

Film Review – The Bucket List – Littleham Village Hall – Saturday 1st November 2008 at 1930

Given that for several weeks I had been expecting to watch the much heralded but now cancelled, sing along version of the musical “Mamma Mia”. I was surprised at the spring in my stride as I made my way with eager anticipation to the village hall last night. Even more surprising as I knew that it’s programmed replacement “The Bridges of Madison County” had also been “pulled” at the last hour! Why was it then that I strode on so enthusiastically? Well, it was because I had been told only a few hours earlier of the problem with “The Bridges of Madison County” and that *it’s* replacement was to be “Cinema Paradiso”, in my opinion possibly the finest film ever made. By any measure, “Cinema Paradiso” is in a different league to anything that we have yet seen at our Village Hall film Club but that is another review.

Imagine my feelings then, when I arrived at the Village Hall flushed with expectation only to find that “Cinema Paradiso” had now been pulled at the last minute. Furthermore, we were not to know the title of the film we were about to see until it started. Not that it would have made any difference as, like Macbeth I was “...so far waded into blood that it would be as tedious to turn back as it would be to go o’er.” So, somewhat disconsolately, I took my seat and waited for the action.

Frankly, had I known that the subject matter of the film was an intimate observation of the impact of impending death upon two disparate individuals, thrown together by fate into the same hospital cancer ward, I would most certainly not have been there. Mortality! The last mystery! I didn’t want to be reminded of it and the instinct to run for cover was considerable. Indeed, there was a tangible tautness in the village hall for the first fifteen minutes or so of this unusual film. I doubt that this tension was entirely the result of the exceptional acting performances of Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, which are unquestioned. No, I suspect it was a natural response to this graphic reminder of the eventual “end game” for all of us. The promised “humour” was certainly absent from these first minutes.

Watching at this point invoked in me those times spent visiting loved ones who, like these actors' characters, were confronting their own demise in hospital. Not a comfortable experience and I felt agitated at having to spend the duration of the film in such discomfort. Happily, my fears were eventually dissolved as the essence of the story became clear. Jack Nicholson's ebullient and wealthy character railed against the impending final events with such gusto that I felt carried along with his enthusiasm for living – albeit, a less than unselfish life. On the surface this man was a very black and white character leaving little to the imagination, whereas Morgan Freeman's portrayal was much more demanding and indeed puzzling. A black American car mechanic, possessed of a remarkable recall of general knowledge, a convincing philosopher and all round good egg. He appeared equally at home in the richest and most indulgent luxury as he did under the bonnet of a vehicle, a man of contrasts that resulted from circumstances in his life that I didn't completely comprehend.

The reluctant pairing, against all the odds, developed into a close friendship. On the strength of Nicholson's apparently unlimited money, they traveled the world together, inspired as they were by a list (the bucket list) that they had drawn up of all the things they wanted or needed to do before they died. Not surprisingly, Nicholson's character's list included mostly hedonistic needs whereas Freeman's were rather more cerebral and spiritual. And here was the fascination in the film, the ingredient which enabled a story, fundamentally about man's greatest fear, to be entertaining. Principally, through great acting, and glorious locations, one was inspired by the character's determination to achieve the maximum from the days of life left to them. Alongside them we felt their joys and sorrows as they confronted physical, mental and emotional challenges as each in their own quite different ways tried to put their lives straight before the final departure.

Beverly Todd as Morgan Freeman's, apparently, long suffering wife, was not entirely convincing to my mind. Unlike Sean Hayes who played Thomas, Nicholson's, also long suffering but completely convincing assistant, a cameo role of considerable strength.

Sir Lorn Stakes – Littleham – 2nd November 2008