Quite obedient really

The Cider House Rules, directed by Lasse Hallström, screenplay by John Irving, based on the novel by Irving

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It seems to me difficult to make a compelling film about the advisability of "breaking the rules," when as an artist you aren't prepared to break any.

Swedish-born director Lasse Hallström (*My Life as a Dog* [1985], *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* [1993]) has filmed a version of John Irving's 1985 novel, *The Cider House Rules*. The story, set during World War II, concerns a young man, Homer Wells (Tobey Maguire), who's grown up in an orphanage in Maine run by the remarkable Dr. Larch (Michael Caine). Larch, in addition to looking after the parentless or unwanted children of the area, delivers babies and performs (illegal) abortions. He has personally trained Homer to be a skilled gynecologist and obstetrician and expects that the younger man will take his place.

Oppressed by Dr. Larch's father-like ambitions for him and desirous of seeing something of the world—and also opposed to the practice of performing abortions—Homer decides one day to leave the institution. He takes a job picking apples, alongside a crew of black migrant laborers, headed by Mr. Rose (Delroy Lindo), and becomes involved with a young woman, Candy, whose boyfriend is off at war. One thing leads to another. Homer is obliged to make some difficult choices. He performs an abortion and covers up a killing; he loses in love and watches someone sacrifice herself. In the end, he returns to the orphanage to replace the now deceased Dr. Larch.

The "Cider House rules" refers to a sheet of paper tacked on the wall in the apple pickers' quarters that instructs them not to do a series of things that they've always done, consider sensible and intend to continue doing.

Nothing here is terribly difficult to miss. Regulations established by those who know little about the conditions in which people live are likely to be at variance with life's deeper requirements. The person with a genuine sense of responsibility for himself and others ignores the official rules and creates his own moral code.

John Irving's insistence that abortion is an elementary right is certainly commendable and, in the US at this point, perhaps even courageous. He observes, "Everything that happens in 'The Cider House Rules' can only happen in a world where abortion is illegal (and generally unavailable)."

The film has a firmly humanistic attitude. It sympathizes with children, and specifically abandoned children. It encourages the spectator to admire Dr. Larch (portrayed by Michael Caine with obvious feeling), a man dedicated not to money or social standing but to being useful to others, and someone who judges people solely by the degree to which *they* are useful to others. It also invites respect for those on society's lower rungs, like the migrant laborers, and asks for understanding of some of their failings. One might say, in sum, that there is nothing malicious about *The Cider House Rules*.

Lack of malice, however, is not the same thing as artistic or intellectual strength and conviction. What strikes you forcefully about Hallström's film is the lack of genuine unconventionality in a film formally advocating the unconventional. Everything, unfortunately, has been quite carefully calculated. Idiosyncrasy, whether on the part of the children, with names like "Curly," "Fuzzy" and "Buster" (in fact, nearly all the characters' names are impossible!), or Dr. Larch and his staff, amounts to little more than

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charming quirkiness. The various acts of crime or passion neatly balance out; no emotional or moral debt is left unpaid. The only character who truly steps over the line, pays for it in full.

Any hopes aroused by a certain Scandinavian rawness to the cinematography are largely disappointed. An irritating and obtrusive score (nominated of course for an Academy Award) announces when your heart-strings, or some other part of your anatomy, should feel touched. Too many picturesque views of New England countryside! Overall, there's little in the way the film is shot, acted, edited or scored that would encourage the spirit of protest.

In the end, nothing gives serious offense. As if rebellion against authority didn't require going beyond politeness. As if those who draw up society's “rules” were merely out of touch, insensitive, and not *deliberately oppressive*. In formulating a rather mild-mannered anarchism, which promises no windows will be broken, the filmmakers, probably unwittingly, have tailored their work to the present conformist climate.

Furthermore, for a work ostensibly arguing for a certain moral flexibility and open-endedness, Hallström's film is highly deterministic, in the weakest sense. The critical moral choices the characters face turn out not to be choices at all. The filmmakers can't help stacking the deck. They create a certain irresistible momentum through imagery, words and music. Circumstances, as arranged by Hallström and Irving, *oblige* Homer to perform an abortion; they *oblige* Candy to sacrifice herself; they *oblige* Homer to return to the orphanage and replace Dr. Larch, etc. There is something oppressive and conventional about this. The refusal to give characters the freedom to act in ways one disapproves of, the inability to endure ambiguity are signs of artistic insecurity, and worse.

At an earlier point in history Swedes, Germans, Austrians and others came to Hollywood and taught the American film industry quite a lot. Now Swedes, Germans, New Zealanders and others, having made mildly interesting films in their own countries, come to Hollywood and turn out films that look and feel more or less alike and look and feel like other studio products. And they do so without apparently putting up much resistance. Is this the result of the sheer force of the American film industry machinery? Perhaps, but I tend to think this gives the latter too much weight. The unhappier possibility is that since the stagnation in contemporary cinema is an international trend these filmmakers didn't have all that much to say to begin with.

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