

Home Cinema @ the digital fix, September 2006 - Anthony Nield

In part this review should be read as a corrective. I've had previous opportunity to discuss the work of Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor, creators of the *Civic Life* series, when their 2004 short *Who Killed Brown Owl* was included on the *Best v Best Vol. One* compilation. Covering that release for DVD Times in January of this year I gave the film only a brief mention, noting its grandiosity and the fact that it unfolded in a single, virtuoso take. As such some of its other qualities were unfortunately overlooked: its deft use of Vaughn Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*; the darkness of its material; and the strange ambiguities at the heart of its narrative and thematic concerns – was this a cruel film, a sardonic one?

Who Killed Brown Owl opened with an intertitle describing the following nine minutes as a view of Britain – “civil, polite... and above all safe” – yet the images tell a different story. Over the unbroken take we witness self-interest, surrealism, strange accidents and unexplained death, all part of the same picture but told in their own fleeting little episodes. And now these episodes have into a whole series of self-proclaimed *Civic Life* shorts; in 2005 Molloy and Lawlor made another six films, each thematically similar and each told in a similar style, namely that single virtuoso take. Indeed, it's hard not to admire the pair, and on a number of levels too. Firstly there's the logistics of mounting these shorts to consider: five- to seventeen-minute pieces told with multiple, and often non-professional, performers but only one camera movement. Then there's the fact that they've managed to be so prolific of late, especially as so many promising British filmmakers struggle so much to create any kind of body of work. And finally it has to be noted that Molloy and Lawlor have put together this DVD release themselves, with a little help from the Arts Council. It's a handsomely mounted affair, complete with book, and is currently available exclusively through Cornerhouse.

Any admiration is firmly backed up, however, by the quality of the shorts themselves. The sleeve describes them as “both theatrical and deeply cinematic, experimental and highly accessible” and it's hard to disagree. Looking back at the history of the single take it's those found in *Touch of Evil*, *The Player* or various DePalmas which the *Civic Life* resemble most, as opposed to the likes of Michael Snow's *Wavelength*. In other words it's entertainment that comes first: each film represents a dense, rewarding experience, the majority being a cornucopia of enticing, often

unresolved details. Why is that man smugly hogging the paddling pool in *Who Killed Brown Owl* and where exactly did the gorillas in *Revolution* come from?

Yet Molloy and Lawlor are not in the habit of repeating themselves. The *Civic Life* offers far more diversity than suggested thus far. *Twilight* is a quiet, moving vignette about a woman dying from cancer; *Moore Street*, on the other hand, offers a whispering voice to the UK's immigrant community – a kind of 21st century update of Robert Vas' *Refuge England*, if you will. Furthermore, both of these pieces perfectly encapsulate the focus on character and landscape. The former concern demonstrates a pleasing subcultural focus, at least in cinematic terms: the aged; the community at large; those unsung everyday folk who take their dogs for walks and attend town hall meetings. The latter, meanwhile, is encompassed via quintessentially British locales and activities: rivers, the park, a local fête. (There are also further references in this respect courtesy of various implicit asides. The use of Vaughn Williams mentioned earlier, for example, recalls his contributions to a number of British Transport Film efforts. Elsewhere, the bizarre, unexplained deaths which pepper some of the narratives bring to mind the quaint likes of *Miss Marple*, *Midsomer Murders* or those “accident” sequences which occupy the first acts of *Casualty* episodes.)

There's also the growing confidence to be commented on. Trusting that these films are presented on the disc in order of production, there's a definite progression going on. Each short is seemingly more elaborate than the last, gaining in length and building in narrative focus. Outdoor locations switch to trickier indoor situations (as the titles occasionally suggest: *Town Hall*, *Leisure Centre*), scored soundtracks or those created in post-production give way to a greater dependence of live sound; in other words the potential for further logistical headaches only increases, yet still each short pulls through to fine results. If there is one caveat then it's that these latter, more dialogue-dependent efforts demonstrate a theatricality that doesn't quite gel with the more overt cinematic concerns. The speeches in these pieces feel like just that: too florid, too contrived to fit in with the realist elements in play elsewhere.

And yet, perhaps this shouldn't surprise too much given Molloy and Lawlor's background in experimental theatre. Indeed, you could argue that the *Civic Life* series finds them coming full circle: from theatre to cinema and back again. Likewise, the release of this DVD seemingly represents the closing of a chapter, the filmmakers now ready to move onto other filmic concerns. In fact, it appears as though this is already taking place; upon contacted me with the aim of covering the disc for this site I was informed that their latest effort is currently going through its post-production stages. Given the sheer ambition on display here, that can only be a good thing.

The Disc

The *Civic Life* series of films come to DVD as part of a disc-and-book package. The disc itself is really quite pleasing for a self-produced effort. Each of the shorts has been taken from a spotless print whilst the original 2.35:1 aspect ratios have all been maintained. There is some disappointment inasmuch as these are not backed up with anamorphic presentations, but then perhaps we should make this one concession given the nature of the DVD's production. Otherwise, everything is pleasingly complete: the soundtracks (DD2.0 in all cases) cope well with both dialogue and music; and the extras besides the book are pleasingly full. There's a single-take B-roll look at *Who Killed Brown Owl*, a broader backstage glance at the making of *Town Hall*, and a 3D animatic walk-through to accompany the same film. As for the book, here we find four intelligent, considered essays teasing out the meanings in the various shorts and allowing us a bit of background into their makers. Indeed, it becomes hard to make your own contribution to discussing the *Civic Life* series as most of the touchstones are already mentioned: *Touch of Evil*, *Wavelength*, the BTF (all of which I've also acknowledged above), Michelangelo Antonioni, Andre Bazin, Margaret Thatcher, even Jonathan Coe. Furthermore, various stills have reproduced inside this book and also appear on the disc as part of a gallery.