

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 (Americans are blue). But the schizophrenia goes 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 eerie 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 it 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 is to open 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



● Shades of Capra! *One Magic Christmas*' all-American family

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 Abbie 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

remniscent 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 to 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 lost, but essentially good, person, come back to the true path of belief in family and community values was used by Capra in his 1946 film, *It's A Wonderful Life*.

In *One Magic Christmas*, the angel looks like a Depression hobo and speaks with a soft western accent. In his earthly 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 humorous 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 individualis-

tic capitalism. These may not be bad values in themselves but in the 1980s they sound too much like Reaganomics 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. The first person she meets 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 that there is a Santa Claus. Finally convinced, Ginnie risks getting fired from her job (their sole means of support) so that she can stay home on Christmas Eve and give her husband their last \$5000 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 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 young husband 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, a bully or a clown, but a simple 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. James states that, by reinventing the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period, these films seek to reawaken a sense of the past associated with those objects.

ritual death and rebirth of the young god, sometimes accompanied by the actual sacrifice of a young man. Jack takes the place of this sacrificial victim and, like the dying god, he is reborn as the same person. Finally the Christmas tree, symbolic of the tree of life, is the central motif around which the community gathers at the end of the film to celebrate the continuance of its life and beliefs.

Mary Alemany-Galway •



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 made clear in *One Magic Christmas* when the children go to visit their great-grandfather in his old farmhouse and explore the attic with him. There they find a Christmas book which 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 speaks of past values, this time those of a lost femininity. The allusive plagiarism of older plots is also a feature of post-modernism as is the recreation of the '50s atmosphere in a contemporary setting.

The effectiveness of the film in making these old-fashioned values attractive can be accounted for, in part, if we understand its use of an underlying mythic structure. The dark angel is disturbing but his characteristics are appropriate for a figure that brings death and destruction to this society. It is through Gideon's agency that the tragedies in the film occur. These tragic happenings lead to the death of the idealistic, young hero, Jack Grainger. The underlying myth of Christmas is that of the solstitial cycle of the solar year and its attendant symbolism. At this time of year the theme of a newborn light threatened by the powers of darkness predominates. The angel is usually seen in the blue light of a movie night. When he performs his sleight-of-hand magic trick which brings about the tragedies, all the lights on the Christmas trees, up and down the street, go out. When the tragic events are nullified, like a bad dream, the lights go back on. The feast of the winter solstice also included the

ONE MAGIC CHRISTMAS d. Phillip Borsos sc. Thomas Meehan from a story by Meehan, Borsos, Barry Healey; p. Peter O'Brian p.exec. Fred Roos exec.p. Phillip Borsos assoc.p. Michael MacDonald d.o.p. Frank Tidy, B.S.C. p.des. Bill Brodie ed. Sidney Wolinsky mus. Michael Conway Baker cast. Gail Carr L.A.cast. Janet Thirschenson, C.S.A. and Jane Jenkins, C.S.A. NY cast. Bonnie Timmermann sd.des. Bruce Nyznik p.man. David Coatsworth 1st a.d. Tony Lucibello art d. Tony Hall cost.des. Olga Dimitrov set dec. Rondi Johnson make-up Ann Brodie sp.afx. John Thomas cam.op. Robert Saad, C.S.C. sd.rec. Bruce Carwarding, Glen Gauthier p.assoc. Sarah Hayward unit loc. man. Keith Large 2nd unit loc. man. Howard Rothschild 2nd a.d. Elizabeth Scherberger 3rd a.d. David Till p.asst. Orest Haba p.coord. Debbie Cooke post.p.coord. Elaine McFeat exec.coord. Terri Fettes exec.asst. Debra Henderson p.acct. Joanne Jackson, Judy Roseberg; p.cons. Paul Tucker cont. Penelope Hynam dialogue George Pothitos p.illust. Joe Griffith art dir. Tom Doherty, Alicia Keywan asst a.d.'s Debra Gjendem, Nancy Pankiw, Alistair MacRae, Caroline George; tech.efx. Jeremy Borsos set dressers Gustave Meunier, Dennis Kirkham, Ken Clark; prop.master Mark Freeborn prop.man Chris Biden const.sup. Bill Harman hd paint. Willie Holst standby Fred Geringer head carp. Alex Russell ward.mist. Madeline Stewart ward.dress. Gail Filman, Rose Mihaly; hairstylists Tony Marrero, Bryan Charboneau; make-up artist Beverly Carr cast.assoc. Michael Hirshenson, Jim Simpson; add.cast. Susannah Conebeare extras Peter Laverder animals Steve Martin's working wildlifeanimal krainer Marc Weiner animal master Rick Parker sp.efx. Neil Trifunovich; Bill Orr, J. Tracy Budd; stunt coord. T.J. Scott The Stunt Team stunt driver David Rigby 1st asst.cam. Neil Seale 2nd asst.cam. Perry Hoffman 2nd unit cam. David Crone, Henri Fiks; 2nd unit asst.cam. Michael Hall, Kerry Smart; trainee asst. cam. Pauline Heaton, Tony Guerin; gaffer Chris Holmes best boy Tony Eldridge key grip Michael Dan Kohne best boy Noah Farrill unit pub. Prudence Emery stills Gail Harvey dialog.ed.; Glen Gauthier a.d.r. eds Robin Leigh, Rick Cadger; sd.efx.eds Alan Geldart, Alison Clark, Michael O'Farrell, Peter Thilaye; mus.ed. Denise McCormick sd.efx.rec. Bruce Nyznik, Gord Thompson; re-rec mixers Joe Grimaldi, David Appleby, Don White; asst.film eds. Tim Eaton, Robin Russell, Scott Eldridge; asst.sd.ed. Jan Nicolichuk, Rosmary Conte, Leon Wood, Daleshel-drake, Anke Barker, Roberta Kipp, Anna Pafomow, Susan Lindell, Bob Cooper, Susan Maggi, Bruno Degazio, Sandra Moffat; trans.coord. Fred Ionson driver capt. Stuart Hughes. Re-rec. Pathe Sound and Post Production Centre, Toronto Lenses and Panaflex Panavision 35mm, color by Alpha Cine Service, Vancouver, Canada p.c. North Pole Picture Company of Canada Inc., in association with Silver Screen Partners II and Telefilm Canada. Dist. Buena Vista Lp. Mary Steenburgen, Gary Basaraba, Harry Dean Stanton, Arthur Hill, Elizabeth Harnois, Robbie Magwood, Michelle Meyrink, Elias Koteas, Wayne Robson, Jan Rubes, Sarah Polley, Graham Jarvis, Timothy Webber, Joy Thompson-Allen, John Friesen, Debra McGrath, Julie Beaulieu, Jeremy Dingle, Jane Schoettle, Damir Andrei, Amah Harris, Rita Tuckett, Sam Malkin, Gareth Bennett, John E. Johnson, Alf Humphreys, Gary Bush, Robin McCulloch, Robert King, Rodger Barton, Genevieve 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 childish audience, with its particular perspectives, that will determine whether or not a film made for them works or not. (See box)

The Peanut Butter Solution is the second film in Les Productions La Fête's 'Films 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, *Peanut Butter* only loosely fits the for all category. 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 derision than honest laughter.

Nevertheless, the film does have certain graces, and merits attention for those elements that display a level of filmic ingenuity.

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 kept a mystery until the final moments. It occurs when Michael daringly looks into a recently burned-out and presumably haunted house where coincidentally two rubbies he had given money to the previous day die in the blaze. 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. After several days of shamefully hiding out at home, Michael has a disastrous attempt at wearing a wig that takes him to even deeper levels of despair. Then, one night, the two rubbies, Tom and Mary, miraculously appear, and Mary offers Michael a recipe to be smeared all over the head. The secret ingredient, is, of course, the peanut butter that makes it all stick together. Following one failed try from which Michael is unhelpfully "rescued" by his father and sister, he succeeds in completing the concoction but, disregarding Mary's warning, adds four times the amount of peanut butter called for. And so the adventure begins. Michael's hair starts to grow – and grow – and grow.

The premise is good and reasonably well developed to this point. On the level of the family interrelationships, the kinds of animosities and tendernesses possible in a close-knit family (where the mother is absent) are accurate. Despite some corny lines, the dialogue is good, and the cast well-chosen.

Reflecting a child's perspective, the adult characters tend to be one-dimensional, (i.e. mean, good, silly, authoritarian etc.). The father (Michael Hogan), an artist, is essentially "out to lunch,"

concentrating on his painting and leaving the household management to his wife (replaced in her absence by the daughter). Like many fathers, he just doesn't understand what's going on about him. He is inept, but loves his children and in return is adored by them.

Other adult characters include Miss Prume (Pat Thompson), the school principal, who is forbidding, dominating and just the way you remember all school principals to be: eyes in the back of her head and arms that seem able to reach 20 feet in any direction to grab unsuspecting children in school hallways. The Rabbit, the Doctor and another teacher are all fine, if somewhat formulaic, though it seems logical that the reason the Rabbit is named the Rabbit and why he is a family joke should be shared with the audience.

Where the film doesn't work is in the realm of "evil", personified in the character of the Signor (Michel Maillet). He is the bad guy, evident to any viewer of any age, but why he is so is not. Is it because he's always wanted a son but never had one; is it because he's an unrecognized and unrewarded artist? A child will wonder what produces evil, and unfortunately the question of why the Signor is the bad guy is never answered, even if Michel Maillet does a fine job of portraying the eccentric, egomaniac and thwarted artist.

For their effects, the most wonderful and fascinating scenes are those in the Signor's factory (aside from those between Michael, Suzie and their father at home). Here are elements that should strike any viewer as insidiously horrifying: the visions of children working silently on the factory assembly lines, living completely according to the whims of the Signor. Trapped in a world where there is only work and sleep, a world devoid of natural light, imagination or means of escape, this is fantasy turned nightmare. Added to the images of children on assembly lines are the Signor's incredible paintings that glimmer eerily of "reality." But, as one of the captives explains to Connie (Siluk Saysanasy, the story's hero), they offer no escape from the Signor's prison because they are unreal, representing places that exist only in the Signor's mind. One can walk into these landscapes, but will only end up wandering in a nowhere land. All of this is intriguing, and the paintings themselves do visually exude a magical quality. If only the rest of the film had followed the same imaginative tack, instead of seeking easy solutions and convenient situations.

As an idea for a film directed at entertaining the entire family, Michael's fright is a terrific one, combining fantasy, mystery and humor. Unfortunately, *The Peanut Butter Solution* oversimplifies and over-explains some of its ideas though it fails to carry other ideas through to their resolution. So it has a strangely inexplicable character like the Signor, or a scene where Connie's pubic hair stops growing under the force of his will, but his voice continues to deepen only to return to normal in the next sequence. Why? If it's for the sake of humour, it comes off as cheap. At the same time, in an attempt to make sure the point gets across about imagination and its power, Michael sums up his adventure at the end by saying that the fright was mostly in his imagination.