

Guy Maddin's
**Tales from
the Gimli Hospital**

John Paizs can now measure his successes by the number of disciples and competitors he has spawned. The Manitoba film scene is currently in a Paizs-phase.

Tales from the Gimli Hospital by Guy Maddin is one of several recent independent films that share Paizs' offbeat sense of humor, his go-it-alone prowess, and his "prairie postmodern" sensibility. But Guy Maddin is no Paizs-clone. *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* is darker, more disturbing, and often funnier than anything John Paizs has yet done.

Regional cinema is often a hotbed of ethnic eccentricity. John Paizs is a Hungarian-Canadian glutted on '50s American popculture. In contrast, Guy Maddin is an Icelandic-Canadian, and his absorptions are more international. *Tales* is like something you might get if you crossed Ingmar Bergman with Luis Buñuel, leavened it with dollops of von Stroheim, von Sternberg, and Monty von Python, and tossed in a pinch of Hans Christian Andersen, Esther Williams and Al Jolson. It's a wild farrago of a movie, a first feature, done in black and white for a mere \$200,000, with all of the beauty marks and blemishes you'd expect from this sort of venture. And many surprises and provocations you most definitely would not expect.

Maddin took his initial inspiration from a book called *The Gimli Saga*, a kitschy, self-promotional bit of oral history. Gimli, Manitoba, is the largest Icelandic community outside of Iceland. Founded in the 1870s, Gimli (with a hard "g" as in gimlet) takes its name from ancient sagas. It means a secure or protected place, or the promised land, or paradise. Of course, if there is any hint of this grandiosity in Maddin's movie, it is there only ironically. His Gimli is a dank place wracked by a mysterious pox-like epidemic, where animals and patients share the same barn-hospital (based loosely, I'm told, on actual practices in tougher times). The only vista is an empty, rock-stream beach; otherwise this is a "placeless" place of confining darkness and eerie shadows cast by some unseen light.

Icelandic literature, according to Maddin, is always about cold and asexual fishermen who spend their time untangling nets, and being sad in a stark environment. Maddin long ago decided that there was something comical about all this austerity and that the only way to treat it was straightfaced but with no respect - to deal with it the way Buñuel deals with Catholicism.

So, through a frame-story interlocutor named Amma (played by Margaret-Anne MacLeod), an earth-mother who looks like a narwhal in a white pointy bonnet, Maddin takes us back to "a Gimli



Snjofridur (Angela Heck) and Gunnar (Mike Gottli) admire a fish fashioned from birch bark

we no longer know." It's a place where women sleep on briar-patch beds, where men clean themselves with dirt and help each other to shave their eyebrows, and where people sweeten their coffee by holding sugarcubes between their teeth when they sip. His hero is an archetypal Icelandic fisherman, Einar the Lonely (Kyle McCulloch). Einar shares his ramshackle smokehouse with a cat, vainly trying to make himself attractive to some frolicking women by squeezing fish goo onto his hair. Then a mysterious pox puts him in the hospital. As feathers waft through the air, Einar watches a sinister doctor (Guy Maddin himself) perform surgery with a rusty sickle while three nurses try to distract the patient with a Punch and Judy show. Einar passes out when they move the puppet stage to the foot of his bed. He soon feels as if he is invisible and mute, for the nurses pay more attention to a blackfaced minstrel and to Gunnar (Mike Gottli), a pudgy storyteller who spends his time cutting fish silhouettes out of birch bark. Finally, Gunnar befriends Einar and begins telling him about the fair maiden, Snjofridur (Angela Heck) who died when he rejected her on their wedding night. Before Gunnar can finish, Einar interrupts and confesses an even more horrendous sin. He once sexually defiled a young woman on an Indian burial platform. When Gunnar finishes his story, Einar discovers that the fair maiden on the platform was Snjofridur. Gunnar goes blind with jealous rage (the nurses paint his glasses black while he is still wearing them), but still he tries to kill Einar. They both stagger into a darkened forest where strange rituals and erotic dances take place. There they engage in a deadly kind of buttocks-grappling.

Amma has been telling this story to her two grandchildren in the Gimli Hospital while their mother lies dying, unable to drink, unable to drink her 7-11 Big Gulp. As she finishes this tale about the strange consequences of jealousy and storytelling, Amma realizes that her daughter has died. She assures her grandchildren that their mother is now in heaven watching over them. Sure enough, as the camera cranes up from the hospital and through the clouds, it discovers their mother in a white cassock, halo and angel wings, smiling down solicitously.

The trailer for *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* has already become a cult classic. Played at midnight screenings for the past two months, it has provided the kind of uninhibitedly interactive audience response once reserved for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Whether the film itself achieves this sort of stature remains to be seen. It has a sensational opening reel - zippy, teasing, and outrageous. The sound track is quirky and hummable, including Paul Whiteman's 1929 classic "I'm a Dreamer, Aren't We All" and Ilon Massey's "Spring Love is in the Air" and a batch of campy Icelandic songs from scratchy old 78s. And the movie wends its way through a veritable thicket of emotions. It is sad, amusing, tender, disgusting, mysterious, sweet, sick, sexy, and insulting.

Tales is fascinating stuff, full of riveting images and delirious sequencing. Several of the scenes are touched by genius: original, true, and precisely rendered. A wedding performed across a river because the minister is afraid of the pox is heartbreakingly amusing. A honeymoon between two passionate people reluctant to touch each other's sores is breathtaking in its emotional inflections. And when three

inseparable young sisters disappear, only to show up floating down a river in three small caskets, dead, the moment is as touching and reflective as any in recent memory.

This is not a flawless movie, however, nor am I convinced that, overall, it really works. The frame-story, for instance, could be better integrated. A magenta-tinted dance fantasy is almost totally wrongheaded. This and several other scenes in the second half of the movie look like the filmmaker was more concerned with simply amassing bizarre incidents rather than with confronting and developing the full implications of the story. In the end I couldn't help asking: "What is this story all about and why is it being told?"

Tales from the Gimli Hospital is not as complete and coherent as Maddin's equally bizarre short film *The Dead Father*. But it is lively, different, personal, serious, and ambitious. Guy Maddin is already being touted as Canada's answer to David Lynch (whose influence he vigorously denies). What is unusual about them both is their seeming willingness and ability to put their psyches on the screen, secret phobias, dark obsessions and all. They both make movies that are exhilarating and disturbing experiences.

Gene Walz •

TALES FROM THE GIMLI HOSPITAL

d. /sc. /ld. o. p. /ed. Guy Maddin. *d.* Kyle McCulloch. *art d.* Jeff Solylo. *story cons.* George Toles. *makeup* Donna Szoke. *proc.* Mid Can Labs. *sd.* Clive Perry, Wayne Finucan. *studios* neg. Dawna Finn. *aid* Manitoba Arts Council, Winnipeg Film Group. *market aid* CIDO (Canada-Manitoba Cultural Industries Development Office). *l. p.* Kyle McCulloch, Michael Gottli, Angela Heck, Margaret-Anne MacLeod, Heather Neale, Caroline Bonner, Don Hewak, Chris Johnson, Donna Szoke, Kyle McCulloch, Ian Handford, Greg Klymkiv.