



SENIORS

Gregory's Girl

+ intro by Sherief Hassan, editor, Movie Masterclass – seeing beyond the screen + discussion

‘Gregory’s Girl’: a contemporary review

Bill Forsyth’s second film, *Gregory’s Girl*, is set in and around a pleasant comprehensive school in a New Town near Glasgow. Early on, while our attention is focused on foreground activity of some import to the plot, a small boy in a penguin costume is glimpsed wandering along one of its corridors, before vanishing as abruptly as he appeared. What that capsule description omits, however, is the almost subliminal level at which the gag properly functions: though our immediate perception is of a penguin, albeit an oversized one, our laughter is provoked less *by* its incongruity than *during* the fraction of a second which elapses before we conclude that, under the circumstances, it can only be a disguise (perhaps for an end-of-term play). Later, apparently lost, the penguin resurfaces to be directed by the headmaster to the classroom where his presence is mysteriously requested. At which point, we may already suspect that the penguin’s identity and *raison d’être* are forever to be withheld from us. But what we are unlikely to anticipate is that he will make a third appearance, one which by exactly duplicating the particulars of that preceding it – the by now forlorn wee creature is steered once more towards his elusive destination – would seem to be breaking a basic rule of visual humour. Yet the effectiveness of the joke this time paradoxically depends on our failure to respond to it as such. For we have come to accept the penguin as a familiar and even reassuring element of the school’s curricular routine: that he is no longer funny *is* funny.

If I have made so much of a single gag, in a film crammed with gags, it’s not merely for the pleasure of reminiscing about it in print but also because, within its modest narrative framework, *Gregory’s Girl* strikes me as a well-nigh flawless comedy, and perfection is a much trickier concept to come to terms with globally than in an isolated detail. For this reason, the delayed release of Forsyth’s first film has served at least one purpose, that of clearly demonstrating the distance since covered by its director.

[Forsyth’s debut] *That Sinking Feeling* deals with a group of Glasgow slum urchins who, faced only with the disheartening prospect of no prospects (‘There’s gotta be more to life than committin’ suicide’), devise a foolproof plan to burgle a local plumber’s warehouse of 90 stainless steel sinks. And, for a first film, it boasts an extraordinary variety of comic tropes. A pity, then, that its too frequent lapses into nudgingly facetious whimsy tend to swamp the more delicate *trouvailles* – most notably on the subject of role reversal, which, developed in *Gregory’s Girl*, would seem to herald the inception of a Forsythian *thematique*.

Gregory’s Girl, however, manages to invest the same theme with both humour and resonance. Dorothy, the gorgeous centre forward, initially catches Gregory’s eye as much by her dribbling skills as by the way her pawky *volupté* is displayed to advantage on the soccer field; and when her goal-scoring is greeted with the traditional sweaty embrace from the (otherwise all-male) team, he mutters ‘Perverts!’ from the goalmouth. In direct

contrast is the treatment of Steve, Gregory's confidant, whose knack for pastry-making ('The doughnuts are selling like hotcakes!') and apparent indifference to either sport or girls set him slightly apart from his more boisterous chums. When asked by euphoric Gregory if he has ever been in love, Steve, visibly trembling on the brink of a revelation (and perhaps of self-realisation), is rescued only by the garrulity of his friend's own amorous discourse. Forsyth's not inconsiderable achievement here, aided by a remarkably sensitive performance by William Greenlees, is to have created a character no less perplexed by his sexuality than is the spectator.

But the whole film is enhanced by these modulations from the overt to the latent, or between what Lévi-Strauss termed 'the raw and the cooked', in a manner comparable to, and worthy of, early *nouvelle vague*. The slender but affecting storyline – Gregory, at first infatuated with Dorothy, is slyly shunted from schoolgirl to schoolgirl till he falls straight into the arms of Susan, the one determined to hook him from the beginning – possesses much of the lapidary elegance we associate with Rohmer's *contes moraux*. Though Forsyth's social observation is far cannier than Truffaut's (he makes wonderfully evocative use of Scottish faces, landscapes and such assorted miscellanea as apple slab, Irn-Bru, san's shoes and Partick Thistle), it's possible to be reminded of Truffaut by the haunting transition that whisks us across town from Gregory's bedroom to Susan's, where she lies snuggled up in bed presumably dreaming of him. As for the Godardian epiphany when, stretched out on the grass, the couple persuade themselves that they can feel the earth's rotation, and Forsyth gently tilts the image to prove them right, it succeeds (as Godard's rarely did) in keeping their fleeting apprehension of cosmic immensity firmly rooted in a common, almost humdrum, human experience.

Still, *Gregory's Girl* is above all a comedy, and an even more eclectic one than *That Sinking Feeling*. Forsyth's dialogue now ranges from the suggestively Pinteresque ('What about Alan? D'ye think he's a virgin?' 'Och no, he's been in the school orchestra for over a year now') to the plain delirious (the amateur photographer's obsession with the word 'elephant' which, taking exactly one second to utter, is therefore useful for timing in a dark room); and at least one of his visual gags, surpassing even Keaton and Tati, approaches purity (in the exposed centre of an empty playground, Gregory, late for class, heroically endeavours to conceal himself behind nothing). From a uniformly delightful cast no one should be singled out. But special mention really has to be made of Chic Murray, a well-known Scottish comedian who plays the headmaster and, with a film-stopping (as one says 'show-stopping') piano solo, offers us a couple of minutes – or 120 elephants – of sheer bliss.

Gilbert Adair, *Sight & Sound*, Summer 1981

GREGORY’S GIRL

Director: Bill Forsyth
©/Production Company: National Film Trustee Company Ltd.
Production Companies: Lake Film Productions, National Film Finance Corporation, Scottish TV
Production Company: Film & General Productions *
Producers: Davina Belling, Clive Parsons
Production Supervisor: Paddy Higson
Accountant: Louise Coulter
Production Assistant: Margaret Waldie
Unit Runners: John Hardy, David Brown, David Ferguson
Assistant Director: Ian Madden
2nd Assistant Director: Terry Dalzell
Continuity: Anne Coulter
Screenplay: Bill Forsyth
Director of Photography: Michael Coulter
Camera Operator: Jan Pester
Focus Puller: Lewis Foster
Clapper Loader: Norman Halle
Gaffer: Alex MacKenzie
Grip: Allan Ross
Stills Photography: Tom Hilton
Editor: John Gow
Assistant Editor: Fiona MacDonald
2nd Assistant Editor: Stuart Rose
Art Director: Adrienne Atkinson
Assistant Art Director: Ross Balfour
Props: Gus Maclean
Costumes: Nadia Arthur
Make-up: Lois Burwell
Titles: National Screen Service Ltd.
Music: Colin Tully
Sound Mixer: Louis Kramer
Sound Assistant: Allan Brereton
Boom Operator: Cameron Crosbie
Dubbing Mixer: Tony Anscombe, Cine-Lingual Sound Studios
Football Coach: Donnie McKinnon
Thanks to: Alan Pattillo
Publicity: Geoff Freeman

Cast

John Gordon Sinclair (Gregory)
Dee Hepburn (Dorothy)
Jake D’Arcy (Phil Menzies)
Clare Grogan (Susan)
Robert Buchanan (Andy)
William Greenlees (Steve)
Alan Love (Eric)
Caroline Guthrie (Carol)
Carol Macartney (Margo)
Douglas Sannachan (Billy)
Allison Forster (Madeline)
Chic Murray (headmaster)
Alex Norton (Alec)
John Bett (Alistair)
David Anderson (Gregory’s dad)
Billy Feeley (Mr Anderson)
Maeve Watt (Miss Ford)
Muriel Romanes (Miss Welch)
Patrick Lewsley (Mr Hall)
Ronald Girvan (Alan)
Pat Harkins (Kelvin)
Tony Whitmore (Gordon)
Denis Criman (Richard)
Graham Thompson (Charlie)
Natasha Gerson (Brenda)
Christopher Higson (Penguin)

UK 1980©
91 mins

* Uncredited

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Seniors’ Free Matinee: Gregory’s Girl + discussion
Mon 16 May 14:00
Experimenta: Lensing the Landscape: River Yar + discussion with artists William Raban and Chris Welsby
Wed 18 May 18:15
Terror Vision: Ms .45 (AKA Angel of Vengeance)
Fri 27 May 18:30
Relaxed Screening: Frequencies (AKA OXV: The Manual) + intro and discussion
Mon 30 May 18:10
Projecting the Archive: Idol of Paris + intro by Josephine Botting, BFI Curator
Tue 31 May 18:15

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