

REVIEWS

Ralph Thomas's

Ticket to Heaven

Although *Ticket to Heaven* is not the great English Canadian masterpiece we've all been dreaming of, it is a powerful, and on the whole, well-crafted film. Based on a moving, revelatory book called *Moonwebs* by Josh Freed, the first half chronicles the breakdown, conversion and indoctrination of David (whose name was Benji in Freed's account), a young Montreal teacher (played by Nick Mancuso) into an insidious and political religious cult. The second half of the film explores the process whereby his family and friends, led by his comical buddy, Larry (Saul Rubinek), kidnap and deprogram him, reclaiming him to the real world of individuality, healthy skepticism and personal, self-fish love.

Ticket features the whole cast, and the performances are excellent. Clearly, everyone who worked on it was inspired by the commitment and enthusiasm of director Ralph Thomas, and the film resonates with his personal indignation against, and understanding of, the phenomena of cults.

One certainly comes away from *Ticket* with a heightened awareness of the techniques, motives, and powers which characterize certain cults; however, the audience remains outside of David's sleepless nightmare. Thomas's approach is to make his "Heavenly Children" look and sound consistently ridiculous or sinister.

While David is being repelled by the experience, we share his discomfort, and we identify with him. However, we lose sympathy entirely during the process of conversion, because our skepticism is not subverted and broken down along with his. Instead of being drawn into the moonwebs which trap David, we become more and more incredulous and angry, alienated from his subjective experience.

One feels that Thomas intends to break the audience down, and he succeeds. The film captures perfectly the physical effects of acute psychic stress. Mancuso's performance powerfully expresses the experience of Benji as reported by Josh Freed: "My head felt like it was splitting open from the pressure, as though something inside me were swollen and about to burst. I was overflowing with anger, tension, confusion, fear. A voice inside me was saying, 'You've got to get out of here, Benji!'" When David tries to run away, our subjective experience of his existential claustrophobia is so excruciating that we also want to get up and run out of the theatre.

Having been brought to this condition, however, it is impossible for the audience to accept the fact that David surrenders himself and stays. The problem is that we are never encouraged to identify with the soul-searching experience into which David is seduced in the two days prior to his breakdown. Josh Freed's sympathetic account of Benji's descent illustrates the weakness in Thomas's script. Freed explains how they pressured Benji into a deep emotional conflict, and in a long, warm, night-time conversation an older mem-



● "Lost to himself," David (Nick Mancuso) gets 'guidance' from Ruthie (Kim Catrall)

ber of the group actually got him to identify the lost values of his dead grandfather with the values of the cult. The ideal specific memory appeared to him — his patriarch who would not tolerate hypocrisy, the wise man of the synagogue — and in a shock of seeming recognition, Benji imagined he had found his monastic community. This essential personal aspect of the process is not developed in the film. Remaining outside of David's head, we can't begin to understand what key the cult leaders use to unlock his skull.

In the film, when David tells the group, and us, about the death of his grandfather, we see it as the brief confession of a young atheist stud, without any texture of memory or the deep-running current of desire which was really tapped to flow into the eager embrace of the group.

This is the extraordinary thing about cult indoctrinations. They are a sophisticated blend of B.F. Skinner's behaviourism (as David realizes early on) and millenarist passion, but they really seduce by engaging the sympathy of the recruit through the most profound personal associations. In *Ticket* we are never allowed to feel or imagine the value and hope which recruits get when they're inside the experience. We doubt and cringe, while David lets his guard down and unburdens himself about his casual morality, disintegrated home, situation ethics, and atheism. He becomes completely alienated from his past, and from us.

A much more subjective approach to this material would have been truer, more intense drama. The view from out-

side is frustrating. Whereas in the actual 'one last lecture', Benji felt the "sheer weight" of his opponent, we see in the movie only its sugary fascism. The cult is a force because of its brainwashing techniques and the greed of its leader, but it is also a force because it professes many of the moral imperatives shared by millenarist religious movements throughout history.

David identifies the cult depicted in *Ticket* with the power and wisdom of his grandfather, but the de-programmer, Link Strunk (played brilliantly by R.H. Thomson), forces David to recognize the cult's narrow dogma of self-righteous utopia, and to admit to the hypocrisy of selling flowers for God, tickets to heaven. Strunk is the perfect Lucifer figure — gaunt, arrogant, red-headed. It is an understanding of what he has to say about the fact of suffering in the world, regardless of ideology, that frees David.

The conversion of an individual into a follower of a false Messiah has less to do with heroin addiction or cult fanaticism than it has to do with personal, emotional and spiritual crisis. This is the key element which Thomas chose not to see as seminal to the story. Thomas rejects too forcefully all the implications of Benji/David's subjective experience. Instead of dealing with the actual pseudo-religious breakdown, he censors it from the script as if he is afraid that vulnerable audiences might get confused, and go join a cult. Originally, *Ticket* was 40 minutes longer than the released version; perhaps it contained some of this understanding. However, Thomas has explained that his own

fundamentalist missionary background made the whole thing an ordeal for him. Perhaps he had to maintain a critical distance from David's conversion, and wasn't able to bring himself or the audience to identify with him, preferring instead to shift our sympathy over to the uncomplicated determination of Larry to rescue his friend.

A touch of the artistic freedom which Ken Russell indulged in his dazzling, irreverent and grotesque movie, *Altered States*, would have done Thomas a lot of good. The night after Benji succumbed, he awoke to a vision of a blinding, soothing white light. This is the kind of potent, ambiguous image which would have added subjective depth to *Ticket*.

Thomas's conclusion, and Benji's real-life experience, is that basic personal love is the primary value which must bind people, the reality which puts the lie to the cultists' "love bombing." But the ideal order, the mythical dimension which they claim to offer, is not represented sufficiently by something on the side of David's family in the film. At the point of crisis David is driven to the brink of the most acute anguish: it is a nausea, not unlike the state of torment which artists and madmen sometimes reach. At that moment the Heavenly Children carefully wrap the smothering blanket of their intense community around him, and he is lost to himself.

Ticket to Heaven is an important piece of work with a serious message tempered by some nice comic relief. It could have been a masterpiece, had it not been shackled by a basically reactionary attitude to religion, and had it not been directed from an uncomfortable seat on the fence between objective reportage and dramatic art.

Christopher Lowry ●

TICKET TO HEAVEN d. R. L. Thomas exec. p. Ronald I. Cohen p. Vivienne Leebosh co-p. Alan Simmonds sc. R. L. Thomas, Anne Cameron based on book "Moonwebs" by Josh Freed music Micky Erbe, Maribeth Solomon d.o.p. Richard Leiterman ed. Ron Wisman p. man. Sally Dundas 1st asst. d. Bill Corcoran 2nd asst. d. Bruce Moriarty 3rd asst. d. David Storey p.a. Oni Freeman, Vladimir Steffoff, Simone Sterio, Marlene Puritt producer's asst. Annika McLachlan p. sec. Gabrielle Clery p. acct. Lisa King p. bookkeeper Roma Panczszyn cam. op. Bob Saad asst. cam. Neil Seale (1st) Paul Herman (2nd) trainee asst. Kerry Smart (no. 1), Robin Campbell (no. 2) stills Laurie Raskin sd. rec./ed. Bruce Cawardine, Glen Gauthier, Marc Chiasson sd. re-rec. David Appleby, Donald White p. des. Susan Longmire art d. Jill Scott, Andris Hausmanis (asst.) Marlene Graham (trainee) loc. man. Phyllis Wilson, Maureen Fitzgerald (asst.) props. John Berger, John Rose (asst.) set dec. David Jaquest, Denis Kirkham (asst.) cost. des. Lynda Kemp ward. Erla Lank, Madeline Stewart (asst.) make-up Valli Slutski, Linda Gill (asst.) hair James Brown, Adrian Hofman (asst.) tech. advis. Benji Carroll sc. superv. Sarah Grahame cast. d. Clare Walker, Bryan Gliserman (actors + extras) unit pub. Valerie Dugale craft service Blackwood asst. ed. Ion Webster, Roberta Kipp (2nd asst.) gaffer Dave Usher best boy Creg Daniels 1st elec. Gary Deneault gen. op. John Ferguson key grip Michael Kohne, Robert Daprato (asst.) grip James Kohne driver capt. Jim Kennedy dead driver Stewart Mitchell mus. engineer Andy Hermant stunts Robert Hannah, Dwayne McLean l.p. Nick Mancuso, Saul Rubinek, Meg Foster, Kim Catrall, R. H. Thomson, Jennifer Dale, Guy Boyd, Dixie Seattle, Paul Soles, Harvey Atkin, Robert Joy, Stephen Markle, Timothy Webber, Patrick Brymer, Marcia Diamond, Michael Zelicker, Denise Naples, Angelo Rizacos, Cindy Girling, Gina Dick, Christopher Britton, Margot Dionne, Claire Pimpare, Lynne Kolber, Lyn Harvey, Josh Freed, Candace O'Conner, Michael Wincott, Doris Petrie, Judy, David Main, Les Rubie, Sandra Gies, Susan Hannon, Marie Lynn Hammond, Paul Booth, Charlie Gray, Brian Leonard, Ron Nigrini, Craig Stephens, Grant Slater p.c. Stalkers Production Inc. (1980) Munning time 107 min. dist. Les Films Mutuels (Canada), United Artists Classics (U.S.A.).