Gerald Saul's and Brian Stockton's

Wheat Soup

It always seemed to me that a province like Saskatchewan would never be a place where unique cinema could be made. Not that the prairies are visually (or thematically) uninteresting: the arid and barren geography with its golden fields of wheat, and grain pools by the railway, would leave even Terrence Malick drooling. But somehow, abyssal cinematic efforts, produced mainly by easterners - films like the NFB's outdated The Dyersand, or Allan King's saccharine Who His Spy The Wind? - popularized the stereotype that Saskatchewan was forever existing in a '30s-style depression, populated by Kurelek figures straight from a W.O. Mitchell novel.

A change was long overdue, and it came in the form of Wheat Soup, a little-known film by Gerald Saul and Brian Stockton, and the first feature-length effort out of Regina's Saskatchewan Film Pool. Wheat Soup is a pseudo-experimental drama, laced with existential philosophy, post-apocalyptic science fiction, and a dry, minimalist sense of humour: a sort of cross between The Seventh Seal and Waiting for Godot, as directed by Jim Jarmusch or Luis Buñuel. While in turns entertaining and perplexing, Wheat Soup projects its practice, post-modernist view partly through the film's provincially localized text. No English-Canadian feature since Feeble's Bigfoot has provided more regional in-jokes. In Wheat Soup, religion has become mainly pantheistic, centering completely around wheat (The Wheat Farmers Almanac has replaced the Bible). In fact, wheat is considered the only thing worth living for. This grain fixation, in its own self-mocking way, suggests that in the aftermath of an apocalypse, the drylands will be the best place in the world to live. Propaganda, Saskatchewan-style!

The sparseness and banality of the theme reflects itself not only in the script, but also in the movie's nonexistent production values, occasionally overlapping scenes, and shoestring budget (around $14,000). Inevitably, some viewers will view Wheat Soup as too peculiar, aimless, or confusing. Despite the film's unity of theme, it seems debatable whether the filmmakers really knew what they were doing in the first place. This is a rarity, a film that makes its point, without really going anywhere. On the plus side, there is a wonderful sense of deadpan, hilarious humour; some clever references to old films and cartoons (Ralph and Sam are the names of the wolf and sheepdog in Chuck Jones' cartoons); and occasional sparks from a largely amateur cast. The one standout is Brian Stockton as the dry, deadpan Ralph. Also especially memorable is the shy disc jockey in Willoux's Heartline, Stockton strikes me as sort of a low-key Dustin Hoffman.

But the film's major triumph, for which it cannot becatalogued, is its visual imagery. In stark black and white, Stockton and Saul, along with cinematographer Spyros Egaratos, have concocted a view of the prairies which is both dream-like and hallucinatory. The vast horizons of cloud and sky, the long stretches of wheat fields, and even the final sunset sequence have none of the picture-postcard qualities found in archetypal CBC or NFB products. These prairies are a strange, sublime, alien world - dry, sterile, mysterious and, in their own way, appealing. When T. E. Lawrence is asked in Lawrence of Arabia why he likes the desert, he merely replies "It's so clean." Such a description seems proper for so desolate, yet so serene a world as that created in Wheat Soup.

Patrick Lowe •

WHEAT SOUP, Saskatchewan Film Pool 4, inc.