

GUY MADDIN
DIRECTS
ISABELLA
ROSSELLINI
IN

*The Saddest
Music ^{in the} World*

BY PETER VESUWALLA



THE SADDEST MUSIC IN THE WORLD

GUY MADDIN finds some shade outside the coffee house where we've been meeting for the last couple of years every time he's finished a film. We start with a little chit chat. He thanks me for the praise I left on his answering machine right after watching *The Saddest Music in the World*. I return his VHS copy of Billy Wilder's *Ace in the Hole* (a.k.a. *The Big Carnival*), a film that drips with so much cynicism it initially seems to kid the audience but ends up being so dark it's difficult to tell.

"Is there anything better than that last shot?" asks Maddin rhetorically. "I am a thousand-dollar-a-day reporter. You can have me for nothing" he says, imitating Kirk Douglas's final drunken uttering right before his character slumps down (in a perfectly composed shot), dead of a knife wound. The unrelenting ruthlessness of Douglas's character in *Ace in the Hole* obviously inspired that of Chester Kent in *The Saddest Music in the World*. It's no wonder the tape Maddin loaned me had the words, "To Niv," scribbled on the label, referring to the film's producer, Niv Fichman.

Before the interview begins, I have to tell him about the contest I just covered for a weekly newspaper in Gimli, Manitoba, not far from his family's cottage. It was the first ever fish-filleting competition. Two hundred people

had turned out in the pouring rain to watch local fishers compete for a \$1,000 prize. Maddin sees the humour in the situation. He ought to. He claims to have made his first feature, *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* (1988), which celebrates the ancient art of carving fish from tree bark, to get back at his Icelandic relatives. But there was more going on at that filleting competition. After the contest was over, everybody just kept on gutting fish. Their manner was fairly routine but there was a sense of urgency. They absolutely had to keep gutting the fish, as if their very survival depended on it. Perhaps when the Icelanders originally settled in the area long ago that was true, but now it seems like the remnants of an obsolete Darwinian mechanism. Of course, it takes an outsider to spot it.

That's where *The Saddest Music in the World* finds its humour. The film is about an international contest sponsored by Winnipeg beer baroness Lady Port-Huntly (Isabella Rossellini) to determine the country that has the saddest music in the world. There is a scene in which a Serbian cellist beats out a Scottish pipe-and-drum band but becomes so overcome with grief he loses consciousness. The contest continues as if everything is normal while his comatose body is dropped into the celebratory beer bath. The contest and the beer bath are strange enough on their own, but it's the moment when the lifeless body slides down the ramp into the bath that the humour really takes hold. The contest *must* go on. The winner *must* take the celebratory beer bath. There's no contingency plan in place if anything goes wrong.

Maddin has been toying with cultural rituals for as long as he's been making films. In his celebrated short *The Dead Father* (1986), the nuclear family life continues despite the presence of a corpse on the breakfast table. *Archangel* (1990) contains a scene in which a small boy is flogged and all parties involved, including the boy, agree it's for the best. *Careful* (1992) is a celebration of stern warnings not to deviate the slightest from village traditions. The ritual du jour in his latest film is the very act of being sad. Maddin, and his long-time collaborator George Toles, took an original script by British author Kazuo Ishiguro and transplanted it from 1980s London to Depression-era Winnipeg. According to the film, Winnipeg has the dubious distinction of having

been named the world capital of sorrow by *The Times*. Perhaps there’s an element of truth to this. “We call ourselves Winterpeg,” Maddin points out. “No one else does. No one bothers to call us anything. We love our mosquitoes. There’s something very sad about the way we adore Monty Hall and David Steinberg, who both claim to be from Toronto.”

The sadness in the film isn’t quite distributed uniformly. Winnipeg expatriate Chester Kent (Mark McKinney) moved to the United States to become a Broadway producer, but like his inspiration in *Ace in the Hole* (not to mention his namesake, the James Cagney character in *Footlight Parade*) he finds himself out of money and out of luck. Still, he’s unable to feel real sadness, so for his part in the \$25,000 contest he stages lavish spectacles. There’s a running gag in the film about the way he hires Mexican, Jewish, Spanish and Indian musicians to be sad on America’s behalf.

His brother, Roderick (Ross McMillan), is at the other end of the spectrum. He represents Serbia, taking on the name Gavrilo the Great from Gavrilo Princip (the man who killed the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914), and with it he takes on that nation’s sadness at having begun the chain of events that led to the First World War. His first performance is in front of a mural depicting the assassination of the archduke.

However, Maddin’s most overtly political satire didn’t quite begin that way. “A lot of the political stuff is there because people are wearing national colours,” he says. “They start interacting and you can’t help but project things on them. When George and I were writing the script, our thesis, as we presented it to Ishiguro, was that Americans have a different way of expressing their sadness than Europeans.

During the Great Depression, Americans repressed their sadness, buried it in an avalanche of razzmatazz and marching music. Depression-era Tin Pan Ally songs were upbeat, such as “We’re in the Money”; whereas, when you think of European music of the last century it was atonal and sombre. It’s embracing its sadness. It’s keeping it. It’s almost enjoying it.”

The notion of enjoying sadness, of dramatizing it, underlies every scene. Early on we see a montage of pairs of hands playing various instruments—guitars, bongos and pianos—until the fingers bleed. Perhaps the most amusing moment comes during the traditional Mexican funeral march for dead children in which the mother implores her dead child not to sneak in at night to drink from her breast. “That milk is for the living.” Finally, Chester just says: “I don’t think all this sadness really exists.” It’s the first time in any of Maddin’s films

that a character has come out and stated what the film is about. “For once I’m not really making a movie that’s dreamlike or narcotic or anything,” he says. “I hope it’s entertaining and all that, but I realized, ‘Shit, I’ve got to go for clarity,’ and Ishiguro was very valuable here. He kept coming back to me and trying to help me clarify each character’s through line.”

But Maddin, never one to pander to the audience, has Chester deliver his soliloquy during a funeral scene in which

the deceased’s daughter must fight back tears while singing her father’s favourite song, “Skip to My Lou.” Again, Maddin plays with the idea of a ritual being carried out relentlessly despite the fact the song is hilariously inappropriate. Having Chester point out the phoniness of the situation puts the audience on his side, even though he is, for the most part, a reprehensible



character. He once had an affair with Lady Port-Huntly, despite the fact his father (David Fox) was madly in love with her. Their triangle ended in a tragedy that left Port-Huntly without legs. Chester has moved on. But his new girlfriend, a nymphomaniac named Narcissa (Maria de Medeiros), who listens to her tapeworm the way Edward G. Robinson listened to his "little man" in *Double Indemnity*, bares a striking resemblance to Roderick's estranged wife.

Maddin employs his usual arsenal of techniques, mixing black and white with colour, sometimes shooting in Super 8, using an iris, betraying continuity, inserting little bits of micro-montage editing and occasionally mimicking old hygiene films. However, for the first time, he relies on the performers to tell the story. "This story actually has real characters in it, for once in my life, rather than types. It's important that I let the actors breathe, inhale and so on, so it actually takes on three dimensions. It's still mannered because of George's dialogue. It's the way he speaks—which is unnatural, thank God—and it makes it very special

because everything he writes has a little bit of pixie dust, or something mannered, on it. And it just helps to bring widely diverse actors from God-knows-what acting origins under the same roof."

And then there is the music. Just as there's no shortage of sadness in Winnipeg, there's no shortage of ethnic groups willing to put their music up on screen. Most of the bands in the film regularly take part in Folklorama, an annual festival at which just about every ethnic group in Winnipeg sets up a pavilion featuring food, art and live entertainment. The auditions for *The Saddest Music in the World* were very much like the contest in the story, with each culture's representatives attempting to prove their national music was sad enough to be on film.

Of course, *The Saddest Music* puts on a wicked spin when the particular upbeat brand of sadness that tends to get toes tapping and beer flowing captures Port-Huntly's favour. The local radio station, which apparently broadcasts worldwide, takes full opportunity of the potential for advertising revenue. "The original

THE ISABELLA ROSSELLINI INTERVIEW

I spoke to the international beauty on the set of The Saddest Music in the World.

I grew up thinking of you as a glamorous movie star, so I was surprised to read that it took you a long time to be accepted as an actress.

Well, I still don't think I'm completely accepted. I think sometimes I'm self-deprecating. And there is some truth to this. Someone will say to me, "What is your job?" Well, I think my job is to be a

celebrity. And the reason why I'm a celebrity is a combination of things. Yes, I've been an actress, but also I've worked as a model. My face is very familiar. Then obviously I'm Ingrid Bergmann's and Roberto Rossellini's daughter and that adds to the mystique. A combination of these things made me a celebrity. I wish I was known for something that I'd done, but I think that's just the way it turned out.

But you seem to be choosy with the roles you take, favouring independent films, such as Blue Velvet and Big Night.

Probably. My modelling work pays me very well, so I can afford to do the films I like. Coming from a family like mine, I grew up think-

ing that film was sort of a religion. I really only recently realized that it wasn't that important [she laughs]. I had a strange perception, and it was important to me that I had respect for every film I made.

What did you think when you first saw the tape of The Heart of the World?

It's incredibly dense and yet it flies in front of your eyes. It's almost as if cinema has collapsed in these six minutes and you're left with the impression of this art form that characterized the last century. The power of it is so strong. I needed to see more of his work and so I looked at *Careful*. Then I was absolutely sure. In *Careful* there were other dimensions in the

script was set in London on the eve of perestroika when the Iron Curtain was about to come down, freeing up a huge new market for distilled goods that were coming out of London," says Maddin. "CNN was involved somehow. The more you boil down this story, the more the presence of CNN is unavoidable. While I was making this movie, America was prepping for war against Iraq and you had the choice of CNN or a few other monster McNetworks. You got the feeling these are really powerful advertising agencies. I wish I included more radio broadcasts in the script just to get across what it really is all about: selling stuff, whether it's booze or arms or whatever."

It's here, perhaps, the film finds the most in common with Wilder's *Ace in the Hole*, where the predicament of a trapped prospector initiates a media circus and ultimately becomes a tourist attraction. While the crisis is prolonged for the benefit of the local burger joint, the tourists set up camp and then an ad hoc amusement park. Consumerism becomes that great American ritual. But in Maddin's decidedly more Canadian vision, the

ritual is one of self-deprecation. "I always wanted to mythologize Winnipeg as much as possible, just the way Hollywood is great at mythologizing the most far-flung corners of its own country. I thought why not Winnipeg?"

In so doing he has made a film in which the musical numbers are in black and white, the funeral scenes are in colour, the pallbearers wear ice skates and the trolley routes end at the beer hall. He also managed to work through his own sense of sadness. "After years of struggling with my own motivation, my own inspiration and a bunch of other demons, I've finally made three fairly large-sized pieces—*Dracula*, *Cowards Bend the Knee* and *The Saddest Music in the World*—in about an 18-month period. All of a sudden I feel prolific, as opposed to beating myself up every day for low production. I find myself feeling smug."

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storytelling that were comical in an awkward sort of way. It's very ironic, very funny and at the same time you cringe. It's a story about incest. You say, "What am I laughing at? How is he capable of making me laugh about this?"

Guy Maddin is also known for giving his films a very painterly look. Has working on this film been more like modelling than acting?

Actually, it's funny. Looking at some of his other films, I thought it was going to be more like modelling. It seemed to me they were almost like moving photographs. A lot of the acting was really posing, but in the end I used more of my acting ability than my modelling

ability. There was more acting in it than I suspected.

Is this your first time in Winnipeg?

I came once before, when I received Guy's script. I asked if I could go to Winnipeg to meet him. He's a great artist and a very charming person. He was very kind. There are many ways to direct and some directors direct out of fear or out of authority. Guy does it with charm, so you're ready to do anything for him. He always seems to be walking on eggshells. There's a fragility about him that's very touching.

When Tales from the Gimli Hospital came out a lot of people compared him to David Lynch. Having worked with

both directors, what's it like on the other side of the camera?

It's hard to tell. Both of them are very funny, very kind. I haven't seen David in such a long time. We shot *Blue Velvet* nearly 20 years ago, although I talk to him on the phone occasionally. When I did *Blue Velvet* I was conscious of working with somebody who was reinventing ways to make a film, and it maybe works or maybe doesn't work. But you know there is a serious, wonderful attempt. I think the same here. Working with Guy is working with somebody who is reinventing how to make films, like Hitchcock's editing or my father's neo-realism.

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