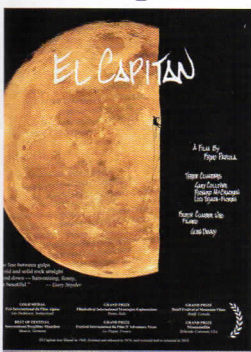


Conversations with The Capitan



El Capitan by Fred Padula (DVD, \$15)

Shot during May and June 1968, this is the first filmed ascent of *The Nose* on El Capitan in the Yosemite Valley. You might expect the result to be a grainy, black and white record of a bygone age that would be only of historical

interest. But you would be completely wrong, though it is interesting to hear the noise and see the sheer graft of aid climbing.

Shot in colour on 16mm film (no mean feat in itself), this film is anything but a documentary of an early ascent of this iconic route that was so important to the development of climbing in The Valley. With lingering images of swirling water droplets, nesting swallows, great sweeps of granite and a moonrise you will not believe we are treated to a sixty minute aesthetic reflection on climbing as a human interaction in a beautiful vertical world.

There are, of course, dramatic big wall scenes such as an epic pendulum across the face, a casual lunch break hanging in slings, and forgetting to clip in at the bivy ledge. As climbers Gary Colliver, Richard McCracken, and Lito Tejada-Flores progress up the wall, we eavesdrop on snippets of banter but we are never introduced to them.

There is neither narrator nor talking to camera, we have no intermediary telling us what we are looking at or what we should be thinking or feeling. We are invited into this world of granite and air and allowed to think our own thoughts, accompanied by the evocative contemporary score.

If you have no interest in aid climbing and can't tell a bong from a swami belt, don't worry. This is not a film about the mechanics of climbing, it is a meditation on the relationship between the men, the rock, and life in the vertical. This is a climbing film like no other: a work of art which captures something of the magic of climbing in a way that so many other films fail to do when they focus on the latest pump-fest or personality-driven story.

Although filmed in 1968, its premier did not take place until ten years later at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Yes, that's right; such is the beauty of this film its premier was in an art gallery. As is the way with DVDs, this one has an extra feature about the climbers 40 years on. Sadly, this is little more than a self-indulgent home video that wastes its opportunity to offer us much in the way of fresh insight. So, let's not dwell on that but celebrate Fred Padula's painstaking frame-by-frame restoration of this multi-award winning film that many will have never heard of, but has yet to be surpassed.

- Ian Wyatt