

Apocalypse Deferred

The Second Coming of John Doyle's

Extraordinary VISITOR

By Tom McSorley

When the new millennium comes to Canada, it will arrive first in Newfoundland. Yes, Canada's newest province will experience the monumental event half-an-hour ahead of the Maritimes, an hour-and-a-half ahead of Quebec and Ontario, two-and-a-half before Manitoba, three-and-a-half before the Prairies and a full four-and-a-half hours before British Columbia. For 30 minutes, Newfoundland will be Canada's millennial pioneer, the first and only on the scene. Perhaps it's fitting, as things seem to have arrived last in Newfoundland ever since its ambivalent embrace of Canada in 1949. Indeed, central Canadian media habitually announce programming schedules with that misleading and vaguely condescending phrase "and a half-an-hour earlier in Newfoundland." However, this temporal slide does function as an apt metaphor for the state of things, given the province's ongoing struggles, its failed megaprojects, the collapse of its cod fishery and the general and serious economic disparity between Newfoundland and the rest of Canada.

But Newfoundland is not behind, it's ahead! It always has been. It will be the first to experience millennial ecstasy and the Y2K bug in all its purported apocalyptic excesses. It will witness bank collapses, planes falling out of the sky, ships running aground en masse, telecommunications systems melting down, the whole loud silence of the End of Time. It may also see, according to *Extraordinary Visitor*, the return of John the Baptist to the city named in his honour.

The premise is simple. In the late 20th century, November 1999 to be exact, God has had enough of the senseless slaughter and decides to "shut down the human experiment." He delivers His message via His Mother to the Pope, telling His Papal Eminence that He is sending John the Baptist back to earth to search for a sign of hope for humankind. If, after one week, no such sign is discovered, it's apocalypse now. The reluctant emissary John (Raoul Bhaneja), who broods about his inadequacies and constantly compares himself to his cousin Jesus, is sent to Newfoundland's capital to search for hope in Canada's poorest, most marginalized, most resilient and tough-minded province. Landing on Signal Hill

Raoul Bhaneja as a latter day John the Baptist

Photos courtesy of Cinema Esperanza



Raoul Bhaneja and Mary Walsh: God sends John the Baptist back to earth in search of a sign of hope for humanity.

and wandering into town, John soon finds himself befriended by and living with Rick (Andy Jones) and Marietta (Mary Walsh) and their teenaged daughter, Alison (Jordan Canning). Rick is an inventor who owns a junk shop and fantasizes about bringing down global capitalism, while Marietta hosts a local daytime talk show broadcast from a shopping mall and dreams of riding the now fashionable millennium obsession out of the mall and into TV stardom.

With his fish-out-of-water naiveté, vague exoticism and unintentional messianic charms, John rapidly becomes the vehicle for both Rick and Marietta to succeed. Marietta brings him on her talk show to talk prophecy where he is both rightly and wrongly identified as a true biblical prophet; Rick enlists him to go to Wall Street to destroy the "epicentre of greed" via one of his telecommunications devices; Alison, meanwhile, scours the Internet for clues about the real identity of this evasive creature who tells her, "You might say I'm from the Middle East." As events accelerate, the Pope decides to travel to Newfoundland, CNN gets wind of the hysteria and sends a crew to St. John's, the Mother of God questions John's methods and John himself wonders if finding hope in the bizarre, confused and technologically mediated human world is an utterly futile undertaking. All the while, the clock is ticking.

In a rare case of fiction being stranger than truth, this is, in fact, the second terrestrial visit to St. John's of John the Baptist. Doyle, Walsh and the Jones boys, Andy and Michael, were the creators of a short film in 1976, also entitled *Extraordinary Visitor*. One of the first productions of the fledgling Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers Co-op (NIFCO), the 20-minute short was a more improvisational and more directly politicized chronicle of the saintly visit. In it (with Rick and Marietta present but decidedly younger) John's visitation involves the revelation of a concealed message from the Virgin Mary, a message charged explosively with the typical Newfoundland double edges of humour and anger: "Newfoundland, leave Confederation at

once." While the feature version is far less concentrated in its attack, leaving such anti-Confederation arguments aside entirely, it does elaborate upon the sharply satirical grid of the original, with varying degrees of success, to include lively ruminations on the nature of faith, the dangers of mass media and the traps of technology. All this and anticlericalism, too!

As a prolific writer and broadcaster in the late 1970s and 1980s, St. John's native John Doyle had always wanted to expand the first version of the story. "I had been writing a feature-film script entitled *Breaking Faith* when I was living in Montreal for awhile in the 1990s. I'd always wanted to write a feature and things were happening, but *Breaking Faith* stalled at the development stage, so I began to think again about *Extraordinary Visitor*. Actually, I remember having regretted that we hadn't exploited the short enough, hadn't teased out the possibilities it contained. Of course, I realize that was a

function of time, our minuscule budget and our total lack of experience in feature-film production. The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if there is a bigger story based on the same premise. I would run into Mary Walsh in bookstores and tell her I was reworking *Extraordinary Visitor*, and she'd roll her eyes a little but also signal her support. So, time goes by and by 1994 I had the first draft of a treatment written. Andy and Mary would come over and we'd do readings, improv a

bit around the idea, and try to free it from the short. Local producers Paul Pope and Jenice Ripley were also involved by this time, and the film eventually came together."

For their parts, both Walsh and Jones enjoyed developing further the rather basic satirical sketch characters they played in the short. "Marietta 24 years later is a much more interesting character," says Walsh, "though what she's still doing with old Rick, I can't understand. You'd better ask John about that! Whatever the reason, Marietta's taking a stab at fulfilling her dreams. It's her last hurrah, this rather low-rent talk show in a bloody shopping mall. I mean, it's sad, but Marietta's dream of escaping it all gives the whole situation dramatic depth. You

Not simply an easy
anti-clerical rant,
Extraordinary Visitor
is also critical of shallow
materialism and unbridled
faith in technology.

know, she really is trying, this middle-aged woman, to achieve a kind of self-transcendence." As for Rick, Andy Jones recalls, "Revisiting this character was one of the most desirable things to do. It's a very important role for me, a special character. Rick will boil himself in oil in the short, but in the feature version he's frustrated by his lack of power and by the fact that society exists in a certain way, without a sense of romance. His schemes for revenge are a bit grander in this version. We tried to get back to the original character in some ways and not in others. We also tried to revive what we call the 'EV' acting style: loose, improvisational, a kind of unrehearsed realism."

As the visitor, Raoul Bhaneja, who was a mere toddler when the first saintly visitation was filmed, found in the experience a kind of positive alienation. "When I read the script, which I loved because it was so unlike other movies, I really felt a strong connection to the role. As it turned out, I was the only non-Newfoundlander in the cast, which I suppose is appropriate given my character, a person who's definitely 'from away.' Andy, Mary and John all had the reference point of the short film and they could build on that. Not me. Andy and Mary are so amazingly aware of each other's performances. It's like they're part of each other and they know each other's aesthetic inside out. So, for me it was a great experience in the sense that I could try to complement my 'strangeness' with the familiarity of these great actors."

Armed with a strong cast and that very rare second shot at the same idea, Doyle delivers a clever comic entertainment about a world of fear, misplaced faith, callow opportunism and general confusion in the face of a supposedly imminent apocalypse. It is a world in which technologically manufactured illusions—as John observes as he watches television—are absorbed as substitutes for knowledge and even for the world itself. Moreover, as he learns from Rick, the avaricious and predatory late 20th-century capitalists move money across the world electronically with no regard for borders or human consequences. If this wasn't perplexing enough for the man "from away," he also gets conflicting signals about modern technological life from within his host family. At one point, for example, Marietta, excited by major network interest in her show and exasperated by Rick's schemes to overthrow the capitalist New World Order, looks John in the eye and explains in all seriousness that "CNN is real." In his search for hope in a world seemingly lost in a miasma of delusions and disconnected images, it's not surprising that John sees nothing but despair.

Throughout the film Doyle fuses an archetypal Canadian ambivalence about technology with surgical strike parodies of the Catholic church (he was raised Catholic, and was in the junior seminary for five years) as an institution that is in the business, much like CNN, of peddling illusions. Not simply an easy anticlerical rant, *Extraordinary Visitor* is also critical of the shallow materialism and unbridled faith in technology that has replaced religion in much of the Western world, including Newfoundland. Interestingly, Doyle even levels a sly criticism at the familiar notion of Newfoundland as victim. When an audience member at Marietta's show asks that the island be



Left to right: Greg Malone as Cardinal Vignetti and Rick Boland as Pope Innocent XVI

spared the apocalypse because, after all, Newfoundlanders aren't greedy, John retorts, "Then where are your fish?" No orthodoxies are safe in this film, be they sacred, secular or millenarian. It is the interstices of belief that interest Doyle, those obscure areas of human thought that motivate human action and faith, however bizarre or irrational. Happily, these rich thematic strands sustain the film through its weaker moments. Perhaps as a concession to marketability, the film also includes some rather conventional family strife and a predictable adultery subplot involving Marietta and John, not to mention a comedically stillborn section involving Greg Malone as a scheming, devil-worshipping cardinal. These aspects of the film do not detonate the whole architecture of the story, but they do distract from the larger and more ambitious set of explorations Doyle is pursuing.

Ultimately, though, and in surprising ways, the second coming of *Extraordinary Visitor* is a welcome one. It is a thoughtful comedy about the crisis of belief at the end of the you-know-what, quietly raising a number of pressing late 20th-century issues. How and what are humans to believe in now? In our manufactured millennial distraction and distress, which leap of faith will work? Organized religion? The Internet? Technology? Eastern mysticism? Crystals? Moses Znaimer? Ted Turner? As Doyle himself says, the film is really about "living in an age which distorts your ability to believe in anything, the dilemma of not being able to believe." Despite its seemingly slight and simple surfaces, *Extraordinary Visitor* poses questions that linger long after the beleaguered figure of John the Baptist, having once again deferred the apocalypse and like some North Atlantic version of *E.T.*, disappears into that grey infinity east of Signal Hill and heads for home. ●