

Lunch an echo of 1984

By ALEX PATTERSON

The Festival chain of repertory cinemas is again venturing into the realm of first-run movies, and again they have come up with a worthy entry which might otherwise slip into oblivion. This time it's the Toronto premiere of the acclaimed British drama, *The Ploughman's Lunch*, slated to open at the Revue Cinema on Roncesvalles on February 21.

A "ploughman's lunch"—that plateful of cheese, French stick and pickled onions consumed by millions in British pubs—is generally believed to have been the traditional mid-day meal of the English peasantry. In fact, as a character in the film tells us, it was no such thing. It was a concoction of an advertising agency in the 1960s, part of a campaign to persuade more people to eat in pubs. The rustic "history" of the dish was "completely successful fabrication of the past." It stands as a metaphor for the media's rewriting of history, which the film argues with considerable force, is a more frequent occurrence than most of us would like to think.

Revisionist history is a pertinent topic for Canadians, what with the looney likes of Ernst Zundel and James Keegstra at large, making *The Ploughman's Lunch* even more of a must-see than it would ordinarily be. Set in London during the 1982 war with Argentina over Britain's colonial holdings in the Falkland Islands,

the story neatly exposes the distortion and myth-making behind the news. James Penfield (Jonathon Pryce, soon to be seen opposite Robert deNiro in the infamous *Brazil*) is a writer for BBC Radio News covering the conflict in the South Atlantic...from the angle which his superiors have requested of him. Penfield is also writing a book on another event from recent British history—the Suez Canal fiasco in 1956—which was also subject to much media mystification. Penfield, more interested in advancing his career than in accuracy and fairness, trades in moral ambiguity and political doublethink as he researches his book and pursues an attractive young female colleague from the BBC.

This colleague, Susan (Charlie Dore), turns out to be the daughter of an eminent left-wing historian, Ann Barrington (Rosemary Harris), who is one of those English anomalies, the upper-class Socialist. To ingratiate himself with the daughter, Penfield befriends the mother, claiming that he, too, is a Socialist.

Daughter Susan remains remote and aloof to Penfield, possibly because she is "above his station," as his friend Jeremy (everyone's favourite transvestite Tim Curry in a wonderfully urbane performance) has warned him. To avoid owning up to his working-class background, James rewrites his own personal history by telling Susan that his parents are dead.

All of the actors are thoroughly natural and convincing, with Jonathon Pryce's low-key portrayal of the ethically-questionable James Penfield a standout. The film's climax takes place at a Conservative Party conference and includes a special guest appearance by what seems to be the real Margaret Thatcher, admonishing the crowd to "keep the spirit of the Falklands alive." By this point, the film has indicted the official British story of the war so completely that the Iron Lady's tub-thumping strikes the audience as, at best, ironic. (More than just a Tory, she's *ObfuscaTory*.)

The Orwellian theme of the rewriting of the facts to suit current policy



is one which Ian McEwan's screenplay has elaborated upon with great skill and an often wicked wit. While Western governments and media cannot do it outright as is done in totalitarian states, they are capable of the skewing of stories, of selective omission and of, well, not exactly lying, but misrepresenting. McEwan is advising us to be aware of this, and not to forget the past, and he does it in a hugely entertaining manner.

Director Richard Eyre, like his star, has his background in theatre, rather than film. *The Ploughman's Lunch* only liability is its visuals: some of the editing is slightly jarring, the camera set-ups do not always convey the action as clearly as they might, and the lighting is unfortunately dim. If Eyre's pictorial sense were the equal of his ability to elicit

the best from his actors, the film would be an unqualified masterpiece.

This is a trifling gripe in the case of a movie as fine as this one, especially considering the modest budget. The filmmakers have spent their money wisely; that is, in hiring the most appropriate actors for the parts, rather than on technical wizardry. The film's look is also forgivable in light of the fact that all its shooting was done on location, (including the BBC's art deco headquarters) where the production designer is at the mercy of the existing scenery, decor, etc.

In addition to being a better examination of the malaises of postwar British society than either of David Hare's films (*Plenty* and *Wetherby*), *The Ploughman's Lunch* also boasts a quietly poignant soundtrack by Domenic Muldowney, who composed the equally excellent score for 1984. Muldowney, who also arranged Sting's current remake of "The Ballad of Mac the Knife," is one of the best movie composers still working with a symphony. He is also one of the few movie composers ever whose work can be tolerated by itself, without the celluloid crutch that most movie music needs.

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