



THE DOCUMENTARY ART OF FILMMAKER MICHAEL RUBBO

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How It Works

Waiting for Fidel; I Am an Old Tree

It's early 1974. Three men—Geoff Stirling, a media magnate and native of Newfoundland; Joey Smallwood, the former premier of Newfoundland and the man credited with bringing it into the Canadian Federation in 1949; and Rubbo—are aboard a small jet en route to Havana along with a film crew. This, the opening scene of *Waiting for Fidel* (1974), underlines the film's *carpe diem* provenance. Smallwood, Rubbo explains, has received an informal invitation from Fidel Castro to come to Cuba and interview him for a film that, Smallwood hopes, might ease relations between Cuba and the United States. Stirling has agreed to pay the outside costs (travel, location expenses, film stock) in return for broadcasting rights, which he hopes to sell to the National Broadcasting Corporation, one of the so-called Big Three American commercial networks. Stirling wanted Rubbo, whose *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* he had seen and liked, to direct. Rubbo jumped at the opportunity—the Film Board had only about a week to decide whether to seize it or not. The mood of the resulting film is excited and hopeful, but already the three men's distinctive characters are beginning to emerge. Smallwood is an admirer of Red China and adores Fidel Castro. Stirling is skeptical about Cuba but thinks a tough-minded if generally positive film will make money and perhaps do some good. Rubbo leans toward Smallwood politically but is thinking in terms of returning to Canada with a film “rich and rare” because of its interview with Castro

and insights into Cuba. All three believe the film might just open the door to better relations between Cuba and the United States.

Waiting for Fidel is Rubbo's best-known film. Even most people who have only heard of it know that the interview does not happen; the title itself suggests as much. Rubbo, Smallwood, Stirling, and the film crew sit around for three weeks waiting in vain for the promised interview. They are billeted in Protocol Residence Number Nine, a mansion once owned by an American textile tycoon who fled Cuba after the revolution. The three dine on splendid food in an immense, echoing room, attended by well-trained cooks and waiters. During the day, they are taken to visit various sites of interest, including a high school, a technical college, a mental hospital, a housing complex under construction, and a museum about the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1962.

The richest aspect of *Waiting for Fidel*, if not the most famous, is the interplay among the three protagonists. Of course Rubbo had been in front of the camera before—first as a self-deprecating, mildly provocative stirrer of action in *Persistent and Finagling*, then as a tour guide in *Wet Earth and Warm People*, and finally as a somewhat more active participant in *The Man Who Can't Stop*. But this time he is a full-fledged character, as fully present as Smallwood and Stirling. Throughout the film, the other two take opposing views of Cuba. Early on, Rubbo uses the camera as well as narration to suggest the antagonism to come. As the team is being driven from the airport, Smallwood and Stirling are filmed in a two-shot in the back seat. "Welcome to Cuba," Rubbo says in voice-over, as the two men, "the capitalist and the Socialist," look out their respective windows. At dinner, a testy exchange occurs after Smallwood recounts a previous conversation with Castro in which he mentioned that Stirling was a very rich man. Stirling says, "I certainly hope you also told him that I give seventy-six cents on every dollar to my fellow human beings." Smallwood rejoins, "No, you don't *give* it, they *take* it. The government *takes* it, in taxes."

"But I give it willingly."

"Well, that's good," Smallwood says as if to close the matter. "That's good."

In such exchanges, Smallwood, who was seventy-three at the time the film was made, demonstrates his political tact (if he is a bit domineering at times), reflecting a lifetime of intense and successful political



6.1 “The capitalist and the Socialist.” Screen grab. *Waiting for Fidel* (1974). The National Film Board of Canada.

activity. Had the promised interview with Fidel Castro taken place, Smallwood and Castro would have been the two main characters. Castro’s importance was well established at the time of the film, but Smallwood’s achievements were not well known outside of Canada. He was born poor, the first of seventeen children in a remote part of Newfoundland. A generous uncle paid his tuition to Newfoundland’s leading Anglican school. From an early age, he had dreamed of one day becoming prime minister of Newfoundland. In his twenties, he worked as a journalist in New York City, where he became a Socialist. He was an avid reader who “felt inferior to no one, an attitude that would enable him to approach anyone anywhere, no matter their prominence or wealth.”¹ Back in Newfoundland, he became a passionate pro-labor journalist (in both print and radio) as well as a union organizer, but his overarching goal was to bring Newfoundland into confederation with Canada. A member of the British Commonwealth,

Newfoundland had been invited to join the country in 1867, but turned it down. When it went bankrupt during the Great Depression, it went into a kind of receivership under Britain's control. In 1948, when Britain decided it could no longer maintain it, and Newfoundland wanted to regain control of its affairs, voters were faced with a choice: to go it alone (but perhaps then join the United States, if the country would have it) or to join Canada. Geoff Stirling had advocated joining the United States, which could happen only if Newfoundland first turned down confederation. Confederation won in a close vote, and Canada agreed to accept Newfoundland. Smallwood became its premier (provinces do not have prime ministers). Over the years, he did many things to help Newfoundland economically, but his rule was often thought iron-handed, controlling, top-down. He was a Socialist with a populist bent. His reign lasted about twenty-four years, ending in 1972, only two years before *Waiting for Fidel* was shot. Thus, although he was not Castro's North American counterpart, had not led a revolution or become a hero of the Left, he had more years' experience as the head of a quasi-state than Castro at the time had as a prime minister. He was, moreover, a committed Socialist (although a member of the Liberal Party), and was used to getting his way.

At what appears to be the equivalent of a middle school, where students pay no fees and are fed and clothed but have to work three hours a day making baseballs, Smallwood and Stirling engage in an intense argument. Smallwood is impressed, Stirling is disturbed. About the work, Stirling asks sarcastically, "They get paid for it?"

"Yes—free tuition, clothing," answers Smallwood.

Stirling: "Like our Newfoundland fishermen used to, with no money involved."

Smallwood thinks the work requirement is a good thing; it promotes a positive attitude towards labor. Stirling is outraged that children eleven years old should have to work. Rubbo takes Smallwood's side. Stirling shouts, "If you want to get apologetic for this whole system, *that's fine*. But it isn't *my way of looking* at it!"

"No," replies Rubbo, "I want to *learn* something. You don't want to *learn* anything!"

Smallwood accuses Stirling of looking at work as a penalty. Stirling counters that he looks at work as an opportunity to develop one's



6.2 The three men debate the Cuban system. Production photo. *Waiting for Fidel* (1974). The National Film Board of Canada.

“God-given talents.” Smallwood would like to see every child in Canada have to do some work; Stirling says children should be allowed to have a childhood.

At dinner, the argument resumes. Stirling says that his employees are much better off than Cuban workers. Smallwood reminds him that Cuba is “a *poor country*.” To bring hostilities to an amicable end for the night, Smallwood says, “One thing I think we can agree on: if we can get an interview with Fidel Castro, it should be interesting.”

Their next outing is to a mental hospital. Its treatment of patients appears to be humane and accepting. An affable doctor tells us that the patients are given paid work, and we see them enjoying recreational activities. The film lingers on a discussion with a woman who has a sad face and a bruised left eye. She says that her parents emigrated from Cuba to the United States and that she could have joined them, but chose to stay. She calls Castro “a very great and very busy man.” When Smallwood asks her in what sense is he great, she replies, “The only way



6.3 The debate continues. Production photo. *Waiting for Fidel* (1974). The National Film Board of Canada.

one can be: serving other people.” When Rubbo asks her what kind of passport she has, she says that she has a Cuban one, of course, being Cuban, and then adds, “My dear man, I’m the one who’s a patient here, not you.” While we don’t witness arguments here among the three men, Rubbo, narrating, says he is “quite impressed. Stirling is ... more skeptical. And we argue constantly about what is natural in human society.” By the time they visit the next site, where, we are told, a whole new small city is being constructed mostly by amateur builders, and the rent for a dwelling is just 6 percent of the breadwinner’s salary, the division among the men has become acute. The community’s “enthusiasm makes me a bit giddy,” Rubbo says. “It seems intoxicating to Joey ... no doubt recalling his own blockbusting days.” While Smallwood is asking all sorts of questions about the project, Stirling is sitting off by himself, and we begin to hear him in voice-over reading some doggerel he has written:

Oh to live in gay Havana in the concrete blocks of clay,
And the workers from the anthills coming out to start
each day.
Oh, the pure, right endeavor as they shovel dirt and clay,
Singing songs of inspiration as they toil day after day.
No more need to worry of redemption, no need to bow
their heads in prayer,
For they know that they are chosen, made of nothing more
than clay.
Ah, the gay and happy workers, toiling daily for the state,
If they reach their happy quota, on Sundays they can sleep
in late.

Midway through Stirling's rhyming, the scene shifts to the mansion, where Stirling is reading the poem in sync. He seems pleased with it. Smallwood, annoyed, asks Stirling, "Geoff, did you write that? It was clever." Rubbo asks Stirling if he believes those sentiments or is just being cynical. Stirling says he's just being cynical. "You're poking fun," Smallwood says, adding that he is irritated "at the *slur* on the concrete boxes. I *wish to God* every family in Newfoundland, in St. John's, had homes as good as these."

A visit to a prestigious technical university provokes discussion, not an argument. Unlike Stirling, Smallwood is entranced. As premier, he had made education a top priority. In 1965, at Memorial University (Newfoundland's most prominent), he announced that students would no longer have to pay tuition and that they would get living allowances. He was wildly cheered.² The three men speak with the student body president and with other student leaders. One explains the difference between Socialism—it rewards workers according to their contribution—and Communism—it rewards workers according to their needs—and is utterly unfazed by Stirling's skeptical comments and questions. The student leader and a grinning young woman at his side, who bobs her head with him in constant agreement, display the serene confidence of true believers. When Stirling mentions that in a capitalist country, a worker can buy stock in the company he works for and eventually become majority shareholder, the student body president says that he worked for Chemical Bank in New York for a year,

and the amount of stock he could buy was infinitesimal in relation to the total amount of stock in circulation.

The arguments between Stirling and Smallwood about the merits of the Cuban Revolution are only part of the contrast drawn between them. They not only have opposing ideologies—they have opposite personalities. Smallwood is fighting off, we sense, the fear of having become something of a has-been. In downtime (on a beach, beside a pool, at a patio table), Smallwood composes questions he will put to Castro during the interview. We hear them in Smallwood's voice-over. They sound slightly self-important, presumptuous, and sometimes rather silly: "Prime Minister," Smallwood rehearses, "You're a doctor, Doctor Fidel Castro. Doctor of what?" Before the revolution, Cuba was bedeviled by crime, alcoholism, drugs, prostitution, unemployment, and poverty, for which "Cuba was really notorious ... infamous, even. Tell me about them, would you? ... Prime Minister, would you, uh, would you tell me your thoughts on parliamentary democracy?" Later, as Smallwood paces around carrying his notebook and ruminating, Rubbo, in narration, comments, "Joey has enough questions to fill a small book."

While Smallwood thinks up questions, Stirling relaxes and philosophizes. He is a capitalist but a new-age one. He likes to sun himself in a skin-colored Speedo. He enjoys standing on his head because, he says, it opens up the organs, relaxing them. He alludes to Jonathan Livingston Seagull. He wonders if the psychiatrists at the mental hospital have tried LSD therapy. He wears heavy gold chains and shirts open to his belly button. Often he seems bored, while Smallwood is consumed with excitement at the prospect of interviewing Castro.

Despite their tense exchanges, we begin to sense that at some level Smallwood and Stirling like each other. We learn that they have known each other for more than twenty years, and although they were on opposite sides of the debate over whether Newfoundland should join Canada, they respect and even admire each other.

Rubbo helps us to like them both. He films an engaging scene on a beach with the two men, in a wide two-shot, discussing the impact of changes in the price of gold. The film team's imperturbable Cuban interpreter is looking on and listening. "Every time gold goes up ten

dollars an ounce, we make a million dollars,” Stirling says. “So,” Smallwood asks, “you’ve made a million in the last week?”

“Yeah.”

“I think you should present *every nickel* of that to Cuba.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.”

Stirling needles Smallwood back, saying that if he presents it to anybody, he’ll give it to his corporation to expand television throughout Newfoundland.

Smallwood can be tiresome, but we learn from Rubbo that he carries within him a painful political memory. He had instituted radical, populist educational reforms, and was once loved by students and others for them. “But he lost the support of the Newfoundland youth,” Rubbo explains, “and at the ’69 [Liberal Party] leadership convention, the students gave him the Nazi salute and shouted ‘Fascist!’ And that hurt.” Although Rubbo doesn’t show footage of the incident, there are glimpses of students giving the Nazi salute in an earlier NFB documentary on Smallwood, *A Little Fellow from Bambo* (1970), directed by Julian Biggs. (Rubbo’s remark that the incident was hurtful to Smallwood is perhaps corroborated by Smallwood making no mention of it—that I could find—in his exhaustive autobiography, *I Chose Canada*.³)

And it’s hard not to be touched when, nearing the end of their stay in Cuba, when there still has been no interview, Rubbo asks Smallwood if he feels frustrated. Smallwood answers, “I still have faith. I have faith in Fidel. In fact, doesn’t ‘Fidel’ mean—faith?”

Rubbo: “That’s right.”

Smallwood: “I must ask him what the name Fidel means, when I’m done asking him about his religious faith.”

Stirling (facetiously): “That’s a new question.”

Smallwood: “Huh?”

Stirling: “That’s a new question.”

Smallwood: “Hmm. Yeah. I’m prepared to understand. I’m prepared to make all kinds of reasons, even excuses, because ... *I had a job ... once ... something like his job. A bit like it. I had a cabinet, he has a cabinet. I had ministers, he has ministers ... and responsibilities, and cares, and concerns ... and, uh—*”

A phone call interrupts. Smallwood has been invited to a reception Castro is holding for the head of East Germany, Erich Honecker. Smallwood is delighted, but he is told he needs to wear a dark suit. He didn't bring a dark suit with him to Cuba. Fortunately, the assistant cameraman has one. It doesn't fit Smallwood well but will serve the purpose. When Stirling laughingly observes, "Fits you like a glove, Joey. Too bad it doesn't fit you like a suit," we sense his affection for his ideological opposite.

The angriest and most memorable exchange in the film is not between Stirling and Smallwood but between Stirling and Rubbo. "Relations between Geoff and myself are deteriorating," Rubbo informs us over a shot of a tape recorder on which Stirling has been leaving messages for him. "Stirling is worried about his financial stake in this film." Stirling (on tape) disagrees with Rubbo's position that some things are worth doing whether they make money or not. Rubbo wants the argument to continue on camera, and so it does. After several exchanges along that line, their voices getting shriller, Stirling finally explodes: "I happen to be the guy that's paying for *that* tape that's running, and *that*"—Stirling points to the camera—"film that's running. And I'm telling you that [this project] was set up as an experiment to see if we could bring in a film that was good enough for release on NBC, and if you go over—as I know, I've had too many camera crews, and my instructions are three-to-one in color, five-to-one in black and white."

Now Rubbo, who a moment earlier had denied having heard of this experiment, explodes: "Why did you come to the *Film Board*? You *know* we do twenty-to-one!"

"Not with *me*, you don't!"

"Why didn't you say that?"

"It's your problem."

"Why didn't you say that in those meetings?"

"Because it never entered my head you'd try to shoot twenty-to-one!"

"Well, I'm *sorry*."

Stirling becomes apoplectic: "When you shoot—Mike, try to tell me—no, just a minute, Mike, maybe you're going to spend the rest of your life—"

Rubbo, muttering: "It's going to be twenty-*five*-to-one."

“—as a good, *graying*, *fat* guy who has never done anything under twenty-five-to-one, but if it *is*, Mike, you are so far *out* it, man, as a producer, that you’re just a (BLEEP) joke!”

“Look, you think it’s somehow—”

“(BLEEP) twenty-five-to-one, Mike, for the love of (BLEEP), man, you’ve got to be *kidding* me.”

“I—”

“Twenty-five-to-one to put a film on?”

“Yes.”

“How much (BLEEP, BLEEP) talent have you got, if you can’t shoot better than that?”

“It’s not a question of talent.”

“If you’ve got a script together, man, and you know what you’re gonna put together, you need three-to-one on the outside—”

“Bull-(BLEEP)!”

“Who the hell are you kidding?”

“Bull-(BLEEP)!”

“Well, come and meet a few *professional* directors! They’d—they’d *laugh* at you! If I told them twenty-five—wait till they *see* this film! They’ll say, ‘My God, *who* was that *guy*? ... On *what grounds* did he call himself a filmmaker?’”

The film cuts to the three men at dinner, subdued. It is in this scene that Smallwood is invited to the reception. When he returns from it, he is jubilant. “What a *night*! There’re eight hundred *people* there, diplomats from all around the *world*, and here was Fidel and Honecker, from Germany, lined up [receiving people].” Smallwood beams with pleasure bordering on joy as he tells Stirling and Rubbo that he got a hug from Castro.

Smallwood says he told Castro about the film crew waiting for the promised interview, and that Castro assured him the interview would take place. But the interview does not occur, and days later a dejected Smallwood and Stirling take leave. They are gracious. Smallwood tells their interpreter, “I was very pleased to meet him. Will you tell him that?” Stirling expresses his thanks to the Cuban government for the exceptional hospitality it has showed them. Rubbo is staying behind to shoot some more footage, for a second film. Over credits, we see, from the point of view of onlookers, Castro giving a public speech.



6.4 “Twenty-five-to-one to put a *film on*?” Screen grab. *Waiting for Fidel* (1974).
The National Film Board of Canada.

The film’s mood in this scene is awestruck, wistful, and just this side of worshipful.

As the film neared completion, the largest concern at the Film Board was the expletive-laden argument between Stirling and Rubbo about shooting ratios and the purposes of film. Was it self-indulgent in an institutional sense? Would audiences care about the issues in the argument? Rubbo and producer Tom Daly wanted to keep the scene but bleep out the cuss words. Fortunately the executive producer, Colin Low, and the Film Board’s upper management supported them.

Rubbo and Daly had another hurdle to clear before the film could be released: they had to show a finished cut of the film to Smallwood and Stirling for their approval. After the screening, Rubbo remembers, “Joey paced in front of the now-darkened screen and mused, ‘If we hadn’t been on our high horses, we would have got that interview.’” Smallwood thought that their freewheeling arguments about Castro’s

Cuba might have been reported to the authorities and scared them off. Stirling was furious at how he was portrayed, but he

relented when some courageous member of his entourage piped up and said, “That’s you, Geoff.” At this point, Geoff laughed, and said, “We’ll do a deal with you. I’ll sign a release if you give me all the outtakes, and I’ll make the film that *should* be made, the *good* film.” This was a most unusual offer, but since I knew there was no better film in the rushes, I urged Tom to accept the deal. We did, and the material all went to Stirling, who did nothing with it as far as I know except rant about the whole affair on his Newfoundland TV station, after midnight, sometimes with Joey there to tease him.

The film fared less well with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. A 21 October 1974 letter from a CBC executive to the Film Board reported that the CBC’s director of information programs thought the film “self-indulgent and precious.” In a letter dated 29 November 1974, another CBC executive, from whom the NFB sought a second opinion, reported to the board’s administration that he too found various problems with the film. The argument between Stirling and Rubbo struck him “as being a very ‘in’ thing” and unlikely to interest most of CBC’s typical audience. And the narration “had a distinctly pro-Castro Cuba orientation” which, he says, may have disturbed the director of information programs, whose position on the film he seconded. In addition, as Jeannette Sloniowski has suggested in an insightful scholarly essay on the film, broadcasters were uncomfortable with Rubbo’s style because it undermined the assumed authority of the typical television documentary: “Is it any wonder that the CBC balked at showing *Waiting for Fidel*, a film that mocks that serious, and frequently stodgy, enterprise: the documentary film?”²⁴

While the Film Board pressed the CBC, in vain, to broadcast the film, its own distribution wing apparently did not make an all-out effort to get the film before audiences. In 1975, I told David Denby, whom I had known from our graduate school days and who was now living and working in New York as a freelance film critic (and later

staff film critic first for *New York* magazine, and then the *New Yorker*), how terrific I thought *Waiting for Fidel* and *Wet Earth and Warm People* were. Denby had seen and loved *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*, so he arranged for a screening of the two films at the Film Board's New York office. He liked them so much that he introduced them to the Film Forum, which subsequently programmed them for a short run in November. Afterwards, he wrote me (8 December 1976) about the Film Forum run and his experience at the Film Board's New York office:

The Rubbo caper seems to have gone off very well. I include the press coverage, which is really quite decent. ... I don't expect the Film Board to do anything [to promote the film]. They are the most lazy and indifferent people (in New York, that is) I have ever met in the film business. I set up the screening of Rubbo's films at their office—they didn't give a damn—and dragged some other critics along. ... When we got there ... no one seemed to know what was going on or why we should care about these films. The projectionist put the Indonesia film on first because it was "the better of the two." I had to remind him that he was supposed to be promoting this stuff, and he shrugged his shoulders. He then told us we might not be able to see both films because "a Canadian M.P. is coming along and we need this room." (This turned out to be a false alarm.) The final absurdity: when one film was finished he switched on the second without the slightest pause, as if it were an ordinary reel change. Now I understand why nobody outside of film schools gets to see NFB work around here. As far as these guys are concerned, it's just a *film*—it could be [about] anything, the Alberta Falls, or a travelogue on the Northwest country. I finally blew up at them and went into a long rant about Rubbo going halfway around the world and knocking himself out, and you guys don't care if anybody sees it, etc., etc. Sometimes Canadians are a little too low-key. Anyway, everything worked out fine and the Film Forum did the best business in their five-year history.

When I asked Denby, in 2014, for permission to quote from his letter, he wrote back, “Yes, of course quote from it. My anger came back when I read it again.” Richard Eder praised both films in his *New York Times* review (14 November 1975)—they were “fresh and funny”—and offered a perceptive observation: “Mr. Rubbo likes the Cuban Revolution, but he does not anchor the film to his liking. Perplexity is his instrument for measuring the world, and he never lets go of it.” In his own review (also in the *New York Times*, on 16 November 1975), Denby called *Waiting for Fidel* “a highly inventive and at times excruciatingly funny documentary about self-deception and the limitations of curiosity,” adding that Rubbo was “attacking the complacency of conventional ‘observers’ as a way of reasserting the right to observe.” *Waiting for Fidel* became a hit on the festival and art-house circuits. It was shown on American public television.

After these successes in the United States, the Film Board again approached the CBC about broadcasting the film. On 30 March 1976, in a memo to Rubbo, who had inquired about distribution efforts, NFB executive Barbara Janes wrote that she had reopened the subject with the head of current affairs programming at the CBC. That person, Janes reported,

said that he too had seen the reviews and that they had interested him. He had therefore sounded out [his boss] on how he felt about “Fidel.” [His boss’s] reaction was so overwhelmingly negative that [he] felt it was pointless to pursue the issue. Therefore, the film seems a lost cause as far as Information Programming at CBC is concurred [*sic*; probably “concerned”].

Janes wrote that she has approached still another CBC executive for an opinion and would report back to Rubbo when she heard from him. Presumably the response was negative. The film was not shown on the CBC.

The film gradually achieved wider fame among the fans of documentary. The scene that the CBC and some at the Film Board thought was too much like shoptalk delighted audiences. The public was becoming savvier about film, and interested in its workings. The issue

of shooting ratios, which broadcasters considered of little interest to non-filmmakers, is not just a budgetary matter—it's also a matter of empirical method. The constraints that a three-to-one shooting ratio impose on what a film can explore and reveal are far more stringent than those imposed by a twenty-five-to-one ratio. The difference is not just quantitative: the lower the ratio, the more a director has to rely on preconceptions and the less open he can be to experience. And Rubbo's on-camera direction, responding to the unforeseen, inspired documentary filmmakers in the way Jean-Luc Godard's disruption of traditional dramatic narrative provoked new experimentation by directors of drama. As Trish FitzSimmons and her coauthors put it in *Australian Documentary: History, Practices, and Genres*, the film became "an influential model of a documentary whose narrative emerges during production."⁵

The CBC's objection to the film's pro-Cuba, pro-Castro slant was not wholly unfounded. Stirling is outnumbered two-to-one. Rubbo's narration is sympathetic to Cuba and Castro. Smallwood is effusive. His adoration of Castro is disconcerting, as is his embrace of the murderous Honecker. The concluding scene of Castro delivering a speech to the masses is uncomfortably reverent. Nevertheless, the criticism, when elevated to a reason not to distribute the film, seems overblown. The film's ideological slant is mild and not insistent. And there are subtle suggestions, intended or not, that maybe Cuba is not a workers' paradise. The responses of the student leader at the technical school sound programmed. The mental patient who captivated Rubbo looks sad, defeated. During one scene at night just outside the mansion, Rubbo cuts away to a shot of ants carrying pieces of leaves down a tree. What's fascinating about the film is the clear and hilarious way it demonstrates how one's preconceptions shape perceptions. Stirling, Smallwood, and Rubbo see in Cuba mostly what they came prepared to see. And Rubbo's film shows that. This lifts the shouting match between Stirling and Rubbo far above just a filmmaker's extended in-joke. Rubbo lays bare his own values and possible shortcomings in the scene, and he allows it to conclude with Stirling ridiculing him. Thus the film not only shows how preconceptions shape perceptions, it shows how it shows it.

And Rubbo accomplishes this through *drama*—that is, with characters in conflict, characters with flaws and strong points. He does

not demonize opponents. Each character is treated with dignity, and the closest Rubbo comes to denigrating one of them is in the argument with Stirling, which concludes with Stirling's denunciation of Rubbo himself. Conflict between persons is not at all uncommon in reality-based documentary, but conflict between *characters*—persons depicted in the round—is rare. A director showing himself to get the worst of an argument is rarer still. Rubbo easily could have edited the argument so as to give himself the last word.

As the film was shown, and written about positively by major critics and commentators, Stirling began to change his mind about it. In March 1976, he sent a telegram (stamped 23 March 1976 in the Film Board archives) to Daly. His message was brief: "CONGRATULATIONS ON THE MAGNIFICENT REACTION TO WAITING FOR FIDEL AND THE ASTUTENESS OF YOUR DECISION TO SELECT RUBBO. I BELIEVE YOU HAVE A WINNER ON YOUR HANDS. NAMASTE. GEOFFSTIRLING." Whether Stirling had forgotten that he had asked for Rubbo to be assigned to direct the film or was generously crediting Daly for the choice, he was conceding that Rubbo was right about the film.

After putting Smallwood and Stirling on the plane back to Canada, Rubbo and his crew remained in Cuba for another few weeks to shoot additional footage. From this new footage and some outtakes from scenes used in *Waiting for Fidel*, Rubbo edited a second television-hour film, *I Am An Old Tree* (1975).

The film is stylistically remote from that of *Waiting for Fidel*. Rubbo makes only one (very brief) visual appearance, and that is near the end, when he steps in front of the camera to shake hands with and say goodbye to two Cubans he had filmed. It is an inconsequential appearance. He is heard asking questions off camera from time to time. And yet, in some ways the film seems more personal than *Waiting for Fidel*. It expresses just *his* point of view, not those of three opposing observers of whom he was one. Without Stirling and Smallwood sharing the stage, his narration reflects only his own thoughts. And it is denser—i.e., there's more of it—in this film than in the ones he had made so far. He seeks to answer a question, posed over opening shots of happy toddlers in a day-care playground: "I stood at the gate, watching the kids in the playground, and wondering what this collective life ...

is really about.” He visits several different locations or events, including the day-care center, a parade honoring visiting North Vietnam leader Pham Van Dong, a hospital where a woman gives birth, a boarding school, a meeting of a neighborhood Committee to Defend the Revolution, and a small farming village in a remote province.

Rubbo marvels at the love Cubans show for their children. He is impressed that all families can now eat meat and fish regularly and that they feel a sense of economic security. There is rationing, he acknowledges, but says it ensures that everyone gets a fair share. He seems to approve of Cuba’s honoring of Van Dong, seeing parallels between what the United States did in Vietnam and what Cubans suspect the United States may have wanted to do in Cuba. He admires the Cubans’ ability to improvise, the way they cannibalize parts from old machines, including cars, elevators, and air conditioners, to make some of them work. He is charmed by the children and impressed by how they are socialized into a sharing attitude. He expresses ambivalence about both the mass meetings presided over by Castro and the small meetings of the neighborhood committees, but he admires the neighborliness he observes in various gatherings. He is awed by the quiet beauty of the small farming village—not just its picturesque setting and quaint appearance, but also its simple, open, hardworking, apparently contented residents. At one point, he muses, “When I see people, fairly happy, making do with ... so little, I start thinking ... about ... *balance*. Is it inevitable that the human animal will always want more food, more power, more affection, than it needs? What will happen if we can’t have more ... without depriving others? Will we accept a smaller measure, or will we go to war, to protect our affluence?”

The film is clearly sympathetic to Cuba, but Rubbo harbors ambivalence. He finds the committee meetings doctrinaire; the mass rally is exciting but intimidating. He observes that some factories have a problem of absenteeism, which results from basic needs being met already by low rent, free health, and cheap food. One Doctor Grande, who recurs in the film, is of particular interest to Rubbo. Dr. Grande had moved to the United States in the pre-Castro 1950s in order to make more money than he could in Batista’s Cuba. He did well there, but he says that while he had a good account in his bank, he wanted a good account in his conscience. In 1963, after the failed US-backed

invasion at the Bay of Pigs, he returned to Cuba. He says he is happy with his decision even if the adjustment has not been easy. Rubbo asks Dr. Grande how well he has adapted to collective life. An old tree, Dr. Grande answers, is already shaped. I am an old tree. I have bad habits, he says. A young tree, you can shape, make it what you want.

Near the film's end, as Castro is mesmerizing the massed crowd (as well as people listening on the radio or watching on television), Rubbo says the speech reminded him of "another moving speech, almost as old as the revolution. Perhaps there's some connection." Then, over a scene from the village, we hear a recording of John F. Kennedy's famous exhortation, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." Rubbo then rephrases Kennedy: "Ask not what you can do for yourself. Ask what you can do for others. It's hard. I think that I too . . . am an old tree." Then the credits roll over images of "young trees," the children at the day-care center.

I Am an Old Tree is a meditative film. It is not a story. It reflects primarily Rubbo's thoughts about what he shows us. But Rubbo is a keener witness than his informal style of narration might suggest. His observation about the flagging work ethic is prescient: Western welfare states are now experiencing a similar phenomenon. His question about our willingness to share our affluence is now the subject of discussion on college campuses, in Western legislatures, and in the United Nations. And his pairing of Castro's inspirational (to Cubans) speech with Kennedy's call to put country first is a clever warning leading to a deft rejoinder. Kennedy gave his speech less than two years before the massive build-up of troops in Vietnam and their subsequent long stay, a venture Rubbo despised then and now. Thus Rubbo is cautioning admirers of Cuba that such idealism can go wrong, as it has so often in the past. His recasting of Kennedy's words into a universal message of altruism dampens the original's chauvinistic undertone.

Rubbo's closing admission that he is an old tree is another example of the personal honesty and lack of self-righteousness in his on-screen persona. It also reflects maturation in his political outlook. Documentary filmmaker and scholar Alan Rosenthal, in his 1980 anthology of interviews with filmmakers, *The Documentary Conscience: A Casebook in Filmmaking*, asked Rubbo about using film to advance a political agenda. Rubbo responded that he is

not a true believer, and am becoming less of one every day. I distrust more and more those who say they have the answers. The idealists and the utopians. I tend to want to be a weakener of strong positions where blind strength and dogmatism go together. I want to sabotage the sloganistic response to life. I am more skeptical than I was of societies that say they are trying to create the new man, like Cuba. I think these things appear in most of my films and will probably go on appearing in them in the future.⁶