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CINEMA

Review:

Peter Weir—on making of *Witness*

Witness; directed by Peter Weir; story and screenplay by Pamela Wallace, Earl W. Wallace, and William Kelly; cinematography by John Seale; starring Harrison Ford, Kelly McGillis and Lukas Haas.

Carriages. Horses. Pilgrim-like people walking together on the land. The opening images of *Witness* establish immediately the nature of the Pennsylvania Amish farmers. Quiet and hardworking, they are tribal, religious, pacifist—and, like the American Indians—knowledgeable in the old ways.

Enter Harrison Ford, in the character of John Book, a Philadelphia police detective investigating a drug-ring murder secretly witnessed by a clear-eyed, innocent Amish boy. When Book discovers that fellow police are involved in the murder, his own life is jeopardized and he's forced into hiding on the Amish farm where the boy Samuel (Lukas Haas) and his mother Rachel (Kelly McGillis) reside. What follows is a story of suspense, fear and love, a portrait of innocence and corruption.

Written by television writers Earl Wallace, William Kelly and Pamela Wallace, the movie is Australian director Peter Weir's first American film. If you saw *The Last Wave*, you'll remember the incredible tension Weir created through the use of sound and long takes. Although this is a combination love story/police thriller, some of that *Last Wave* tension is created here using similar film techniques. The music is by Maurice Jarre, the same composer who scored David Lean's *A Passage to India*.

Partly, this film is so good because it starts with a good story—full of tension, humor, suspense, romance and rivalry. What makes it all work, what makes the jokes funny, the violence hard and the love bittersweet is the striking contrast between his world and hers.

Peter Weir describes the contrast:

"The ambience of the movie is somewhat different from the screenplay. The screenplay was emphasizing more the melodrama—the cop on the run, hiding out with the Amish people. It had the humor, but you didn't sense from the screenplay this extraordinary clash of these two people (Harrison Ford and Kelly McGillis' characters) from virtually different centuries. And, you know, casting makes an incredible difference. I basically tried to cast all foreign people in the parts of the Amish—which is, in a way, a way of getting at the truth through a certain distortion. A lot more of them

speak with an American accent, but they don't look like Americans."

The music and other sound is so critical in a Peter Weir film because this is his point of departure for image-gathering. His earlier films (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *The Last Wave*, *Gallipoli* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*) tell us something of his penchant for searching the mysteries, both in story and by way of sound design. Peter Weir comments on his film process:

"I began to gather about three, four, five cassettes that seem to give me the whole picture. I can put this part of that tape on—that rock & roll, that aria, that piece of Mozart, or that African drum track—absurd for anybody else, perhaps, but for me somehow they've tied together all the major emotional movements of the picture, and have all given me images. They influence the casting, the entire film."

"And then with my head buzzing I put the tapes on, start reading, and then suddenly words are coming off the page and they're not something that I remember. I haven't planned on them. And I think, 'Oh, we don't need that there, that's quite apparent with a close-up there, and that sort of turn will be wonderful, so we don't need to say anything because the picture is giving us that feeling, and particularly that bit of music, so let's delete that.' And so that process begins cutting down the dialogue. . . ."

I had an argument with Rod the mailman about this film because he thought the dialogue was a little thin, and having read the Weir interview and seen the film twice, it made perfect sense to me that the dialogue was more visual than verbal.

If we look at Weir's use of the close-up, we understand the fierce draw of this love story. It has power precisely because it isn't littered with words. When Rachel dares to serve drink to the outsider Book before her tribal brother Daniel (who has in effect already spoken for her), the competition is set. Daniel doesn't need to say, "Stay away from her partner, she's mine." The camera, facial expressions, and cross-cuts between principals all convey the notion of jealousy to each of us.

Peter Weir on words vs. pictures:

"I think we're in an age when we're not articulate in emotional areas. And therefore, rather than having a certain limited number of patterns expressing a feeling from one individual to another—you choose pictures."

There are wonderfully funny scenes in this film which offset the tension perfectly. Book angri-

ly chomps his hotdog, as Rachel and Samuel pause to pray. We laugh—not at the thought of prayer, but at how out-of-place it would be for this Dirty-Harry-type city cop to pray. It's funny, and at the same time a warning: Rachel cannot really be with a man who does not pray.

Throughout the film, John Seale's superlative photography provides pictures that are both magnets and deterrents to a shared life for Rachel and John. But because we are each of us a mixture of personalities, we can see the parts of Rachel that fall in love with the persons of John. She is Madonna, nurse, seductress, feeder, religious devotee. He is father-man, builder, playmate, lover, killer. When he awakens from the night of near-death to a Madonna-like photograph of the sleeping Rachel, what can he feel? When they dance in the night-lit barn to rock and roll music from the car radio, the camera moves them closer, closer, to a charge that is absolutely electric. The happy spell is broken as they are abruptly reminded of who they are. People out of time, people from different centuries.

Lukas Haas, the beautiful child Samuel, plays with the gun, and is angrily chastised by John Book. The next scene shows grandfather (Jan Rubes) intimately instructing the child on pacifist Amish belief. "What you hold in your hand, you hold in your heart," he lovingly cautions. The audience is painfully aware that John Book's gun will never harmoniously co-exist with Rachel's garden.

Everybody likes this film because it ALLWORKS—story, acting, direction, location, costumes, editing, casting, lighting—everything synchs. Peter Weir talks about his method:

"I like to work fast, so sometimes I've just got it all worked out and I just say, 'Look, the camera's being set up while you're in makeup, and unless you've got any objections or a particular idea I'd just like to do it in one shot. . . ."

"And if you've got an actor like Harrison Ford, then you've got an extremely agile mind, a terrific ally in a situation like that because he'll always have a point of view. And this is film-making in the old sense of the word, from the Mack Sennett-type thing or the early Australian days, when you were all thrown in together. You would pool the ideas. Someone was better at acting than directing and you just divided the jobs up—but basically, you're throwing it in there and stirring the pot."

Peter Weir talks about the closeup as a stripping device, and how in his films he's tried to get rid of the clutter:

"What I've been left with are the people, really, and the faces. Hence the close-ups, and finding wonderful mysteries in the human spirit. . . and tying that in with the music, as I said earlier, and then probably finding words failing in terms of the corruption of the language and the inability to express feeling."

"As a matter of fact, the expression of feeling is also out of fashion, among educated people anyway, and in some countries more than others—particularly in Europe. I've found my films fit less and less into the pattern of Europe, because they've decided to label—tragically and dangerously—all areas to do with expressing the human spirit in certain overt ways as 'sentimental.' Particularly the French. And it's their loss. And that's why this country suits me at this time. Because you are still more open."

[The comments of Peter Weir were excerpted from an interview with L.A. reviewer Michael Ventura, from the L.A. Weekly, Feb. 8, 1985.]

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