

# Whale Music

directed by RICHARD J. LEWIS

written by PAUL QUARRINGTON, RICHARD J. LEWIS, based on the novel by PAUL QUARRINGTON

with MAURY CHAYKIN, CYNDY PRESTON, JENNIFER DALE, PAUL GROSS, KENNETH WELSH

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**S**ome whales you can't save. I remember the excitement in the theatre just before the premiere screening of *Whale Music* at the Toronto International Film Festival last September, the overflow of generous fellow-feeling for the film's imminent success. Hope was co-mingled with assurance: *Whale Music* could scarcely fail, could it? I remember the theatre-wide deflation afterwards, the general embarrassment, the refusal to talk about it, the need to talk about *something else*. Here was disappointment that was palpable, that was substantial enough to qualify it almost as betrayal.

A lot of public affection was riding on *Whale Music* that September evening. Everybody liked co-screenwriter Paul Quarrington and wished him well. Quarrington had written all those enjoyable novels (*Home Game*, *King Leary*, and the new *Civilization*), played in the still legendary band, Joe Hall and the Continental Drift, and won a Genie for his scripting of *Perfectly Normal*. As an index both to his success and his engaging modesty – now famous writer still eager to learn – Quarrington had spent the 1991-92 season as a resident at the Canadian Film Centre. Just days before *Whale Music* premiered at the festival, *The Globe and Mail* profiled him as both “master storyteller” and the “ultimate guy's guy.” And, all the while, the “guy's guy” was smiling affably and shrugging away the outrageous compliments, fending off all attempts to deify him, and basically acting the part of the swell sort of person he probably is. The result being that everybody loved him more.

With Quarrington at the writerly helm of *Whale Music*, adapted from his own Governor-General's Award-winning novel – how could the film screw up? Richard J. Lewis, with whom Quarrington wrote the script, was directing his first feature, but he was scarcely an

unknown quantity, having helmed a number of award-winning shorts and a clutch of slick, competent things for tv (*Alfred Hitchcock Presents, North of 60*). There were a lot of skilled and enjoyable actors in the film – Maury Chaykin, Paul Gross, Jennifer Dale, Kenneth Welsh. And it was being photographed by the remarkably gifted Vic Sarin.

So what went wrong?

Going back to Quarrington's novel is a help. Reading it, *Whale Music* seems both funnier and slighter than first time around. Based more or less on the life of the reclusive and dissipated genius Beach

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the majestic whale music he is composing on a staggeringly complex and advanced synthesizer, the Yamaha 666. ("I call it the Beast," Des confides to his

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narrative flow. "Once I get it juiced up it screams, the Beast must be fed a handful of microchips and talked to softly...")

The Beast is a major character in the novel, and it should have been in the film – but it isn't. On the other hand, Des is a major character in the film (he is

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and complexity and personal force to herd Des out of his lethargy and grief and brilliant bewilderment into a show-down with the facts about his life and

Danny's death and an epiphany with the very whales for whom he is composing the endless music.

Chaykin is so watchable it's alarming. His funny, touching little walk – as if his bulk were rolling along on little spoked wheels underneath him – is so Des Howl, I thought he'd invented it for *Whale Music*. So I went back to take a gander at *The Adjuster* and there it was – same walk. So nothing has really been invented here. It's just that Chaykin fits Des like a glove. Or rather, bathrobe.

But while watching Chaykin's Des Howl is fun, listening to him only makes you pine for the novel. There are little bristling bits of Quarrington's Des clinging to Chaykin's, but too much is gone. In the novel, Des says things like: "My brain is leguminous, I make no bones about it..." But he can't say things like that in public, as it were. Leguminous is just too hard a word. But it's that kind of self-analysis that lends *Whale Music* the only meaning it ever gets. Yes, Des still gets to plunge, stone-like, into his scummy swimming pool (the obsessiveness of it almost reads persuasively as Des's repeated attempts to cleanse his soul and wash away his grief), and he gets to dither around with the Beast (for whom the Rheostatics have composed some commanding music). But without the continued assistance of Quarrington's Despeak, most of which has been

trimmed away for the film, these meaningful moments in Des's life are diminished into incidents. When, at last, the resolution comes, and Des rights himself and plays his finished whale music to the creatures themselves (honoured guests at Des' aqua-concert), the film plunges hopelessly into bathos (the girl comes back, the whales mill and mew with pleasure). The result is enraging. Yes, *Whale Music* looks great. Sounds great. But it's mortally empty at the core. As one curmudgeonly film critic of my acquaintance said to me when the lights came up, "But it's not about anything!" And it's not ●



Boy, Brian Wilson (the Oblomov of rock), the novel is an extended, muttering internal narrative from Quarrington's protagonist, Des Howl (née Desmond Howell), as he roams his decaying mansion by the sea eating stale jelly donuts, musing on the death (or more likely suicide) of his brother Danny. As the book lumbers along, Des fends off the cupidities of a grasping record producer, Kenneth Sexstone, tries to make sense of the sudden presence, amidst the squalor, of a comely but emotionally damaged teen-aged groupie from Toronto, and makes desultory attempts to complete his magnum opus,

the whole novel) and this is a problem too. The difficulty is that Maury Chaykin's Des Howl – balding, with a glorious tangle of unkempt curls tumbling down over his beefy shoulders, horribly leonine in his gigantic, tent-like bathrobe – is so overwhelmingly present in the film, a huge, perambulating density, that the film cannot withstand him. Chaykin enters so fully into the role of Des, there's no room for anyone else. There is certainly no room for newcomer Cyndy Preston who, as the needful young Claire Lowe, fails (as she must) at the difficult job of portraying a two-dimensional being with enough vivacity