

Bob Clark's A Christmas Story

Some years ago, about the time of *Black Christmas* and *Murder By Decree*, it was thought Bob Clark might have gifts as a director of thrillers. Ever since then, however, with *Tribute*, the two *Porky's* films, and now *A Christmas Story*, an adaptation of Jean Shepherd's "In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash," it has become apparent that Clark is little more than a talentless hack, with no ability for anything save a connection with the densely corrupted sensibilities of America's teenaged movie audience.

A Christmas Story follows the attempts of young Ralphie (Peter Billingsley) to con his parents, Mother (Melinda Dillon) and The Old Man (Darren McGavin), into giving him his dream Christmas Gift, a Red Ryder model air rifle. He is constantly rebuffed by his mother, his teacher and even the store Santa Claus, all of whom tell him that "You'll shoot your eye out," which is the film's first of many errors. The line, as I recall from my youth, is "You'll shoot someone's eye out," which goes with those two other great maternal adages, "Come down from there or you'll break your arm," and "Put on your rubbers or you'll catch double pneumonia." The BB gun seems to be the one area where parents are not worried about the kids' own health.

Anyway, *A Christmas Story* no doubt is intended to evoke the lovely sort of Christmas films that were popular in the late '30s and early '40s, films like *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *Miracle on 34th Street*, but it fails to approximate any of them, for the simple reason that Clark is a heavy, thudding oaf of a director.

If we remember anything aside from the warm feelings generated by a film like *Meet Me in St. Louis*, it is the extraordinary subtlety of the playing of actors like Judy Garland and Margaret O'Brien. In *A Christmas Story*, the playing couldn't be any broader if the film had been shot in Panavision. Darren McGavin, a generally good actor, plays the role of the splenetic head of the family like a Nebraska insurance salesman auditioning for the roadshow company of Mr. Magoo. Melinda Dillon has some effective moments as Mother, but Peter Billingsley, the pie-face, wide-eyed, bespectacled hero of the piece, seems to have spent his early childhood being dropped on his head.

While this broadness of playing, combined with an extensive use of the distorting powers of the fisheye lens might seem to be a reasonable way to adapt Shepherd, whose literary style consists of the canny exaggeration of petty events into epic comic conflicts, it is not, because the satiric ideal in the cinema is quite different. Playing this broadly defeats the innately realist basis of the cinema - a faithful adaptation of Gulliver's Travels would be almost impossible in any sort of live action film. The exaggeration involved would simply be unbelievable, whereas a literary figure can push things much farther, simply because the mind is more supple when supplying its own images as opposed to the cinema's images.

The one thing the film has going for it is the beautiful production design of Reuben Freed, a loving recreation of the film's early '40s period. When I visited



● Reuben Freed's production design steals the show in *A Christmas Story*

the set while the film was in production at Toronto's Magder Studios, I was immediately struck by the wonderful house that had been constructed in the studio. On a dolly near the front door was a box filled with old appliances - toasters, waffle-irons, Waring mixers. It was evidence of care and taste, and made one tremendously nostalgic. It is unfortunate that the film does not live up to its art direction.

I have never been one to complain about the arrival of American productions in this country, nor about the Americans who work in the industry. Of these, Clark is certainly one, and he has been working here for a decade. But the time has come to say "Yankee go home."

John Harkness ●

A CHRISTMAS STORY* d. Bob Clark p. Rene Dupont and Bob Clark sc. Jean Shepherd, Leigh Brown and Bob Clark, based upon the novel *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash* by Jean Shepherd d.o.p. Reginald H. Morris, C.S.C. p. des. Reuben Freed ed. Stan Cole mus. score Carl Ziffner and Paul Zaza post-p. sup. Ken Heeley-Ray cost. des. Mary E. McLeod assoc. p. Gary Goch cast. Mike Fenton, Jane Feinberg, Marci Liroff NY/Chi. cast. Marcia Shulman, Joanne Pasquito, P.K. Fields (asst.) Tor. cast. Karen Hazzard p. man. Marilyn Stonehouse 1st a.d. Ken Goch cam. op. Harald Ortenburger sp. efx. Martin Malivoire make-up Ken Brooke hair James Brown ward. Lynda Kemp sc. sup. Blanche McDermaid art d. Gavin Mitchell set dec. Mark Freeborn cam. asst. Gordon Lagevin sd. mixer Alan Bernard sd. boom man. Malcolm Rennings asst. ed. Rick Cadger, Neil Grieve sd. sup. Ken Heeley-Ray sd. rec. Joe Grimaldi, David Appleby dialog. ed. Wayne Griffin sd. efx. ed. David Evans, Steven Cole asst. sd. ed. Ann Heeley-Ray, Gudrun Christian, Tom Hanrath mus. eng. Frank Morrone gaffer Chris Holmes key grip Ron Gillham props master J. Tracy Budd prop. man. Ken Clarke const. sup. Bill Harman p. acct. Joanne Jackson p. office co-ord. Suzanne Lore loc. man. Cindy Morton, Michael MacDonald Cleveland co-ord. David Craig 2nd a.d. Don Brough 3rd a.d. Alan Goluboff p. sec. Denise Mulvey stills Shin Sugino unit pub. Janice Kaye children's coach Charles Northcote asst. art d. Carmi Gallo l.p. Melinda Dillon, Darren McGavin, Peter Billingsley, Ian Petrella, Scott Schwartz, R.D. Robb, Tedde Moore, Yano Anaya, Zack Ward, Jeff Gillen, Colin Fox, Paul Hubbard, Les Carlson, Jim Hunter, Patty Johnson, Drew Hovevar, David Svoboda, Dwayne McLean, Helen E. Kaider, John Wong, Johan Sebastian Wong, Fred Lee, Dan Ma, Rocco Bellusci, Tommy Wallace.

* Not a certified Canadian film

George Cosmatos' Of Unknown Origin

Some jobs and situations are best described with the words "tense boredom". Cops, nurses, truckers, and soldiers all spend time scanning their environments for the first signs of trouble they know is coming. The trouble and the fact that they must remain constantly alert combine to create tension. Put yourself at the wheel of a small car on a freeway, late at

night, in a heavy snowfall, without a companion or a radio: tense boredom. Or, worse, subject yourself to a viewing of *Of Unknown Origin*.

The tension of the film comes from the conflict between an executive and a rat that has invaded and is slowly destroying his Manhattan brownstone. Now, a rat may sound like a dandy little tension-generator. It's a traditional foe of humanity and a common object of fear. It's also small and quick enough to hide in all sorts of unlikely places and jump out with fangs a-flashin', which it does, thus providing *Of Unknown Origin* with a number of effective suspense-and-shock sequences. Unfortunately, once it's done that, there's nothing for it but to scuttle back into the darkness and get ready to jump again. This lends a certain sameness, that is to say boredom, to the suspense and, since we know that rat and hero are fated to battle it out at the climax, attempts to vary the suspense by the introduction of a cat and leg-hold traps are spectacularly unsuccessful. At the first sight of each, we know the rat will kill the cat and the trap will chomp the trapper. And events prove us right.

Furthermore, a rat lacks the awe-inspiring qualities of, say, King Kong or Bruce the shark. Director George Cosmatos and cinematographer René Verzier have tried to pump up the rat with the sorts of extreme close-up, partial view and ultra-short shot so effective in *Alien*, but, since we already know what rats look like - small, brown and typically rodentoid - and what they do - gnaw and scuttle - the hype doesn't work. What it does achieve is irritation and a heightened viewer awareness that the rat just doesn't have the star power to carry the movie.

Fortunately for the rat, it doesn't have to. That's Peter Weller's job and he plays Bart Hughes, competently, as an intelligent, warm-hearted, very likeable, supremely balanced individual. Unfortunately, for us, that isn't how the character was intended. Brian Taggart's script (from Chauncey G. Parker's novel, "The Visitor") tells us that Hughes is ambitious, desperate for more money and far more deeply in love with the



● *Of Unknown Origin's* Peter Weller and Shannon Tweed: a film about twits and rats