Tunes a Plenty

Although Greg Hance’s Tunes a Plenty has some of the same deadpan humour that distinguishes other Winnipeg features like John Pats’ Crimewave, Guy Maddin’s Tales From Gimli Hospital and Hance’s earlier Downtown, this second feature seems a throwback to an earlier tradition of Canadian moviemaking. Eschewing ’80s post-modernism, the film looks and sounds like a lost child of the CJC’s “low-budget features” programme of the earlier ’70s. The requisite realist signifiers are all there: the unmodulated photography of nondescript basements, living rooms and back offices, the sound of speaking voices competing with the sharp scrape of kitchen utensils across an arborite table. As I watched and listened, my recollections were of Don Shebib’s Rip-Off and Clarke Mackey’s The Only Thing You Know.

Tunes a Plenty is about a garage band in self-imposed exile. The title is not particularly apt. Although songs make up a considerable portion of the film’s running time, the title hints at a jauntiness never aimed for and fails to suggest the downbeat tone achieved. Early on, the band’s leader, M.C. (played by Hance himself) dismisses a would-be manager who might offer a gig or publicity. The scene is significant because it signals the way the band, under M.C.’s tentative, turns away from others, especially women. Some of the best scenes counterpoint the triedly harmonic of the band as they rehearse in dark basements with the greater irritation engendered by individual member’s contact with employers or girlfriends. As he demonstrated in Downtown, Hance is especially adept at expressing inner-city ennui, the unfulfilled camera placements and editing allow you to catch the cryptic words and missed eye contact that underwrite understanding between male and female.

The film has a thin anecdotal narrative line you might readily follow at first, associated with American films of the rock group genre (The Buddy Holly Story, La Bamba) but it drops even this tentative connection to convention when the anticipated career-making audition sequence fails even to materialize. Though if this is really such a remarkable break with narrative practice or merely a case of a Canadian convention – the tendency to urge to fail – replacing an American one?

Tunes a Plenty may deliberately ignore the anticipated climaxes of standard narratives in this genre, but it possesses an odd rhetoric all its own. Here is where it suffers in comparison with the earlier Downtown which benefitted from Mitch Brown’s more generous characterizations and quirky dialogue.

As a musician as well as filmmaker, Hance wants to use the movie to dramatize the frustration of trying to be an independent rock artist. The argument here is the overworked one about the need for integrity in a world where, as Hance’s mouthpiece, M.C. puts it, “all that work and effort just boils down to how you advertise yourself in some stupid video or poster.” M.C. is a purist for “original” songs whereas his bassist, Cal, urged by his boyfriend who arranged the promised audition, sees no harm in doing “covers.” (Let’s seem an obscure topic, CBC radio recently examined the phenomenon of “tribute” bands who make a living playing note for note imitations of deadbeat groups: Grand Funk Railway or Gary Lewis and the Playboys – take your pick of instant nostalgia.) Occasionally Hance makes something of this theme. He neatly deflates the pretensions of M.C. for instance when one of his “originals” comes over the car radio and a companion who can’t tell the difference says, “Is this you? Sounds alright. I thought it was one of the bands who make a living playing note for note imitations of Grand Funk.” Tunes a Plenty – take your pick of instant nostalgia. Occasionally Hance makes something of this theme. He neatly deflates the pretensions of M.C. for instance when one of his “originals” comes over the car radio and a companion who can’t tell the difference says, “Is this you? Sounds alright. I thought it was one of the bands who make a living playing note for note imitations of Grand Funk.”

The film climaxes with a clumsy sequence that calls into question the self-mockery that animates the earlier scenes. M.C. is now a church organist leading a choir in a hymn-like rendition of one of his songs condemning commercial radio. He’s become a kind of master of ceremonies but the event is fantastical and absurd. The banality of the rapidly scripted, unrehearsed lyrics (‘A.M. radio is no good but there are some good tunes / The people who program are turning us into tools’) is made worse by the pretentious setting and transcription.

Marred by its gauche rhetoric, Tunes a Plenty still has its eyes and ears alert to the lives of these second cousins of boath. The movie validates their existence and Hance is to be commended for keeping the realist aesthetic vital.

Howard Curle