Phillip Borsos
One Magic Christmas

The fairytale castle which is the logo for Walt Disney studios appears on the screen and we are plunged back into the world of our childhood. A world, where, as Canadian children we spent most of our time watching American movies and TV programs. One Magic Christmas was produced by Peter O’Brian (The Grey Fox, My American Cousin), and is being presented by Walt Disney in association with Silver Screen Partners and Telefilm Canada. It is directed by Phillip Borsos, the director of Grey Fox, and shot on location in Ontario. Do we have here an essentially Canadian film sponsored by Disney, or, an American film shot in Canada by a Canadian director with (at least in part) Canadian money?

The movie is as schizophrenic as its origins. The location is ambiguous. The story supposedly takes place in a small town called Medford in the north (Meaford, Ontario is one of the towns used for location shots). A small town which flies an American flag. A small town where out-of-towners come from Oklahoma, poor mothers cash in food stamps and yet where the mailbox (which is central to the story) is red and definitely Canadian (American ones are blue). But the schizophrenia is deeper than just an ambiguous sense of location. It shows up, even more strongly, in the values portrayed and the characterizations. Perhaps, after all, it could only be made by a Canadian, on Canadian soil, since it exemplifies so well the overwhelming impact of American society and values on Canadian life and art.

One Magic Christmas starts by establishing a fairytale atmosphere. The moon sheds an eerily blue light on a man sitting in a treetop. A voice out of the sky speaks to him. The man is an Xmas angel, named Gideon, whose task is to help someone on earth regain the Christmas spirit. This time he will try to help Ginnie Grainger overcome her cynicism about Christmas and life in general. Poor Ginnie works as a supermarket cashier to support an unemployed husband, Jack, and their two kids, Cal and Abbie. The big bad company boss has not only fired her husband but also wants them out of the company house by January 1st. The story starts a few days before Christmas. She has reason to be dispirited. Her husband, however, is an idealist, a dreamer, who believes in angels and the spirit of Christmas. He also believes in his own particular fantasy which allows him to run a bicycle shop where his talents for repairing and manufacturing bikes can be exercised. Ginnie is unimpressed by such a fanciful notion, and, besides, this would mean using the last of their savings. She even questions the point of living in a world where "God’s gone away forgetting the promises he made." But, by a magic trick, the angel will be able to make her see the value of what she has (husband and kids) and help her regain the spirit of Christmas.

Through Gideon’s agency her world falls to pieces. Her husband is shot in a bank robbery and her children are kidnapped and nearly drowned. It is her daughter Abbbie who undertakes a journey to the North Pole to ask Santa Claus to bring her father back to life. But, in the end, only Ginnie’s reawakened belief in Santa Claus and Christmas allows the miracle to take place. Once she mails Abbie’s letter to Santa, the Christmas lights return and her husband reappears. In the end, the whole town unites to sing Christmas carols under the town Xmas tree put up by Jack and a friend.

It is beautifully crafted movie in the old classical Hollywood tradition. Every shot-counter-shot brings us closer to the characters’ emotions and Mary Steenburgen gives a highly believable performance as the mother even in the tear-jerker scenes. The little girl is beautiful and the classical Hollywood lighting, highlighting her golden hair, does her proud. The angel, however, brings in a darker note. Harry Dean Stanton’s performance is evocative. He is a dark, somewhat threatening, angel. Dressed in a long dark coat and a big dark hat, he seems incongruous in this suburban town.

The film supposedly takes place in the present, but the atmosphere is more reminiscent of the ’50s, with certain shadings from the ’30s. The theme of unemployment, the company town, the big bad boss and the family in danger of losing their home are all elements reminiscent of the ’30s, even if also present in the present. In particular the characterizations, the values and the atmosphere of small-town America are all elements that belong to the quintessential American director of the Depression, Frank Capra. The idea of the angel coming down to earth at Christmas to help a poor mother cash in food stamps and yet where the mailbox is red and definitively Canadian (American ones are blue). But the schizophrenia goes deeper than just an ambiguous sense of belonging. The company boss could only be made by a Canadian, on Canadian soil, since it exemplifies so well the overwhelming impact of American society and values on Canadian life.

One Magic Christmas, the angel looks like a Depression hobo and speaks with a soft western accent. In his earthy past he was a cowhand and he still plays a harmonica and sings. He is a familiar figure and yet hard to place. Unless one knows that Capra’s idealistic but humourous heroes, such as John Doe, were based on Will Rogers, an old cowboy, comedian and homespun philosopher who was a star in Hollywood and a friend of Capra’s. Of course, Borsos has already shown his attachment to old cowboys in The Grey Fox. The values which underlie this Christmas fantasy are also straight out of a Capra movie: God, family, community and the courage to believe in one’s dreams. For Jack Grainger the dream is that of becoming his own boss, a small entrepreneur, the dream of individualistic capitalism. These may not be bad values themselves but in the 1980s they would sound much like pragmatism or, dare I say, Mulroneyism.

One hates to sound like Scrooge, but, on some level, the spirit of Christmas in this movie seems actually to be anti-feminist. The central characters of the film are the mother and the daughter. They follow Capra’s usual dualistic character traits of the idealist and the cynic. It is true that in terms of the male character parts the same dualism occurs. The boy is cynical and the father idealistic. But our attention is mostly focussed on the female characters. The little girl believes in Santa Claus and this belief must be reawakened in the mother. Why is this anti-feminist? First of all, the two other families we meet in the film are single-parent families and they cannot afford to give their children any Christmas presents. The character who becomes a bank robber and causes all the tragedies in the film is a single father. Even more central in the film’s plot is the failure of Ginnie to believe in her man and his dreams. To reawaken this belief her daughter must go to the North Pole to seek Santa’s help in bringing her father back to life. Perhaps the deep sexist lies there is Mrs. Claus, a sweet white-haired old lady. When Abbie asks Santa to bring her Daddy back, he replies that only her mother could do that. Abbie asks “How could she?” Immediately there is a cut to Mrs. Claus bringing a big red sweater to Santa and saying “I fixed your sweater, Nicholas.” When Santa leaves for his Christmas eve tour, she sweetly brings him a little red lunch box. One would think that enough milk and cookies would be left out for him. Abbie takes back the good news and brings it to Jack, but simply convinced, Ginnie risks getting fired from her job (her sole means of support) so that she can stay home on Christmas Eve and give her husband their last $500 so that he can open his bicycle shop. The message to women everywhere seems clear enough.

And yet the film is so well-made, the old-fashioned Santa and his home so much like an old-fashioned Christmas card, that one longs to believe in him. It is a fairytale, not for children but for adults. The very innocence of the society portrayed is such that maybe it could only be made in Canada by a Canadian. Surely such innocence is lost to the American society of the 1980s. But the values are American and the idealistic hero does not fit the usual characteristics of a Canadian film hero as defined by Robert Fothergill in his 1973 essay “Coward, Bully or Clown.” As a matter of fact, he is neither a coward nor a bully but simply the man who holds his own against a world that would put him down. The values of the film are too much those of Capra and too much those of America for the film to be defined as Canadian. As a Canadian film one can only see in it the overwhelming influence of American values, ideals and artforms on Canadian culture.

Whether the film is seen as Canadian or American, one still has to account for the way this movie celebrates values...
which seem to belong to a vanished past. However, if one thinks of such films as Star Wars or Raiders of the Lost Ark, a pattern does seem to evolve. U.S. critic Fredric Jameson, in an essay on postmodernism and consumer society, points out that such films reinvent the mass media cultural experiences of the 30s to 50s so that we can re-experience them. Jameson says that by reinventing the feel and shape of character art objects of an older period, these films seek to reawaken a sense of the past associated with those objects.

I would go further and state that these kinds of films also try to recreate a sense of values associated with the past. This is manifest in the film One Magic Christmas when the children go to visit their great-grandfather in his old farm-house and explore the attic with him. This attic is something that had belonged to the grandfather as a child and old-fashioned glass ball containing a snowy scene of Santa's house.

It is to this location that Abbie will later travel in her efforts to bring her father back to life. Another artifact from the past which appears throughout the film and which obviously has a lot to do with past values is the antique doll which Abbie is usually clutching. The doll looks completely out of place in the suburban environment of her home but, again, it is an artifact which be-speaks of past values, this time those of a lost femininity. The allusive programmation of older plots also is a feature of postmodernism as is the recreation of the suburban environment of her home. Andrei, Amah Harris, Rita Tuckett, Sam MaIkln, Michelle Meyrink, Elias Kotcas, Wayne Robson, Jan Steenburgen, Gary Barus, Robert King, Roger Botter, Geneveve Appleton.

Michael Rubbo's The Peanut Butter Solution

A disclaimer should probably be included when an adult, unaccompanied by a child, reviews a movie made for children. Because it is only a child's audience, with its particular perspectives, that will determine whether a film is made for them works or not. (See box)

The Peanut Butter Solution is the second film in Les Productions La Fête's 'Fête's for All' series, following the enormously successful La Guerre des Tuques/The Dog Who Stopped the War. Based on his original idea and script as well as directed by Michael Rubbo, the film appears to lack the finesse of its predecessors. These tragic happenings in the film occur. For this reviewer, for instance, there were too many holes in the plot, and the script is in many instances too contrived to have much adult appeal. Even from the older children of this country, sophisticated by American movies, television and computer technologies, Peanut Butter's sticky cuteness should draw more discerning young audiences.

Nevertheless, the film does have certain graces, and merits attention for those elements that display a level of filmmaking that is surprisingly good. The story is a fantastical one – about young Michael who experiences a fright that causes him to lose his hair. His fright is the premise of the film and is underlined by a Christmas tree, reviews a movie made overnight loss of one's hair would be horrifying for a person of any age and presents a catastrophe to 12-year-old Michael. It occurs when Michael daringly looks into a recently burned-out and presumably haunted house where coincidentally two rubbish he had given money to flows from the old man who lives in the house. The overnight loss of one's hair would be horrifying for a person of any age and presents a catastrophe to 12-year-old Michael. It occurs when Michael daringly looks into a recently burned-out and presumably haunted house where coincidentally two rubbish he had given money to flows from the old man who lives in the house.

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