



Lincoln Film Society

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Friday April 8th, 2016, 7.30pm

Me and Earl and the Dying Girl

(USA 2015. Cert 12a)

dir: Alfonso Gomez-Rejon

starring: Thomas Mann, Olivia Cooke, R. J. Cyler

sponsors: Richard and Linda Hall

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Laredo-born Alfonso Gomez-Rejon has followed his feature-directorial debut, the layered meta-slasher movie *The Town that Dreaded Sundown* (released in the UK in April 2015), with a drily humorous and psychologically penetrating high-school comedy-drama that augurs well for his future. Exuberantly stylish but never giddy or unctuous, sensitively scored by Brian Eno and Nico Muhly, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* presents a more trenchant mortality story than the breezy *50/50* (2011), Michel Gondry's *Mood Indigo* (2013) and the tear-jerking *The Fault in Our Stars* and *If I Stay* (both 2014); Gus Van Sant's *Restless* (2011) is more analagous. Harnessing Gomez-Rejon's cine-literacy, *Me and Earl* is additionally the first American teen movie to cite liberally, through visual touchstones, the influence of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger.

Jesse Andrews's young-adult source novel comprises the "stupid book" written by its 17 year old protagonist Greg as a readmission letter to the University of Pittsburg. First-time screenwriter Andrews's adaptation focuses on this as a coming-of-age story though both novel and film stress the solipsism from which Greg must free himself. Self-conscious and self-loathing - to the extent that he's unaware of his likeability and coolness, which intrigue his dream girl Madison - Greg is pressed by his well-meaning mother to befriend fellow high-schooler Rachel, who is terminally ill. It's an experience that forces him to crack the carapace shielding him from other people's pain.

The placement of Earl's name in the title indicates his pivotal role as Greg's more emotionally intelligent friend, the one who makes him truly connect with Rachel. Enraged by his sustained denial of Rachel's imminent death, Earl literally knocks Greg's self-obsessiveness out of him, prompting him to take action by completing the avant-guard film (influenced by Warhol, Brakhage and Charles and Ray Eames) that he's been making for Rachel and that expresses his - brotherly rather than romantic or sexual - love. It has a more potent effect on her than the film received ambivalently by the novel's Rachel.

Gomez-Rejon and cinematographer Chung-hoon Chung (Park Chan-wook's DP) artfully depict Greg's tunnel vision perspective in a way that is expansive, using alarmingly fast dolly shots, fly-on-the-wall ceiling shots and especially wide-angle shots, emphasising his belief that he is alienated. The wide images, which make Greg's experiences of the tumult of the school canteen almost agoraphobia-inducing, may have been inspired by Dr Reeves's camera obscura views in *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), serene though they are. That's a guess founded on the inclusion in *Me and Earl* of a clip from that Powell and Pressburger film, and the hint that the fire escape on which Greg



and Rachel often talk is Greg's 'stairway to heaven.' It eventually leads him to Rachel's room, where he learns from the illustrated musings she has left behind how much their relationship means to her - a magical scene built on six lines from the novel's final page.

The idea of outsiders Greg and Earl expressing themselves through their co-directing of irreverent, affectionate movie pastiches is analagous to the recreating (or "sweding") of erased VHS tapes in Gondry's *Be Kind Rewind* (2007) and, curiously, the

Synopsis: Greg Gaines narrates the story of his friendship with fellow Pittsburg high-school senior Rachel Kushner

He maintains anonymity at school by being amenable to every clique, while belonging to none. He and his African-American best friend Earl Jackson co-direct absurdist parodies of movies, especially arthouse classics.

After learning that Rachel has been diagnosed with leukemia, Greg's mother insists that he befriend her. Rachel resents being pitied, but Greg makes her laugh and they gradually become close. Greg is perplexed by the sudden friendliness of Madison, his long-time crush. Rachel loses her hair after chemotherapy. Madison tasks Greg with making a film for Rachel. He and Earl tape their classmates' insipid messages to her. When Rachel stops her chemotherapy, Greg's self-involved reaction angers her. Earl attacks Greg for his lack of empathy. Madison upbraids him for not completing Rachel's film but invites him to the prom. However, on prom night he visits Rachel in hospital instead. He gives her a corsage and shows her the finished film - a poetic impression of the feelings she has inspired in him. She dies shortly afterwards.

Greg pays a shiva call to Rachel's home. In her room, he discovers a college recommendation letter that she wrote on his behalf, explaining why his grades have suffered. He is moved by her artworks, which shed light on her inner life and reveal how much their platonic love meant to her.

Credits

Greg	Thomas Mann	Director	Alfonso Gomez-Rejon
Rachel	Olivia Cooke	Written by	Jesse Andrews
Earl	R. J. Cyler	DoP	Chung-hoon Chung
Greg's dad	Nick Offerman	Editing	David Trachterberg
Rachel's mum	Molly Shannon	Music	Brian Eno, Nico Mulhy
Mr McCarthy	Jon Bernthal	Sound	Pawel
Greg's mum	Connie Britton	Costume	Jennifer Eve
Scott Mayhew	Matt Bennett	Production	Gerald Sullivan
Madison	Katherine Hughes	Design	
Ill Phil	Masam Holden		
Derrick	Bobb'e J Thompson		

USA 2015. 105 mins

therapeutic staging of favourite films by the Angulo brothers in the documentary *The Wolfpack* (showing as our last film this season, on May 27th), like *Me and Earl*, a Grand Jury prizewinner at Sundance.

Whereas Greg and Earl's guiding auteur in the book is the Werner Herzog of *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (1972), Powell and Pressburger occupy that place in the film. Greg has a replica of the duo's production company the Archers' target logo in his room, and the Powell spoof that Greg and Earl make - along with similarly off-colour tributes to films by, among others, Scorsese, Welles, Kubrick, Schlesinger, Truffaut, Godard, Roeg, Reed, Malle and Les Blank, all given mock Criterion-collection DVD covers - is called *Pooping Tom*. Gomez-Rejon was introduced to Powell and Pressburger by Martin Scorsese, for whom he worked as an assistant; he thanks him here by showing a clip of the director talking about *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951 - shown by us this season) and also includes inserts from Ian Christie and David Thompson's book *Scorsese on Scorsese* and Powell's *A Life in Movies*.

If the visual references to Powell and Pressburger seem like an outpouring of fanboy enthusiasm, they are justified by *Me and Earl's* absorbing of the Archers' fatalistic approach to the deaths of young women, as seen in *Black Narcissus* (1947), *The Red Shoes* (1948) and *Gone to Earth* (1950). In losing the will to live and refusing further chemo treatment, Rachel essentially takes a death plunge like the heroines of those films. *The Red Shoes* and *Gone to Earth* particularly share Edgar Allan Poe's belief that "the death...of a beautiful woman is the most poetic topic in the world". Dying from cancer resists poetisation and Gomez-Rejon and Andrews creditably avoid the manipulativeness of *Love Story* (1970), *Terms of Endearment* (1983) or the more appealing *The Fault in our Stars* on the one hand, or the Powellian romanticisation of a woman's violent death on the other. Rachel's agonising demise is closer in spirit to that of the teenage leukemia patient who humanises a self-indulgent rock musician in the little-seen 2014 indie *Lullaby*. Another parallel is the death from non-Hodgkins lymphoma of an adolescent girl in David Cronenberg's *Maps to the Stars* (2014). Dying in hospital, she elicits the callousness of the bratty teen movie star who visits her as a publicity stunt; as a ghost who haunts him, she proves she has a conscience, as the dying Rachel does with Greg.

One aspect of *Me and Earl* that gives pause is whether Rachel and Earl respectively fit the politically incorrent archetypes of the 'manic pixie dream girl' and 'magical negro' who traditionally help a neurotic white male protagonist to grow up and embrace his existence. With her wide-eyed stares and dimples, Olivia Cooke's Rachel would seem to embody physically the MPDG, yet the Oldham-born actress's performance makes no concession to cuteness or quirkiness; her apparent ordinariness makes the posthumous revelation that she was imaginatively creative all the more effective. Notwithstanding the poster on her bedroom wall

of Hugh Jackman (who provides a fleeting cameo), it makes sense that she and Greg should bond.

A kid hardened by his poor, unhappy upbringing, the dyspeptic Earl is more of a caricature - an unsmiling junior Chris Rock - but R. J. Cyler individuates him, notably in the scenes where Earl reads Greg the riot act and delivers the most touching encomium to Rachel. Meanwhile, the wonderful Thomas Mann, though thinner and more handsome than the novel's Greg, is suitably pasty-faced and aghast as a youth ill-equipped to deal with the quotidian, let alone a friend's cruel premature death - no matter that a sequel would likely find him a happening writer-director of visually inventive, bittersweet indie comedies. Texture is added by the nuanced acting of Connie Britton and Nick Offerman as Greg's pushy mother and eccentric hipster dad; of Molly Shannon as Rachel's tipling mom, whose effusiveness makes a bitter core; and of Jon Bernthal as Greg and Earl's macho history teacher - a kind of liberal Chuck Norris.

Membership 2016-17

Membership rates for next season have been announced. They are

- Single - £35
- Joint (2 people) - £64
- Concession (senior citizens, students) - £32
- Guest - £5

Membership will be available from May 1 - 31 and is open to anyone interested in joining the Society. The form will be emailed shortly to existing members and all on our email contacts list and will also be available for download from our website.

Some programme news

- *we are starting to accept suggestions for films to go on our long list, from which next season will be chosen. If you have any recently released world & European films you wish to see included, please email them to us at lincolnfilmsociety@hotmail.co.uk*

NB: *Films that have appeared in Lincoln more than briefly are not considered*

- *With the recent success of Amy showing the appeal of pop music documentaries, we have put together a short season of 6 such films, called **On The Record**, to be shown in June. More details soon*

Our next screening - Friday April 15th, 7.30pm

Three Hearts (France 2015. Cert 12a)

Apart from a few screenings at the London Film Festival and ICO viewing sessions, this film has not been seen in cinemas before. We are grateful to Metrodome for allowing us to show it as a preview screening, before its theatrical release.

Three Hearts is a stylish melodrama, starring Charlotte Gainsbourg and Chiara Mastroianni as sisters (in love with the same man, Benoît Poelvoorde) and the grande dame of French cinema, Catherine Deneuve as their mother (Mastroianni's mother in real-life). Tax inspector Marc (Poelvoorde) is in Valence for work and misses his train back to Paris. Meeting Sylvie (Gainsbourg) by chance, their attraction is immediate, and they spend the rest of the evening walking the streets before agreeing to meet again in the Tuileries. But their reunion fails. Marc then meets antiques dealer Sophie (Mastroianni) but, pursuing her, he only discovers her connection to Sylvie far too late and must decide if or who to tell. Which sister does he most truly love? Will this secret break up the sisters?

Benoît Jacquot's handsome, stylish film is a deeply felt exploration of the vicissitudes of the heart and the distinction between love and passion. It recalls Richard Linklater's *Before Midnight* and shows the influence of Douglas Sirk. Come and join us.