

## Two recent American films

Bad Santa, directed by Terry Zwigoff; The Station Agent, written and directed by Thomas McCarthy

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Director Terry Zwigoff has now had two chances to live up to the promise he showed in his first film, the intriguing documentary *Crumb* (1994), and he has failed on both occasions.

*Ghost World* (2000), about an angst-ridden teenage girl in Los Angeles, came as a disappointment. At the time I commented: “The filmmaker appears to lack an independent position of his own or any clearly worked out ideas about the world. The dramatic result is simply flat, by and large, and dull. The attempts at satire ... are neither amusing nor penetrating because there is no genuine social insight at their heart.

“Presumably the filmmaker is critical of his character’s air of superiority, born of adolescent defensiveness and insecurity, but too often he joins in with his own and less excusable brand of sneering. *Ghost World* mocks most of its characters—including an immigrant storeowner—and their activities, without ever establishing the Olympian credentials of the filmmakers.”

If anything, *Bad Santa* is a weaker effort. Willie (Billy Bob Thornton) and Marcus (Tony Cox) team up to rob department stores each year at Christmas time by getting themselves hired as Santa Claus and one his elves (Marcus is a dwarf). Willie distinguishes himself by his drinking, his cursing, his fornicating and his verbal abuse of the children who sit on his lap and tell “Santa” what presents they want.

A silent, overweight, unhappy boy, The Kid (Brett Kelly), comes into the safe cracker’s life, as an ardent and unquestioning admirer. When Willie is forced out of his apartment, he goes to live with the boy and his nearly catatonic grandmother (Cloris Leachman). He has meanwhile accumulated a girlfriend, Sue (Lauren

Graham), a Santa-obsessed bartender.

Difficulties threaten the latest store heist. Willie’s drinking has worsened and his misbehavior has alarmed store manager Bob Chipeska (John Ritter), who in turn alerts mall security chief Gin (Bernie Mac). Once the young boy comes into his life, Willie threatens to turn human, worrying Marcus. The film unexpectedly plunges into blackmail, murder and mayhem, before ending on a more or less conformist note.

First of all, I would intensely distrust any filmmaker who misuses and demeans a singularly talented and appealing performer like Cloris Leachman, who is obliged here to play the role of the demented grandmother, without a single significant line or scene. What an inexcusable waste of talent! The late John Ritter, in one of his last roles, does not fare much better.

The film contains perhaps 90 seconds of genuine amusement. The rest is forced, juvenile, “off.” *Bad Santa* uncomfortably combines art-house pretensions with the tastelessness of an Adam Sandler effort. Thornton is an accomplished comic actor, and his delivery saves the day on more than one occasion. But neither he nor the others is given enough with which to work.

Zwigoff’s film is full of red herrings, dead ends, implausibilities. The subplot involving The Kid is simply peculiar and doesn’t arrive at any particular emotional or dramatic conclusion. Willie is made out to be a thoroughly repugnant semi-derelict, but the young and attractive Sue cannot resist him. Characters come and go without explanation or purpose. Ritter’s character, for example, simply disappears from the film. The security chief seems poised to play a pivotal

role in the narrative, then comes to an unpleasant end with surprising and unlikely ease. The denouement and “epilogue” are unconvincing and sloppily executed. One senses that the filmmaker had no idea how to end his work.

The film in general is carelessly, loosely made. It’s difficult to believe that those making *Bad Santa* took it terribly seriously. And nothing requires more earnestness and commitment than comedy.

The targets are far too easy. The writers and director had all of contemporary America to choose from as targets of their vaunted “nastiness,” and this is what they chose? An uptight store manager? A senile old lady? How daring! How iconoclastic! The spitefulness of the film dissolves itself, when push comes to shove, into a lack of much to say, on the one hand, and incipient sentimentality, on the other. There’s disappointingly little here.

*The Station Agent*, written and directed by Thomas McCarthy, presents different difficulties. The film follows the life of a dwarf, Fin (Peter Dinklage), with a love of trains, who inherits from a friend a station house in rural New Jersey and makes it his home.

Bruised, isolated, determined to live his life without the important presence of other people, Fin slowly comes out of his shell when he befriends a sociable hot-dog vendor, Joe (Bobby Cannavale), and a woman, Olivia (Patricia Clarkson), separated from her husband, who has recently lost a child. The three form what is known as an “unlikely trio.”

However, aside from the lead character’s stature, everything that goes on is fairly predictable and heart-warming in a low-key, quirky sort of way.

The work is also oddly and confusingly constructed. Presumably we are meant to interpret Fin’s obsession with trains, which he spends entire days watching, as a substitute for interaction with other humans. However, the writer-director spends a great deal of time lovingly filming trains passing by. If he is going to devote that much footage to the subject of railway trains, than he ought to have something to say about them. But he doesn’t. In the end, the train sequences seem quite extraneous. They end up simply killing time.

Or perhaps suggesting another, earlier America. There is an air of nostalgia to the film. It photographs small-town existence with loving care. And there’s nothing wrong with that, except these elements (trains,

rural life, etc.) are external to the film’s supposed core—Fin’s growing connection to the other people in his life. Unless the filmmaker is arguing that only by “going back” to an allegedly simpler way of living one can establish such a connection. Let’s hope, for all our sakes, that’s not what he intended.

*The Station Agent* proceeds quietly and more or less intelligently. It holds a middle position in a filmmaking tendency that includes David Gordon Green’s films (*George Washington*, *All the Real Girls*) and Kenneth Lonergan’s *You Can Count on Me* at the high end and Todd Field’s *In the Bedroom* at the low. All films cleanly shot in small towns, about relations among deliberately unglamorous individuals. Each clearly intended as a response to the bombastic and violent fare emerging from the studios.

It is thoroughly understandable why such films, under present conditions, attract audiences, hungry for cinema that treats a recognizable reality.

There is nothing wrong of course with opposing Hollywood’s stupidities. However, it would be preferable if one had something of substance to offer in place of the studio’s vulgarity and noise. It’s not possible to make an enduring work simply by removing the offending features of “blockbuster” productions, the aforementioned bombast, violence, stupidity. A filmmaker has to offer his own positive content, his own contribution, his own important interpretation of life. *The Station Agent* is another piece of “passive realism.” In the end, there is something timid, cautious and unsatisfying about this type of film.



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