

The Slingshot

Stockholm in the 1920's. Streetcars and carts over cobblestones. Gustav V's reign amidst pinched conservatism and stumbling reformism. Kids in wool caps and breeches. And among these latter is young Roland--or Rolle--a ten-year-old with a Russian-Jewish mother, a stern socialist father, and a pugnacious older brother. Preyed upon by his friends, his schoolteachers, by life itself, he wonders: "How do I know I was meant to be Swedish?" The new Swedish coming-of-age film *The Slingshot* doesn't answer Rolle's question, but at its end we certainly come to know the questioner.

The subtitle of the film could be "The Trials of Roland." From the first frames he is bonked in the face by his brother Bertil, a novice boxer, and early on he is giped by his mates as a "Jew" and a "socialist." Such persistent humiliations and taunts continue throughout the film, but we in the audience can take them, mostly because Rolle himself (Jesper Salén) does. His constant comebacks from adversity--his rubber-like resilience--form the symbolic meaning of the film's title, and young Salén's performance beautifully embodies it.

The film is based on the true story of Swedish inventor Roland Schütt, and it highlights young Rolle's inventiveness, along with his spunk. Up to any challenge, he licks a frozen pipe on a dare, he learns to give his father Fritiof (Stellan Skarsgård) morphine shots for his dreadful sciatica, and he intones the Lutheran hymn "A Mighty Fortress" louder than the rest of his class (to vex his pompous teacher). Enterprising and good with his hands, he both repairs and renovates bicycles, and then comes up with novel uses for the condoms his mother is selling clandestinely in the family's tobacconist shop. One is an "underwater sock" while another--a brief big seller--is the popular "balloon with knob." The real hit, though, is the literal slingshot of the title, the "Schütt condom catapult," a total smash among his contemporaries.

Rolle's every effort encounters resistance, however, and his resourcefulness is everywhere tested. We see, according to the director, a "childhood like running the gauntlet." His attempts to help his mother Zipa (Basia Frydman) with her sewing machine ends in his "sewing" his own finger. She discovers his "balloons" and pops them, fearing her condom sales will be found out. The unmasking of his slingshot trade at school earns the full-bodied hatred of his teacher and a nasty flogging. His work on the bicycles, which happen to be stolen, finally lands him in reform school. The latter institution, introduced late in the picture, appears to be more benign than his own household, and his life is even looking up at film's end.

This litany can sound grim, and in recounting it, it is. It reminded me in part of a classic film tracing the tribulations of a small boy, Francois Truffaut's *The Four Hundred Blows*. Rolle seems to be the victim of a least fifty. Among more recent motion pictures, *The Slingshot* is reminiscent of last year's splendid *King of the Hill*, another period piece (Depression-Era 1930's St. Louis) recounting the

resilience and tenacity of a young boy. Yet the film doesn't have the overall grittiness of Truffaut's opus or the drumbeat relentlessness of *King of the Hill*, in great part because writer-director Ake Sandgren designs it as a filmic picaresque, leavened with plenty of humorous episodes from Schütt's autobiography.

One lovely irony is when Fritiof, a sour anti-monarchist, is hired as a stand-in for a portrait of the King, a fervent socialist substituting "red blood for blue." Rolle's jolly peddling of "balloons with knobs" to little neighborhood kids is worth a laugh, as is his creation of the condom catapult. Seeking revenge for his maltreatment at school, Rolle celebrates the end of term by implanting readily available lice from a buddy onto the toilet seat in the staff water closet, leaving his professor and headmaster to scratch their way through the summer. One of the best bits is when Bertil (Niclas Olund) must train hard and lose weight for an important boxing match. The combination enervates the kid so much that, stepping out for round one, he topples over like a tower of blocks. Much of the funny stuff is, like much humor, based on cruelty and physical debasement. It's funny like Laurel and Hardy or the Three Stooges.

While humor thus softens the overall effect of Rolle's rather bleak upbringing, it is humanized most completely by the presence of Jesper Salén as the protagonist. Director Sandgren has said about this work: "I set up this film around the face of Roland--close to his eyes, to his way of looking at things." It is a face worth looking at, by turns puzzled and scared, outraged and smiling, invariably curious about what life is going to deal him next. This is less a performance than an embodiment of a small and questing pre-adolescent.

Movie goers expecting the Swedish world of an Ingmar Bergman should be forewarned: this is no somber investigation of God and Fate, but rather a supple, simple story of one kid trying to find himself and his place in life. (*"The Slingshot"* is rated "R" for sexual suggestiveness, some nudity, and some general grossness. Though it is told through a young child's eyes, the film is not really for children .)

(July 1994)