

## THE SWEET HEREAFTER AND THE ART'S HEART'S PURPOSE

By Patricia Rozema

*Curatorial essay by Patricia Rozema to accompany The Cinema Lounge screening of Atom Egoyan's, The Sweet Hereafter on November 6, 2009.*

*"...the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's hearts purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It's got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of part of yourself that can love and not the part of yourself that just wants to be loved."*

- David Foster Wallace

Of all the movies made in this country so far, I have chosen the film *The Sweet Hereafter* as our best work yet.

First a couple of disclaimers:

Atom Egoyan, the screenwriter and director of this movie is one of my best friends. If my partner and I die in, say, a bus accident, he and his wife will become the guardians of our two children. So one could argue that choosing his film is a selfish act, almost Darwinian protection of my offspring. I'm human. So be it.

Secondly, some may argue that it's not *entirely* Canadian.

The book was written by an American writer, Russell Banks. But his father was Canadian and he always felt, he said, that Canada was thought of as the fatherland in his home. Also, the events that take place in the book – a bus load of children, virtually all the children in one town, plunging to their deaths - originally happened in South Texas. Banks then transplanted the story to New England where he lives. When Atom Egoyan adapted the movie he transplanted the tale to the interior of British Columbia.

So, with that out of the way, I'd like to explain what I think makes this a film of timelessness and rare artistic power. I believe great fiction – whether filmed or not - somehow teaches us what it is to be human. (Strange, really, that we need to learn this. Do dogs need to be taught how to be dogs. Anyway.) But great fiction either dramatizes humanness through positive expression or negative expression, or, in rare and beautiful cases such as this one, both. In *The Sweet Hereafter* we certainly learn the darkness of grief, the operatic, fathomless pain of losing a child, the incomprehensible anguish that rains down like acid for the rest of the parents' lives. Endless grief. And we learn the twisted outgrowths of this tragedy – the self-severing, money grubbing expressions, the community-destroying aspects of grief. The blame. The lies. But it also treats the positive expression of this event – the love the bus driver had/has for the children, the daughter's growing to understand the wrongness of her father's sexual behaviour towards her.

Another characteristic of great fiction, in my mind, is that it has a moral authority. Quiet, simple, and authoritative moral clarity. It gives us insight into right behaviour. (That's probably not a terribly hip view of fiction but I'm not terribly concerned with hipness. It usually only lasts about ten minutes anyway.) When you let this film wash over you, there is a feeling, a spirit of gentle authenticity to its intention. The central character of Mitchell Stevens (played by Ian Holm) is trying to get the whole community to sue somebody for this tragedy he is stirring up rage where only grief makes sense. And as audience members we know in our gut that his attempts – as seductive as they are in the moment– are wicked. Wrong. Even fiction that claims not to be concerned with morality is moral. It's probably only presenting the values of the era so they can go undetected; it's the morality that is just floating in the air we breathe so we can't see it. But every film asserts some value or another. It can't help it. So what then gives a work "moral authority"? Hard to say. Maybe it has something to do with never losing our trust. The voice that is speaking to us has weight. We want to listen. We feel we are ennobled. We are made more essentially human by listening to the morality of the tale.

Another marker of a great work is its genuine emotion. Nothing is strained. Trying to be loved, trying to get you going. There's no obvious evidence of intention. There's none of that sickly feeling of a work doing overtime to wring out a few tears – even if it succeeds you resent it. The swelling music, the button pushing. But if you know what you are feeling has been felt in its creation, that it was born in a real moment of humanness, that it's not motivated by greed or some sadistic wish to cause the audience to suffer needlessly. A story that deals with the death of children is especially prone to stupid excess. But I believe something I read by Andrei Tarkovsky a year ago: "Art is the absence of conscious exaggeration". I'm fascinated by that and don't entirely understand it intellectually because I know that many great film artists heighten moments and use various techniques to convey the emotion of a moment but still they don't seem to be "exaggerating". His observation seems to suggest we can only use naturalistic filmmaking styles if we are going to avoid "exaggeration". But somewhere in my filmmaking gut I know that slow motion, exaggerated sound, and extreme angles don't necessarily distort the emotion of a moment. But that question doesn't even come up with Atom's film, it is sober and restrained and mature. The emotion is without even a suggestion of exaggeration.

Mastery of the craft is another sign of greatness. Sometimes you see/feel the work of a young as yet uncontrolled filmmaker and although we trust the voice because we know we are in the company of a thoughtful authentic soul, the work itself is clumsy. Maybe the tone shifts in disorienting ways, the acting is awkward, the angles inexplicable. Atom's mastery is self-evident here. Each shot has a quiet inevitability about it. The way, when he adapted the book to the screen, he delayed the actual bus crash until a good hour into the film was masterful. He knew that the suspense would be excruciating, every time you see a bus on the road, it could be this time, no, maybe this time. Suspense is one of the key tools to be mastered in all fiction. Especially film because you can't

control the speed at which you watch something. Also, his control of tone is shockingly expert. This film could be a sentimental sob fest, instead he has all his actors trying desperately to contain the raging grief, it becomes instead strong and wise and demonstrates a deep human elegance of spirit. Even though he jumps back and forth from past to present in his characteristic Egoyanesque “sculpting in time” (Tarkovsky’s famous phrase for what it is to make movies) we never waste emotional or mental energy trying to figure out where the hell we are. Atom also chose to make Nicole’s character struggle with incest as an *evolving* story rather than one that she has already ended, understood and been filed away. He’s made her story much more dynamic and complex. Mastery.

Finally I think this film loves the people in it. The ordinary people of this town with all their weaknesses and strengths. To use David Foster Wallace’s phrase, “the art’s heart’s purpose, the intention behind” *The Sweet Hereafter* is to love and not some cheap look-at-me show-offy career-building attempt to be loved. The book, the screenplay, and the movie all demonstrate incredible -- and now I’m getting embarrassed by the simplicity of this -- love.

I could list a dozen more reasons why this is a great film: timelessness, personal urgency, a sense of the events being somehow greater than they are, metaphoric power etc. but I think I’ve gone on enough.

So there you have it. And, in case my life comes to a sudden close in a tragic, say,...blimp accident, I’ve done just a little more as a parent to ensure the well being of my children, the two little people who have taught me more, along with certain works of great art, about what it is to love and thereby to be devotedly, achingly human.

#### **About Patricia Rozema:**

*One of Canada’s most accomplished women directors, Patricia Rozema was raised in Sarnia, Ontario, by Dutch Calvinist parents and graduated from Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with a bachelor’s degree in philosophy and English. She initially pursued a career in journalism and became an associate producer with the CBC’s nightly news program The Journal. In 1985, after a five-week course in film production, Rozema started her film career with the short film Passion: A Letter in 16 mm, which won second prize at the Chicago International Film Festival.*

*While writing and preparing her first feature, I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing, she worked as an assistant director on Cronenberg’s The Fly and on TV dramas, such as Night Heat and The Campbells. I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing, a serious comedy about a socially inept Girl Friday, completed for only \$350,000, made one of the most outstanding feature debuts in the history of Canadian cinema. And Rozema, at 28, became one of Canada’s first female filmmakers to win serious international acclaim. At the 1987 Cannes Film Festival, I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing won the coveted Prix de la jeunesse. She went on to create a larger body of feature and television work*

*including White Room, When Night is Falling and Mansfield Park. More recently she directed Kit Kittredge: An American Girl and was nominated for an Emmy Award for her writing on the TV movie Grey Gardens which won an Outstanding Emmy Award as a made for television movie.*