

Tom, Thanks for Punchline

October 23, 2019

PUNCHLINE (1988)

Directed by David Seltzer

Written by David Seltzer

Starring Sally Field, John Goodman, & Tom Hanks as Steven Gold

I can tell you exactly where I was when I first saw a sad clown. There were two of them, in separate picture frames, in the basement of my grandparents' house in Truro. I'm guessing this memory is literal and not some traumatized substitution, but it's been years since I've been there and I've never discussed the pictures with anyone. As I recall, they hung in the musty basement, on shiny led-painted wall panels, diagonal to the stiff, mid-century exercise bike with a duct tape seat. On a brisk Saturday each November, we'd eat dinner in the adjacent laundry room, after having attended the Truro Santa Claus Parade, because it was the only room in the house big enough for all my cousins. At this time, the clown pictures would be wrapped like presents and re-hung decoratively.

I can't recall having any particular feelings toward the clowning vocation for years beyond that. They've never frightened me as they do many folks. I remember the life-sized plastic Ronald McDonald who sat on a bench outside the McDonald's in the now defunct Penhorn Mall. It seems to me I liked sitting next to him, if only to analyze the perversion of a life-sized plastic *anything*. Regardless, Ronald McDonald hardly seems the sad-clown-type; too many Happy Meals. In my adulthood, I've had the opportunity to personally know the odd starry-eyed stand-up, improviser, radio knucklehead, or funniest guy in the room. Through that, a super-sized-mcdouble-diet of late night network comedy, and requisite meditations on Pagliacci, I've come to better understand what the sad clown represents. As with Ronald McDonald and my grandparents' kitsch, I'm a fan.

But it's such a cliché, isn't it? When one's assumed role is to make others feel joy in lieu of being able to feel it personally? Please. The Serious About Comedy mentality, as a qualifier, is so self-involved, granted, it can come from a very real place. To crave the adulation of a crowd that's submissively forward-facing and seated has to be a sign of something wrong upstairs, no? It's definitely the case for Steve Gold, monologist-extraordinaire at NYC's *The Gas Station*, who, within minutes of meeting a Carson or Letterman booker, unloads a tanker of sob stories about his apartment woes, and his failed med school efforts, and his father's expectations, before garnishing the rant with the warning, "If you're sending someone down, you better send them fast because Funny Steve is going under." Through all this self-pity, he manages to be pious about what makes comedy good and bad. Maybe you've met a Funny Steve or two.

I'm learning a lesson, in the early days of this blog, that TH is wonderful in spite of many of his characters being far from it. Steve Gold isn't wonderful, but the performance of him is, in a way that's so convincing I found myself troubled. After a rocky start to his mentorship of floundering wife-and-mother comic Lilah Krytsick (Sally Field), he's managed to mine her genuine talent, and has thus begun to find her romantically compelling. Lilah discourages Steve's interest because she still loves her Vernon Dursley of a husband (John Goodman). It also feels wrong for us, because Field played Hanks' mother in a way more iconic movie six years later. Steve's Hail Mary play for Lilah's affection is a spontaneous Singin' in the Rain pastiche, wherein he maniacally splashes around city traffic, while she watches from a diner window, crying. The disturbance you feel through Lilah marks a masterclass in TH's steadfast commitment.

In its day, I suspect *Punchline* was forced to answer for its thematic similarities to Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy*. But while that would have been an obstacle in '88, it allows for a new experience now, to be viewed in the wake of the cultural moment that was Todd Phillips' *Joker*. To take it a step further, *Punchline* illustrates the comedic treasure trove that is a housewife with stifled creative instincts, meanwhile *The Marvellous Mrs. Maisel* wins like all the Emmys. I guess the average entertainment consumer is as compelled by the inner-workings of comedy as they are the comedy itself. Admittedly, I've long been a Studio 60 apologist, probably because I find the torture of funny's pursuit a lot more relatable than *What's the Deal with Pop-Tarts*.

An inanimate painting of a tearful clown is one thing, but the biggest struggle in making drama about comedy is that you still have to include some jokes, and ideally *good* ones. If Studio 60 and Maisel have anything in common it's that they present content as hilarious when, frankly, it's not. Punchline has the same problem, and further, much of it is aging poorly (see: Gold's generic Asian person routine which bookends the film). But it matters less that you find Steve and Lilah funny, and more that you sense their mutual desperation to be seen; Lilah by the members of her chaotic family, and Steve by anyone at all.

So, why is the sad clown such a striking image? For a few reasons: It's comforting to see evidence that others are also struggling to uphold a facade, and it's a gratifying justification for your doubts in clowns in general. The sad clown also represents the constraints of self-imposed responsibility, the impossible pressure to augment emotions within and surrounding.

Punchline resolves with Lilah winning a contest which earns her a feature spot on The Tonight Show. But she steps aside, allowing Steve the opportunity of which he's always dreamed. Lilah got what she came for. She's finally agreed to let her previously unsupportive husband watch her perform; he loves it and is transformed tidily from a verbally abusive bully into her proudest cheerleader. The Krytsick family story overall feels trite, but TH has managed to elevate his role to manic surrealism. Watching live comedy in a gritty club is one of my favourite things that I almost never do. It's best in rarity, lest it get easier to spot the darkness. Funniness is often sad. Sadness is funny that way.

Thx!