

Enigmas, variations and the search for miracles

"RAUL RUIZ", reads the file. It's a slim, yellow file: a few photographs in which Ruiz's face is mostly blurred and unrecognisable; some press clippings from all over the world. Not much to say about 20 years of work. But then, Ruiz keeps a very low profile.

The little that's known about him could fit on a business card. Exiled from Chile after the fall of the Allende regime in 1973. Now living in Paris. Taught for a time at Harvard. A Marxist with surrealist tendencies — and that's a dangerous combination in anybody's book.

And now he's in Australia. There's a retrospective season at the State Film Centre, on now; before he arrived, I was to have an interview with him over the phone. The set-up was simple enough. Could I tape the conversation? Certainly. Could I have his number?

A slight chuckle on the line. No way.

The next night I waited by the phone for the call. Nothing happened. Outside, I heard sirens, the hiss of traffic, someone laughing in the street. But no Ruiz.

Time to talk to my contact. "We want you to speak to him," said the go-between. He sounded edgy, apologetic. "And he wants to do it, he's very eager. But he's in Paris somewhere, and we can't track him down right now."

He broke the line and made another call, this time across the globe, only to hear an answering machine playing its message in an empty room. Ruiz had vanished.

He rang me back, and now he was sweating. "Just sit tight," he said. "Sit tight and we'll get you Ruiz."

WHO is Raul Ruiz? Good question.

The data is sketchy, at best. Born in 1941. He completed degrees in law and theology at the University of Chile, then began an association with avant-garde theatre, writing more than 100 plays between 1956 and 1962. Studied film in Argentina, made a number of uncompleted short films before his first feature, 'Three Sad Tigers' (1968), a basically realistic depiction of proletarian society in Santiago. With the fall of Chile's so-

Just who is Raul Ruiz? SHANE DANIELSEN got on the trail of the cult Chilean film-maker who is determined not to be famous.

cialist government, Ruiz moved to Paris. There he proceeded to turn out full-length features and short films at an incredible rate — more than 50 works in two decades. The guy's a workaholic.

According to some, he's also the linear descendant of Orson Welles, Jean Cocteau and Salvador Dali. He's the champion of a cinema effectively without rules, unbounded by anything beside the imagination of its creator.

Others talk in hushed, reverent terms of his obvious literary antecedents: Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges and, to an extent, Robert Louis Stevenson and Lewis Carroll. Ruiz, they say, is one of the cinema's few true magical realists.

A COUPLE of days pass without a word. I catch a whisper of his appearance at a festival somewhere in



The elusive Raul Ruiz: "For me, any given moment is an enigma."

Europe, otherwise nothing. The trail is getting colder by the minute.

I sit at my desk and stare at his photograph, a collection of poorly resolved dots, and wonder why it is that Ruiz is not more widely known. Why he's not accorded the kind of celebrity status of a Peter Greenaway (with whom he has more than a little in common) or a Wim Wenders.

Maybe what makes him an outsider is his stubborn, eclectic streak. Where most directors spend years trying hard to be auteurs — carefully honing and perfecting a distinctive style, using themes and obsessions immediately recognisable as their own — Ruiz shifts between all manner of subject, all modes of expression, seemingly at random.

One moment he's adapting Shakespeare ('Richard III') or Stevenson ('Treasure Island') for the screen; the next, he's making a film about cannibalism ('The Territory'), or turning out episodes for SBS's 'Dante'. He works in 35 mm, 16 mm, video — whatever's available at the time. Makes no difference to him: work is work. And Ruiz clearly likes to keep himself as busy as possible.

LATE one night the phone rings. I pick it up, mumble something. The voice on the other end is clear.

"This is Raul Ruiz," it says.

Not the voice I'd expected. Older, a French accent underlined with a Latino burr, each word is enunciated with uncommon precision. I want to ask "How do I know it's you?", but somehow I'm convinced: it's Ruiz all right — at last.

So, Raul, how ya doing?

"Doing?" He sounds puzzled. "I have just returned from a festival."

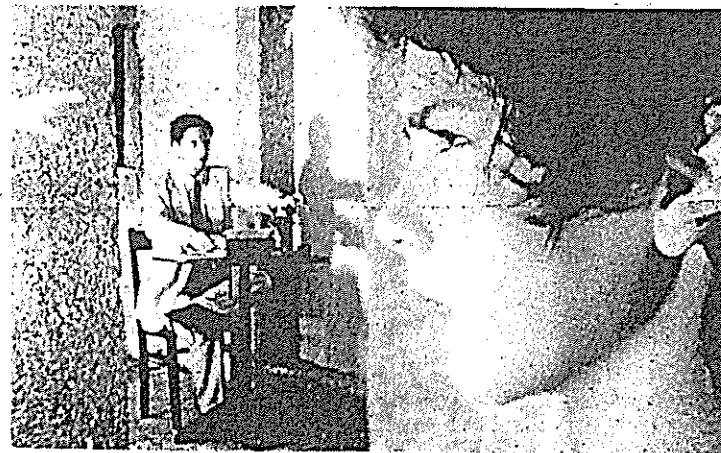
Doing some press? Getting yourself a little better known?

"No, I am far too well-known already," he sighs. "Even in my neighborhood here, I have too many friends. Too much contact."

"I can't have more than 50 friends in my life. If one is too widely known, one has trouble with people."

Enough of the pleasantries. We start talking theory, the hard stuff. He admits that "many of the problems you face in cinema are essentially philosophical ones".

"From the outset I was interested in reconciling these concerns with



Treasure Island: "There are stories that start at A and end at Z and those in which every letter along the way can contain the story in itself."

more conventional filmic techniques." "Conventional" is hardly the word that springs to mind in connection with his work. Ruiz's penchant for extraordinary, visual compositions, the array of textures and colors ... it isn't exactly 'Beaches'.

"I like variation!" he says. "I come from America, remember, the home of cocktails."

Cute, but I'm not buying it. I try another tack. Why this fascination with children's stories — pirate yarns like Treasure Island? What are you searching for, anyway?

"I try," he murmurs at last, "to put myself once again in the situation of going to the cinema as a child, when what I saw in the films was often not the story being told, but instead a collection of memorable situations and very incoherent. I seek to reproduce that sensation."

"I am not so interested in telling stories in that way. There are, I think, two types of story: those that start at A and end at Z and those in which every letter along the way can contain the story in itself."

Damn it, he's right. I recall the wild digressions of 'Three Crowns Of A Sailor' and 'City of Pirates', the labyrinthine narratives, the unexpected twists of plot and characterisation. It all fits.

"I believe there is a basic misunderstanding in cinema concerning the decision of whether you want to give the audience information, or to 'play' in a poetical way. You see, to give pure information in a narrative is a kind of striptease, gradually allowing pieces of data to be revealed until the central problem stands naked by the end."

"Whereas, if you want to evoke po-

etry, you still have to give information, yes, but also impart it with the quality of enigma and recognise that both have the same importance."

"For me," he concludes, "any given moment is an enigma."

Even in its barest form, Ruiz's philosophy remains oblique. He's losing me. To buy time, I shift gears.

You still a Marxist, Ruiz?

"In many ways, yes," he says, unfazed. "I think I am a Marxist when I acknowledge that some real events can be understood using economic models and when I express my belief in the class struggle ... I am not a Marxist when I suspect that reality is too complex to be explained using a single dialectic." Then he laughs softly, a surprising sound: "Reality, you know, is not a public service."

Great, another enigma.

"In cinema," he adds, "what is wonderful is that so many things happen as miracles. Chance is one thing, but a miracle — things happening just at the moment you need it most — that is something else. A good film-maker is someone who can sense their approach."

— Sydney Morning Herald

► Raul Ruiz will speak at an AFI seminar, to be chaired by Adrian Martin, at the State Film Centre tomorrow at 4 pm. He will also present the premiere screening of 'A TV Dante' at midday on Sunday 7 February at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Dallas Brooks Drive, South Yarra. A season of 16 of Ruiz's films is now screening at the State Film Centre. See listings and 'Bufts' Choice' (page 7) for details.