

take

by eamon byrne

THERE'D been mutterings on the shareholders' board about a dodgy deal shoved through. In the rush after the towers' thing to get out relevant stock an executive producer had signed off on some film school kid for five big ones to shoot a legover flick involving the suspected "seventeenth" conspirator's daughter and the junior Congressman. The single only reason the mutterings had stopped was it turning out the product grossing two hundred in its first week of release. After that the kid could do no wrong. But apparently the boy wonder owed a debt of art to some ancient German moldering away under a blanket somewhere out in west LA, and seeing as how it was only on the prodigy's postmodernist acumen that a worldwide box office smash had rescued the studio's ass from a Chinese takeover, the honchos had no choice but to, as they say, let the lion roar once more. And that's how it came to pass that a 96 year old legend was wheeled out of a Beverly Hills sanitorium to take control of a twenty million dollar picture.

Fritz von Stroh came out of forty years of retirement to find most of the movers and shakers he'd once influenced were either long dead or seriously inert presences at funerals he felt moved to attend on rainy days in gardens of stone or crematoria. On his first day on the main sound stage the assistant director offered to take him on a grand tour on the latest pneumatic hi tech but Stroh waved him away. He told the assistant director that, in case he was interested, in the six decades he'd been on sabbatical it appeared the cranes had gotten a lot smaller. The assistant director thought this was very amusing. Stroh said he hadn't lived to an old age to be going up just thirty feet on such a small crane. In response to the assistant director's smile, Stroh said that crane jockeying, a stunt he called 'pulling a Bitzer', was something he hadn't indulged in since banging

his head doing it against a plaster lintel and bringing down the whole goddamn Babylonian arch in the epic which was to be his last silent film before a finally pissed-off Lasky'd had enough and had him bounced from Famous Players' lot in '27 ostensibly for blowing budget sewing real gold thread in the Pharoah's undergarments, and second-chanced his buddy de Mille to do a makeover, a move which, incidentally, altered Paramount's whole dynamic for the next 30 years, with the eery segue being de Mille himself almost croaking on a crane in '55, and which had the side-effect of Stroh being made the first in a long line of ex boy-wonder pariahs, and since when, and now, he was strictly an eyeline guy, having always, like Dreyer, eschewed low angle compositions, although not for the Dane's spurious reason of having a bad back. All this was way over the head of the assistant director, who only understood from the rant that now that the old man was back on the scene it'd be strictly feet on the floor and ass in the chair going forward. And pissing assistant directors off.

The age of close-up terrorism hadn't begun when Stroh was beginning to work with old lenses. He was noted in a few rare monographs for his glacial style, though no one around here would have known that unless they'd read them — unlikely given they were so obscure, not to mention they'd been penned in Russian. And so these tinseltown arrivistes weren't in a position to know if it was any mere inclination of style that was the reason Stroh went about his work at his own pace. The most they knew about him was a name — it was reputed to have some vague notoriety. Of his films they knew nothing at all, and certainly not the circumstances of their vanishing, the details of which were hidden in another of his Slavic connections. For it was in some old vault inside a pile of grey Russian stone (it was known as the Ministry of Culture in those days), that the few existing prints of his old films still lay, moldering, in archives, under lock and key — or at least so Stroh believed — perhaps wrapped in the same yellowing pieces of paper unremembered for their unfortunate author who'd likely inherited an untended gulag grave, a reward, if it were anything in those

days, for being a revolutionary theorist in an uncertain time. The time was more delicately described elsewhere as the briefest interlude between Kozintsev's flirtation with German expressionism and its withering under the light of Eisenstein's socialist realism (a citation, needless to say, which would have been another thing about the movies unknown to his new acquaintances).

But all that was long ago, long distant from this new century's low-alphabet generations. Stroh's own embalming was to occur elsewhere, in sunnier climes. It followed a descent well into shade, from mansion to apartment to rented room to old peoples' home; and now that the shades had been finally raised by the bizarre whim of a celebrity geek he was finding he'd been well forgotten. His peers, his fans, his critics had all departed. There appeared none left over who could say they'd actually seen any of his museum'd works, as it was equally true there were none around this crummy Wiltshire Blvd lot at the present time who knew what real film work was, if one were to ask Stroh. The same first day the first cameraman made this very mistake. How would you like I should use the light, Mr Stroh? This in a faintly Bronx Jewish accent. It was like he was totally oblivious to the possible effects a Jewish accent might have on a man who'd, for all he knew, shot footage for Goering, played footsies with Leni Riefenstahl. Stroh put to his mouth the monogrammed cone he kept in the one fist that wasn't holding a lighted cigar and told the first cameraman to go away and "cue the sun." After a few days word got around and people pretty well left him alone.

They were into the third week's shoot and he'd one shot in the can already. And the shot was slow, real slow. And not only was it really slow but it was worrying the producer, who was a man who worried a lot when things didn't go really fast. So now here was the producer expressing his concern that audiences might be bored by all this slow, old-style stuff. He was getting it out of his craw in dribs, telling the German how audiences these days tended to drift off watching just a few minutes of slow stuff, that there was no way they could be expected to imagine what it actually was he was putting up there, it

was so *slow*, it might even be probable, actually, that, in fact, nothing, it seemed, *was* happening, except, as they'd notice, a slight movement of the camera, so slight it wouldn't be possible, yet, to tell in what direction it was moving, etc etc, and he's going on like this getting all this doubt about the product out, and between all the commas poking at the German with the rolled up script, all two pages of it, and the legend is looking up at him, at this overweight American whose name happens to be Jerry, and giving him the cold stare out of his one eye, the one with the teutonic stiffness that he screws up in this tight scrunch like the glass is about any moment to pop out of its 96 year old hole, the teutonic eye stare that's actually probably one of the main reasons he's such a legend, or anyway he was with the old French crowd in the sixties, the ones who badly translated the monographs on his slow style, and he says: Turgid? Can stillness, can silence, be turgid? — this in a voice so snide it's a fair match for the sneer which blights the producer's face on far too many occasions, only this time it's more an aghast horror look, as though Stroh's remark had been some insult directed towards his saintly old mother, because the sinews on his hackles have gone all taut, and he backs off and throws, nay hurls, the only tin can containing the only piece of film Stroh's shot in sixty years, hurls it like a discus shot at the back wall where it bounces back and two hundred feet of pure celluloid spill out, which though it contains mainly leader marks and trails to mostly blank, also has the only twenty seconds of completed shot in the entire sixty years of Stroh's past life, and screaming 'It *shits*, Fritz!' he storms out of the viewing room, kicking over a chair, leaving an imperturbable Stroh sitting there wiping his monocle with slow, soft circular movements of the handkerchief with the embroidered V, one of a set made for him by his pet Leni all those years ago in his dear Vienna — a last link to a past that Stroh always keeps hold of by means of this practical memento kept freshly pressed in his breast pocket, the left side, covering his heart.

