



SILVIA BARALDINI WAS SENTENCED TO 43 YEARS IN PRISON FOR HELPING ASSATA SHAKUR ESCAPE FROM PRISON. *FREEING SILVIA BARALDINI* SCREENS IN CATSKILL ON NOVEMBER 21.

When Revolutions Fail, There's Always Prison

"Why don't you live for the people? Why don't you struggle for the people? Why don't you die for the people?"

So spoke Black Panther Fred Hampton. On December 4, 1969, he was shot dead by police and FBI agents in his apartment, apparently while he slept. Hampton's death galvanized a generation of political activists. One was Silvia Baraldini. Born in Rome in 1947, she came to the United States at age 14. (Her father worked in the Italian embassy.) At the University of Wisconsin in Madison, she joined the Students for a Democratic Society. Her path from SDS to the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee to the May 19 Communist Organization is familiar to students of late-'60s politics.

The May 19 group (named for the day on which both Ho Chi Minh and Malcolm X were born) supported the Republic of New Afrika, a black nationalist movement that believed five states in the Deep South should become a new socialist nation governed by African-Americans. The idea strikes one as absurd today, but in fact a similar plan succeeded in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Eventually, Baraldini joined an underground cadre of militants. In 1979, this group freed Assata Shakur, "the soul of the Black Liberation Army," from prison in New Jersey. Three visitors to the prison pulled revolvers, took two guards hostage, and commandeered a prison van.

"History is written by the victors" is the Roman proverb. If events had played out differently, Silvia Baraldini would be a national hero like Nelson Mandela. As it is, she was sentenced to 43 years in prison. The filmmakers shrewdly interview the activist in

an enclosed space with white walls. Throughout the movie, we wonder: *Is she still in prison?* The ending—which I won't give away—is so improbable that if a screenwriter had penned it, it would be rejected as "too Hollywood."

Freeing Silvia Baraldini is not propaganda but a narrative of an era blotted out of the American memory. While Michael Jackson was having his first hits, police and revolutionaries were fighting in the streets and alleys of Amerikkka (to use the terminology of the era). How gorgeous were the radicals of 1971, with their symmetrical afros, raised fists, foreheads shining with righteous zeal! And they had great names, too, like Sekou Kambui and Kojo Bomani Sababu!

Margo Pelletier, director of the film, knows the story from the inside. She worked with the May 19 Communist Organization and was one of the Anti-Springbok 5, spending six months in prison at Riker's Island for throwing stink bombs at an airplane carrying the South African rugby team. (Due to a miscalculation, they attacked the wrong plane.) "In the Movement, you feel such euphoria. You feel that you're living with a purpose," Pelletier observes. "And the camaraderie is so addictive."

Making an independent film requires all of one's talents. Pelletier has been an artist, a silkscreener, a sound engineer, a carpenter. Her co-director, Lisa Thomas, is a film and television producer who speaks fluent Italian. The film also has the best reenactments I've ever seen a documentary, filmed in 16mm by Ted Ciesielski.

Freeing Silvia Baraldini will be shown at the Community Theater, 373 Main Street, Catskill, on Saturday, November 21, at 6pm. (518) 943-2410; www.thinedgefilms.com.

—Scott Ettman