Gordon Pinsent's

John and The Missus

In John Ford's The Sun Shines Bright, Charles Winninger 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’Brien 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’Brien, who makes small-scale, heartfelt, honest, decent motion pictures.

My basic problem with O’Brien 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.

O’Brien 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’Brien’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 virtuosity, 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 ’30s), 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 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 happy? 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’Brien’s films utterly lack. (It was exceptionally interesting to see Philip Borsos’ non-O’Brien 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 little 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, and his daughter has gone on an expedition. He’s going to join his dad down the mine which is the town’s sole economic base. How Green was Your Outpost then, Gordon Pinsent?

But into this quasi-idyllic existence comes harsh economic reality and the evil government, wanting to close the mine (it doesn’t have any copper left) and uproot the town, which one is a better movie? Which one is a better film? Now guess which one will win lots of awards.

John Harkness •

JOHN AND THE MISSUS

d. Gordon Pinsent


March 1987 • Cinema Canada