

Dorfman's journey into exile and his return to Chile's past

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For those of us of a certain age and background, September, 1973, was momentous. It was when we learned, and would remember forever, how the world works. We learned that the division of politics into left and right is more than mere talk or debate. We learned, too, that the United States acts to protect businesses, not democracies.

It was all about Chile. There was a coup and the elected president, Salvador Allende, was dead.

A few years earlier, not long after Allende was elected, Henry Kissinger is alleged to have said, "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves."

A few years later, after the coup, the world would learn what had happened in Chile under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. The horror of it was unimaginable. The deaths. The torture.

A Promise to the Dead: The Exile Journey of Ariel Dorfman (Bravo!, 10 p.m.) brings it all back. Made by Peter Raymont, the doc follows the great playwright Ariel Dorfman (*Death and the Maiden*) as he returns from exile in the United States to his Chile and revisits scenes of the extraordinary and traumatizing political power struggle in the 1970s. It's a powerful reminder of what happened to Chile mere decades ago. It's also about exile, memory, the pull of the past and the idea of democracy, as Dorfman sees these matters.

Dorfman was cultural adviser to Allende when the coup happened. The title of the documentary is taken from Dorfman's statement in the documentary that, on that day of the coup, he knew some of his closest friends would die, that he himself might die. And as a writer he knew that if he survived, he had to make "a promise to the dead - that I would live and tell their story."

A major writer, Dorfman is eloquent in his passionate recollection of that period in Chile and in his life. Speaking of Allende's election victory, he says, "There is nothing like the moment when you stand in the giddy centre of history and you feel that anything can happen. And it depends on you and the people around you. I've lived that experience and it keeps me alive. Jubilantly alive to this very day."

He emphasizes that the Chile in which he lived (born in Argentina, he had spent his childhood in the United States, where his father was a diplomat at the United Nations) was a poor country, essentially at the mercy of U.S. corporations that controlled the copper mines and other industries and looked upon Chile as a place to blithely exploit and control. He also emphasizes what Allende achieved with that election victory - a democratic win at a time when many on the left struggled with the idea of achieving revolution through democratic change rather than violent action.

A good deal of this powerful, at times unforgettable, documentary is taken up with Dorfman's visceral descriptions of the immediate aftermath of the coup - his time on the run and how he eventually found refuge, with hundreds of others, at the embassy of Argentina. The blend of archival news footage with his personal, vivid memories is exemplary and beautifully done.

Still, this is not just about Ariel Dorfman and his memories. It's about the resonance from the coup. It's about Dorfman's complex feelings about the United States, where he eventually became an academic at Duke University. It's about the feelings he had on 9/11 because the bloody coup in Chile had occurred on Sept. 11, 1973. It's about his cold loathing for Augusto Pinochet. Also it's about Latin America today and how the rise of such figures as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela mirrors the rise of left-wing politicians in the 1960s.

It's utterly compelling and definitely worth seeing. If you know nothing about what happened in Chile, it's a must-see because you soon learn that it's about more than Chile. It's about how the world works.

Check local listings.

Also airing tonight

Project X (CBC, 7:30 p.m.) is a trying-hard-to-be-hip-and-sexy new science show. That means it's all fast facts and peppy attitude. Perhaps that will attract younger viewers who are hungry for science information delivered fast, those who expect to exclaim "awesome!" every two minutes. But it's likely to irritate anyone who wants serious information delivered with some authority. Tonight's program explores all kinds of bodily protection, from animal hides to body armour to human skin. The purpose is to examine "how nature and technology have evolved to protect us from potential dangers in the world around us." Dr. Brian Alters dives off an exploration boat and looks at the unusual protective suits of sea creatures including lobsters, sea snails, loggerhead turtles and sharks. Frankly, it's insanely frantic and full of itself.

J.D.