

ARCHANGEL

A FILM *by* GUY MADDIN

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇ **A WEIRD AND WILD MELODRAMA OF OBSESSIVE LOVE**

ARCHANGEL IS SET IN THE NORTHERNMOST TIP OF OLD IMPERIAL RUSSIA IN THE WINTER OF 1919. THE GREAT WAR HAS BEEN OVER FOR THREE MONTHS, BUT NO ONE HAS REMEMBERED TO TELL THOSE WHO REMAIN IN THE TOWN OF ARCHANGEL. MADDIN'S STUNNING BLACK AND WHITE CINEMATOGRAPHY AND MEMORABLY STYLIZED SET DESIGN MAKE THIS A FILM QUITE UNLIKE ANY OTHER. ◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

1990 | 83 MINUTES | B & W

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rific intestines.”¹ Rarely in the annals of film history have craft services and special effects been more successfully fused into one department as on the set of *Archangel*.

Much like the polyvalent kubasa, Maddin was similarly multi-tasking on set. With a miniscule but dedicated crew, Maddin worked not only as director of *Archangel*, but also as its production designer, director of photography, editor and sound designer, plus any assortment of odd jobs in between. And that’s another thing that can be said with absolute conviction: *Archangel* is a true auteur film. With Maddin performing every major artistic function, the film represents a filmmaker’s vision in its most purified and undiluted form. Most filmmakers would tell you they’d prefer to maximize their control by doing every job on set, but worry that the inevitable onset of workaholic delirium and insanity might obfuscate their decision-making. For Maddin, however, delirium was the honoured guest at his cinematic table. Such was the world of *Archangel*.

The most delirious moment of all seems to have come when Maddin and Klymkiw watched *Archangel* for the first time. The picture was being mixed at the Wayne Finucan Studios, where Maddin and Klymkiw could finally watch the film from start to finish on a big screen with every single track of sound. “This first screening was one big daisy chain.” Klymkiw recalls, “Guy and I were convinced that no matter what anyone else thought, that this was the movie we all wanted to make — that this was the movie to end all movies.” When the screening was done, Klymkiw and Maddin embarked on a euphoric, supernatural *miraj* of triumph through the streets of Winnipeg. Maddin describes driving through the city all night, fuelling up on cinnamon coffee at the Blue Note Café before launching into more perfervid congratulation: “We were delirious on pride, absolutely wild with hubris!”

Upon its release in 1990, *Archangel* won critical acclaim from all corners of the globe, including the National Society of Film Critics’ award for Best Experimental Film. J. Hoberman of New York’s *Village Voice* praised the film as “stylized, convoluted, visionary.” But Maddin has frequently expressed a certain

degree of concern that audiences were quickly getting lost in the film’s delirium and tuning out. “The story isn’t that easy to follow for a lot of viewers,” Maddin told programmer Cameron Bailey in 1991, “You can easily get lost in it. So I just want to warn viewers not to worry about getting lost. It’s the feeling that concerns me most.”

It must be affirmed that *Archangel* is extremely rich in feeling. It may well be Guy Maddin’s most emotional film, in fact. Yet, as with many of Maddin’s films, *Archangel* has often been explained in formalist terms alone. Maddin’s inventive formalist approach to the discarded vocabulary of film history is certainly one of the film’s most remarkable hallmarks, but *Archangel* is not a purely formalist exercise. Rarely explored by critics is *Archangel*’s dense emotional core. This is due, perhaps, to the fact that the film’s emotive textures are at times deeply buried in the film’s opaque, delirious narrative, which many viewers have found to be nearly impenetrable. But for those who are willing to give themselves over to *Archangel*’s unique brand of delirium, the film can sustain multiple and increasingly emotional and inspired viewings. Throughout all of his deliberate weirdness, his relentless barrage of artifice, his fascination with the surface materiality of film and sound, not to mention his dizzyingly elusive plot lines and indulgent non-sequiturs, there is a feeling, a mysterious web of love-struck emotion, almost romantic, that runs through every frame of *Archangel*. Because of this densely-layered emotionality, however abstract it may be, the film always feels honest, and never once slips into pretension. As in all Maddin photoplays, *Archangel*’s emotions walk a delirious, somnambulistic tightrope between the comic and the tragic, between euphoria and ridiculousness. Furthermore, this strange alloy seems to magically emerge not in spite of Maddin’s formalist effusions, but because of them, as if these mystifying emotional embers are directly ignited by Maddin’s exquisitely degraded film emulsions. It’s strange, and beautiful. As a ghostly Veronkha/Iris calls out into the frozen battlefields of Archangel, “If you love me, you will find me. Here are your maps.”

¹ Klymkiw’s craft service acumen served yet another crucial function in *Archangel*’s LOVE sequence, which features a group of rutting Huns as they sodomize each other with kubasa links.

GOOSEFLESH & HARD-ONS:
GUY MADDIN & GREG KLYMKIW DISCUSS
THE MAKING OF ARCHANGEL with M. RANKIN

The Zeitgeist DVD version of *Archangel* is different from the original film. Some new inter-titles were added along with some colour tints. Why did you change it? Will these changes carry over into the new 35mm prints?

GK: The 35mm prints have been lovingly restored to their previous delirium.

GM: No new inter-titles, no tinting. Greg and I really rushed the final stages of post on *Archangel* to be ready for the Berlin Film Festival pre-selection process, and I always felt I would have added the clarifying inter-titles I did for the DVD release had I not been so rushed. So this was not a case of revisionism. But as the years went on I realized the film is just the way I like it in its original, rushed form. Oh well, I say, so it's not an easy film! It's still plenty delirious, perhaps the most delirious movie I'll ever make, and that was what I wanted to affect most!

GK: Much as I enjoyed the new inter-titles and tinting on the DVD version, my preference will always be for the original version. If they don't get THAT, they're NEVER going to get it.

***Archangel* was a true auteur film, with a director who also served as production designer, director of photography, editor and sound designer. That's insane by conventional industry standards! Weren't the funders a little reluctant to allow this amount of directorial multi-tasking? How did you convince them?**

GK: I'm going to take all the credit for this. I was (and, I guess, still am) a bombastic prick who does not suffer fools gladly. That said, I'm often charming and polite. Were people worried? Not for long. My Cossack blood came in

pretty handy in such matters.

It's funny, I actually recall being pretty open to any sort of insanity in the filmmaking process. When Guy indulged himself, I was more than happy to let him, because, frankly, I enjoyed it when he indulged himself. It gave me gooseflesh and hard-ons.

What was the most discouraging moment for you during the making of *Archangel*? And what was the most thrilling, the proudest moment?

GM: *Archangel* was bliss from beginning to end. I remember working with Jeff Solylo in my living room. He was making bombs out of 2-liter Pepsi bottles and Polish helmets out of oatmeal cartons. I remember having a war medal bee, where I invited Carl Matheson and other members of the philosophy department out at U of M [University of Manitoba] to make ww1 vintage medals out of cardboard, macaroni and gold spray paint. We listened to Arthur Tracy 78s that night! I remember visiting Donna Szöke out at her studio to see all the wonderful costumes she made for our army of "toy soldiers" — She made one hundred full costumes for me, all for the price it takes to rent a single dress for a shoot! I remember sitting for an hour in a Black Hole rehearsal space watching George Toles scrawl out in one fecund sitting, then reading aloud to me ALL the wonderfully mannered dialogue of the film; and I remember Gene Walz and Jim Keller, full professors both and both cast for their facial hair because I didn't know where to buy fake beards, kissing each other Russian-style, beard on beard, in take after take just before breaking for lunch one delirious day. I only weighed 160 lbs in those days, full of nervous energy as I was, even though Greggy had given me 35 days to shoot a film which, according to its modest budget, should have been given no more than 12.

Can you narrate the saga of the spiders created by local animator Patrick Lowe for the Nocturnal Transmissions sequence?

GM: Well, I needed 18 frames of wiggling spiders for the scene in which a cactus positively ejaculates bugs onto Geza's chest. Patrick and I met many times to make sure there were no misunderstandings about what it was I needed.

I had no idea how to animate, and Patrick did, so he was my man. He gave me many options, including pencil drawings, ink, even claymation. I chose ink. After a few weeks of unbelievably diligent work, peppered with many triple-through-octuple checks by Patrick, he decided to give me pencil sketches, in case I didn't like the ink ones. I was thrilled and assured him he could proceed with the ink. I'd never worked with an animator before and couldn't understand their patience, their perfectionism. I was so impatient and my work on the set always reflected this, sometimes to the point of regretful sloppiness. Since Patrick was working to his own exacting standards, I felt at times I needed a team of midwives to help me bring these spiders into the world. They came in just under the deadline, perfectly, screaming and vibrating just as spiders just ejaculated from a cactus should! Hail stout Patrick Lowe! For most people, his moment is their fave *Archangel* moment, if they've actually watched the film that is.

The men's haircuts in *Archangel* were meticulously crafted by master barber, Bill Sciak, whom we espy snipping Maddin's coif in Noam Gonick's documentary, *Waiting for Twilight*. Since this nonagenarian Winnipeg hair stylist has only recently retired (in November 2007), perhaps you would like to say a few words about his contribution to *Archangel* and to the Mad-din film universe.

GK: The first time I ever went to Bill Sciak's barber shop he asked me how I wanted "it". I'd been so disgusted with my coiffures since the death of Dick Geekie on Portage Avenue that I was convinced I'd never get another decent do ever again. So, almost flippantly I replied to Bill's query with, "Give me a Von Stroheim." I assumed he'd have no idea what or whom I was referring to, but when he asked which Von Stroheim picture I was referring to, I realized that, perchance, he was the only barber who could carry the torch of the late Dick Geekie. I walked out that day, proudly sporting a "Foolish Wives" period do — back and sides down to the marrow and the tiniest fluff of muskrat on top — Magnificent!!!!

We wanted Bill to be on-set for the entire shoot and offered him a princely sum to do so, but he was so loyal to his regular clientele that he made us

come to him - on his time, of course. Going to Bill for a haircut was an all-day affair. But what an affair!!!!!! WHAT AN AFFAIR!!!!!! Clippers, straight razor, gentle head massage, hot lather, spin-towel-dry, more lather, more razor and of course, the final touch, Yardley's Lavender Brilliantine. Delirium was never so blissful as sitting in Bill's barber chair.

Guymo and [screenwriter] George [Toles] often want to downplay this fact, but it was actually Bill who set them on the path to our next collaboration, *Careful*. I recall Guymo asking Bill for an Emil Jannings cut and Bill's response was, "From the silent mountaineering pictures?" The rest, as they say, is history.

What about the music you chose for *Archangel*? Your use of Anton Rubinstein's mesmerizing "Rève angélique" in the Philbin wedding sequence (and elsewhere) seems like it might be a knowing wink to Josef von Sternberg, who also uses it in *Scarlett Empress*.

GM: I got that piece from an old Virgil Fox LP. Fox was THE great church organist recording star of the mid-20th Century and I had a big stack of his fantastic discs! I love that piece BECAUSE it had popped up in a choral version in *Scarlet Empress*. This was not an homage or nod, however, but a simple case of attempted thunder-theft. That music really evokes TONS of occult atmosphere for me and I wanted some of this for myself! The rest of the music comes from very old, very scratchy 78 rpm recordings of Boris Godunov, Verdi's Macbeth, and other public domain stuff I had accumulated over the years. I actually have one ton of 78s. I can't give them away and I would go straight to hell if I threw them out. They are a lifelong burden — a punishment for stealing thunder.

In the Geza death scene, the surface of the film becomes all splotchy. It looks like chemicals have been splashed onto the celluloid. Given your love of image degradation, was this an accident or intentional?

GM: Ask Courtland at MidCan Labs. I think he sneezed a hoogie and some coffee on the film while he was processing it back in 1989. Whatever he did, I couldn't have been happier! The splotches — almost amoeba-like — come at the best possible moment!



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