The Man From Earth

This film is by far the dumbest film to choose for such an assignment, I have no doubt that writing about the newest Die Hard movie would be much simpler. But I just had to write about this one, because … well, it’s just great! But we will get to that later.

Released 13 november 2007, this film was first conceived in the early 1960s by Jerome Bixby, and then filmed as an independent filmed in 2007 in just 8 days. One thing which is very apparent, is that this film has been in the back of Jerome’s head for more than 40 years. And it has aged to perfection.

The movie starts of with Professor John Oldman who has prematurely left a goodbye-party in his honor. We see him packing his car when his fellow colleagues catch up with him, they eventually begin to ask why he is leaving. John then tells them he is 14 000 years old, and is just “moving on” so that he is not discovered. This leads into a rather interesting debate about immortality, religion and the truth. The movie ends with a nice, and quite unexpected turn.

The most impressive and amazing feature about this movie is the setting. Everything in the movie is happening around a little house in the woods. Where the main character tells his friends about his rather special life. There is no flashback, no effects, just a living room, a connected kitchen and a bedroom. And this movie is amazing!

I have to say that I am afraid that you will never watch this film if you have read this first. Because I just told you the whole film, is some guy walking around in a house telling a story. I sure am happy I didn’t look to much into the film before watching it, I never would have seen it if someone told me that. And I think that the people behind this film has really made a great job in making you feel like you are there, that you are just one of the characters in the room, gathered around the fire. This makes you just sit there quietly, watching the film.

This way of telling a story is very unusual in film making. But in real life, especially if we go back in time to the first americans, being gathered around a fire and telling stories would not be unusual at all.
The first thing you notice is the diversity of the characters. All of them come from one college, and they are so different. This shows the multicultural America, there is no such thing as a typical American, they more than any other nation are definitely multicultural. In a way America is just a sample of people from around the world that have at some point believed in a better life. How can that not end up as a diverse nation?

This film has a full cast of 11 people, three of these having a very minor role (a policeman and two movers), while the rest all have their time to shine. If we look at how these characters react to John’s story, this will tell us a lot about American society and values.

The most obvious is Edith’s (Ellen Crawford) reaction to John’s story about Jesus, she shows that she is far from not open minded, and completely incapable of grasping what John is saying, she then totally breaks down and starts to cry. The American society is full of people who can not accept other ideas than their own, this is more apparent in older generations (here represented by Edith). The reason for her crying can also be that she is in love with John.

In contrast to her reaction stands Dan (Tony Todd) he is a professor in anthropology and never questions John’s story. He often writes in a notebook and for him, this is just an observations, another day at work, so to speak. We see again that defining what is American and what is not, is very difficult, since the country is so diverse.

According to Kris Kobayashi-Nelson the director’s previous work with Playboy “explains a lot”, to my mind, this is very puzzling. Since this movie has two very beautiful women, that it never “uses” (Sandy (Annika Peterson) and Linda (Alexis Thorpe)). Their beauty is never played on. This is highly unusual for an American film, who to often displays women as mere sex symbols. But maybe I have just misunderstood the point of Playboy.

Unfortunately this is about the only American stereotype they omit. Sandy, John’s secretary is in love with her boss, she is also the one serving the food. The good student,
Linda (Alexis Thorpe), (whose reaction to John’s tale is “what a great chance to learn”) is in love with her teacher. The teacher whom she is in love with, Art (William Katt). Is an old teacher trying to appear young and cool, wearing a black leather jacket and a small patch of beard. Harry (John Billingsley), the geeky biology professor, well … he is a geek (tries to be funny, short, well built and with glasses). And lastly Edith, who is more likely to be the perfect christian then the old lady?

This would probably not have happened if the movie had a bigger budget, and more time. But in a way, I am glad. Maybe it is just me who have not watched enough small budget films lately. But doing so for a change is really great. In fact, I believe a bigger budget would actually hurt this film. The simplicity makes us more aware of what the characters are actually saying, and less about what is happening on screen. The drama of this film is in the conversation.

On the other hand, this can be a bit frustrating. At first, when John starts telling his story and the background music is turning up, I find myself just waiting to be transported 140 centuries back in time. This however, does not happen.

If someone ever does a remake of this movie, I actually hope they make some fancy flashbacks, the movie will not be nearly as great (since the suspense of not knowing if he is telling the truth or not is half the fun), but it will bring some much needed attention to a great story. (A remake would of course have a larger budget for not just filming but for advertisement as well.)

All in all a great film, who will undoubtedly live for a long time yet.

Sources

3. Commentaries by Emerson Bixby and Gary Westfall.
   http://www.dvd.ign.com/articles/833/833098p2.html
   http://latefilm.com/is-jerome-bixbys-the-man-from-earth-this-years-sleeper-hit
Fansite: http://www.themanfromearth.com/
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I see some of these sites have actually disappeared during the time of writing.