

## Waiting for Guffman

There is a minor, but lively movie tradition, which features some eager amateurs or mismatched professionals thrown together to “put on a show.” The going is rough, people back out, there are doubts it all will come together--but somehow everything comes together for the finale. The classic Hollywood form of this mini-genre were the Mickey Rooney-Judy Garland vehicles, *Babes in Arms* and *Babes on Broadway*, filmed just before World War II. Their success spawned numerous cheap copies during the War years, often taking place on bouncy college campuses.

In recent decades, as the musical itself has faded from movie screens, there have been fewer shows to be put on, but this story line, with its ripe possibilities for conflict, comedy and, especially, inspiration and cascading applause, continues. *The Muppet Movie* was a perfect resuscitation of the type. More recent examples (from England) include *A Man of No Importance*, with Albert Finney leading a rag-tag cast performing Oscar Wilde, and *A Midwinter's Tale*, Kenneth Branagh's film of a hard-luck troupe putting on “Hamlet.” The Aussie success of a few years back, *Strictly Ballroom*, contains much of this same spirit, and another import from Down Under, called *Cosi*, is in the same grain, with a callow writer aiming to put on a production of a Mozart opera with mental patients.

Goofily and winningly entering this competition is the engaging new comedy by Christopher Guest *Waiting for Guffman*. The movie captures the preparations for and production of a musical pageant commemorating the 150th anniversary of the founding of Blaine, Missouri, the “little town with a big heart,” renowned as the Stool Capital of the World (no, no, not the medical kind) and as the site of the famous 1946 UFO encounter and potluck dinner. (Blaine's very origins were, sadly, a mistake, since its nutty pioneer founder laid stakes there, thinking he had reached California.)

The big show, christened “Red, White, and Blaine,” is to be the work of Broadway wannabee Corky St. Clair (Guest himself), who is to write, direct, costume and choreograph the epic (hoping against hope that it will be his ticket to the Great White Way). Corky has made his local reputation with offenses like a tacky stage version of the film “Backdraft,” whose special effects nearly burnt down the local playhouse. His cast comes to include the town dentist and closet comic, Dr. Pearl (Eugene Levy), travel agents Ron and Sheila Albertson (Fred Willard and Catherine O'Hara)--who have never been outside Blaine, spaced Dairy Queen counter girl Libby Mae Brown (Parker Posey), local mechanic and stud-muffin Johnny Savage (Matt Keeslar) and retired taxidermist Cliff Wooley (Lewis Arquette). As might be imagined, raw enthusiasm reigns over talent in this ensemble.

Triumphs and tribulations dog the production, of course. Corky gets laughed out of the City Council after requesting a \$100,000 grant. He has run-ins with music director Lloyd Miller (Bob Balaban) and quits in a huff. Johnny is pulled from the show by his crusty dad, and Corky must jump into the breach. Against all odds, “Red, White and Blaine” is mounted, opening night made the more electric by the news that a New York producer, one Mr. Guffman, is coming to look over the show. A reserved seat is left, front and center, for Guffman, and the cast eagerly awaits his arrival as the curtain

goes up...

Christopher Guest is probably best known for his role as Nigel Tufnel, one of three British rockers in Rob Reiner's cult "mockumentary" *This Is Spinal Tap*. Guest has produced his *Guffman* in the same spirit, shooting in a pseudo-documentary style complete with candid interviews, 16mm film stock, and some rough-hewn camera work. It's all done with charm and acumen, nailing the vagaries and vanities of the townsfolk with gentle, even affectionate ridicule.

The cast makes it easy. Willard and O'Hara, playing the "Lunts of Blaine," make an exquisitely cheesy pair "with some issues" who think they have an (undeserved) knack for The Show Business. Eugene Levy (who co-wrote the loose screenplay with Guest) is droll as the dippy Dr. Pearl, who harbors the ample illusion that he is funny, recalling great punch lines like "Dybbuk, Schybbuk, I Wanted Ham!" As Libby, Posey is an earnest dim bulb who auditions with--of course--a raunchy version of the old Doris Day hit "Teacher's Pet." Bob Balaban masters one of the longest slow burns in movie history as the put-upon Lloyd Miller. There are some cute bit parts, too, like Paul Dooley as the poker-faced UFO abductee who talks blankly of his "probing" by aliens, and a crusty old timer (Jerry Turman) who auditions for the show with a profane reading (the film's only obscenities) from *Raging Bull*.

One can think of this as a kind of "Spinal Tap" reunion since, besides Guest's full-blown presence, his co-stars Michael McKean and Harry Shearer contributed lyrics for the Blaine pageant such as "Covered Wagons, Open-Toed Shoes," "Nothing Ever Happens on Mars," and the catchy "Stool Boom." Also, for those who think fondly of the old SCTV troupe, there are cast members Levy and O'Hara in fine form. If either of these comedic references bring back good memories, this film should be to your taste. For those not familiar with either Spinal Tap or SCTV, *Waiting for Guffman* is worth trying out; this is sweet satire, sweetly delivered.

(February 1997)