

NO TIME FOR PLOT

Scotland's One-Man Film Industry

BY ERIC FLAUM

Comfort and Joy is Scottish director/writer Bill Forsyth's follow-up to his highly acclaimed box-office successes, *Local Hero* and *Gregory's Girl*. A soft-spoken, intense individual whose thick Scottish accent gives everything he says a melodic, lyrical quality, Forsyth has little in common with the star-oriented Hollywood community that gathered for the Los Angeles premiere of his movie.

Gossip pages featured photos of Elizabeth Taylor and Joan Collins, but Forsyth slunk through the glamorous surroundings with the air of a man forced to visit the dentist.

"I was quite out of it at the Opening," he admits over lunch in New York, just before departing to his beloved Glasgow. "I didn't really feel like I belonged there. I felt as if one of those Secret Agents was going to come down and remove me any minute. It was quite an odd feeling."

Wearing a yellow plaid shirt of the picnic table variety with a blue and white striped seersucker jacket, Forsyth was actually more conspicuous in the chichi hotel cafe we spoke in than the traveling

rock and roll band that had just noisily checked in.

Comfort and Joy is the story of a Glasgow DJ who finds himself, improbably and unexpectedly, in the middle of a mafioso ice cream war. "Dickie-Bird" is a personable, velvet-voiced local celebrity whose girl has just abruptly left him. In pursuit of new romance he stumbles into a war — "Mr. Bunny" against "Mr. McCool" — for dominion over Glasgow's ice cream truck routes. There's a melee of window smashing by McCool hoodlums of a Mr. Bunny van. The assailants are doused with raspberry syrup. A fleeing hood recognizes Dickie-Bird and soon the hapless platter spinner is playing peacemaker while at the same time



Mr. Bunny: Raspberry syrup violence. Bill Forsyth (below, left): Humane comedies on a Glasgow basis.

nursing his broken heart.

Like Forsyth's previous films, *Comfort and Joy* is mostly a character study, working off of a simple, amusing premise. It is a developing trademark of Forsyth's work to spin a simple story in a rich atmosphere. "Usually there is an idea, and usually it's an idea that strikes me as being funny," says Forsyth.

"Most films have too many ideas or too much plot in them," he continues. "It just seems like a burden if you've got a very complex plot. It just soaks up too much time."

Forsyth uses time to create and develop characters. The results have been picturesque voyages through the lives of interestingly off-beat people.

Bill Forsyth is a devout self-analyzer, and his observations seem quite accurate. "I'm just kind of realistic," Forsyth says in a matter-of-fact way. "I think I can see things pretty much as they are. I think I'm quite perceptive, without getting distracted by too many things. This wasn't always the case."

Over-contemplative in his earlier years, Forsyth seems to have been a lot like the central character in his first commercial release, *Gregory's Girl*, the film that beat *Chariots of Fire* to win the British Isles' equivalent of an Oscar.

"I must have been about sixteen and I had two friends and we formed ourselves into this little thinking cabal. One Saturday night the three of us were in the park and by that time the cafe had closed and the evening had kind of whittled to nothing. You see, we wanted to go see girls in the cafe. And we would debate about it until the cafe was closed! One of my friends says, 'You know what the problem is? We think too much!' So we just threw a bench into the pond and went home."

These days Bill Forsyth has found a more constructive way of channeling his

energies. (He has not, however, forgotten the lesson.) Films have become an ongoing passion, and the basis for some of his friendships as well. When we discuss Mark Knopfler, guitarist-leader of the group Dire Straits, who scored *Gregory's Girl* and *Local Hero*, Forsyth pays him a high compliment when he credits Knopfler with "a filmmaker's brain, because the way he works is very conceptual. His work is often based on little stories, much like my own."

In fact, two Knopfler compositions from Dire Straits' last studio album, *Love Over Gold*, inspired Forsyth in the creation of *Comfort and Joy*.

"He played me the album," recalls Forsyth, "before I'd sat down to write the script, although I'd had most of the general ideas for it, and there was a real kind of coincidence in finding his album going down the same road. The basic concept in 'Telegraph Road' of a city being born and dying, and then 'Private Investigations,' which was the other side of my story about a solitary person with an enigma, was all in the album, and it was really inspirational."

The result is a delightful story of a jilted lover's search for companionship and meaning. There is much humor, but a deeper examination of human nature as well, a concern that permeates Forsyth's work. Although all too often, however, reviewers have chosen to focus entirely on the lighter side of Forsyth's movies.

"I think the kind of humor that I work with is always bordering on the darkness of the other side of itself," Forsyth reflects. "I like working on the borderline, but it just depends on how people perceive it. Maybe they're scared to look over the edge."

"In almost indescribable ways you reveal yourself when you make a film," Bill Forsyth says.

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