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CONCERT FILMS AND IRISH-CANADIAN CO-PRODUCTIONS

ABOUT 70 MINUTES INTO DAVID BYRNE'S NEW CONCERT FILM, *American Utopia* (2020), he explains the minimalist layout of his show by speculating about absence: "What if we could eliminate everything from the stage, except the stuff we care about the most? What would be left?" These are also the opening words of the film trailer, and they sent me back to the Talking Heads concert film *Stop Making Sense* (1984), which really does deserve its legendary status even though it's not always that good of a film.

Stop Making Sense is a totally different piece of work from *American Utopia*. The newer film is directed by Spike Lee, and even though most people tend to see concert films in terms of the musicians rather than the filmmakers, you can really tell that this is a Spike Lee Joint. As a film, it's *tight*. There is some hand-held camera work for sure, and even the occasional zoom that was clearly the result of something unexpected happening during the performance. But overall the editing is seamless and often synchronized with the rhythms of the songs. The camera work is largely defined by impeccably framed medium shots and close-ups (not infrequently of the band's bare feet), but Lee makes recurring use of extreme high-angle, bird's-eye shots of the stage that recall the video experiments of Samuel Beckett and that highlight the choreography in the same way. You literally never see a camera until the very end of the film (and then only for a few seconds), but the whole show seems to be laid out for the cinema. The last time I wrote about Lee in this chronicle (in the summer 2018 issue), I tried to argue that he was a kind of high formalist—someone in total command of his medium's unique formal properties and the history of those properties—and *American Utopia* certainly shows that side of him. Indeed, I can even see a wink to the history of the concert film when, about an hour into the show, Byrne and the band play "Born Under Punches" by adding one instrument at a

time; this is a clear call-back to *Stop Making Sense*'s structural goofiness of adding one instrument per number until, about 20 minutes in, everyone is finally on stage, and they all play "Burning Down the House" followed by "Life During Wartime."

Those centrepiece numbers in *Stop Making Sense* look nothing like anything in *American Utopia*, and that's because the filmmaker was such a different kind of figure. Jonathan Demme got his start making cheap exploitation films (such as the 1974 women-in-prison movie *Caged Heat*), but in 1980 he made it onto the map as "quirky" because of the surprise success of the low-budget drama *Melvin and Howard*. As a film, *Stop Making Sense* looks like it was made by someone accustomed to working on the fly, in both "exploitation" and "small drama" modes; you get good material, set up the cameras in some loose formations, and just kind of see what happens. The shots of Byrne dancing joyously with backup singers Lynn Mabry and Ednah Holt and running in place with backup guitarist Alex Weir during "Burning Down the House" radiate a totally uncontainable energy; that's also true of the moment when Byrne starts running in circles around the stage during "Life During Wartime." The whole thing seems to slip away from Demme, and you sense that he's just happy to be there. That is much less true of the sequence where they play "What a Day That Was," which really is a bravura example of filmmaking. Its images look like something out of a German Expressionist film from the 1920s, and its editing resembles the films of Kenneth Anger. As a four-minute piece on its own, it's an undeniable masterpiece, unequalled in live-music filmmaking (and unrivalled in Demme's corpus as well; as a filmmaker he was never again as good as he was in those four minutes). But in the context of the film as a whole, it seems weird; most of *Stop Making Sense* does not look like this. Thirty-five years after its initial release, Demme's work remains a joy to watch and, despite the protests of my wife and kids, I come back to it over and over again. In terms of filmmaking, however, it seems cluttered, unpredictable, and uneven. While it is filled with moments of joyous freedom on the part of Byrne and the backup singers and musicians (the rest of the Talking Heads come across as quite distant), there are only occasional flashes of true cinematic brilliance.

Byrne is at a different place as an artist now, so it's entirely logical that he's made a series of more mature choices in terms of how to make a concert film. He's managed to deploy only the stuff he cares about the most

and eliminate everything else (including the Talking Heads). This time, for instance, the director he wants to work with is not a hot newish talent looking to prove that he really can go beyond exploitation; rather, he's one of the most formally sophisticated and versatile filmmakers of his generation. As I've said, the cinematic hand on the wheel here is unmissably steady and precise. Lee makes every detail of camera and editing feel utterly natural, as though there could be no other way, without for a moment falling into the clichéd visual layouts of performance films. He mixes things up a bit visually (when the band performs "Blind" he uses Dutch angle shots to great effect; close-ups are deployed well enough for the Toronto percussionist Jacquelene Acevedo to confidently and expressively deploy facial expressions), but it's not as disjointed as what is on display in *Stop Making Sense*. When Lee uses strobing black-and-white stills for "I Dance Like This" or cuts away to surviving relatives and concludes with superimposed, blood-red text for Byrne's cover of Janelle Monáe's "Hell You Talmbout," it feels consistent with what's been going on with the film overall; perhaps more importantly, it also feels consistent with Byrne's music and choreography. There is thus a kind of harmony between the filmmakers and the performers, which is pretty rare in concert films and certainly not something you see in *Stop Making Sense*. In all fairness, that may be because there are also other kinds of disharmony in that film. The degree to which the Talking Heads didn't like each other is a well-worn part of pop lore, so I'll not rehash it here except to say that, in retrospect, their simmering resentment is all over *Stop Making Sense*.

Perhaps it is pure movie illusion, but *American Utopia* is defined by a very different energy among its performers. Byrne has an almost professorial air; he radiates a kind of affection for these performers that makes them seem like his prize students, whom he's brought along in a way that seems to make him genuinely happy. Watching *American Utopia* during a pandemic makes me ache more than ever for the joys of pedagogy, working with people earlier than you in their formation and with colleagues who can take that work to new, previously unimaginable places.

One agreeable aspect of the pandemic-led transformation of cinemagoing has been the degree to which film festivals and small exhibition spaces have embraced streaming. I still have a hard time settling into a rhythm, but since March I have actually seen much more new material than would

otherwise be the case. The situation is not perfect, of course; oftentimes, especially with film festivals, material is "geoblocked," presumably because distributors are worried about jeopardizing ticket sales for the (likely fanciful) eventuality of a film getting a more "normal" release. Geoblocking has, however, allowed for a certain amount of regional solidarity to emerge, even in these travel-restricted times. Halifax's Atlantic International Film Festival, for instance, allowed its program to be streamed throughout the Maritimes. And the 2020 enunciation of the Calgary International Film Festival allowed all of its material to be streamed (over a two-week period) to anyone in the prairie provinces. And so my cinephilic, Saskatchewanian heart lept.

One interesting programming subset that emerged at Calgary, seemingly by accident, was Irish-Canadian collaborations. These took some very odd forms, and the oddest by far was Thomas Robert Lee's *The Curse of Audrey Earnshaw* (2020), an Alberta-shot horror movie about an insular community of Irish Protestants set in the 1970s (although you could barely tell; the lifestyle on screen is a clear callback to the 19th century). Livestock die, witches seem to emerge across generations, and lots of bodily abjection unfolds in close-up. Judging from the credits, *The Curse of Audrey Earnshaw* doesn't seem to be an Irish co-production as such, and from what I can tell it has had no presence on Irish screens. But its portrayal of a particularly severe form of Irish Protestantism is interesting, and it's nice to see the veteran Irish character actor Seán McGinley no longer pretending to be a Newfoundlander on *Republic of Doyle* (2010-2014).

Somewhat more recognizable as a co-production was Matthew Bissonnette's *Death of a Ladies' Man* (2020), which features Gabriel Byrne in the title role as a sweet but slightly skeevy McGill English professor who retreats to his native Ireland after his life in Montreal starts to collapse. "Irish literary academics in Montreal" is actually a demographic I know well, and I must say that nothing about their portrayal felt quite right here. The relationship with Quebec culture felt particularly fanciful. Quebeckers—both Anglophone and Francophone—often imagine that the Irish will identify with and integrate into the local culture, as they indeed did in the late 19th century. The reasons that went well then, however, were mostly linguistic (in plenty of instances new immigrants would not have been all that comfortable speaking English) or sectarian (they also wouldn't be all that comfortable among English speakers, especially the Protestant majority thereof). As both of those barriers have vanished, so too has vanished the imperative to

integrate into a language group other than that of the most powerful tongue the world has ever known. The best French-language film on this subject is André Forcier's *Je me souviens* (I Remember, 2009), which features Roy Dupuis pretending to be from Belfast and speaking Irish unconvincingly. That film works for me because it is pure fantasy; *Death of a Ladies' Man* has some fantastical (hallucinatory) elements, most of which involve Leonard Cohen songs, but also comes in and out of fairly grim realism. I was never really able to make the leap between these modes.

Another deceptive co-production, which might have seemed to have nothing to do with Canada, Quebec, or Ireland, was Philippe Falardeau's *My Salinger Year* (2020). It takes place in the mid-1990s and tells the story of an idealistic young woman (played by Margaret Qualley) who gets a low-level job at the New York literary agency that represents J. D. Salinger. Some critics have dismissed it as a rip-off of *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), mostly because there is a terrible boss who figures prominently in the film (played by Sigourney Weaver). This misses the far more interesting point that this is really a remake of Falardeau's *Guibord s'en va-t-en guerre* (My Internship in Canada, 2015), which tells the story of an idealistic young Haitian (played by Irdens Exantus) who gets an internship with a northern Quebec MP whose vote will break the tie on whether to go to war. What *My Salinger Year* has to do with Ireland is a little more foggy, although the up-and-coming actress Seána Kerslake has a small role, as does the great English-Canadian actor Colm Feore who (if *Wikipedia* is to be believed) lived in Ireland as a child. All to say, this was in some ways the most typical international co-production, as it was hard to see how it was anything other than just another Hollywood movie with some unusual financing. But of these three films I liked it the most, partly because figuring out how it was more than just another Hollywood movie with some unusual financing was definitely worth the trouble.