Gookness! Gracious! Great balls of fire! Two Canadian rock and roll flicks were unspooled during the most recent edition of the Toronto Festival of Festivals. One of them, Bruce McDonald’s Rodkill, blasts across the silver screen like some insane cross between Eraserhead, This is Spinal Tap and Rock ‘N’ Roll High School, while the other, William D. MacGillivray’s The Vacant Lot, plods its way to celluloid immortality alongside such earnest, but definitely unhip, cinematic song-fests as Neil Diamond’s The Jazz Singer.

While MacGillivray’s film means well, McDonald’s picture means very little (and appears to be gloriously proud of that fact). Rodkill is hilarious, raunchy, and booby – it’s endowed with a crushingly winning, up-yours mentality that’s sadly lacking in most Canadian cinema (and even more sadly lacking in The Vacant Lot). In a nutshell, Rodkill is rock ‘n’ roll.

The latter movie tells the mid-life tale of David (Grant Fullerton, in embarrassingly stiff form), a 40-ish musician who befriended the 17-year-old Trudi (Trudi Peterson, an actress who is not without screen presence, but is saddled with an incredibly dull role), a choir-singing cherub who manages to squeeze out something that isn’t contributed, maudlin or unintentionally humorous (although one thanks the god for the latter in this utterly humorless exercise).

For example, the scene in which Trudi contemplates her babbling father is – in and of itself – rather well written and nicely performed. The scene actually comes close to being quite moving. But in the final analysis, these few moments only work out of context since the rest of the film is so badly overwritten/underwritten and underplayed. Mainly, the problem here is that The Vacant Lot is so square. It appears to have absolutely no feel for the life rhythms of the rock world. Most of the musical numbers resemble an episode of The Tommy Hunter Show, rather than the music of a boogy, aggressive background band gone semi-pro.

Ironically, one of the best things about The Vacant Lot, is the very thing that MacGillivray and his central character, David, seem to dislike. The leader of the feminist punk band, Patti Precious (a deliciously lurid and loudmouthed performance from Barbara Nicholson) appears to represent – at least to David – everything that’s wrongheaded about the alternative music scene. In the context of all the dressness and the grinding monotony of David’s music, Patti Precious and her precious self-importance are actually refreshing.

Another gem amidst the mire is Patti’s lyric about the wonders of rock ‘n’ roll. Beginning with a furiously funny spoof of homage to those notorious Canadian Wildlife Service PSAs, and ending with a gloriously terrifying display of mass murder, Rodkill is yet another example of the sort of film which will continue to put Canada on the map. Just as The Vacant Lot represents the dry, humorless aspect of our country’s popular culture, Rodkill digs beneath Canada’s underbelly to reveal our sense of the life rhythms of the rock world.

The Vacant Lot, is endowed with an earnestness which is – at the very least – consistent. All the way through the film, MacGillivray’s intentions seem fuzzy, but the picture keeps nagging at you to like it. And, once in a while, the picture actually manages to squeeze out something that isn’t contributed, maudlin or unintentionally humorous (although one thanks the good lord for the latter in this utterly humorless exercise).

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