A conversation with Alan Taylor, director of Palookaville

David Walsh
3 June 1996

Palookaville is a rare American film, one which deals with ordinary people in a sympathetic, yet not uncritical, fashion—and with some imagination. Alan Taylor's film follows the lives of three unemployed men in Jersey City who take up crime for a variety of reasons. Russ (Vincent Gallo), the ringleader and would-be tough guy, calls the move merely a "momentary shift in lifestyle." Devastated by a failed marriage, Sid (William Forsythe), takes part in the activities in a state of numbness. Jerry (Adam Trese) objects to each proposed crime, but goes along in order to provide for his family.

After botching a jewelry store burglary and abandoning their one effort to go "straight"—operating a gypsy cab service—the trio come up with the idea of robbing an armored security truck. At the decisive moment, Russ resists the temptation to shoot one of the security guards. The cash escapes them. In the end, the three receive an unexpected—although perhaps not compensatory—reward. Along the way, each of the characters has enjoyed at least one magical moment.

The film is rare as well because it shows signs of storytelling ability and comic timing which seem nearly lost arts in American filmmaking, a domain in which they once held considerable sway. *Palookaville* derives some of its inspiration from Italian comedies of the 1950s and 1960s, e.g., Mario Monicelli's *Big Deal on Madonna Street*. David Epstein's script also makes use of several stories by Italian author Italo Calvino.

In a conversation, I asked Alan Taylor about the Italian influence. "I lived In Italy as a kid," he explained. "Also, there's something about the world view in stories of that period. It assumes a kind of bleak world. And then, given that, it's surprising how many positive, hopeful, little tiny things it discovers. And that seems to be the world view that I have right now."

I mentioned that I'd seen a number of films at the festival which took economic desperation as their starting-point. Taylor commented, "A lot of the Hollywood movies we see are responses to desperation and fear, economic uncertainty and political uncertainty. Most of them confront that fear by going: Pow! Pow! Pow! It's a very reassuring thing for an audience to feel that they can get control back that easily."

I told Taylor that I thought the moment when Vincent decides not to shoot the guard to be quite significant. He remarked, "We live at a time when we expect the most cynical response. If you really put someone like you or someone you know in that situation, there's a wide range of reactions. It's not always going to be the cheapest, most violent, most immediate."

At the public screening of *Palookaville* two nights earlier, Taylor had referred to the three characters at one point as "losers." I mentioned that the word had made me wince, particularly when used before a relatively well-heeled audience. "Losers is a lazy choice of words," he admitted. "The characters are written as unfinished people. If they were more highly evolved, more self-aware, they would not be acting the way they do. Psychologically, politically, economically, they would have a different response to their situation. They're 'losers' because the system they've been trained to respond to isn't there for them anymore, so they are surprised to find that the 'loser' category has expanded to include them. There's a moment when Jerry tries to find a job doing what he does and a guy comes in, who has a job, and he's feeling better than him, and the best thing he can do is negate any connection between him and Jerry, because he has a job and Jerry doesn't. In the eyes of the guy who walks into the diner, Jerry is a 'loser.' In the eyes

© World Socialist Web Site

of the audience, which hopefully has more affection, he's not a loser."

I told Taylor I thought the overall feeling conveyed by the film was one of sympathy and compassion. He said, "There is a sympathy with them as underdogs. Every authority figure in the film is corrupt and untrustworthy. The cop is a wonderful character, but he is what he is. This is obviously a film which has a lot of affection and faith in the class of people in which these guys are operating."

"And it's critical as well, which is legitimate," I added. "Their aspiration," Taylor said, "is to just do one thing so they can get back into the American dream. And that's all they're thinking about. It hasn't gotten to the point where they're thinking, 'Well, wait a second, should we be more critical of the whole idea?' They're not at that stage."

The film has its share of problems. Aside from the issue of whether the director has entirely worked out his own attitude toward his characters, certain representations of working class life do not completely convince. This is true, for example, of a scene in which Jerry quarrels with his wife, Betty (Lisa Gay Hamilton). This is one of the few moments in the film where the scriptwriter and director seem to have taken the line of least resistance. Here they fall prey to the school of so-called 'social realism' that confuses four-letter words and violence with acute observation—à la Nick Gomez's infinitely weaker *Laws of Gravity*. Betty's character as a whole—including her inevitable brush with sexual harassment—seems contrived. In addition, the sudden arrival of a lovely fur-store clerk into Sid's life, charming as it is, is also—unfortunately—a bit hard to swallow. Even paradise has its logic.

Palookaville, as a whole, is amusing, thoughtful, sometimes moving. Taylor is a genuine talent.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site