A Christmas Story

Some years ago, about the time of Black Christmas and Murder By Decree, it was thought Bob Clark might have gifts as a director of thrillers. Ever since then however, with Tribute, the two Porky's films, and now A Christmas Story, an adaptation of Jean Shepherd's In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash, it has become apparent that Clark is little more than a talentless hack, with no ability for anything save a connection with the densely corrupted sensibilities of America's teenaged movie audience. A Christmas Story follows the attempts of young Ralphie (Peter Billingsley) to con his parents, Mother (Melinda Dillon) and The Old Man (Darren McGavin), into giving him his dream Christmas Gift, a Red Ryder model air rifle. He is constantly rebuffed by his mother, his teacher and even the store Santa Claus, all of whom tell him that "You'll shoot your eye out," which is the film's first of many errors. The line, as I recall from my youth, is "You'll shoot someone's eye out," which goes with those two other great maternal adages, "Come down from there or you'll break your arm," and "Put on your rubbers or you'll catch double pneumonia." The Bill gun seems to be the one area where parents are not worried about the kids' own health.

Anyway, A Christmas Story no doubt is intended to evoke the lovely sort of Christmas films that were popular in the late '30s and early '40s, films like Meet Me in St. Louis and Miracle on 34th Street, but it fails to approximate any of them, for the simple reason that Clark is a heavy, thudding oaf of a director.

If we remember anything aside from the warm feelings generated by a film like Meet Me in St. Louis, it is the extraordinary soundscapes of the playing of actors like Judy Garland and Margaret O'Brien. In A Christmas Story, the playing couldn't be any broader if the film had been shot in Panavision. Darren McGavin, a generally good actor, plays the role of the splendidly corpulent head of the family like a Nebraska insurance salesman auditioning for the Shaw company of Mr. Magoo. Melinda Dillon has some effective moments as Mother, but Peter Billingsley, the title character, never emerges as a hero of the piece, seems to have spent his early childhood being dropped on his head.

While this breadth of playing, combined with an extensive use of the distorting powers of the fisheye lens might seem to be a reasonable way to adapt Shepherd, whose literary style consists of the canny exaggeration of petty events into epic comic conflicts, it is not, because the satiric ideal in the cinema is quite different. Playing this broadly defeats the inherently realist basis of the cinema - a faithful adaptation of Gulliver's Travels would be almost impossible in any sort of live-action film. The exaggeration involved would simply be unbelievable, whereas a literary figure can push things much farther, simply because the mind is more supple when supplying its own images as opposed to the cinema's images.

The one thing the film has going for it is the beautiful production design of Reuben Freed, a loving recreation of the film's early '40s period. When I visited the set while the film was in production at Toronto's Magder Studios, I was immediately struck by the wonderful house that had been constructed in a vast set. On a dolly near the front door was a box filled with old appliances - toasters, waffle-irons, War ing mixers. It was one tremendously nostalgic. It is unfortunate that the film does not live up to its art direction. I have never been one to complain about the arrival of American productions in this country, nor about the Americans who work in the industry. Of these, Clark is certainly one, and he has been working here for a decade. But the time has come to say "Yankee go home!"
house he renovated himself with nothing else, including his wife and children. (Note to "Papa" freaks: Shannon Tweed, as the wife, performs a small but simple part competently, has some presence and more beauty than prettiness.) Equally unfortunately, Tagger contents himself with telling us about these traits in the dialogue and doesn't set up any scenes that bring them to life. One scene—Hughes chiding his son over a mess—was written and played so mildly that the focus is father-and-son, rather than man-and-furnishings. It is almost as if somebody decided the character's likability. In the current Hollywood jargon, had to take precedence over the logic of drama and character.

The result is that Welller's playing tends to mesh with Tagger's scenes and leaves his dialogue out in the cold, which makes the whole premise ludicrous. There's animal handling, sure. Bob this man would ever tip over into obsession with killing a common household pest at the expense of the most important man of his career, nor to believe he would behave so stupidly once committed to killing the rat. It takes a real moron to walk around home while it's being slept in, acts like an ordinary person and walk about unarmed and without protective clothing once he's been attacked.

What all of this adds up to is severe boredom. Of Unknown Origin is a very slow movie. Time is spent setting up Hughes and detailing his transformation from civilized executive to primitive killer and it's clear that Cosmatos and company wanted to make a serious movie about character transformation, about the fragility of our thin veneer of civilization. Since they trashed the important, make-it-or-break-it assignment of the rat to death with a baseball bat. Howver, since Verzier has chosen to light the climax largely in choppy, fast close-up, we never really get to see much destruction or get much sense of something that was beautiful and is no longer.

One has only to think of the wonders of character disintegration worked by Polanski in The Tenant and in Repulsion, with only Catherine Deneuve and a dead bunny, to realize that Of Unknown Origin could have been a superb movie. One of Runnel's prissy, fastidious bourgeois heroes, in a well-lit house, in a pristine, bourgeois city—Toronto over Manhattan—could have won us comedy to tragedy and horror, moral and spiritual decay, redemption with power in it. That it didn't happen seems to me to indicate a triumph of commercial thinking over dramatic instincts. Or, to paraphrase Paul Bartel's classic line in Hollywood Boulevard, "This ain't a movie about the human condition; this is a movie about tits 'n ass!" Of Unknown Origin ain't a movie about the human condition; it's a movie about tits 'n rats.

Andrew Dowler