

Ride Into the Sunset

Two brothers and a frozen corpse hit the road for a voyage of discovery.

BY BILL GALLO

Back when Bob, Bing, and Dorothy Lamour used to hit the road, they'd find diamond mines in Zanzibar, talking camels in Morocco, and causes to crack wise at every palm tree. By the time Thelma and Louise gassed up the car, they were ready to discover some other things — sisterhood, courage, and maybe the meaning of life. One of the most versatile genres in the Hollywood catalog, the road movie can be almost anything you want it to be, but it always helps if the players actually move on from here to there, emotionally speaking. Witness *Along for the Ride*, an intelligent, nicely made independent feature in which two feuding brothers, at large in a Cadillac convertible in rural Mexico, come to understand each other and their lifelong quarrels with an estranged father.

Shot in 35 millimeter for a measly

\$150,000, this first feature by a young Chicago-born director named Bryan W. Simon is an astonishing thing to behold, given the filmmakers' constraints, and it underscores the inestimable value of two elements that can come cheap — good writing and heartfelt acting. The underfed strivers who got *Ride* into the can were limited to just a 13-day shoot in the broiling Mojave Desert (near Palmdale and Ridgecrest), and it's clear that they went all out — dust storms, permit disputes, and heatstroke be damned.

The movie's older brother, one Terry Cowans (Randall Batinkoff), is a slick former big league pitcher who's ruined his arm but assures us he still has everything together — money, cars, women, winning attitude. Terry's playing the options market, don't you know, and it won't be a moment until he makes a fortune. Younger brother Vance (Dylan Haggerty) is a different sort — a scruffy, semi-hip mailman with some actual thoughts in his head, most of them brimming with anger and resentment over the traumas of his youth. Once a year, he traipses off to India or China or Peru, searching for himself.

Predictably, the brothers' first greeting in 10 years goes like this. Terry: "You alive?" Vance: "You care?"

After that, however, almost nothing in

Along for the Ride
Directed by Bryan W. Simon.
Screenplay by Jim Moores,
from a play by Randall
Wheatley. Starring Randall
Batinkoff, Dylan Haggerty, J.E.
Freeman, and Jenny Gago.
Runs Sat.-Sun., 10 a.m., at
Laemmle's Sunset 5.

this inventive and stubbornly offbeat little movie is predictable. For one thing, the third principal character happens to be dead, but that doesn't keep him from making lots of noise and stirring things up. Our incompatible fel-

low-travelers, Terry and Vance, have driven to a flea-bitten hamlet in Mexico to pick up the body of dear dad, Jake Cowans (J.E. Freeman), a bush league ballplayer who never made the majors but spent his life trying, while ostensibly ignoring his family. In tiny Villa Tristana, the sons find their father, still in his wheelchair, frozen stiff in a meat locker. Significantly, he's in the care of his mystical girlfriend, Maria (Jenny Gago).

In a new twist on an old trope, Jake is destined to spend the rest of the movie propped up in the backseat of Terry's El Dorado, not only thawing but insinuating his thoughts and posthumous advice into the troubled lives of his two alienated sons. This surreal turn ("Villa Tristana"? Surely we are meant to recall Buñuel) is as hilarious as it is macabre, and Freeman gives a wonderfully wry performance, especially for a corpse. The mysterious Maria has her own part in this transmigration of souls: "Jake and I have an understanding," she cryptically explains.

The "understanding," as we come to understand it, is that the shattered Cowans family deserves better things now that Dad

is gone. So the boys talk and bicker and explore old hurts, and soon they begin to strip away their fears. Backseat driver Jake here and there gruffly interrupts, imposing bad dreams and startling epiphanies upon his bedeviled offspring. Let's not spoil the journey; Said simply, Jake gives the kids his spirit while we have all the fun. Here are shades of *Ghost* by way of *Topper*, with a little *Sullivan's Travels*-style enlightenment mixed in for good measure.

Meanwhile, no self-respecting baseball fan will ignore the lovely, insistent tug that grand old game exerts on director Simon, screenwriter Jim Moores, and playwright Randall Wheatley, from whose work the script derives. Long before *The Natural* and *Field of Dreams* popularized the notion, baseball's mystical potential was a staple at the movies, and it's evoked with particular grace here. In fact, *Along for the Ride* brings vividly to mind the late poet and fan Donald Hall's classic assessment of the game, which could serve as a fitting epigraph to this brave, funny, and engaging movie. "Baseball is fathers and sons playing catch," Hall wrote, "lazy and murderous, wild and controlled, the profound archaic song of birth, growth, age, and death. The diamond encloses what we are."

Terry and Vance Cowans would likely agree, no matter what stretch of road they're traveling.

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