Northern Lights unsettles its audience

Northern Lights, starring Robert Behling and Susan Lynch; produced, directed, written, and edited by John Hanson and Rob Nilsson; a New Front release, now showing at the Central Cinema.

Northern Lights is a new independent film that leaves you unsettled without letting you know why.

Superficially, this is a story of love and hardship in North Dakota in the second decade of the century, and even though this is all the film is really about, somehow it transcends its story and becomes something more vital. This is, above all, a mood picture. Northern Lights is strongest when we can feel its haunting landscapes, its simple farming lifestyle, its struggles for independence. It is weakest when it deals with its story alone, forgetting the atmosphere it has created to that point.

The story is rather simple. North Dakota in 1915 is essentially a new frontier colonized by farmers, many Norwegian. The "home country" controlling these grain colonies is the combined Eastern seaboard grain-producing network, with grain-selling companies, and banks. As with most of the country at the turn of the century, the farmers have a hard time earning any income with the home country exploiting them in these times of low grain prices. Some farmers have started to band together to form the Nonpartisan League and hope, by proceeding from farm to farm, to unify the individual farmers and so wield some political power.

One farmer who is approached by the League is Ray Sorenson (Bob Behling), who is courting Inga Olsness (Susan Lynch), daughter of another local farmer. But Ray refuses to join the League, until the Olsness family can't sell their crop and the farm is lost to foreclosure. Then he becomes active; the League is soon the most important thing in his life and recruiting other farmers becomes his daily task.

Though this is the essential story of Northern Lights, the film does not approach its subject matter in a standard cinematic way. Its unraveling of the political struggle is sketchy at best, as is the romantic relationship between Ray and Inga. Far more central to the film is the depiction of farm life and its associated hardships, and, a level above this, of the gloominess the Dakotan life is wrapped in.

The film is imbued with a sense of nostalgia that tends to dictate a certain stylistic, specifically the morbid dark mood and the bleak landscapes. The closeness of the film-makers (descendants of original Dakotans) to their subject only reinforces the film's strengths — consideration of change in life, and frustration. Northern Lights is a film about change. "Nothing lasts long," as even the passing splendor of the aurora borealis attests.

In a sense, the film has its cinematic relatives, and about halfway through the picture one is struck by how much Ray resembles Henry Fonda's Tom Joad in The Grapes of Wrath. The similarities are many, the sense of transience and insecurity above all. "If we work, we live, if we don't, we die." The frustration of the farmers' lives comes across fiercely, as in the violence it produces, even in a simple family. "You struggle for a good life, and you never get to live it" is the final sense, and we wonder at the end what the point of struggling is, even though they succeed. The most memorable scenes in the picture are stark exemplification of this final futility — as when a pale disk of a sun glows through the overcast sky with snow starting to fall over a funeral party, or even the scene when Ray's father sits up against a scarecrow in the night, giving up his hold on life, the hard work now enough for him. It is this very subtle and unassuming treatment of man against nature that finally makes the picture as affecting as it turns out to be, in its quietly noble way.

—Kevin Cunningham

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