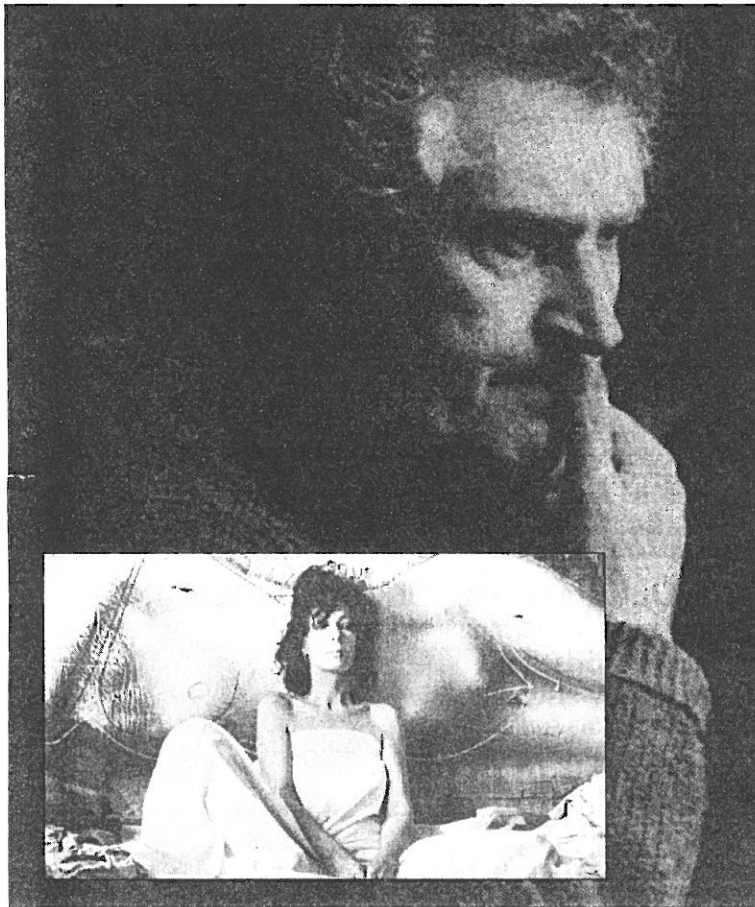


Lengthy documentary highlights
Solanas retrospective

260-minute Hour a cinematic triumph

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Tangos, the Exile of Gardel (inset), is Fernando Solanas' coming to terms with his own exile from Argentina.

BY NOAH COWAN

Fernando Solanas, Argentina's most important living filmmaker and an outspoken Marxist and anti-American, was gunned down last year by masked men in Buenos Aires. He survived the attack, but was unable to work for several months. This was but the latest in a series of indignities Solanas has suffered at the hands of Argentine governments over the last 25 years.

North American audiences know Solanas primarily for his 1985 film *Tangos, the Exile of Gardel*. A festival and art-house hit, it re-established Solanas' cinematic reputation after his 15-year hiatus from the cinema — a break stemming from Solanas' 10-year exile in Paris as a result of the 1976 military coup in Argentina.

Tangos is, in a sense, Solanas coming to terms with these lost years. It's structured around a dance company of Argentine exiles in Paris — yes, Sherlock, there is an autobiographical component here — desperately trying to perform. They have choreographed a work called a "Tango-dy", which combines comedy, tragedy and, of course, tango, the primary expression of Argentine patriotism through dance. It tells the sad and bitter tale of exile in dreamy and romantic episodes. Off stage, Solanas' camera tracks the company's central figures as they confront their own hardships, both mundane and metaphysical.

This doesn't stop the proceedings from being fun (they're often hilarious), wildly sexy (it's the tango, after all) and very smart. Solanas has the keen ability to portray the strains of displacement as not only personal ruptures (nowhere to live, separation of families), but cultural ones as well. When a mediocre French thespian smilingly condescends to Argentina's greatest actress, we feel revulsion. We understand not only the personal bitterness the Argentine must feel, but also, suddenly, her contempt for the First World and its neo-colonialist aspirations.

Solanas' follow-up, *Sur*, takes up many of the aesthetic metaphors of *Tangos* and transposes them back into democratic Argentina. Ostensibly about loss — of love, family, self-respect — *Sur* is finally nowhere near as compelling a film as *Tangos*. An ex-political con, desperate to see his wife after years of separation, must confront his past before they can reunite. Perhaps farther removed from the dirty war, it is unable to conjure up the same emotions, and so its powerful symbols — flying bits of paper, oppressive blue lighting — just seem hackneyed.

Solanas' first and most important work, *The*

Hour of the Furnaces, is one of the most important documentaries ever made and one of the most important political statements made in any medium anywhere. Running at 260 minutes (that's right, over four hours), it is a triumph on virtually every level.

Part one deals with underdevelopment and the realities of neo-colonial control in Latin America. Using stock footage, a barrage of statistics and quotations from revolutionary writers, it makes Third-World Marxism a coherent and eminently plausible path. In this context, phrases like "American imperialism" are not merely rhetoric, but inescapable fact. For North Americans, this is an eye-opening experience.

Part two applies these meditations to the Argentine political scene from 1945 to 1966, leaving its analysis open-ended — after all, oppression doesn't stop when the camera shutter

PREVIEW
LAST TANGOS: THREE FILMS BY FERNANDO E. SOLANAS
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flips closed. It details the rise of Juan Peron, a figure indebted to neither American capitalism nor European socialism/communism, but a populist, working-class and uniquely Latin American hero. When he is overthrown by a 1956 coup d'etat, Solanas does not just call foul. He goes underground, searching out the resistance and entering factories to interview workers who have seized control of the means of production.

Part three, constructed largely around testimonials of people tortured and destroyed by the coup, focuses the theoretical concerns of part one on the practical experiences of part two, developing in the process a sophisticated political position and, finally, a spirited and engaged call-to-arms.

The Marxist rhetoric of *The Hour of the Furnaces* may seem dated now. But Solanas' political analysis is still salient today, even if a worldwide Marxist response to his concerns is impossible. Oppression and American-conspired underdevelopment is still a daily fact of life in Latin America, a fact that George Bush's so-called New World Order is unlikely to change.

The Hour of the Furnaces is also worth seeing for historical reasons. It was the foundation for a movement called "third cinema," which rejected both Hollywood and European styles of filmmaking in favor of a cinema organically (i.e. without outside intervention) produced in Latin America.

All told, *Hour of the Furnaces* is simply one of modern cinema's key texts. Stacked up with *Tangos* and *Sur*, it becomes clear that Fernando E. Solanas must be considered one of the cinema's vital treasures. ☺