

Bob Clark's **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 BB 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 subtlety 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 splenetic head of the family like a Nebraska insurance salesman auditioning for the roadshow company of Mr. Magoo. Melinda Dillon has some effective moments as Mother, but Peter Billingsley, the pie-face, wide-eyed, bespectacled hero of the piece, seems to have spent his early childhood being dropped on his head.

While this broadness 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 innately 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



● Reuben Freed's production design steals the show in *A Christmas Story*

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 the studio. On a dolly near the front door was a box filled with old appliances - toasters, waffle-irons, Waring mixers. It was evidence of care and taste, and made 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."

John Harkness ●

A CHRISTMAS STORY* d. Bob Clark p. Rene Dupont and Bob Clark sc. Jean Shepherd, Leigh Brown and Bob Clark, based upon the novel *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash* by Jean Shepherd d.o.p. Reginald H. Morris, C.S.C. p. des. Reuben Freed ed. Stan Cole mus. score Carl Ziffner and Paul Zaza post-p. sup. Ken Heeley-Ray cost. des. Mary E. McLeod assoc. p. Gary Goch cast. Mike Fenton, Jane Feinberg, Marci Liroff NY/Chi. cast. Marcia Shulman, Joanne Pasquito, P.K. Fields (asst.) Tor. cast. Karen Hazzard p. man. Marilyn Stonehouse 1st a.d. Ken Goch cam. op. Harald Ortenburger sp. efx. Martin Malivoire make-up Ken Brooke hair James Brown ward. Lynda Kemp sc. sup. Blanche McDermaid art d. Gavin Mitchell set dec. Mark Freeborn cam. asst. Gordon Lagevin sd. mixer Alan Bernard sd. boom man. Malcolm Rennings asst. ed. Rick Cadger, Neil Grieve sd. sup. Ken Heeley-Ray sd. rec. Joe Grimaldi, David Appleby dialog. ed. Wayne Griffin sd. efx. ed. David Evans, Steven Cole asst. sd. ed. Ann Heeley-Ray, Gudrun Christian, Tom Hanrath mus. eng. Frank Morrone gaffer Chris Holmes key grip Ron Gillham props master J. Tracy Budd prop. man. Ken Clarke const. sup. Bill Harman p. acct. Joanne Jackson p. office co-ord. Suzanne Lore loc. man. Cindy Morton, Michael MacDonald Cleveland co-ord. David Craig 2nd a.d. Don Brough 3rd a.d. Alan Goluboff p. sec. Denise Mulvey stills Shin Sugino unit pub. Janice Kaye children's coach Charles Northcote asst. art d. Carmi Gallo l.p. Melinda Dillon, Darren McGavin, Peter Billingsley, Ian Petrella, Scott Schwartz, R.D. Robb, Tedde Moore, Yano Anaya, Zack Ward, Jeff Gillen, Colin Fox, Paul Hubbard, Les Carlson, Jim Hunter, Patty Johnson, Drew Hovevar, David Svoboda, Dwayne McLean, Helen E. Kaider, John Wong, Johan Sebastian Wong, Fred Lee, Dan Ma, Rocco Bellusci, Tommy Wallace.

* Not a certified Canadian film

George Cosmatos' **Of Unknown Origin**

Some jobs and situations are best described with the words "tense boredom". Cops, nurses, truckers, and soldiers all spend time scanning their environments for the first signs of trouble they know is coming. The trouble and the fact that they must remain constantly alert combine to create tension. Put yourself at the wheel of a small car on a freeway, late at

night, in a heavy snowfall, without a companion or a radio: tense boredom. Or, worse, subject yourself to a viewing of *Of Unknown Origin*.

The tension of the film comes from the conflict between an executive and a rat that has invaded and is slowly destroying his Manhattan brownstone. Now, a rat may sound like a dandy little tension-generator. It's a traditional foe of humanity and a common object of fear. It's also small and quick enough to hide in all sorts of unlikely places and jump out with fangs a-flashin', which it does, thus providing *Of Unknown Origin* with a number of effective suspense-and-shock sequences. Unfortunately, once it's done that, there's nothing for it but to scuttle back into the darkness and get ready to jump again. This lends a certain sameness, that is to say boredom, to the suspense and, since we know that rat and hero are fated to battle it out at the climax, attempts to vary the suspense by the introduction of a cat and leg-hold traps are spectacularly unsuccessful. At the first sight of each, we know the rat will kill the cat and the trap will chomp the trapper. And events prove us right.

Furthermore, a rat lacks the awe-inspiring qualities of, say, King Kong or Bruce the shark. Director George Cosmatos and cinematographer René Verzier have tried to pump up the rat with the sorts of extreme close-up, partial view and ultra-short shot so effective in *Alien*, but, since we already know what rats look like - small, brown and typically rodentoid - and what they do - gnaw and scuttle - the hype doesn't work. What it does achieve is irritation and a heightened viewer awareness that the rat just doesn't have the star power to carry the movie.

Fortunately for the rat, it doesn't have to. That's Peter Weller's job and he plays Bart Hughes, competently, as an intelligent, warm-hearted, very likeable, supremely balanced individual. Unfortunately, for us, that isn't how the character was intended. Brian Taggart's script (from Chauncey G. Parker's novel, "The Visitor") tells us that Hughes is ambitious, desperate for more money and far more deeply in love with the



● *Of Unknown Origin's* Peter Weller and Shannon Tweed: a film about twits and rats

house he renovated himself than with anything else, including his wife and son (Note to "Playboy" freaks: Shannon Tweed, as the wife, performs a small, simple part competently, has some presence and more beauty than prettiness). Equally unfortunately, Taggart 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 messed-up carpet - is 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 likeability, "rootability" in current Hollywood jargon, had to take precedence over the logic of drama and character.

The result is that Weller's playing tends to mesh with Taggart's scenes and leaves his dialogue out in the cold, which makes the whole premise ludicrous. There is no way to believe that this man would ever tip over into obsession with killing a common household pest at the expense of the most important, make-it-or-break-it assignment of his career, nor to believe he would behave so stupidly once committed to killing the rat. It takes a real moron to keep sleeping at home and to 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 their character from the start, we're left with tedium, relieved briefly by the comedy and street-wise rat expertise of Louis del Grande and Keith Knight, while we wait for the destruction.

Which is a dud. The results of a rat's gnawing are messy but not spectacular. The spectacle is reserved for the climax, in which Hughes smashes his home apart in a heartfelt attempt to club the rat to death with a baseball bat. However, since Verzier has chosen to light the home with the gloomy shadows of a horror movie and, since Cosmatos and editor Robert Silvi have rendered 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 Bunuel's prissy, fastidious bourgeois heroes, in a well-lit home, in a pristine, bourgeois city - Toronto over Manhattan - could have worked wonders: 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 twits 'n rats.

Andrew Dowler ●

Claude Jutra's **KAMOURASKA** (1972 - 1983)

Claude Jutra's *Kamouraska*, restored to its original structure and length by the director, and presented exclusively on Superchannel pay-TV - what excitement this announcement stirred in the veins of a multitude of film devotees! *Kamouraska* was screened some half-a-dozen times in November and December, in four episodes on consecutive nights, and dubbed into English.

The gorgeous images, the delicately shaded performance of Genevieve Bujold as Elisabeth Tassy, the claustrophobic atmosphere of the period, and the passive/submissive role of women, are all there as Jutra meant them to be in the first place.

Generally, most sequences have been expanded and, in addition, the complete scene has been reinstated (in episode 3) where Elisabeth (Bujold) and her doctor lover (Richard Jordan) walk through a flower-dotted field in high summer. They fantasize a duel, with the doctor triumphantly killing Elisabeth's husband Antoine, and liberating their love. Expanded details of the doctor's ride to finally kill the husband, in an amateurish but somehow believable way; the last, wild, headlong journey back to Kamouraska in the now bloodied sleigh; the creaking and jingling harness; the frozen landscape and glaring white snow; all add clarity and beauty.

In spite of all this richness, enthusiasm is considerably dampened, mainly because the English-dubbed dialogue is horrible, jarring and anachronistic. At one point, Antoine's old mother remarks: "I expect he lives it up a bit now

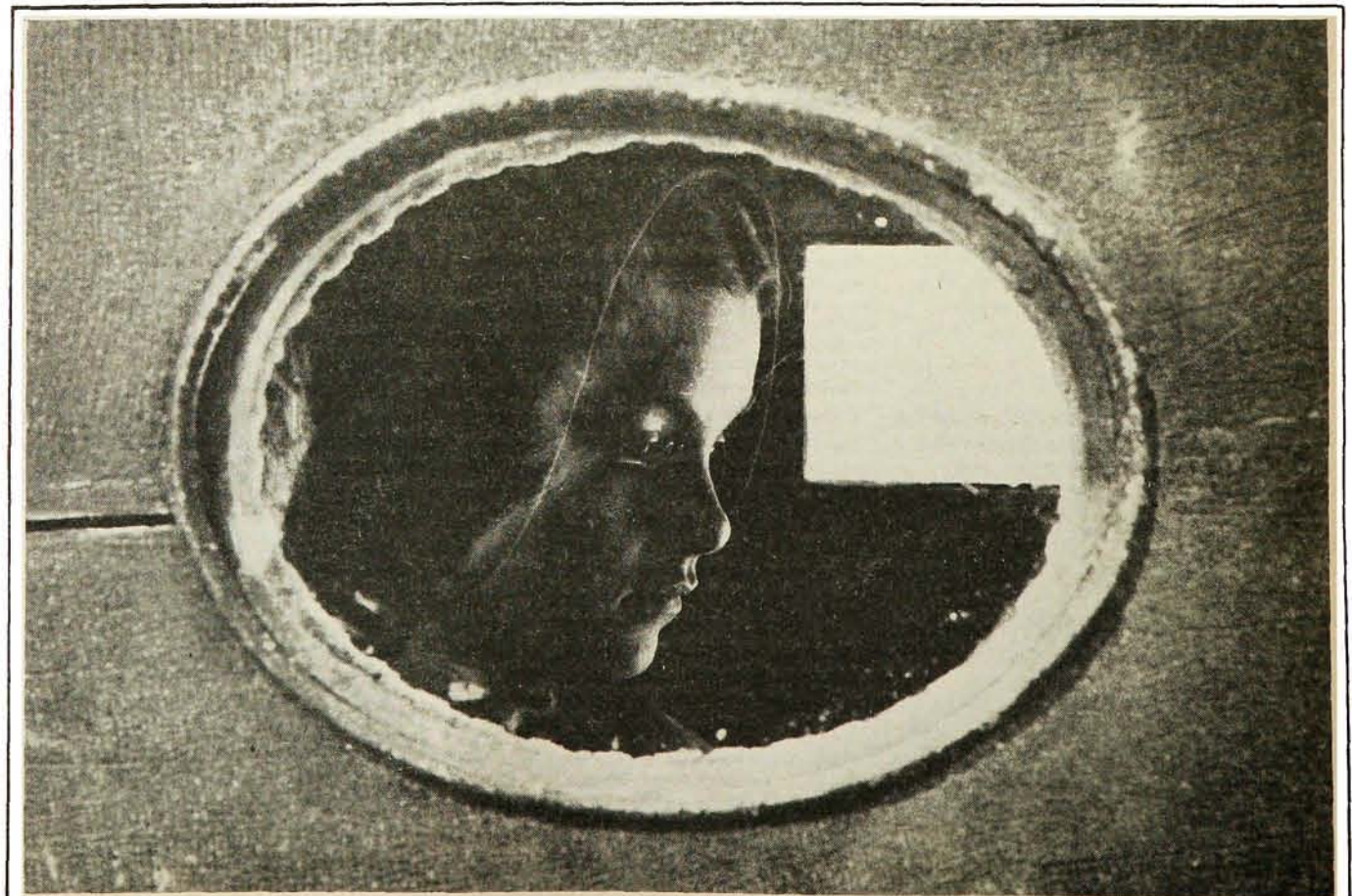
and then", while the maid Aurelie says: "Your affair with the doctor - I'm dying to know what happens", and, to boot, one of the aunts has a definite British accent.

Kamouraska runs about 200 minutes, chopped into four episodes of 50 minutes. Each is "topped and tailed", as it were, with reminders of the previous episode and teasers of the next one. How much better served would the film (and the audience) be if *Kamouraska* had been shown complete, in one evening, as a special presentation. The rhythm and flow would be sustained, the build-up of the story to a richly tactile and climactic far more exciting. With the French language restored and English sub-titles, it would surely be sublime. The film was designed as a whole, to be seen and savoured in one sitting. After all, *Nicholas Nickleby* ran for some eight hours, so why not the much shorter *Kamouraska*? An opportunity badly missed (and botched) by Superchannel.

However, *Kamouraska* will be screened again during 1984 and everyone who cares for film, Jutra, Quebec and Canadian film should see it. Bujold is superb, Philippe Léotard as her husband ably projects a larger-than-life swine, Richard Jordan as the doctor/lover is woodenly handsome, while Camille Bernard has a small triumph as Antoine's blindly devoted mother.

Patricia Thompson ●

OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN d. George P. Cosmatos **exec. p.** Pierre David **p.** Claude Héroux **sc.** Brian Taggart, based upon the book "The Visitor" by Chauncey G. Parker **mus.** Ken Wannberg **d.o.p.** René Verzier **ed.** Robert Silvi **p. des.** Anne Pritchard **p. sup.** Roger Héroux **sup. sd. ed.** Leslie Hodgson **post-p. sup.** Bill Wiggins **1st a.d.** John Fretz **a.d.** Frank Ruszczyński, Michael Sarao **unit man.** François Ouimet **cam. op.** René Verzier **cont.** France Boudreau **asst. to d.** Denise Di Novi **gaffer** Jacques Fortier **best boy** Claude Alarie **cameramen** Serge Ladouceur, Peter Benison **elect.** Gilles Fortier, Normand Viau, Jean Courteau, Jean Trudeau, Marc Charlebois, Claude Brasseur **art d.** Rosemarie McSherry **art d. co-ord.** Tina Boden **set dec.** Serge Bureau **set dressers** Violette Daneau, Jean-Baptiste Tard, Denis Hamel, Tom Coulter, Abraham Lee, Maurice Tremblay, Barbara Shrier **prop. master** Jacques Chamberland **asst. prop.** Jean-Vincent Fournier **cost. des.** Paul-André Guérin **ward.** Hazel Pethig-Côté, Louise Gagne, Laura Drew **make-up** Michele Dion, Chantal Ethier **hair** Constant Natale, Martin Menard **focus pullers** Denis Gingras, Paul Gravel, Glen MacPherson **loaders** Jean-François Pouliot, Christine Pelletier, Patti Morein **key grip** Marc de Ernsted **grip** Jean-Maurice de Ernsted **sd.** Don Cohen **boom** Eric Zimmer **asst. ed.** Chantal Bowen, Teresa de Luca **stills** Piroška Mihalka **sculptors** P. Karen Langshaw, Peter Dowker, Peter Borowsky **sp. efx.** **make-up** Stephan Dupuis **sp. efx.** Jacques Godbout, Louis Craig **stunts** Marie-Patricia St-Laurent, Jean Lysight **mus. sup.** David Franco **sd. efx. ed.** Peter Burgess **dialog. ed.** Al Streeter **Foley** Terry Burke **asst. sd. ed.** Kerry Kohler, Gary Daprato, Haydn Streeter **animal handling sup.** Bob Tschanz **animal trainer** Robert Dunn **cast.** Deirdre Bowen, Ginette D'Amico **asst. cast.** Rosina Buccì **pub.** Paratel **admin.** Serge Major **p. acct.** Gilles Léonard, Pierre Guevremont **asst. acct.** Mable Arial, Nathalie Laporte **p. sec.** Patricia Cahill **asst. to exec. p.** Monik Nantel **const. co-ord.** Harold Thrasher **const. crew** Jak Oliver, Michael Devine, Serge LaForest, Frank Digiacomo, Larry Lamont, Marc Rainville **p. assts.** Frank D'Amico, Linda Ekdahl, Robert Ditchburn, Maurice Boyer, Michel Martin, David Bailey, Geoff Bowie, Brian Campbell, Marilyn Majerczyk, Paul Hotte, Michel Boyer, Pierre Tessier, Nicholas Koppen, Richard Carrière **mixing** Film House **sd. re-rec.** Paul Coombe, Michael Hoogenboom **rec. eng.** Dick Lewzey **orchestrator** Albert Woodbury **lab.** Film House **titles** Film Titles Ltd. **opticals** Groupe Film Opticals **color timer** Christopher Severn **neg. cut.** T'n T. Services Ltd. **Ms. Shannon Tweed's ward.** furnished by Bob Ore International **watches** Moug furs Montreal Master Furrier **prod.** with the participation of the Canadian Film Development Corporation and Famous Players Limited **p.c.** A Pierre David and Lawrence Nesis presentation **running time** 89 min. **dist.** Warner Bros. **l.p.** Peter Weller, Jennifer Dale, Lawrence Dane, Kenneth Welsh, Louis Del Grande, Shannon Tweed, Keith Knight, Maury Chaykin, Leif Anderson, Jimmy Tapp, Gayle Garfinkle, Earl Pennington, Jacklin Webb, Bronwen Mantel, Monik Nantel, Aimée Castle, Jesse Grasis, Tara O'Donnell.



● Genevieve Bujold in Claude Jutra's re-edited version of *Kamouraska*, restored in its original 200 minutes