Film

'Que Hacer'

By Gary Arnold

"Que hacer," a feature-length film made in Chile by Saul Landau, a leftist producer-director-documentarian, is getting its first commercial showing in the United States this week at the Inner Circle. As it happens, Landau's feature is upstaged by the film on the bottom half of the bill: a half-hour interview Landau conducted in January, 1971, with Chilean President Salvador Allende, who seems to say point-blank what "Que hacer" tries to say circuitously.

With the collaboration of several Chilean and American friends and colleagues (Chilean filmmakers Nina Serrano and Raul Ruiz receive co-directing credits), Landau attempted to use the Chilean national elections of September, 1970, in the way Haskell Wexler used the Democratic Party's convention in Chicago in 1968 for "Medium Cool"—as a dramatically real backdrop for a semi-improvised fictional film.

Ideally, the authentic political drama of the country will be illuminated by the political or romantic melodrama played out by the actors. In practice, the made-up stuff tends to be woefully inadequate to the documentary reality surging around and through it; and "Que hacer" (rendered somewhat awkwardly, "What Is to Be Done") proves as vulnerable on this score as "Medium Cool"—and less exciting to watch simply as a movie or an experiment.

Saul Landau first became famous/notorious in movie circles back in the early '60s for a non-political enterprise: He was one of the distributors of the Jean Genet film, "Un Chant d'Amour." Since that controversial debut Landau has enhanced his reputation for controversy with a film about Fidel Castro, another about alleged victims of torture by the Brazilian government (Wexler, who photographed the Allende interview, also photographed this one) and with a few segments produced for the late "Great American Dream Machine."

While both films will be of interest principally to people who share the political bias of the filmmakers, the Allende interview is considerably more compelling and incisive than "Que hacer" and stands a better chance of holding hostile or apolitical viewers as well as socialist ones.

The reason is simply the force of personality. Allende is an impressive figure, an articulate, tough-minded and likably sardonic politician; and the experience of watching and listening to him proves both informative and fascinating.

People who think of themselves as politically informed owe themselves this brief session with Allende, glimpsed shortly after his election, outlining his socialist program for Chile and shrewdly assessing the odds against socialist reforms; odds that haven't shortened since he took office.

Students of political star appeal and personality projection should find Allende a remakable and perhaps refreshing subject, since there is no air of elusiveness or equivocation about him. It's also amusing to note that Allende, once the dean of the Chilean senate, bears a strong resemblance to Sen. Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania.

The best idea would be to see the Allende interview first and then as much of "Que hacer" as you find interesting or intriguing.

"Que hacer" is a movie that never quite gets out of the discussion stage. It has good moments and several viable story ideas and characters, none of which truly typify or summarize Chile as of September, 1970. The intention is epic, a pan-[illegible] but the intentions aren't realized.

The conception is ambitious, encompassing several contrasting characters whose activities run parallel and then intersect: a Chilean intellectual just returned from Cuba, a Communist official and his son, a member of a left terrorist group, a radical priest in the mining town of Copiapo, an American Peace Corps worker who finds herself more and more in sympathy with Chilean revolutionaries; and a sinister American agent, presumably on assignment from the CIA.

The problem with the scenario is that it fails to sustain any particular relationship or subplot; the film seems to be constantly introducing people and situations only to let them evaporate or die of dramatic malnutrition.

The film is also marred by several streaks of expediency and sentimentality. Richard Stahl, who plays the sneak from Washington, looks transparently sneaky, as if he were cast to encourage semi-facetious hisses from audiences of the faithful. Sandra Archer, who plays the heroine from the Peace Corps (a few people may recall her as the girl Peter Bonerz became involved with at the end of "Funnyman"), is such a looker that she can't help but make The Quest for Revolutionary Consciousness appear hopelessly glamorized. For example, in the closing scenes are we supposed to be impressed with her political sincerity but blind to that great-looking pantsuit she's wearing out in the countryside?

Landau shows a certain naturalistic flair with minor characters—Elizabeth Fransworth rings true as another, more contented Peace Corps worker, and the Americans at a dinner party who offend the archly disapproving, Miss Archer with their casually superior small talk seem right: callous yet lively and rather personable. Unfortunately, the major character seem as oversimplified as the worst of Hollywood. Landau's conception may have been doomed from the start by limited resources and the attempt to juggle too many protagonists too sketchily imagined, but the Beauty-and-the-Creep casting does more than its share to compromise and trivialize the film.