

REVIEWS

Gordon Pinsent's

John and The Missus

In John Ford's *The Sun Shines Bright*, Charles Winniger plays Judge Priest, a judge in a small Kentucky town, circa 1910, who behaves in a moral manner — stopping a lynching, arranging a church funeral for a "fallen woman" — which may cost him his re-election. He is, of course, re-elected, and the people who parade past his house that night carry signs saying things like "He Saved us from Ourselves."

Peter O'Brian is the Judge Priest of the English-Canadian cinema. He seems to have been invented by the surviving tax-shelter producers so that they could go on making *Schlock* while pointing with pride to O'Brian, who makes small-scale, heartfelt, honest, decent motion pictures.

My basic problem with O'Brian is that when I see one of his films, I'm supposed to be impressed. What's wrong with that, you ask? When I see *Scanners*, I'm supposed to be scared. When I see *The Bells of St. Mary's*, I'm supposed to cry. When I see *Ghostbusters*, I'm supposed to laugh. But when I see *John and the Missus*, or *My American Cousin*, I'm supposed to be impressed, and long to throw Genies at it.

O'Brian makes award-winning films that were born to be shown on the CBC. Leaving aside for the moment *The Grey Fox*, which had the benefit of Philip Borsos' visionary style and an enormously persuasive Richard Farnsworth performance, O'Brian's films leave me cold. I can see the virtues of *My American Cousin*, *One Magic Christmas*, and now *John and the Missus*, and why people feel absolutely compelled to honour such clean virtuousness, but virtue doesn't do anything for me. Whenever I see a film that's supposed to give me some sort of moral uplift, I long for the crass commerciality of an Ivan Reitman, the vulgar stupidity of a Bob Clark.

What's really fascinating is that his directors are definitely the *auteurs* of their films — Sandy Wilson's *My American Cousin* is autobiographical, Philip Borsos' style in *The Grey Fox* and *One Magic Christmas* is unmistakable, and Gordon Pinsent's *John and the Missus* inhabits the psychogeography of Pinsent's birthplace as surely as did *The Rowdyman*. But one can see common threads running through them that indicate the producer's personality and taste.

None of them are set in the present (*One Magic Christmas* is, but as *Cinema Canada* reviewer Mary Alemany Galway noted, it could as easily be set in the '30's), which means we don't have to worry about contemporary issues. They are all extremely tasteful and low-key, made on limited budgets but with immense craftsmanship. There is minimal violence, minimal sex, nothing that



•Gordon Pinsent is the John and Jackie Burroughs is the Missus

could really offend anyone. (Actually, *One Magic Christmas* offended the hell out of me — there's Mary Steenburgen, depressed and anti-Santa, a sane island of integrity in her economically afflicted but nonetheless cheerful family, so Santa sends a Christmas angel to teach her to count her blessings. How does he teach her that she should be happier? By killing her husband and children. Jesus!)

Vladimir Nabokov once wrote that few things are more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity, and that is a quality that O'Brian's films utterly lack. (It was exceptionally interesting to see Philip Borsos' non-O'Brian feature, *The Mean Season*, in this light — now there's a picture with some zap.)

Which brings us, in a roundabout way, to *John and the Missus*. Written by Gordon Pinsent, starring Gordon Pinsent, directed by Gordon Pinsent, based on a novel by Gordon Pinsent, it is the story of John Munn, a man who lives in a godforsaken corner of Newfoundland with his wife. (The missus is played by Jackie Burroughs, who has lit-

tle to do but be wise and supportive. Burroughs is one of this country's great and lunatic talents, and she deserves much better.) His son is coming back home with his new bride. He's going to join his dad down the mine which is the town's sole economic base. How Green was Your Outport then, Gordon Pinsent?

But into this quasi-idyllic existence comes harsh economic reality and the evil government, wanting to close down the mine (it doesn't have any copper left) and uproot the town, it being 1963 and the beginning of the closing of the outports. Now John, whose family was among the town founders, isn't going to take this lying down, no sirree. He makes angry speeches. When someone tells him the town's dead, he lashes back "Then so are we?" and accuses the government of wanting him to die among strangers.

I may be the wrong person to review this film — I spent my childhood being dragged over half of North America as my father got transferred from place to place — southern Ontario, New Jersey,

Nova Scotia. The six years I've lived in my current apartment is the longest I've ever spent at one address. So as a rootless cosmopolitan, and, worse, one from that most hellish of all places, Ontario, I have almost no sympathy with or comprehension of these movies — not just *John and the Missus*, but the American farm movies like *Country* and *The River*. What's so great about a tiny village at the ass end of an economically depressed province? What's so great about a farm that belonged to your great granddaddy. Just because your kin are buried there, it's no reason to jump into the grave with them.

Which brings us to an essential hypocrisy of *John and the Missus*. Gordon Pinsent left Newfoundland, the press notes tell us, in 1948, at the age of 18. That is, he left the Rock before it was a part of Canada and before he was old enough to vote. If you want to write about film (and make a living at it), it doesn't make any sense for me to live in Saskatoon. If the mine closes up, and you're a miner, you'd better move somewhere with a working mine. The history of man on this planet — of life on this planet — is that you adapt or you die. Dinosaurs aren't especially sympathetic figures, and neither, really, is John Munn.

The operative comparison, I suppose, is with Mike and Andy Jones, who knocked themselves out for almost a decade to make *The Adventures of Faustus Bidgood*, which is a movie about Newfoundland with a sense of humour (the "humour" in *John and the Missus* involves sniggering at the conjugal passion of the newlyweds, an old joke) and without any false nostalgia for a bucolic past that probably never looked half as clean as Frank Tidy's cinematography makes it out to be. (Hell, people of Scots-Irish heritage in a small community isolated from the mainstream? Two more generations, and they would have looked like the road company of *Deliverance*.)

John and the Missus is well-crafted, professionally acted, and is honest, sincere and bloody dull. *The Adventures of Faustus Bidgood* is lunatic, sloppy, technically impossible, and suffers from extremely peculiar continuity. Guess which one is a better film. Now guess which one will win lots of awards.

John Harkness

JOHN AND THE MISSUS d. Gordon Pinsent sc. Gordon Pinsent, based on his novel p. Peter O'Brian, John Hunter exec p. Peter O'Brian co-exec. p. S. Howard Rosen assoc. p. Gabriella Martinelli ed. Bruce Nyznik orig. mus. Michael Conway Baker art d. Earl Preston d.o.p. Frank Tidy, B.S.C. costumes Olga Dimitrov east. d. Deidre Bowen sup. sd. ed. Bruce Nyznik loc. sd. mix. Rob Young prod. man. Gabriella Martinelli 1st a.d. William Spahic script sup. Penelope Hynam make-up and hair Suzanne Benoit asst. ed. Anna Pafomow asst. art. d. Fred Geringer ast. cost. des. Petra Kravjansky spfx sup. Martin Malivoire 1st asst. cam. Martin Malivoire 1st ast. cam. Christopher Raucamp dev. exec. for ind. pic. Debra Henderson prod. exec. for CBC David Pears l.p. Gordon Pinsent, Jackie Burroughs, Randy Follett, Jessica Steen, Roland Hewgill, Timothy Webber, Neil Munro, Michael Wade, Jerry Doyle, Jane Dingle, Frank Holden, Barry Greene, Ricky Raymond, Austin Davis, Judy Furlong, Brian Downey, Kevin Noble, Lulu Keating, George Earle, Greg Thomey, Doug Seymour, Rick Hollett, Paul Steffler, Mack Furlong. Filmed in association with The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation with the participation of Telefilm Canada and the Ontario Film Development Corporation. colour 35mm running time 90 minutes.