



The Shaman's Apprentice, Bullfrog Films, Inc., VHS videocassette, 54 minutes, \$250.00 (ISBN 1-56029-902-9)

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BOOK REVIEW

The Shaman's Apprentice, Bullfrog Films, Inc., VHS videocassette, 54 minutes, \$250.00 (ISBN 1-56029-902-9)

The Shaman's Apprentice is a semi-documentary that portrays the work of Dr. Mark Plotkin, an ethnobotanist, over the past 20-years. The film is largely produced in the Amazonian rain forest. Portions are narrated by Susan Sarandon, although most of the audio portion is Plotkin himself, providing information in an interview-like format. For the purpose of this review, the film can be considered on various levels, e.g., overall production quality, scientific content, and entertainment value. During the course of the film, five parables related to the cultural heritage of the native peoples are narrated by Sarandon. The philosophical message of these parables, as well as the manner in which they relate to the semi-documentary as a whole, requires a fair amount of cogitation. On the other hand, the visual effects together with the superb narration of Sarandon, are purely delightful, and clearly of award-winning caliber.

More generally, from visual and audio viewpoints, the entire film is incredibly well done. Since few people will ever have the opportunity to intermingle with native Amazonian peoples, or for that matter, to even visit the Amazonian rain forest, the film can instill a good sense of the actual experience. The photography is absolutely first class, the sounds of nature, the music and other audio effects are wonderful, and the overall script is very logical, in terms of content and temporal sequence. Several graphics are interjected, for example, to provide geographic orientation, and these are of exceptional quality. Plotkin himself, frequently on screen, is a likable character who is reasonably photogenic and a surprisingly good actor. It is easy to identify with the courage and dedication that is required to perform such work, and it is clear that he was a major or sole contributor to the scientific and philosophical content of the piece.

The movie starts with Plotkin recounting his entry into the field, and the incalculable influence of his mentor, the pre-eminent Harvard professor, Richard Evans Schultes. In the end, the film is dedicated to Schultes, and some highlights of his life and work interjected throughout the film are touching and sometimes amusing. This is a great tribute to a great man. Some of the other themes are more predicable for anyone familiar with this area, e.g., the impending danger of losing the rain forest and the unique knowledge of the Shaman, the potential of the rain forest to provide useful drugs, the common practice of combining several plants to create a medicine, etc. Plotkin explains these concepts in a

very dynamic and emotional manner, starting at a rudimentary level, which should be clear to all viewers. For example, the activities of a Shaman are elaborated, and Schultes is quoted as describing this as "... the oldest profession in the world, contrary to popular opinion." The visual effects are beautifully integrated.

The overall scientific theme presented by Plotkin is clearly of significant. The rain forest is monumental and in jeopardy, the Shaman is an "endangered species," and a better understanding and respect for this culture is necessary. The Shaman's Apprentice Program, detailed toward the end of the film, is a laudable effort. Also, the strong anthropological emphasis of the film, which was not anticipated, is extremely interesting. Some of Plotkin's specific comments, however, are of questionable accuracy or at least moot. One of the examples he cites for drug discovery is the potential anti-HIV agent calanolide, originally derived from *Calophyllum lanigerum* collected in Sarawak. He states "... when they [colleagues from Harvard] went back to get more bark they were unable to do so because the tree had been cut down." Perhaps this falls under the category of editorial license, but this specimen was collected through a National Cancer Institute contract with the University of Illinois at Chicago. Similarly, anecdotes related to the discovery of penicillin and the benzene ring are not very accurate. Perhaps of greater concern, the viewer is left with the impression that the entire world is ignoring or not involved in these efforts, with the exception of Plotkin. As overt examples, a major focus of the film is work being conducted in Suriname, but there is no mention of a federally-funded International Cooperative Biodiversity Group (ICBG) that is centered in this country. Similarly, a major aim of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) is to characterize potential natural medicines in their commonly used form, but Plotkin portrays this as a completely ignored field of endeavor. Also, two of the key traditional medicines described in the film as examples, topical antifungals and an anti-diabetic preparation, could be strongly criticized from a scientific viewpoint.

Beyond this, the extent of hyperbole verbalized by Plotkin is excessive. For example, we hear about "... a rape and run exercise ...," "... living in a world which is populated only by roaches and pigeons in terms of wildlife ...," "... an army of ethnobotanists wouldn't be sufficient ...," "...

when a Shaman dies in a pre-literate culture it's like a library burning down . . ." One also needs to wonder about application of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle in this situation. In conversations between Plotkin and a Shaman, it appears as if the Shaman is never at a loss for providing answers, and the portrayal of these answers as correct and accurate is hard to accept on a scientific level. The film probably could have benefited by more scientific input and scrutiny, as well as more participation by Sarandon and less participation by Plotkin.

Nonetheless, the film clearly has much to offer, and certainly can be recommended without reservation. The

message is important, and the film is a sensory treat with substantial entertainment value. The life and contributions of Plotkin are quite remarkable. It is a story that is well worth watching.

The VHS videocassette can be purchased (\$250) or rented (\$85) from Bullfrog Films, Inc., P.O. Box 149, Oley, PA 19547 (video@bullfrogfilms.com; telephone, 800-543-3764; fax, 610-370-1978).

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