

Review – Prairie Home Companion – Littleham Village Hall

Saturday 7th November 2009

What a pity that the first half of the showing of this novel film was spoiled by poor sound and vision, it really was a struggle to hear what was being said and sometimes impossible to perceive what was going on due to the darkness of the images, particularly as most of the action took place in the dingy dressing rooms and back stage utility rooms of a Theatre. It was therefore just a little bit of a challenge to figure out the plot. By the time the second half began adjustments to the equipment had been made and whilst the picture was still challenging, the sound was very much better. This review may therefore be a little off centre for which I apologise.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, it became apparent as the film “wore” on that here was a very interesting and humorous look at life and death. Both as it applied to the last performance of a long running live radio show and also the individual mortalities of the performers involved. The action takes place principally on, and back stage of, an American Theatre (St Paul, Minnesota) where the nation’s most popular radio music hall type of show is performing for the last time before the theatre is demolished to make room for a car park.

The action is introduced by a most unlikely private detective named Guy Noir (Kevin Kline) who due to impending bankruptcy, has taken full time employment at the radio show as a security guard. The stereotypical “private dick” of popular American fiction is entirely absent from Kevin Kline’s delightful character as he presents him as a very dapper fellow, smartly dressed, almost effeminate, but completely inept, a role similar to that of the bungling criminal in “A Fish Called Wanda”. Throughout the film he provides regular laughs as he stumbles across stage equipment, struggles with simple technology such as the ‘phone and, due to a completely misplaced sense of his own attractiveness, attempts to seduce an angel!

The angel, represented by a heavenly, attractive blonde lady dressed in a white trench coat drifts in and out of the action at the theatre seeking out those who are to die. This was another fascinating departure from the stereotype as this kind of “angel” is normally cast as the grim reaper. Indeed, it occurred to me that this film might have been chosen for this early November showing because of the date’s close proximity to All Hallows Eve in the calendar.

All the time the film is listening in to the conversations and observing the relationships between the various performers and the supporting theatre personnel as they struggle with the show’s impending demise. The method acting technique that was employed here, clearly with much individual improvisation on the parts of the actors, was a problem exacerbated by the sound problems in the first half. This was so bad that it demanded a great deal of concentration from the viewer in order that the plot could be determined.

These difficulties were nevertheless ameliorated by the regular cuts to the numbers being performed on the stage. They were a delightful, albeit schmaltzy, look at an aspect of popular American entertainment culture. There was a trio of two guitarists and a singer, the latter being the first to be collected by the angel thus rendering the trio a duo by the second half of the film. The two principal performers played by Meryl Streep and Lily Tomlin made up another singing duo later joined by Meryl Streep's character's daughter to make a trio. Lindsay Lohan played the daughter, a character whose presence in the film wouldn't have been missed had it not been for her unfathomable preoccupation with suicide fitting in with the film's darker side. There was also a great female soul singer, sadly uncredited, and a sound effects man whose efforts to meet the demands of the continually improvising cast brought the biggest laughs from the audience in the village hall.

In the second half, the appearance of Tommy Lee Jones brought a sombre note to the film. Known only as the axeman, he came to the theatre with the single purpose of closing it ready for demolition at the end of the performance. He spoke very few words and was seen clearly even less. He did little else but to appear threatening and morose, completely devoid of any emotional connection with the very emotional performances, now thrown into high contrast by the death of one of them, that were going on on-stage. It seemed to me that almost any fledgling actor could have carried off this roll without breaking into a sweat, I wondered why somebody with such a film record as Tommy Lee Jones should have troubled himself with it.

The surprise for me was the character GK played by Garrison Keillor of Lake Wobegone fame. A most creditable performance as the cool, professional anchor man. He linked the performances with witty commentary, made the sponsor's acknowledgements and even sang some of the sponsor's jingles. The surprise for me was fourfold. Firstly he was such a big man that the shots of him were carefully crafted to avoid him towering over his regular height co-actors. In some scenes he was seated quite inappropriately within the context of the action to deemphasise his height. Secondly, he not only wrote the story but also the screen play. Thirdly, he has the most amazing singing voice with a rich deep base tone absolutely right for the country and western numbers that were performed. Fourthly, his role was beautifully acted.

A very clever part of the production was the way in which all of the performers, except the inept security man (Kevin Kline) totally accepted the presence of the "angel" even though none of them knew her and that she appeared in locations that would not be accessible to the general public. No one questioned this even when she appeared on stage during the live performance. There was no sense that the audience were aware of her yet she was clearly interacting with the performers on stage. The more I think about this the more I believe it to be a very accomplished presentation of the notion of an angel and a great credit to Garrison Keillor's imagination.

There were great cameo performances by a person known simply as the "Lunch Lady" (Marylouise Burke) who appeared from nowhere every now and then chattering away like a quacking duck. I apologise to her and Garrison Keillor if anything she was saying

was crucial to the plot but due to her impossible accent and the poor sound I was able to interpret nothing. Also Molly, a long suffering stage hand, whose job seemed to encompass almost everything short of performing on stage, was a delightful confection of dutiful and efficient worker whose job seemed to completely envelope her which is more than her clothes did to cover her very pregnant tummy. A sight that caused Kline's Guy Noir to speculate on her diet, until his slow wit eventually caught up with the bump's reality.

Music for me is always a great treat and notwithstanding the film's numerous deficiencies, albeit that some were caused by the inadequacies of the village hall technology, I enjoyed the performances presented in the theatre. It was just a pity that the film's story line got in the way as they were almost always cut short just as I was getting into the swing of things. A cheerful tune sung by the lately reduced trio entitled "Bad Jokes" was great fun which made sticking with the film to the end worth while.

On reflection, not a bad film at all and one which I will look at again, perhaps in the more intimate environment of my home where I hope I will be able to interpret more of what I am sure it has to offer but which, for a number of reasons, were not communicated at my first viewing.

Finally as general comment, the Film Club officials should not be deterred from presenting what could be described as "alternative" productions in future as a result of this particular foray into the genre. I believe we need this kind of film occasionally to maintain a healthy balance with the plethora of main line films that seem afraid to challenge the cinemagoer with words of more than three syllables and sentences greater than a half a dozen words (Sun newspaper speak). If we allow ourselves to be immersed continually in such easy "entertainment" then we will soon find it difficult to stick with anything that demands any mental input from ourselves at all, after which, brain death and the trench coated angel will shortly follow.

Sir Lorn Stakes - Littleham, 9th November 2009