

Emma

(Dir. Douglas McGrath)

Just when you thought the Jane Austen film industry had exhausted itself, Douglas McGrath's *Emma* arrives to give new life to the party. The strange opening credit sequence of the earth spinning against a velvet-blue background turns out to be a decorative globe hand-painted by Emma, with her father's Highbury manor at the centre of the world. This bauble hangs suspended between the newly married Mrs. Taylor (the luminous Greta Scacchi) and her former charge, Emma, herself the centre of the highly formal universe of the upper class denizens of Highbury's environs, in this extremely watchable adaptation of what is arguably Austen's best novel. Gwyneth Paltrow is the perfect Emma, a young woman so devoted to meddling in the romantic lives of those who enter her orbit, notably her déclassé friend Harriet, (Toni Collette of *Muriel's Wedding*) that she nearly misses the chance to learn about love firsthand. McGrath's screenplay uses novelistic convention to its advantage, particularly the once-crucial art of letter writing. Characters delight in reading aloud and listening to letters from mutual acquaintances, parsing the sentences and above all evaluating the writer's style. Translated into the verbal/visual medium of film, proper "style" in everyday life becomes a character's mode of behaviour, of speaking, dressing and courting—in the hope of attracting the appropriate mate. Nowhere is this imperative better illustrated than during a scene at a ball, when the polite intricacies of the dance mimic the convoluted rituals of courtship. Stylized mannerisms of speech and gesture find correspondence in the film's appearance: the lighting ranges from deliberately dark, candle-lit interiors to sun-soaked exteriors taking full advantage of rural southern England's great horticultural appeal. The film's formalism extends to the editing: frequently the action jumps ahead in time and space, while the dialogue and plot line continue uninterrupted. And it is the dialogue (apart from the many visual felicities) that is the star attraction in *Emma*. Once again, Jane Austen proves that in the not always happy marriage of literature and cinema, there is still room for romance.

-Russ Kilbourn

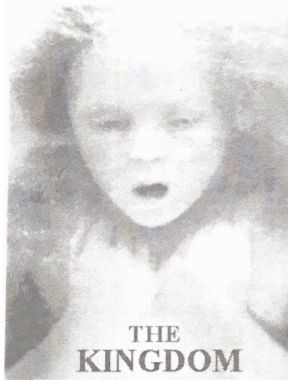


I AM CUBA

(DIR. MIKHAIL KALATOZOV)

If it were possible to ignore the Cuba in the news—Castro's embargoed Cuba, not the package sun vacation Cuba—then *I Am Cuba* would succeed in convincing the world that the Revolution was an entirely good thing, having saved the Cuban people (the workers and students) from the despotic, U.S.-backed Batista regime. While Cuba's political reality is one story, and while this newly released 1964 Soviet-Cuban co-production is a piece of unabashed Caribbean-inflected Marxist kitsch, it is equally a masterpiece of cinematic poetry.

I Am Cuba recounts four different parables of Cuban life on the eve of the Revolution. These otherwise unrelated narratives are linked only



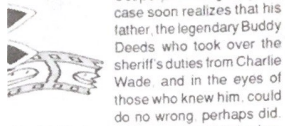
THE KINGDOM

by the bilingual voice of "Mother Cuba," intoning the words of poets Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Enrique Pineda Barnet, and by the extraordinary cinematography of Sergei Urusevsky. The screenplay was co-written with the director, Kalatozov. From the opening shot of the Cuban coastline, it is clear that this is a technically daring film, even 30 years on. Infra-red B&W stock renders the waving palms and sugar cane a luminescent white against a preternaturally dark daytime sky. Wide-angle lenses distort and magnify the characters into supra-human archetypes. Many scenes consist of just one long take, often a continuous gravity-defying shot that leaves the viewer wondering how it was achieved. Throughout, the camera throws over any claims to objectivity, framing the action from a viewpoint that sides unequivocally with the nascent revolution. At the same time, the virtuosic technique never lets you forget you are watching a film. *I Am Cuba* transcends Brechtian distanciation, conveying its message in a manner so seductive as to almost subvert its latent didacticism.

With a large cast of mostly non-professional, first-time actors, *I Am Cuba* partakes of a style of filmmaking that reached an apogee in the '60s and '70s, particularly in the work of such overtly political directors as Pasolini, who put a premium on the actor's face: the exteriorization of character, of emotion, of psychological state. Like Pasolini, Kalatozov *et al.* chose their actors largely on the basis of how they looked, and whether they belonged to the same general class as the character they would portray (workers played workers, intellectuals played intellectuals). Actual revolutionaries, most notably Castro himself, are referred to but never appear.

Oscillating between the private and public, rural and urban, the different stories that make up *I Am Cuba* are alike in their shameless exploitation of the language of propaganda. But even here the film rises to heights of subtlety, even sublimity. In one unforgettable scene, a leftist student, leading a crowd of followers singing the Cuban national anthem, descends an enormous sun-drenched neo-classical staircase, holding aloft the iridescent body of a dove shot by a policeman's stray bullet. This is political filmmaking on the order of the Odessa steps scene in Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*. Walter Benjamin famously remarked that Communism's response to Fascism's aestheticization of politics was to politicize art. *I Am Cuba* achieves this in exemplary fashion and goes beyond, establishing a new cinematic genre: a visual epic poem, singing of a cause too noble and a Cuba too beautiful to be true.

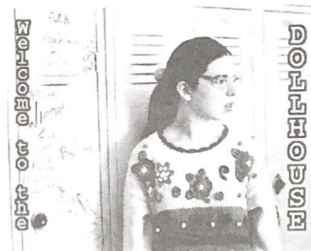
-Russ Kilbourn



Cooper) investigating the case soon realizes that his father, the legendary Buddy Deeds who took over the sheriff's duties from Charlie Wade and in the eyes of those who knew him, could do no wrong perhaps did.

But this film is more than your typical whodunit. It deals with borders: race, class, age, sex, and geography, and in the hands of an expert and socially aware storyteller such as Sayles becomes somewhat of a treatise on the human condition, while engrossing subplots address the nature of relationships woven throughout the film. By film's end, you feel not only caught up in all the complexities of the mystery, but also that you've been thoroughly engaged on a personal level as well.

-Victor Bains Marshall



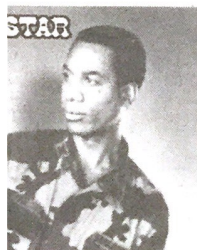
WELCOME TO THE DOLLHOUSE

(DIR. TODD SOLONDZ)

A number of independent American films have appeared recently, otherwise dissimilar, but united in their hyper-real depiction of the horrors of late-twentieth century middle-class suburban life. There is a particular fascination with the experience of kids, who suffer most because there is little they can do but cope, and ride out their misery, or rebel, and risk becoming even more miserable. Dawn Wiener (Heather Matarazzo), the 11-year-old "heroine" of writer-director Todd Solondz's new film *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, is one of those who try to cope, in the face of mounting incomprehension as to why she has been consigned to grow up in the hell of a New Jersey suburb.

Solondz, the one who put her there, explains that *Welcome to the Dollhouse* was catalyzed by his viewing TV's *The Wonder Years* for the first time. "When I finally saw the show, what struck me most was how little it bore any resemblance to my memory or understanding of childhood," Solondz claims he had no intention of making *Welcome to the Dollhouse* a "coming-of-age" drama, however, since he doesn't believe anyone comes of age during childhood. Nor, apparently, does he believe that anyone has a happy childhood. The child merely survives, progressing eventually to a condition of sufficient distance from which they can look back and deem themselves happy for having made it to adulthood.

There is a great temptation to read a film like *Welcome to the Dollhouse* with an eye to autobiography: does Solondz see himself in Dawn Wiener? The director is flattered at the question: "It means there's a certain authenticity, that things feel real from the screen." Stating "for the record" that he was not a little girl, Solondz admits that nevertheless there are autobiographical elements in the story. Unhappy childhood or not, Todd Solondz does not appear to be an unhappy adult, despite the unrelentingly dark tone of his film. And yes, it's also funny, if at times the viewer is made to feel distinctly uncomfortable for laughing. *Welcome to the Dollhouse* is, in short, a film that many people will dislike. There are two primary reasons for this: certain aspects of the subject matter (kids' amazing capacity for cruelty, especially toward those lower on the pecking order than they), and the language. Solondz deliberately set out to foreground the often less-than-savoury language of junior high school-age kids. Despite the ironic suitability



of the film's title, Solondz's first choice, he says, with no indication that he isn't serious, was *Faggots and Retards*—"not for shock value," he explains, "but because I think this is the language these kids deal in: the language that trickles down from their elders: pop culture, TV, etc." In this light, it has to be appreciated that "these kids" use these words not just to threaten each other, but also to understand and relate to each other. At one point, Dawn, who has been systematically harassed by a bully who threatens to "rape" her after school, ends up making the "great discovery" that this bully is just as much an outcast, and is just as vulnerable to name-calling as she is.

As the press notes explain, Dawn is a middle child in middle school in the middle of New Jersey. This emphasis on the mean should be construed in terms of mediocre rather than average. Oddly, middle child Dawn generally displays greater strength of character than either her insufferably cute younger sister (the parents' favourite), or her smarter older brother. She does make one decision that has nearly catastrophic results, and then redeems herself in a manner that has no effect whatsoever on her status in the other characters' eyes. Nor, arguably, do we like her any more by the end, apart from feeling the pity that the film itself so resolutely withholds.

-Russ Kilbourn

TORONTO WORLDWIDE SHORT FILM FESTIVAL

This year's Worldwide Short Film Festival featured more than 120 films from 32 countries, and many insights emerged from the depths of those darkened theatres. In these disparaging economic times, where the phrase "arts funding" is considered an oxymoron, the short film is becoming increasingly valuable as a calling card for future feature filmmakers, allowing them an opportunity to perfect their craft. The fest's opening gala included Nick Park's brilliant Academy Award-winning short *A Close Shave*, yet another adventure featuring that lovable duo, Wallace and Gromit, and concluded with the aptly titled *The End*. Toronto-based Christopher Landreth's Oscar-nominated animated short, *The Festival's* Canadian program played host to 24 films spanning the country, a range of genres, and a scope of filmmaking backgrounds. The *Village Trilogy*, humorously directed and choreographed by Laura Taler, examines themes of hearth, home and family through movement, expression, and music, and won the TWSFF award for best experimental film. More commercial work included *Fellini and Me*, directed by Michael DeCarlo, which aired last year on Global television as part of its New Producer Series. Student projects were acknowledged, including Kathleen Cummins's (York U) ambitious piece, *The Seduction of Mary Day*, a drama examining the plight of an Irish immigrant after her husband dies, leaving her without a male heir to inherit the family's homestead. *Curiosities*, directed and written by David Vainola, picked up top honours as best Canadian short. The film starts out nicely enough with interesting little stories about one-of-a-kind, irreplaceable "curiosities." As the intricacies of the story unfold, a chilling tale is revealed: a son, a broken curiosity, a punishment that ends in tragedy, Richard Waugh's performance as the psychopathic and pathetic father is great.

The Established Actors program made its debut this year, and would have been great if only Griffin Dunne's film, *Duke of Groove*, about a young boy whose mother takes him to a party where Janis Joplin is rumoured to show, was screened. *Duke's* absence left only two films: Christine Lahti's Oscar-winning *Lieberman In Love*, based on the W.P. Kinsella story and starring Danny Aiello as Lieberman and Lahti as the high-priced hooker with a Swiss bank account of gold; and *Ecce Pirate*, Matthew Modine's film about a boy who is captured by pirates and must come to terms with the lessons fate and the sea teach him about life, love and human nature. Ugh. One would think the main advantage of being an established actor—besides knowing other established actors and getting them to act in your films—is you'd pick up a thing or two about the craft of filmmaking. Modine clearly didn't learn anything while making *Cutthroat Island*. Like how to say no.