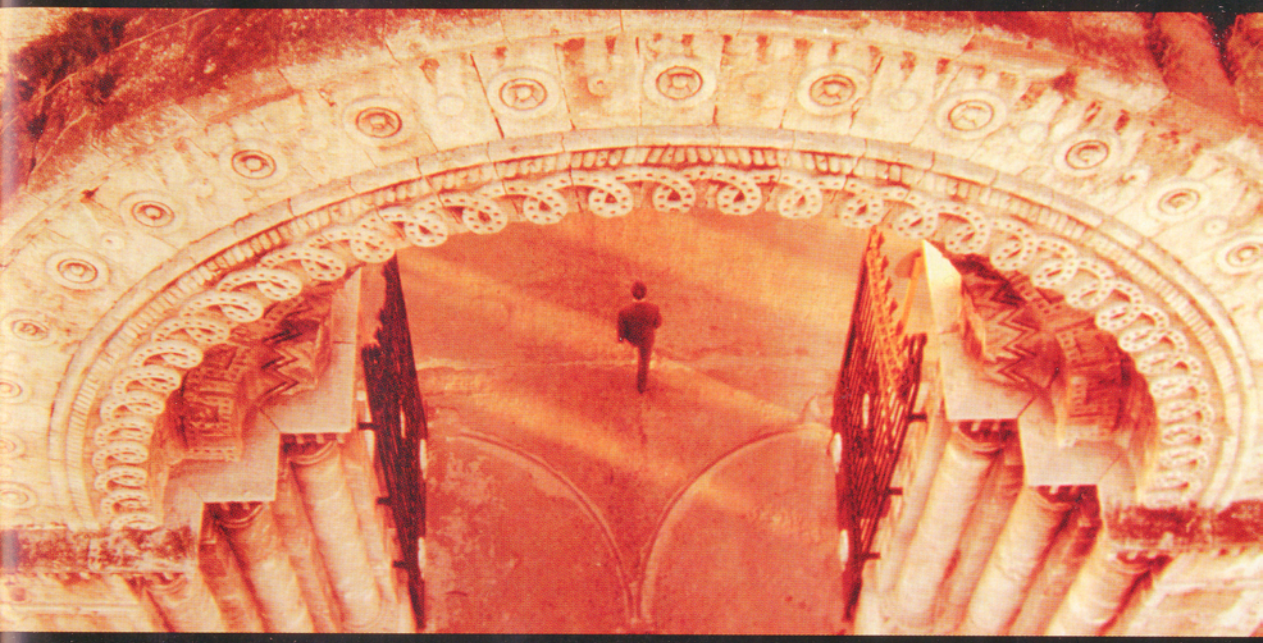
A FILM BY THOMAS STENDERUP



PORTAL TO PEACE

PORTAL TO PEACE

By Niels Jensen

If a tourist is someone who stays at home no matter how far he travels, and the traveller, the true traveller, is someone who immerses himself in a world different to that which he knows from home, no matter what the costs of throwing himself into it may be, Thomas Stenderup was transformed from the zestful tourist into a troubled traveller when he passed through the portal to peace into Havana's mighty cemetery, and curiously approached what he assumed was an interment at which a little flock of people had gathered.

The moment he realised what was actually going on, he was thrown onto foreign territory, so to speak, and subjected to a violent shake-up. A shake-up of the kind nobody can bear without thinking about it. At least not without the consequence being a decline into cynicism or a stunting of the soul. Thought and reflection were required — which in Thomas Stenderup's case resulted in a film about what it meant to him to proceed through the portal to peace. A film with many levels and many variations on its theme.

Firstly, the film is a thorough registration of what an exhumacíon actually is. What happens. Who does what. The bureaucracy of the event and the work involved. The entire process — including the regrettable and in the true sense of the word absurd mistakes. All a matter of

practice. Or lack of it. Secondly we are shown scenes and episodes from another culture with a closer relationship to the process of death than we are familiar with or could cope with, the way our tradition happens to be, not that one may say that the burden is not also very great for the people at the exhumacíon. After all, they are agitatedly confronted with no less than, but at the same time as little as, the earthly remains of their nearest and dearest, and the film records their horror and grief. We see people on the verge of catastrophe, the verge we all skirt all life long, but which the record of the film uncovers as the decay and stench of decomposition.

But this only depicts the patina left by the experience of the moment. The second layer of the film is that of reflection, not to be seen here as intellectual observations on the consequences of annihilation for our understanding of life, but conveyed through the form, the artistic expression, with which this account has been imbued.

The music is vital. The requia brought into the portrayal determine the message of the film, as do Antony Dod Mantle's camera work and the rhythm, the breathing that editor Niels Pagh Andersen has imparted to the film.

The requiem — the Catholic death mass — takes its name from the first phrase of that mass. "Requiem aeternam dona eis" ... "Give them eternal rest". Words and notes melded into a denial of annihilation as the last and final truth. Not that the film attempts to convey hope that eternity exists or consolation that everything will end happily ever after. What does happen is that the account is anchored in a conviction that there is meaning, despite the inevitability of annihilation. A meaning that emerges from the spirit, the soul the music reflects and of which the pictures of these people are images. For as we see them, as their hands and faces are photographed and as the sequences are composed, these people are not only portrayed as agitated, confused and grieving, but also as noble figures who confront the inevitability of life with dignity, courage and love.

If the first layer of PORTAL TO PEACE is that of the reportage, an account of a given event, and the other layer makes it a documentary, a cinematographical essay arguing its theme, in its final form the film is informed by the quality of poetry and becomes a paean to life and the human comedy, where the humour, which is quite different from "good humour", empowers us to relate to our lives without risking our courage and our self-respect. This is formulated so movingly in the closing shots of the film, where a recurrent figure eases open the lid of the box in which the bones of his beloved have now been placed, to slip a flower between lid and box. His world has crumbled, but he proffers a flower. He is one of mankind. A man of spirit.

PORTAL TO PEACE

Duration	**30 minutes**
Format	**35 mm/colour**
Directed·written by	**Thomas Stenderup**
Cinematographer	**Anthony Dod Mantle (dff)**
Editor	**Niels Pagh Andersen**
Production manager	**Maria Magdalena Garcia**
Sound recording	**Jesús León**
Sound editing	**Morten Bøttzauw**

Music

Anton Dvorak: Requiem
Karel Ancerl/Berlin Radio Chorus/Forlane/UMPI 1991

Gabriel Fauré: Requiem
John Eliot Gardiner/Monteverdi Choir/Phillips 1994

Luigi Cherubini: Requiem in C-minor
Riccardo Muti/Ambrosian Singers/EMI 1982

Pierre de la Rue: Requiem
Bo Holten/Ars Nova/SteepleChase 1986

Guiseppe Verdi: Requiem
John Eliot Gardiner/Monteverdi Choir/Phillips 1995

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Requiem
John Eliot Gardiner/Monteverdi Choir/Phillips 1986

Hector Berlioz: Grande messe des Morts
Louis Frémaux/City of Birmingham
Symphony Orchestra/EMI 1994

Produced by	**Final Cut Productions © 1996**
In co-production with	**National Film Board of Denmark** **Nordic Film & Television Fund** **TV 2/Danmark** **Westdeutscher Rundfunk** **Yleisradio**
Distribution Sales	**National Film Board of Denmark** **Final Cut Productions**





CREATION AND ANNIHILATION

By Thomas Stenderup

The idea behind the film arose from an experience in the Columbus Cemetery, Havana, ten years ago. One early morning walk I came across a large crowd of people congregated at one end of the enormous cemetery. I made for the spot, sure that I would witness a traditional burial. But it was not. It was an exhumation. The digging up of human remains.

I don't think I have ever felt so provoked by an event. When I recall the interments of relatives and friends I have attended, they were utterly different affairs. Despite my profound sadness I experienced the distance to death grief lends, as if the lidded coffin allowed common sense enough room to shield me in a disassociative acceptance of the fact that death comes to us all — and that's life. However unfair and awful each individual case may be.

My experience of the exhumacíon was quite a different, direct confrontation with annihilation. It was not a fearful experience, like the times I have been afraid of losing my life because it was under threat. In those situations I felt a link to a higher power - after all, I escaped, I survived. Life went on.

The exhumacíon ritual was a very direct encounter with annihilation. The body stops. It decomposes. I felt lonely and humble — but in particular, bashful and embarrassed by this meeting with nothingness. The provocation remained on my mind, and later became an inevitable question as to how I — my culture — modern man — is to meet life on annihilation's terms.

I happen to have grown up in a part of the world where the great philosophical questions and grandiose sentimentality are reserved for special solemn occasions. I have therefore had difficulty opening up for this provocation, and giving it play. But the late Danish philosopher Knud Ejler Løgstrup came to my rescue with the works he left behind him, particularly "Creation and Annihilation" and "Origin and Surrounding", which were a major inspiration for this film.

Løgstrup pointed out that we live in an irreligious age. In the modern world more effective, more persuasive rationalisations have assumed the role religion once played. Both as a guide to living and as parameters for the social order, religion has lost its meaning. Not that religion possesses no meaning for the individual — if nothing else, then in crisis situations. But as a rationalising factor, knowledge and mastery have taken centre stage in the modern world: we want to expand and confirm our power.

New knowledge and mastery constantly create room for new philosophies of life and cause civilisations to shift. Our world has significance with regard to what it is not — yet. Its significance, its meaning, is shoved continuously out into that which is not — yet.

We live in a belief in progress — in an uninterrupted flight into the future, in what we must achieve and what we have to get done. In what we are going to control next. In our own minds we have attained so much control over the natural foundations of our existence that that we delude ourselves that our lives are due to us. That we ourselves are the power of being. Even though it is unspoken, even though we know it is not true — we live in the illusion that our revolt against annihilation will triumph.

In this philosophy of life, belief in God is an alien element. It plays no active role; at most something the individual bashfully turns to in crisis situations.

I think — like Løgstrup — that the expansion of space over the last few centuries (which is linked to the focus on knowledge and mastery) bears some of the "blame". The fact that the world is no longer finite, but infinitely vast and complex, lends succour to the idea that the life of the individual is infinitely meaningless and irrelevant. This lends nourishment to the idea that our being is just like anything else, merely a matter of time and fortuitousness. We give up any faith and put in its place an infinite belief in our own capacity to comprehend and control an expanding world through common sense. "We mark the World", "The World is Growing" (to be polemic for a moment). But we are still "in control"! Moreover, we ascribe value to success in being so. In this regard we find the meaning in our lives in the existing world, in what it has to offer, and in what we can achieve in it, not in a faith beyond this world.

My encounter with exhumacíon in the Havana cemetery was a provocation because — I now believe — it was an encounter between this modern man — myself — and annihilation, stripped of all make-up. It was embarrassing because for a moment I felt that I could not acknowledge myself. For in everything that is within our power, we live in a deeper dependence on what is beyond our power. And it is in this perspective I have to seek a meaning in live on annihilation's terms. I think Løgstrup has put it succinctly and provocatively:

"Life acquires meaning when we refuse to allow annihilation to brand everything with fortuitousness"

(Knud Ejler Løgstrup; "Origin and Surrounding").

In my mind there is no doubt that we are approaching a show-down with ourselves: with modern man's ideas. Not that we actually take the specific problems that seriously

— for example the problem that our so-called control over the natural foundations for our existence has resulted in our being well on the way to destroying that very nature. No, we go on believing in progress, in our ability to deal with pollution and the gaps in the ozone, our ability to control genetic engineering and all the rest of it. The problem for modern man is more the question of the fundamental meaning of it all, of all that future in which we are going to achieve so much ...

We are well on the way into an upheaval — just like at the end of the last century. Whether religion has greater chances this time round is an open question. The worship of "time and fortuitousness" has so far managed to hold sway over a belief in God as "the power of being in that which is".

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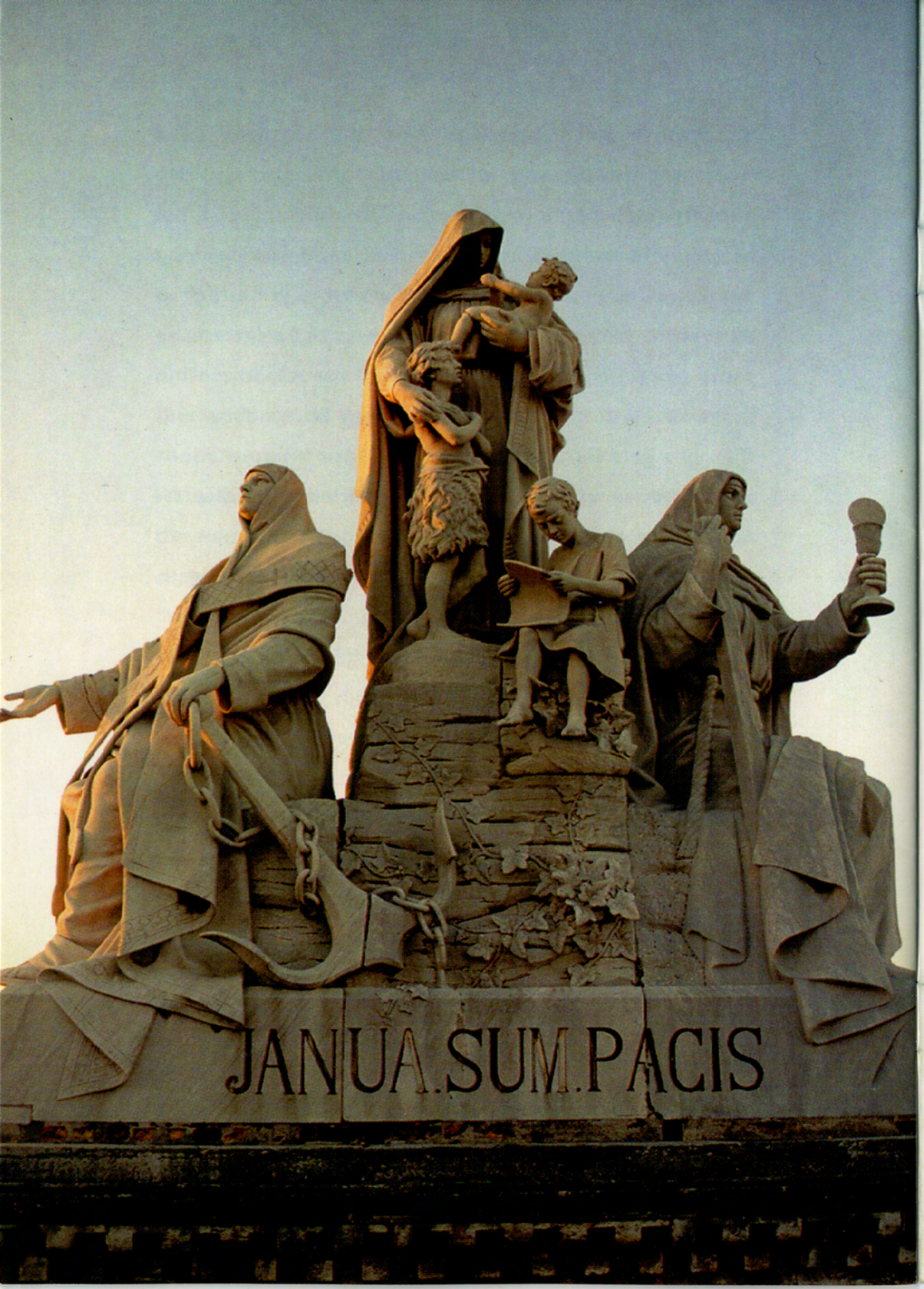
PORTAL TO PEACE is a film about a ritual with a very practical background: in a culture where cremation is unusual, cemeteries fill up rapidly. In Latin America and in some other places, to solve the problem, remains are frequently exhumed. In Cuba, two years after interment. Relatives are invited to observe the little ritual.

The music for the film is drawn from requiems from different periods. Twelve pieces by seven different composers are quoted. Together, they make up a traditional requiem, although only a few passages from the 'dies irae' have been included, and other sections are slightly abbreviated.

It fascinates me that in the last 500 years such a large number of composers have interpreted the same text so differently. Whereas some prayers are interpreted by some composers in the solemnest of moods, the same prayers are interpreted quite joyfully by others. Now and then one gets the impression that in their interpretations the composers are commenting on each others' requiems. At any rate, the works comprise a historical testimony to the way in which man has perceived his relationship to God.

In the film I have taken the liberty of quoting freely from different requiem settings — even from within the same section — in order to fine-tune the way viewers experience the ritual.

I have essayed a provocatively close depiction of the ritual, with all the respect for the participants the situation demands. My hope is that the film — in its intense focus on death — will make room for feelings which are more to do with life.


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