Making "gritty, working class comedy" by the numbers

Among Giants

A film by Sam Miller at the London Film Festival

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Scripted by *Full Monty* writer Simon Beaufoy, *Among Giants* attempts to replicate the success of that film by working closely to its blueprint. Foreman Ray (Pete Postlethwaite) assembles a group of painters. They are employed 'off the books' to paint a network of electricity pylons between the Derbyshire Peak District and Sheffield. They are being paid cash-in-hand, the job is all strictly hush-hush, and it must be completed within an impossible timeframe before the electricity is switched back on. (This clearly does not make much sense, but that does not seem to have bothered Beaufoy).

Ray employs his rock-climbing friend Steve (James Thornton) on the gang. Driving back from the site, they pick up an Australian hitchhiker Gerry (Rachel Griffiths) who is also a climber. She joins the work crew. Steve fancies her. She fancies Ray. She and Ray fall in love, which sours the atmosphere on the pylons. They are going to get married. They fall out. She sleeps with Steve. She climbs a rock face and has a fall. The electricity is switched back on early, Gerry goes back to travelling and Ray and Steve make up.

This slim and not terribly interesting story is padded out with the requisite extra elements; there is music (line-dancing and a cappella harmonising), there is the spectacular scenery around Sheffield and the Peak District, and it is all served up lukewarm against a background of work. It is the perfunctory way these components are assembled that is perhaps the most offensive aspect of the film. It assumes that its audience will be satisfied with the right moves being made, even if they are not convincing.

The director, Sam Miller, is best known for his work on the television series *This Life* about the love lives of a group of young London lawyers. It was glittering, slick and vacuous, and he has brought the same attributes to bear here. He has said that what attracted him to the script was 'its earthiness, the way it is really rooted in work'. This is simply not the case. It is never explained why anyone would pay under-the-counter for pylons to be painted, much less why it must be done without anyone knowing. There are casual references to Steve's mates being on the dole. Bob (Andy Serkis) is always short of money. He comes round to Ray's on a Sunday morning for an advance on his wages because loan sharks are chasing him. That is the only time we hear about it, although we do hear again about the wages being late. The characters are tacked on to the plot, rather than the plot flowing out of the situation faced by the characters.

This becomes most obvious when we look at the rest of the gang. Apart from Steve, the womaniser, and Bob, drunk and short of money, there are Frank (Alan Williams), too old for the work and struggling, Weasel (Rob Jarvis), a country and western guitarist with a vaguely intellectual air, and Shovel (Lennie James), the kind and gentle one. Little happens between them. This is character delineation by numbers and a rather good cast struggles heroically against what it has been given. We cannot care about the characters because they do not live and breathe. They are merely ciphers. Each of them has an interesting moment and then merges once more with the scenery.

The same problems also beset the principal characters. Pete Postlethwaite reprises his bluff Yorkshireman, from *Brassed Off*, struggling with hidden emotional turmoil. He can do this as well as anyone, but without a context it becomes meaningless.

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There is a bizarre moment when Ray takes Gerry to his secret garden on top of a gasworks. This secret place passes into and out of the film without warning. It is a pretext for Gerry to see some inner side of Ray (with the hills of Sheffield as a backdrop) but it is never pursued.

Rachel Griffiths has more to work with as the hiker searching for herself, and James Thornton perhaps does best out of the deal as the restless young man desperate to get away. Even with the character of Steve, though, we see a frustrated young man, but little more of his background is sketched in for us. We are expected to be moved by this love story, but it lacks the depth of a context. It is interesting that one of the more successful scenes, where Steve and Gerry attempt to climb round the walls of a pub, works better precisely because it is set in a social situation. There is less of the portentous staring into open space that has come to symbolise and replace thought in contemporary cinema.

All of the minor characters seize their moment in the film well, but this only reinforces the general feeling that every situation is coldly calculated with an eye on the box office. It is manipulated and manipulative. It was, for example, possible to predict with disturbing accuracy the point at which Bob would burst into tears during a pleasant evening around the campfire. During the film's one moment of tension, when Shovel is caught up a pylon as the electricity is being switched back on, there is absolutely no tension whatsoever. The film adheres rigidly to all the formulae it has set for itself.

This applies equally to the way in which the film is cut. As Frank is suffering from the strenuous work, Gerry is climbing a rock face without ropes. The editing between the two scenes tells you long before either event happens that Frank will fall off his chair with exhaustion and Gerry will fall off her rock face. A film about bricklaying would have been more appropriate given how thickly this is all laid on.

In spite of his protestations to the contrary, Miller replaces an interest in the reality of his characters and their world with a superficial glimpse at the natural splendour around them. He has filmed the pylon work with inventiveness, but the musical numbers that accompany these sequences look and sound too staged, too ready for a soundtrack album and single release with ready-made video clips. Indeed, the one shot that does not work at all is of Gerry falling from her rock face, precisely because this demands the simplest, most honest approach to the camera. Instead, the director has shot it from underneath, from the same angle as the pylon work. We see the stuntwoman pushing herself off the rock because the camerawork is showing us a trick. The scene jars because the rest of the film is so slick and seamless.

If I have dealt at length and with some hostility towards what is a fairly vapid and insignificant film it is not out of malice. I feel a great deal of sympathy with the cast (particularly Thornton and James), who acquit themselves well against the odds. It is because I regard it as symptomatic of the crisis that besets cinema today. In order to recoup the producers' investment, the techniques of filmmaking are made subordinate to the formulae of the most recent box office successes. The most frequently heard question within the British film industry is, 'Where is the next *Four Weddings and a Funeral* or *The Full Monty*?' The question itself points to an artistic impasse that can be seen quite clearly in a turgid mess like *Among Giants*.

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