

The Station Agent

The Station Agent is a discovery, a potent new film from first-time director, Tom McCarthy (see interview below). Honored at the Sundance Film Festival with the Audience Award (2003), this movie arrives with that much desired “buzz” among film cognoscenti, and this time the buzz seems valid. *The Station Agent* is a film which personifies the John Donne line “No man is an island, entire of itself...,” and a film worth talking about.

The film introduces us to Finbar McBride (Peter Dinklage), an isolated, taciturn dwarf who eschews human contact to focus on his one passion: trains. When a work colleague leaves him an abandoned train depot in rural New Jersey, he settles in to what he hopes is a very private life. But somehow *people* keep intervening: the garrulous vendor of a nearby hot dog stand, Joe Oramas (Bobby Cannavale), a troubled divorcee Olivia Harris (Patricia Clarkson) with a penchant for driving him off the road, the spacy local librarian Emily (Michelle Williams), even an inquisitive little girl Cleo (Raven Goodwin) who thinks that he’s her size and, thus, should play with her... Gradually, reluctantly, Fin gets enmeshed in the lives of these folk, especially Olivia and Joe.

The remainder of the film examines the development of Fin’s relationships. He first just glances against these other lives, then succumbs to their presence, and, ultimately, “gets involved” with them. Joe can’t stop talking, so Fin eventually has to defend himself; Olivia is intriguing but needy (she has lost a child) and reaches out for help. And others come to listen when he talks about trains, the one world he truly knows. Fin’s restraint is a constant, but his little depot world gently widens and widens further until he becomes a worthy member--however unlikely--of a community.

From the above, *The Station Agent* might sound cloying, but it is much richer than that. The richness comes from the intricacy and balance between the protagonists and the wonderful naturalness of their playing. These folks insinuate their way into you, much as they insinuate themselves into Finbar’s life. Joe seems at first to be just a nuisance, but one learns that this is his way of revealing his real humanity and empathy. Olivia appears to be a muddled head case, yet her exposure to Fin--and his restraint, his patience--slowly bring her out of mourning. Most of all, Fin’s new friends, though initially surprised by his size, quickly get past it to try to fathom who he really is. Getting to know who one another is is the basic point of *The Station Agent*, and it is a point made with subtlety and care.

The handling of a dwarf’s effect on people--which could so easily be patronizing--is humanely, often humorously done by director McCarthy. A nice scene where Fin comes to talk about trains to a local school group attains that quality, getting past the kids’ easy ridicule of his size to where they “get” his passion for his subject. If there is a false note in portraying the ever-controlled Fin, it may come in a bar scene late in the film, where Dinklage, a bit smashed, ends up calling attention to his size for all comers by standing up on the bar and wailing. It is one moment, clearly meant to be dramatic catharsis, which seemed to me out of character, straining for the drama instead of letting it arise naturally from the character.

Overall, the film’s measured intensity derives from the tight, well-crafted script and in the uniformly high quality of its cast. Clarkson, who has graced a batch of

independent films lately (*Far From Heaven*, *All the Real Girls*), triumphs as the vulnerable and humane Olivia (the role earned her the Special Jury Prize for her performance at Sundance), while Cannavale's Joe is windy but winning, a guy open to the new.

The Station Agent was written for Peter Dinklage, and it may well be the role of his life. His director has said of his star: "The film's power is a testament to the talent of Peter Dinklage. Movie stars come in all shapes and sizes and Peter is proof of that." His Finbar begins hermetic--you wonder what he is feeling--and then reveals himself, ever so gradually, exposing an inner life you were not sure was there. His is work of subtlety and distinction; he creates a little man whom you do look "down" upon but rather straight in the eye.

An Interview with Director Tom McCarthy

Tom McCarthy is a clean-cut 30-something thespian who acts in film and TV and directs plays and is in DC to talk about *The Station Agent*, which he conceived, wrote, and directed. Trained at the Yale School of Drama, McCarthy was purring along with a decent stage and TV career when he was visiting his brother in the small town of Newfoundland in New Jersey (his home state), where he discovered an abandoned railroad depot and wondered: "Who would live in such a place?" While there he also learned of "railfans," a breed of folk obsessed with trains and their routes and schedules.

The concept of the lonely station stuck with him until it morphed into the prospect of a socially isolated figure--a dwarf--in that station. Turns out McCarthy had directed actor Peter Dinklage in a New York play (where he played the dwarf Tom Thumb) and thought of him as his protagonist in his inaugural film effort. He wrote the first draft of his screenplay for Peter and asked him to lunch to read it. "It was scary," Tom admitted, "I was worried that it was condescending or off-tone." But Dinklage found it worthy.

McCarthy also had his other two leads firmly in mind. Bobby Cannavale he knew because they had acted together in the 2002 farce *The Guru*. He knew he wanted the actor for his motor-mouth Cuban-American concessionaire. Patricia Clarkson he had not met, but he knew her work from a passel of films, and she was convinced once she saw the script. McCarthy was delighted, too, to welcome young Raven Goodwin, a child actor from the D.C. area, whom he calls "a gem."

His project "took two years of raising the money--on and off" before he was ready to shoot in Newfoundland. He had an extremely tight schedule--only 20 days--but was backed by a solid crew, most of whom he selected himself. Though this was his first directorial effort, McCarthy wanted a production and acting team "that could work from the inside out--not be imposed upon from the outside." It made for a hearty camaraderie among all on the set, the director's only qualm being that--since he was director rather than actor this time--his relationship with his actors was as a "boss" rather than an acting buddy.

Shooting his first film was both demanding and exhilarating, but he learned flexibility early on. He and his German cameraman Oliver Bokelberg shot in Super 16mm to give his New Jersey landscape a more natural, less grandiose look. The tight shooting schedule meant that "you had to take your chances to make do on the set. You

just learned to get on with it.”

Though his acting career is on hold while he travels around the country and overseas plugging *The Station Agent*, that profession remains important for Tom. “I look forward to acting again. I can relax when I’m acting, and let the director handle all the problems.” His most important role was probably as a co-star in *Mary and Tim* (A Hallmark Hall of Fame television movie), and he had a recurring role on Fox TV’s “Boston Public.”

Tom McCarthy has already gotten other offers for directing and is considering them--without a commitment of any one production. He is also thinking about other projects of his own, what he called “my organized daydreaming” about new script ideas. May his daydreaming result in something as winning as *The Station Agent*.

(October 2003)