

Indian mate Tantoo in the year 1805. He receives a message that his father has died, and that he must go back to Québec to settle the estate and look after his mother. Upon arrival, he's told by the local parish priest that it's time he married and is furnished with a number of recommendations. A late addition to the list is the priest's housekeeper, Marie-Anne, who bursts into tears and complains to her employer that she's 25 already and headed for a dismal future of spinsterhood and domestic slavery. Remaking her mother's wedding dress, she shows up resplendent at the ball that night, and captures the prince's heart in true Cinderella fashion. Cut to scenes of the early days of their marriage, a happy relationship clouded by Baptiste's yearning to return to the open sky and the prairie. Marie-Anne and her husband go to Fort Edmonton in 1808 and immediately run into difficulties with the Company Factor Mr. Bird, who sees Marie-Anne as a potential precedent for the conversion of the Fort from trading post to settlement — the beginning of the end for the local fur trade. He strikes Baptiste from the Company rolls until his wife is sent back east. Marie-Anne also causes a spectacular disturbance among the local Cree Indians: the jealous Tantoo assaults her and Chief Many Horses wants to buy her. This catastrophe is averted only when she goes out to the Indian camp alone to explain why she can't be sold. Many Horses saves face by adopting her into the tribe as his daughter. This even becomes the too-convenient, not-to-be-examined-too-closely escape from the plot's complexities: Marie-Anne can stay because she's an Indian and Bird has no authority over her movements and now Baptiste can return from his trading mission to join her in an idyllic reunion. This outline of the film's storyline is perhaps misleadingly exhaustive for a movie in which nothing of any consequence ever seems to happen. Certainly there's material here for a good film — but only for a film which wishes to intricately observe the niceties of its characters' behaviour and to dwell with quiet intensity on the beauties of period objects and landscape (as, for example, J.A. Martin does),

not for an up-tempo movie that's half conventional plotting and half historical celebration. The treatment of the characters falls squarely between these two poles, so that we're never sure whether to react to them as emotionally-tangled soap-opera characters or as two-dimensional figures in a historical frieze. Whatever individuality the characters do achieve is attributable mainly to the acting (good performances from John Juliani as Baptiste and, especially, from Andrée Peletier — who almost saves the movie, indeed — as Marie Anne).

As for the historical end of things, the film always looks like exactly what it is — a bunch of actors in brand-new costumes cavorting around the reconstructed Fort Edmonton. There's no sense that the objects we see have ever been used, or the clothing lived in; and no sense of the vastness of the wilderness or the distance from civilization — no sense, in a word, of the harshness and isolation, or of the grandeur, of life as it must have been lived in Alberta 170 years ago.

Nor is this unwelcome atmosphere of a small-scale fancy-dress outing dissipated by director Walters and cameraman Reginald Morris. All the interiors are bathed in second-hand Barry Lyndon firelight amber, and all the exteriors are brightly high-key as if lit for television (which, incidentally, is where Walters must have learned his occasional ugly habit of starting a scene with a closeup of some insignificant object and then doing a slow zoom — out to take in the surroundings). Then there's the minor annoyance of peripheral actors injecting an urban Anglo twang into the French-accented context, and the major annoyance of Maurice Marshall's lightweight music — relentlessly wisful and twee, as if assuring us that everything's going to turn O.K. no matter what temporary misadventures the principals might be enduring.

Maybe I'm being too harsh on *Marie-Anne*, which is, after all, an unassuming little movie. What need is there to come down hard on a film with such good intentions and such a transparent awareness of its own lack of ambition? But good intentions and polite unambitiousness are the

bane of the English-Canadian film industry, and it seems a pity to watch Fil Fraser heading down the same road without uttering a protest. Of course we can't produce super-slick superproductions, and we shouldn't want to (though I suspect that's what Canadian audiences do secretly want); but neither should we accept limitations of resources as an excuse for weak scripts and bad directional judgement. I'm sure that, like the parents at the school play, Alberta audiences will get a lot of pleasure out of *Marie-Anne*; but in merely demanding that their child get its lines right and not fall on its face, they will be overlooking a pervasive diffuseness and shallowness in both conception and execution — faults which will be readily apparent to viewers not in the family.

Bill Beard

Ralph Thomas' TYLER

d. Ralph Thomas, sc. Roy MacGregor, ph. Vic Sarin, ed. Ron Wisman, m. Eric Robertson, l.p. R.H. Thompson, Murray Westgate, Sean McCann, Robert McClure, Sonja Smits, exec. p. Ralph L. Thomas, p. David Pears, p.c. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Radio-Canada) 1977, col. 16mm, running time 82 minutes.

This low budget, made for TV film, winner of the Montreal Film Festival for the best Canadian film out of competition prize, is a farming story with a bumper crop of paradoxes. It is too realistic to be fantasy: too fantastic to be real. Those given to classifications will find in this film all the features of a fable, a short story exemplifying a pinciple of human nature and concluding with an epigram. In this case, "Think Canadian First" appears in the last shot on the back of a truck, and in both official languages.

Of course, dealing with any film from a realistic perspective is always risky, since filmmakers from documentaries to experimentalists all lay

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claim to privileged insight into reality. And for most urbanites, except those doing piece work for minimum wage, a realistic depiction of Canadian farming life would resemble the "daze" in the life of Ivan Densinovich. As one farmland refugee has observed, once you've farmed, all else seems to be a vacation. Despite this dark view, supported by recent figures showing a higher per capita tranquilizer and alcohol use in rural areas, many city dwellers dream of the simple country life. Surprisingly, this overtly romantic, often unbelievable and frequently flawed film seems to pander to that dream.

"Surprisingly" is the qualification, since a more penetrating tale might be expected from director and former farm boy, Ralph Thomas, who until recently was associated with CBC's often controversial series, "For the Record." To be sure, real problems facing farmers aren't covered in mulch. Here they have been scripted and cast as stars. These include bureaucratic over-regulation, quota systems which penalize productivity, and financial barriers forcing from the land those young people willing to farm. Indeed, bureaucracy is the villain of the piece.

Any social consciousness raising is over-shadowed by characterizations either larger than life, or too small for it; by a fate so co-operative it must have rehearsed the script; and by a symbolism bordering on poetic overkill, given the complexity of the plot. Several technical faults, certainly not included to give that improvised look esteemed by the European modernists, don't help the film any. What does is the virtuoso performance of R.H. Thomson.

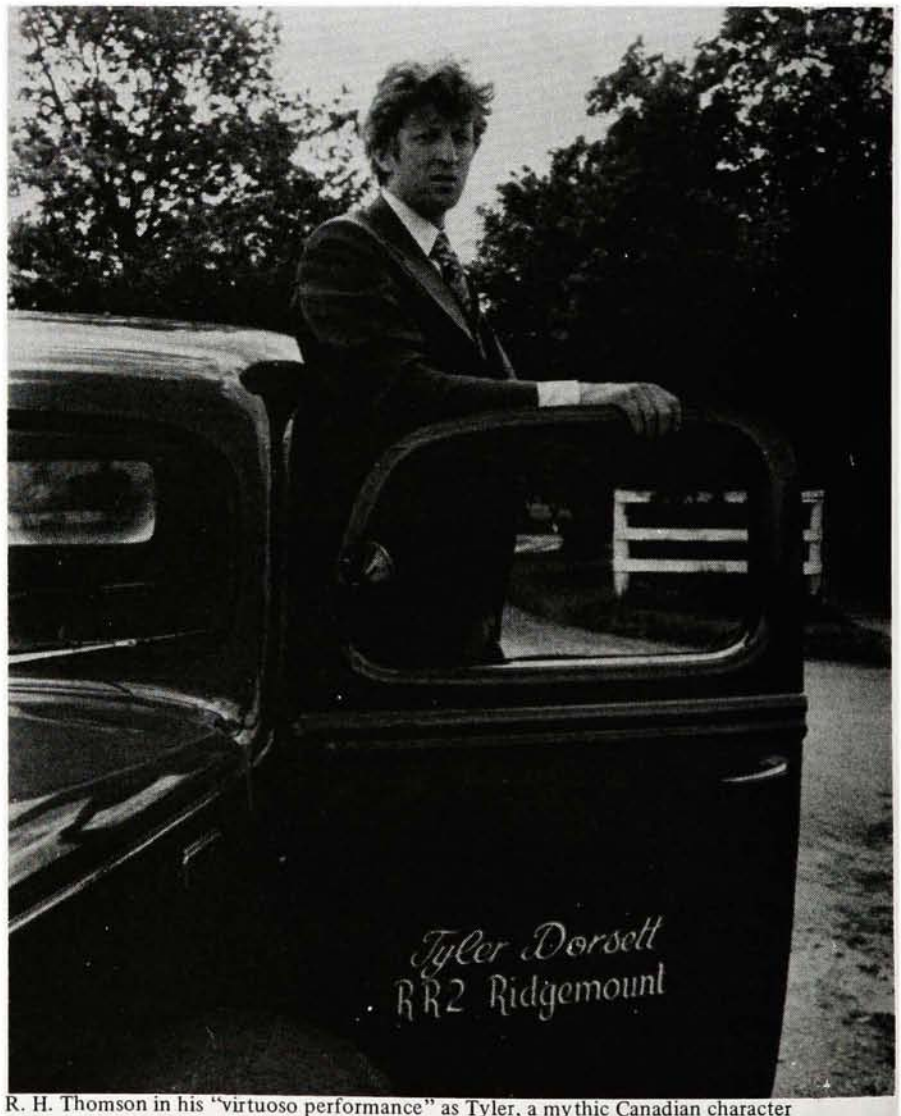
He is superb as Tyler, a post teens farm boy with freckles and red hair (not unlike a rooster's comb), and the charm and ear-lobe-to-shoulder-tip muscles of a budding, farm bred NHL'er (think Canadian). Directorial intent is obvious; early in the film a lingering camera gives Thomson ample opportunity to ham it up. He chug-a-lugs his beer, burps, stuffs a bottle into his belt, and later tosses it into the mailbox, but not before he has impishly "borrowed" money from mom's cookie jar to get drunk. This he does behind the woodpile with the neighbors'

boys, who've got a deluxe shag wagon and a hankering to get from some jail-bait what they used to get from her "friendly" older sister. Tyler is naughty but loveable. For him farm work is play, and play, in keeping with the paradoxes, is undertaken with grim determination easily confused with gusto.

The film opens with a static post-card shot of a white farm building. In one continuous long take, the camera moves forward à la Renoir to re-frame on his father, Archie (Murray Westgate), who walks down a driveway and nails a For Sale sign on a tree. When a distant Tyler yells "Goddamn you!" Archie poignantly turns to the camera and mutters, "Maybe he already has." The film has opened with a curse, a conflict and cynicism. Spectator

interest is piqued, then effectively dis-oriented in the fast cutting sequence following: the shot proves to be a subjective view of Tyler's sister's boyfriend, but before this is ascertained a rush of people has poured from the house with beer commercial enthusiasm, and Tyler has leaped on his motorcycle to race up a hill.

Hills have served as symbols before, and, thinking Canadian, the slag heap in *Mon Oncle Antoine* comes to mind. It was used subtly to begin or end the occasional sequence, a never over-worked temporal sign which also visually resembled the pile of sand in an hour-glass. But Tyler's hill, when he's at one with his machine, is the challenge of nature he must overcome to re-affirm his strength of character, his na-



R. H. Thomson in his "virtuoso performance" as Tyler, a mythic Canadian character

tural if some what romantic ability to take on the toughest challenge and win. It can almost be imagined that with each piston throb he mutters, "I think I can, I think I can...." It is simplistic but significant that the college educated boyfriend, who's hands are as soft as a "baby's bum," chooses that hill for the sight of his home. But later, when he tries to emulate Tyler and make it on the bike, he fails — tragically.

An early demonstration of this aspect of Tyler's character is essential to the plot. Although Archie still has the strength and the will to win the log-sawing contest for the twelfth year in a row (like father, like son, but a poorly cut sequence in which the wrong sawblade is ahead at the end), he has to sell the farm. His wife (Kay Hawtrey, the visual embodiment of wood stove warmed maternalism) is ailing, while each year means \$5,000 more in debt, hard to take when weekly postcards beckon him to retirement in a Florida trailer camp. The quota system penalizes Archie financially if he produces too much milk, but with characteristic rural pride he prefers debts to cutting back "while people are starvin' in the world." Tyler asks to be given first chance to buy the farm and a skeptical Archie agrees.

Tyler visits the farm credit bureau where an agriculture department bureaucrat (Dennis Hayes, so suave he'd easily outshine Eugene Whalen) states that before they could grant him the mortgage, Tyler would have to raise \$30,000 in one month as proof of the farm's productivity. As Tyler leaves, the camera shifts focus to a government poster: Where in the World is Your Dream?

With a skill to turn a commodity broker green with envy, Tyler begins to hustle up the cash. He sells everything he can get his hands on, including the truck he's lovingly restored, and the steers he's raised. He undercuts the going rate to get fence building contracts. When he's short, he turns to back road deals selling un-pasteurized milk — something to think about the next time you buy milk at loss-leader prices. The viewer begins to believe Tyler will make it, just as he always makes it up the hill.

With only a few days left and a few thousand short, Tyler goes to gamble on the cock-fights. Getting there involves a ritual which would do justice to the Klu Klux Klan. The outcome, again in keeping with the paradoxes, requires and overly benign fate; it is about as unbelievable as the way the cockfight is depicted. The preliminaries for each bout are staged for the camera to the point where the roosters are brought in. Then footage obviously taken elsewhere is intercut in all its bloody detail with cut-aways to the gambler. It seems that to keep the film audience entertained the fight can't be alluded to, it must be shown.

The film is not without wit. Tyler takes time from his hustling to dump a pail of milk over the head of a supercilious bureaucrat, a kind of liquid pie in the face. When told his sister has broken off her engagement with her joe-college boyfriend (a caricature of the formally educated who in trying to be one of the boys succeeds only in appearing condescending), Tyler says with a paradoxical blend of urbanity and farmyard forthrightness that the last time he saw them they seemed ready to consummate the marriage. Most hilarious is Tyler's treatment of the city "rubes" who come to look over the farm: the man is dressed in shorts and Adidas, his wife looks ready for a cocktail party. In this sequence, Tyler is filmed upward from below and framed within the frame by a doorway, a perspective to express his dominance in the scene as he hints the neighbor may be a child molestor. Tyler's natural moxie transcends city sophistication as it does his future brother-in-law's formal education, a neat reversal of the country bumpkin stereotype.

But Tyler loses, although he's heroically raised the cash. The credit official, who was also at the cockfight, could recommend the loan, but the government regulations which require an MBA even to read, let alone understand, ultimately won't allow types like Tyler to be financed. The official, whose sudden withdrawal of support is inadequately explained, even mentions that if Tyler had a degree... well... maybe his chances would be better.

A drinking bout follows, a traditional favorite of American directors unwill or unable to articulate dramatically deep emotions arising from setbacks or tragedy. In one sequence, faulty continuity is more intriguing than the action: a baby bottle (paradoxically a nice touch) is almost empty of liquor in one shot, in the next it is almost full, yet no temporal ellipsis has been implied. Similarly, in one last self-affirmation, Tyler takes a run up the hill. He makes it to the top, but not without the assistance of a hand which flashes in from off-camera to grab the wheelfork, presumably a hand from the director or maybe even God. (Then again, within the given context of the film, at times the two are indistinguishable.)



Tyler, the face of a young man whose dreams are shattered

A reflection of its construction or, perhaps, the low budget, this film elicits paradoxical responses. It lacks the self-evident style of *Drying up the Streets*, and in its efforts to be simple, *Tyler* is often simplistic. Characters tend to be caricatures, but Thompson as Tyler is almost mythic, the kind of character Canadian film needs. Farmers' problems have indeed been underlined, but the picture of their lifestyle smacks of the TV *Waltons*, a closely knit family circled together like musk oxen (think Canadian) against a hostile outside world. Eric Robertson's music evokes country without, thankfully, step-dancing through Tommy Hunter territory.

Not to be forgotten is that *Tyler* was made for TV. And for all its faults, it far surpasses the flicker and flash of most made for the tube mass entertainment.

Doug Isaac