

Tom, Thanks The Burbs

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THE BURBS (1989)

Directed by Joe Dante

Written by Dana Olsen

Starring Carrie Fisher, Rick Ducommun, & Tom Hanks as Ray Peterson

Maybe I once knew the names of the people across the street and one over, but I would never remember now. That's partly on me because I never took the time to get to know them, but on the other hand, I was a kid and it was thus my role to classify everyone on our street as either a lifelong friend, or a big fat weirdo. And this family was a big fat weirdo family, and it's reflected by the many names we called them in secret - the names I *will* always remember. To be fair, it was the men of the house who defined their reputation. A father and son. The father would play the accordion on his front step, he'd wear dress clothes to do yard work, he'd cut ceramic tile on a table saw in the driveway at 1 o'clock in the morning. His teenage son was a burn-out-metal-head who eventually upgraded his hang zone from the roof to a school bus he bought and parked on the street. He and his friends painted the bus matte black and lived in it like freaking Manson children, until a mysterious vigilante of the block called the city and had it removed. We all agreed these neighbors were totally strange, and though I never knew them well enough to ask, I'm sure they thought the same of us.

The central thesis of 1989's *The Burbs* seems to be that peculiar behavior is found in the wholesome quiet of the safest-seeming cul de sacs, and that peculiarity can be found in each of us just the same. TH stars as Ray Peterson, an easily agitated workaholic eager to take advantage of a much needed staycation. His wife Carol (Carrie Fisher) insists they spend their time off at their cottage by the lake, but Ray would prefer to stay, and gawk at the ever-flowing fountain in the Jones' yard. In this movie, the Jones' are called the Klopeks, and they've recently moved into the dilapidated house next door and scarcely been seen or heard from since. Ray and his buddies (Bruce Dern & Rick Ducommun) already have their curiosity piqued when another neighbor goes suddenly missing and the Klopek's are seen digging in the back yard, in the dead of a rainy night. Then their nosiness moves up a notch.

The Burbs hardly pioneered the suburban milieu of so many classic horror flicks. If anything, it seems to satirize films like *Rear Window*. For that reason, I kind of wish I'd saved it for Halloween. It opens with an eerie pan across a series of innocent houses, while a crescendo of minor organ music rises. At one point, a character uses bolt cutters to sever a power line into the Klopek house and my fiance predicted they might animate a brief image of his skeleton when he's inevitably electrocuted (which they don't, but it was a fair guess). It *is* a dark comedy, and it also comes by its sense of dread honestly, managing an understanding of its own degree of camp. To that end, *The Burbs* is honestly a great ride. TH is essentially the only three-dimensional character, as both the stubborn rogue among the suburb's rationalists and the voice of reason among the crazies. The cast has other great names but their characters are cartoonish, and Ducommun comes across as a bargain-bin Dan Ackroyd, for whom I'd gladly have traded Carrie Fisher in a more prominent role than the nagging wife she played.

The audio engineer on this movie was the real villain. Prop beer cans are a pet peeve of mine anyway, because they're always over-foleyed, but a worse offender is the scene where Hans Klopek (Courtney Gains) serves Ray sardines and pretzels, and the chewing is belabored and nauseating. Moments later, Doctor Werner Klopek (Henry Gibson) shakes Ray's hand without having washed off a palm of red liquid, and the handshake sounds like two trout sumo wrestling. The doctor claims the red stuff is paint. We're clearly meant to think it's blood, and Ray thinks so too, but it seems to me, his trusty nose could have confirmed or quashed that suspicion. There are many such fictitious liberties. The most obvious is Ray & Co's classic unwillingness to call the police when they suspect a murder has happened next door. Then again, every street has weirdo neighbors, and Ray & Co are pretty weird themselves. At one point they climb into the back of an active garbage truck - the image is at least as upsetting as whatever the Klopeks are up to.

I'd be remiss not to mention that the theme of neighbors invited an amusing (and now quite meta) cameo from the real Fred Rogers. After a disturbing inspection of the Klopek's dwelling, Ray is seen watching Mr. Roger Neighborhood and gently singing along to the theme song. Of course, this is not the last time a TH movie will require him to sing this ditty, but *The Burbs* doesn't end with quite the same existential release as *A Beautiful Day*

in the Neighborhood. It does end with a family coming together after a difficult time, and now that I think of it, the final shot of both films are breakings of the fourth wall. Still, it's more than some sardines that differ these two.

It's important I state that, for all our juvenile brow-arching, we never expected actual evil of the weird family that lived across the street and one over. Wherever he is now, I imagine their son cringes to remember his ridiculous bus and the tantrum he threw when the city hauled it away. I imagine he and his family also remember the weird kids across the street and one over, who spent years mulling about the driveway, staring back with confused looks on their faces. For all I know they saw me digging that hole in the back yard that one time, but hopefully they don't remember.

Thx!