Pierre Falardeau and Julien Poulin's

Elvis Gratton

Elvis Gratton is an exceptionally tricky bit of work. To succeed at what it's doing – let alone succeed as well as it does – it has to be.

For me, the tricks began before the movie, with the Festival of Festivals capsule description that made it sound like a very dreary documentary. Two minutes on TV news is all I've ever needed to see to be convinced of the total shallowness of the Elvis cult and the banality of its followers. The thought of 20 minutes of watching a "prosperous Quebec couple...devote their spare time to preparing for the husband to enter a televised Elvis Presley look-alike contest" with the Elvis cult details "lovingly fetishized" was enough to bring on nausea.

The first few minutes did bring on nausea. The lighting, sound and cinematic techniques are all thoroughly documentary, and there's Elvis Gratton himself, eating like a pig, with the TV on the kitchen table providing the only light, addressing the camera directly and getting into a stupid argument with his wife. Only the thought that one cannot write paying reviews from unseen movies kept me in my chair.

By the third sequence, I was laughing out loud. With his wife in the bath, yelling for him to turn the music down, Elvis Gratton begins rehearsing his act. He loses the timing, blows the gestures, sings off key and sets his fat belly to wobbling when he tries out the patented Elvis leg shake.

He's awful and he's hilarious and he doesn't care a bit. He's having a grand time, which makes it okay to laugh and go on laughing as he works his frizzy hair into a not-very-Elsivid pompadour and grins at it in utter satisfaction, as he bitches like a spoilt bride over the details of his wife's costume and lectures the camera on the superiority of Americans, especially Elvis, over the Quebec culture. His acting is an airbrushed vanilla very loving washing.

Dreary documentary has turned into cheerfully berserk comedy and Elvis Gratton's likeable charisma might be the key guy's who's using the contest and the movie to let loose his natural hamminess. Then Elvis Gratton turns mean. He gets grabby hands and says to a teenage girl who won't put out for him. And just as I realized Elvis Gratton was not a very likeable man, it also dawned on me that this was not a documentary and Elvis G. was an actor.

His name is Julien Poulin and he's also listed as co-director. He is very good, with a brisk sense of timing and a remarkable ability to make physical comedy look natural and spontaneous. The pick-up scene doesn't sacrifice any laughs, despite its length and the character and the nature of the movie. The laughs keep rolling along right up to the end, when the point to all this tripe comes out of the blue.

Elvis Gratton is satire. Classically, satire gets defined as something like, "comically telling home truths about people," or, "laughing at people's foibles," or, "a comedy that gets people to laugh at their own foibles."

By the final sequence, I was laughing so hard my face hurt. Elvis Gratton, in skin-tight suit, pompadour and guitar, is posing for publicity shots. His conversation, between the photographer escalated into shouted slogans that give us his honest view of the world he lives in, his creed.

The movie has already told us there are thousands just like him. The movie's tricks and the intercutting of live-action with black and white publicity stills make him his spokesman – Elvis Everyman. The effect is hilarious, though the sequence may not be: after laughing steadily for 18 minutes, it has no cold stop for the last two.

His world view is greedy, selfish, sexist, reactionary, vicious and stupid. The truth behind the Elvis mask is not a pleasant one, but I can't say if it's true or if it's a true truth. I don't know the Quebecois that well. But the movie makes it seem true and I've run across Elvis cultists elsewhere and caught similar echoes and I know that people like Elvis Gratton exist and are plentiful.

Outside the theatre, I overheard a stranger say: "I was married to a Quebec woman once and you know, it's true, that movie. I could see that in him and his friends."

In Quebec, I hear, it's raising a lot of controversy, which is my idea of a good argument for its being true and, if it's true, I think it's funny. Elvis Gratton may be the best hard-core satirist ever put on film.

Andrew Dowler


**Shorts**

Alex Hamilton-Brown's

Life Another Way

In the year of the handicapped, the media was inundated with stories about sightless, armless, generally less fortunate people, who, with ingenuity and courage, overcame obstacles to the "good life." Hamilton-Brown's documentary Life Another Way looks beyond the handicapped's "difference" to what makes that "difference" good.

With framed head and shoulders, the grandmother Beryl Potter in her Scottish lilt tells us her life story. Her beginnings are ordinary enough, portrayed through a montage of black and white photographs. And when we think we know her, Hamilton-Brown shows her in the harsh reality of life: a woman who has suffered an unusual destiny brought on by simply slipping on a package wrapper. The shocking result: a blood clot in the knee developed into phlebitis, requiring the amputation of a leg. Soon after, she loses two other limbs and the sight in an eye.

With conviction, Hamilton-Brown takes us into the heart of this woman's life. She confides that she contemplated suicide. Then her perspective suddenly changed and she realized a new purpose: "When the able-bodied become disabled they need a bridge to handle the shock." Potter founded the Scarborough Recreation Club for the disabled: a lively social centre that never refuses anybody, one for people who are different, not because they are fat or exceedingly beautiful, but because they are disabled.

Hamilton-Brown's portrait of this club doesn't miss a detail. A direct cinema camera shows the regulars in their gym clothes, posing for publicity shots. His conversational style escalates into shouted slogans that give us his honest view of the world he lives in, his creed.

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**Kalli Pascau**