

films

Dear John (at the Garneau) is a Swedish film dubbed into English; it's also the best love-story film I've seen recently.

As it happens, I first saw it in San Francisco this summer, with the original Swedish dialogue and English sub-titles. I must regretfully report that the dubbing, though well done as these things go, substantially reduces the film's impact.

I mean, what use is it to go to the trouble of finding a five-year-old Swedish girl who is completely natural and delightful if her voice is going to be replaced in Edmonton by that of a little Hollywood pre-Lolita reminiscent of nothing so much as Shirley Temple on an off-day?

But it isn't fair of me to impose the contrast between the two versions of the film upon my readers, who'll probably get to see only the version presently on view here. So just bear in mind as you watch the film that in the original everybody concerned is doing an even finer job of acting than you're being allowed to see.

Anyway, about the film:

The captain of a small coastal freighter has a weekend to spend in a small Swedish town, and decides to spend it with a pretty young unwed mother. They wind up in bed. The course of true love doesn't run completely smooth, but all ends well as the girl gulps into the phone "Dear, dear John!" just to reassure anyone who's worried over whether or not he's at the right movie.

Question: What lifts this simple story above the banality implicit in its plot?

Answer: Banality is never implicit in a plot. Banality is very cleverly introduced into films somewhere between the basic idea and the finished product.

Question: But wouldn't you agree that if Hollywood, or for that matter any Canadian director you can name, were to film this particular story, the results would be pretty undistinguished?

Answer: Indeed I would.

Question: I bet you'd care to elaborate.

Answer: Very well . . . The big problem in telling a simple love story today is that audiences think they've seen it all before. Simple love stories seem to surround us constantly; they're implied in countless ads, situation comedies and warmhearted newspaper features.

Actually these exploitations of the boy-meets-girl pattern don't do much for us, because they're so obviously serving ulterior motives. After all, the basic creative drive in a soap commercial isn't directed toward producing a great love poem: it's directed toward selling soap.

So we get the worst of both worlds: love stories are too common to affect us, yet well-worked-through love stories are too rare to do us any good.

The director of *Dear John* attempts to solve the problem by throwing apparently "intellectual" elements into the stew, notably some trickiness involving flashbacks and flashforwards. While we're working this out, he slips the love story across almost before we notice.

Question: But isn't this awfully risky? Won't the audience be irritated by the trickery and even more resistant to the love story than before?

Answer: Nope, because here's where the actors come in. The two leads, whose names I stupidly forgot to note but who will be familiar to Bergman aficionados, do such a magnificent job that we're swept up by the whole thing remarkably quickly. They act with the art that conceals art (aided, of course, by the director, who does a nice job of naturalizing the basically stylized bedroom sequences).

(If I may remain parenthetical for a moment, may I remark how nice it is to see bedroom scenes in which the actress doesn't wrap the sheets around her breasts in the Hollywood Manner; there are so many other, more natural ways of covering oneself up.)

And the fooling around with time is fun to follow in itself, though it has remarkably little point in terms of what the film is really doing.

All in all, I can recommend the film warmly.

—John Thompson

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