

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 But somehow, abysmal cinematic efforts, produced mainly by easterners – films like the NFB's outdated *The Drylanders*, or Allan King's saccharine *Who Has Seen The Wind?* – popularized the stereotype that Saskatchewan was forever existing in a '30s-style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* offers a new and strikingly original vision of the vast prairie flatlands.

Described as a "Freeform Depressionist Drama in Six Parts," *Wheat Soup* begins with an opening sequence entitled "The Agoraphobic." An isolated, bored artist (played by Gerald Saul) tries to live his life by switching TV channels and churning out expressionist paintings in a self-contained basement environment. Whenever he tries to leave the front door of his rural household, he is gripped by a strange paranoid sensation of standing all alone in an Arctic wasteland. After finally managing to break out of his basement shelter, conquering his phobia, he is whonked from above by a plummeting anvil (perhaps an escapee from a *Roadrunner* rerun?). The next segment ("The Great Flattening Begins") consists of a long camera pan down a metropolitan street to the tune of a hammer banging an anvil, foreshadowing the approaching apocalypse.

We then jump to 100 years after the "great flattening" (either a nuclear war or numerous freefalling anvils) to be introduced to "The Last Wheat Farmer," a young, tanned Kamikaze named Sam (played by Shaf Hussain), bored with defending the precious grain from nerdy wheat poachers and harvesting a crop for outsiders he never meets. Sam decides to throw in his hoe and leave the farm to see what the world outside is really like. In the course of his journey, he discovers lots of dirt roads, cockroaches, and a



Shaf Hussain and Brian Stockton in *Wheat Soup*.

bizarre assortment of dregs and wanderers, who add to the confusion of his quest. Only his offscreen chats with a seated female goddess occasionally shed any light on some of the more difficult issues. Sam eventually teams up with a nebulous wheat poacher named Ralph and later sojourns with a colony of low I. Q. farmers (who harvest a substance called gristle).

Later, after temporarily returning to the farm to bury his ex-farming assistant, Har, (killed by wheat poachers), Sam makes a vow to continue the tradition of cultivating the precious grain beyond the wasteland. The film ends on perhaps the longest sunset shot ever filmed, as Ralph and Sam look over the edge of the Earth, contemplating various thematically related, but rather incongruous subjects (eg., What happens when your feet get all tingly, and won't hurt even if you hit them with a big rock?).

As wafer-thin as the plot is, the film somehow manages to successfully relate its own particular, regional philosophy that flat is, in fact, quite beautiful. In the course of his journey, Sam crosses paths with Delaney, a zealot, who along with his topless assistant, drags an anvil, believing it was once used to compress the planet. ("The glory, the glory! The flatness forever! Two dimensions is all you need! All you got out here!") Other scenes show Sam having chaotic, terrifying visions of himself in a modern, three-dimensional city, overwhelmed by massive skyscrapers and urban architecture.

Technology of the past generation has little use in this brave new world. In one scene, Sam asks the goddess what the farmers used to do

with their appliances, and she replies "Well, they made a lot of toast." As she later points out, things are much better now, since the world is flatter, less complex, and a little more banal.

Wheat Soup projects its prairie, post-modernist view partly through the film's provincially localized text. No English-Canadian feature since *Faustus Bidgood* 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 overlong 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 as the shy disc jockey in Will Dixon's *Heartline*, Stockton strikes me as sort of a low-key Dustin Hoffman.

But the film's major triumph, for which it cannot be ignored, is its visual imagery. In stark black and white, Stockton and Saul, along with cinematographer Spyros Egarhos, 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 sunshot 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 p. Saskatchewan Film Pool d. /sc. / Gerald Saul, Brian Stockton d. o. p. Spyros Egarhos mus. Rod Croften title song: mus. Scott Hudey, lyrics Mike Benny add. mus. Scott Simmie, Spyro Egarhos sd. rec. Angelos Hatzitolios, Marc Lafoy crew Don Cornelius, Chuck Gilhooly, June Madeley, Steve Meikle, Paul Stockton firearms cons. Grant Campbell 2nd. unit d. Szymon Choynowski graphic des. Cec Semchuk add. ed. Chuck Gilhooly special thanks to: Eldon Zimmer, Neal Berken, Grant Zalinko, Joe Siller, Raymond Sebastian, Bill Mills, Larry Bauman, Chuck Jones, Marie Stockton, Wayne Stockton, Dave Sim, Michelle Dempster, Veronica Macdonald l. p. Shaf Hussain, Sandi Happy, Gord Wilson, Leonard Cyrman, Mike Benny, Bob Campbell, Scott Teece, Brian Stockton, Gerald Saul, Martin Kondziewski. assistance Saskatchewan Film Pool, National Film Board, Saskatchewan Arts Board.