

Issue 12: Film Reviews

Son of Rambow

Dir: Garth Jennings, UK, 2008

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If in possession of a genial disposition, and a couple of hours to kill, you could do a lot worse than take a shuftly at the infectiously affable, but not entirely uncynical, Brit-com, *Son of Rambow* (2008, Garth Jennings). Set in the sunny Thames Valley of the early 1980s, it tells the tale of two misfits who come together to make their own version of *First Blood* (1982, Ted Kotcheff) on a video camera in the hopes of winning the young filmmaker's prize on TV's *Screen Test*.

Will Proudfoot (Bill Milner) comes from a devoutly Christian household and is not allowed to watch television. Having been asked to leave a classroom while his classmates watch a TV programme, he meets Lee Carter (Will Poulter) in the school corridor. Lee is the school's live-wire and trouble-causer who has been thrown out of his own class for, one presumes, refusing to knuckle under in some way. After school, in Lee's garage, Will encounters his first ever movie, *First Blood*, and this experience sets his already febrile imagination ablaze. Subsequently, Lee enlists Will as stuntman on his upcoming film project, thereby capitalising on Will's newly born enthusiastic fearlessness. As the project progresses, their friendship deepens. When their secret project becomes common knowledge in the school, the two former outsiders find themselves inducted into the school's in-crowd and loyalties are tested as Will succumbs to the vertigo occasioned by the empty gestures of fair-weather friends.

Youngsters Milner and Poulter are quite brilliant, each giving a convincing and appealing performance, as do the rest of the young cast. Writer/director Garth Jennings has a perceptive eye for slapstick, bolstered by an understanding of the kind of stupid things kids will do when left to their own devices, and it is here where most of the deep laughs are found. In its best moments, the film is a hearty tribute to the imagination and recklessness of young lads and it is refreshing to see a film which features high school boys who are not sex maniacs. It's also good to see English suburbia portrayed as something other than the bland, conformist, soul crushing "middle-England" as it exists in the Metropolitan mindset. In *Son of Rambow*, our intrepid heroes find their imaginations fired by their surroundings, discovering their own ready-made film sets in the picturesque and the derelict.

The film's temporal setting provides many delights for those given to nostalgia. Pedantic nostalgics will relish the many anachronisms: records not yet released are heard as source music, bikes are secured with D-locks, and that staple of British nostalgia comedy, the Big Mobile Phone, makes an

unfeasibly early appearance in the Thames Valley – where it is used to phone Spain. Twice. Additionally, nostalgic linguists can re-live the days when "Jimmy Hill chinny chin" meant "I don't believe you," and "skill" was used as an affirmation of goodness. If, in twenty-odd years time, a similar film is made, it will no doubt be peppered with bewildering and inappropriate uses of the word "random."

Son of Rambow's nostalgic feel, however, undermines its strengths. The film presents us with a view of a world in which youngsters could carry knives, create mischief, break bones and use dangerously unstable structures for recreation without having to explain themselves; childhood is presented as a time of freedom and experimentation. Most notably, it depicts a time when a child of 12 or so could pop to the cinema to illegally watch a proscribed film, comfortable in the knowledge that there would not be a stooge on the door demanding to see their papers for proof of age and identity.

Children under 12 are forbidden from seeing *Son of Rambow* unless accompanied by an adult, and it's a shame that a film which pays such warm tribute to the riotous imaginations of unsupervised children should exclude them from showings. Having received a 12A certificate, *Son of Rambow* was re-submitted to the BBFC who stood by their decision to mollycoddle the UK's youth, guarding them against depictions of "dangerous behaviour" and "smoking" (2007). As depressing as this is, it is not only the BBFC who are at fault; by placing such an emphasis on nostalgia, Jennings may have gone some way to alienating the very audience whose spirits inspire the film.

At its worst, *Son of Rambow* is a kids' movie for adults. Aside from nostalgia, the film's attempts to deal with topics of greater "seriousness," such as the protagonists' feelings of abandonment in their domestic lives, are not only jarring but also distract from the film's sense of fun. What is especially frustrating is Jennings's need to labour a point. The boys' respective outsider statuses form the basis of, and provide depth to, their friendship. There are two key scenes depicting their developing relationship – one in which they become blood-brothers and one that sees Lee unleash a furious tirade prompted by Will's disloyalty – both are brilliantly and movingly performed; but this, it seems, is not enough. Jennings is compelled to repeatedly show his director's hand in order to reiterate.

There are unfortunate consequences of this tactic. The film's climax is compromised by unwelcome moments of excruciating sentimentality that sit uneasily with the warm-hearted farce of the sequence. These fleeting glimpses of cynicism are perhaps not enough to wipe the smile from your face or, indeed, dissolve the lump in your throat, but they are irritatingly unnecessary. More worrying, however, is the authoritarian aspect occasioned by the director's refusal to allow the children's performances to speak for themselves. Seemingly fearful that an audience may not take the lead characters' feelings seriously, the director assumes a patrician demeanour, and in seeking to provide affirmation of Lee and Will's depth of feeling, he, conversely, undermines the accomplished performances of Poulter and Milner.

Son of Rambow is set in a time when youth culture wasn't being relentlessly co-opted by importunate grown-ups demanding inclusion. Its closest cinematic relative is probably *Gregory's Girl* (1981, Bill Forsythe), a film that wasn't marred by concessions made to the adults in the audience. Upon its release, *Gregory's Girl* could be enjoyed by youngsters without a handholding adult to provide protection through the scenes of brief nudity; I myself, as a mere ten year old, without

parent or guardian, braved a screening of this film and the only genuinely disturbing occurrence of the evening came with the unforgivable tedium of the main feature, *Chariots of Fire* (1981, Hugh Hudson). Since then *Gregory's Girl* has been reclassified with a 12 certificate, and whether this was prompted by an over-protective impulse regarding children, or the increasing infantilisation of contemporary adulthood, such encroachments are unwelcome.

Nowadays it is nigh on impossible to find a children's film that does not pander, to some degree, to adult sensibilities; and while such a state of affairs may be pleasing for the adult who has to sit through such films with his offspring, the child is being short changed. With the majority of cinemas situated in places inaccessible to the unaccompanied child, and the continuance of pansyish censorship regulations, children's culture is diluted and compromised in order to accommodate the tastes of the ever-present guardian. *Son of Rambow's* great strength lies in its evocation of the rebelliousness, defiant risk-taking and unfettered imagination of early adolescence; its great weakness is that it pitches these themes over the heads of the generation who inspire them in a placatory gesture that swindles the young.

References

"Son of Rambow" (2007) BBFC

[http://www.bbfc.co.uk/website/Classified.nsf/0/A5716B7C2E94D95D802573B8006113FD?](http://www.bbfc.co.uk/website/Classified.nsf/0/A5716B7C2E94D95D802573B8006113FD?OpenDocument)

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