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MOVIE REVIEW

'Salt of Earth' at the Royal

"Salt of the Earth," based on a 1951 zinc miner's strike that took place in Silver City, N.M., was made in 1953 at the height of the McCarthy era. The film was denounced as subversive and subsequently blacklisted because it was sponsored by the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (which had been expelled from the CIO in 1950 for alleged Communist-dominated leadership) and was made by film-makers who figured as "unfriendly" witnesses before the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Ironically, because it also deals with the struggle of women, specifically the miners' wives, for recognition, dignity and equality, the film is a focus of renewed interest 22 years later. It screens on Sunday only at 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. at the Royal Theater as part of the "Women Emerging Series." "Salt of the Earth" impressively counterpoints the strike itself and the relationship between a striking Mexican-American miner (Juan Chacon) and his wife (Rosaura Revueeltas).

Chacon helps organize the strike which demands that Mexican-Americans be given the same safety standards that the mining company provides for Anglo workers, but at home he refuses to end discrimination and change the status quo.

Miss Revueeltas, pregnant with her third child, is traditionally passive and at first reluctant either to take part in the strike or to assert her rights for equality at home. But she changes and when the men are forced to end their picketing by a Taft-Hartley Act injunction the women take their place in the picket lines and she joins them.

The women, indeed, come out looking stronger than the men, some marching with babes in arms, resisting tear gas and making jail so unendurable for the sheriff (deliciously played by Will Geer) that they are released.

"Salt of the Earth" is also a love story about the young couple divided by conflicting attitudes, traditions and roles, but under crisis finding the common cause. It is the wife who speaks for survival. "You want to go down fighting," she tells her husband. "I don't want to go down fighting. I want to win."

Michael Wilson's script is a masterful blend of passion, poignancy and restraint. The cast is comprised of five professional actors; the rest are the actual miners and their wives. All perform exceedingly well. Miss Revueeltas is stunning. Her portrayal is unforgettable. The late Herbert J. Biberman directed with conviction and excellence.

"Salt of the Earth," a quarter century after the ugly controversies of its birth, remains a taut and moving achievement and a milestone of American political expression.

—LINDA GROSS