Happiness is ‘Two of Us’

By Gary Bjerke

“Two of Us” is one of those very few film experiences that can be called truly moving, trite as that word is. One is rather stunned by the impact and depth of the film, after growing accustomed to a syrupy diet of two-dimensional sticky-tacky flicks with “man-consumption” plots.

“The Two of Us” is also a comedy, but the difference between it and the majority of films labelled as comedies is that its humor very closely approximates that of life. Life is neither sad nor humorous, at least not for very long; it contains no absolutes. “The Two of Us” may be described as a “sad” comedy.

Claude (Alain Cohen) is a mischievous eight-year-old boy whose parents think he was “born to torment” them. He plays with other children, shares in their small pranks and activities, and is general behaves in a normal way. The only problem is that Claude is Jewish, and the setting is Nazi-occupied France in 1944. Claude’s action to the country to live with Nazi-friend Gramp (Michel Simon) believes that all the lessons of France can be attributed to the Jews, the English, the Freemasons, and the Rothschilds. Claude’s name is changed from Langmann to Longuet on his ration card, and he is taught the Lord’s Prayer, in order to play the good Catholic boy in front of Gramp.

After the initial adjustments to Gramp’s anti-Semitism and cruel treatment he receives from the other boys at school, he grows very close to Gramp. Their relationship is almost idyllic, set against the fairy tale farm countryside of France; each learns lessons from the other, lessons that important life may more otherwise have offered them.

Claude Berri, the director, has in this one film managed to coax more human emotion from a set of actors than it is possible to record on film. The dialogue, although in French, is more than adequately translated into English, for the subtitles remain perfectly consistent with the spirit of the film. Simon’s portrayal of Gramp is so delicate that one feels that the changing of just one detail of the movie would be enough to shatter the image that Simon created. Alain Cohen, as Claude, is absolutely brilliant. He gives the impression of a wise imp imprisoned in the body of a child. “The Two of Us”, at the Exeter Street Theater, is not recommended for anyone who hates children, life, or happiness.