

Movies

Pioneering into the nature of the Heartland

by Steve Gregoris

Heartland's excellence lies in the economy and sensitivity with which it expresses man's struggle with — not against — nature. Set in delicate balance with a nature that is at once harsh and beautiful, in order to survive there is no place for the hyperbole and cowboy-excesses of shootouts and brawls. So, in this story of pioneering, there are neither heroes nor anti-heroes. The frontiersman is not championed as conqueror or subduer; neither are women slipped into traditional sexist slots. Characters are unvarnished and unembellished, united in their common 'kampf'. Stripped to its bare thematic bones, **Heartland** is about survival, and, implicitly, life and continuity.

The plot-line reflects the film: simple and uncluttered. A widow and her daughter (Conchata Ferrel and Megan Folsom) flee Denver's unemployment in answer to a live-in housekeeper ad. What, in fact, becomes their pastoral flight takes them to their employer — a rough, earth-hewn Scottish immigrant named Stewart (Rip Torn) — and

the guts (or heart) of frontier America. The widow gradually adjusts to and comes to feel a strong bond with the alluring beauty of Wyoming's highlands. She resolutely decides to set roots into this rugged earth. Shortly, this tender and robust woman enters into a permanent relationship with the land and, eventually, with Stewart.

Director Richard Pearce is pointedly un-romantic in the handling of the film: the widow's transition into a woman-of-the-land is not simplified into sentimental mush. And in this consummately deft and tactful integration into a new situation, Pearce is able to probe mankind's endeavours to create a liveable harmony between itself and nature.

The reference point or focus in this struggle is the instinct and will for survival, part of an evolutionary system which develops into habit, tradition and culture. This position in **Heartland** is basic to this developmental model, this formulation of a pattern of life, of a lifestyle. Mankind, here, looks to build for the future, to construct a founda-

tion. Organic to this groping for life are certain fundamental thematic concerns. Pearce explores love, death, unity, hope, birth.

All characters live their lives through, with and in nature's seasonal progression. Though it holds pervasive influence, nature is not as obstructive as to override cinematic or narrative concerns. Man functions within its context, but under these, the strictest of terms, success is survival.

Some atypically American nuances lend the film its uniqueness and sensitivity. Immigrants retain their ethnic flavour; they do not slip into Uncle Sam's melting pot — yet. Characters are united by their common situations, needs and, as the widow and her daughter spend more time in Wyoming, desires. **Heartland's** immigrants are survivors who are willfully joined by this 'white American' who settles, as they have, to earn a living from the fruits of the earth. Conversely, the only other 'native white' is a creditor, harbinger of economic gloom. He is a slick, automobile-driving intrusion into the film's peculiar

rhythm: an anomaly. He is foreign (urban) and thus disruptive.

Not only is the gunslingin' hero conspicuously absent (the film makes it clear that one is absolutely superfluous) but there is no saga of poor farmer becoming corporate magnate. Success is elemental and called survival.

The cast is strong, buttressed neither by overdone cinematography à la **Days of Heaven** or a few excellent actors. They are a sensitive ensemble playing their

parts honestly and to apparent precision. There is a definite sense of balance with respect to the components of **Heartland**, of constituent parts melding into a successful whole. The occasional plodding moments are more than counterpointed by some intense moments that are not in the least sensational. The film practically tells the audience such excess is unnecessary. **Heartland** is a sensitive, human portrayal of the human condition, unique and ultimately satisfying.

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