

My Favorite Year

# O'Toole peddles soft humour in sentimental vehicle

Joel Guthro

Nostalgia and one-liners return once again as one of America's favorite comedy teams in the new film, *My Favorite Year*.

The year is 1954, and it's a good

year for Benji Stone--one full of action and adventure. Played by newcomer, Mark Linn-Baker, Benji has the lead role as reminiscer in this sentimental comedy. He's a young writer for the "Comedy Cavalcade"

with King Kaiser, a live TV show which, according to Director, Richard Benjamin, is loosely based on Sid Caesar's, "Your Show of Shows."

The film begins as it ends--with Benji's narration. "Suddenly," he says bustling through the mobs in New York, "I was making more money writing than the entire floor of my mother's apartment building in Brooklyn was making." The reminiscing ends, the film reverts to the rapid succession of jokes and gags.

A little spice is added with a movie star, the debonair but decadent Swann, played by Peter O'Toole. The guest on this week's Comedy Cavalcade, he is an irreplaceable entertainment giant who is a lot of

fun, except he hides his bottles. Swann arrives at the studio inebriated, but Benji saves the day promising he'll keep Swann sober, which is a staggering task. So puppy dog meets master, a friendship ensues and trouble begins.

The unexpected is well-timed as the jokes go, but plot and characterization development quickly becomes a necessity. Benji gets the girl, respect and character growth, but Swann is short-changed.

Suddenly, it seems we're being spoonfed vacuous sentimentality. Swann is invited for dinner by Benji's mother in Brooklyn, which is like inviting Errol Flynn to Leslie and Finch. Benji's mother barrages us with Jewish mother cliches and

informs Swann he is missing the good old family life. Immediately he pines for his neglected daughter (what about his wife?) and the groaning begins. To this point everything has been moving so quickly that there hasn't been time to develop proper insight into Swann's character.

All ideas were spent sooner than later, so the jokes burn out and it's time to find an ending that comes in the form of a predictable style punchout and, what else, Benji's narration.

*My Favorite Year* will entertain, and if you're not laughing you're no fun. As Swann says, "Dying is easy but comedy is hard," especially when it has to leave room to develop a few essentials.

## BOOKMARKS

### A query for Callaghan's Black Queen

W. Hurst

There's no reason to question why Atkinson English professor, Barry Callaghan, wrote *The Black Queen* stories--he probably has an excuse. The question is why anyone would publish it.

Set in what seems to be Toronto, these short stories share more than a common setting--vacuous symbolism, incomplete characterization and a variety of ineffective literary techniques pervade the entire collection.

The Black Queen of the title story is a rare stamp which a fussy, middle-aged homosexual sticks on his forehead before serving dinner to his guests. In another story, the Black Queen is a playing card--a young woman removes it from the deck before slitting the throat of her grandmother's pet cock. Neither story is intentionally funny.

The characterizations, particularly of women and homosexual men, are so poorly drawn that even imaginative readers will fail to flesh out the personalities.

Older women are mostly disabled and shrewish or silent and bitter. The younger women are no better. They have little intellectual vitality and their sexuality seems more a matter of function than passion.

Homosexual men, the focus of three stories, are defined by their nail gloss, womanly legs or soft voices. Rather than people, these men are caricatures from the time when all homosexuals were lipping hairdressers and interior decorators.

Callaghan uses a variety of writing perspectives. In "Crow Jane's Blues", the interior monologue flaunts grammatical convention, but fails to illuminate the character; a lesbian encounter is recalled in a way that seems second-hand, rather than experiential.

When Callaghan poses as omniscient narrator, description is trite and the insight spurious. Again, the author ignores conventional grammar, but frequently confuses the reader with sloppy constructions. In "Spring Water", a silver fish seems to be dancing in the street; on second reading, it becomes clear that a young man is the dancer.

Beneath the technical flaws of Callaghan's book, lies a more serious problem. He fails in his attempt to deal with alienation and the seamier nature of urban life. Instead, *The Black Queen Stories* are middle-class voyeurism--self-conscious side-trips to those very real, darker places in our souls and city.

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