



DISAPPEARANCES

Vermont Threads Still Emerging in “Disappearances”

By Jay Craven

I’ve been on the road with “Disappearances” for five weeks now—and I’m discovering new layers in the film as I travel across the state on our 100 Town Tour. More than my other pictures, “Disappearances” continues to percolate in my imagination, thanks to audience interactions and the story’s open-ended magical realism. I’ve also been prompted to explore the film’s distinctively Vermont elements, rooted in Howard Mosher’s rich story.

Some of these Vermont touches were serendipitous. When we filmed the scene where Henry Coville’s ’32 Cadillac breaks down in the woods, sap buckets were still hanging from maple trees. There’s no mention of them in the script but it made sense to include them in the movie. The “Disappearances” story resembles a western, with its mythic themes, scruffy characters, rough-and-tumble action, and high-stakes quest to save the farm. But when Henry grabs a galvanized sap bucket to fetch some lake water, the film shows a distinctive Vermont touch.

Maple sugaring gets another nod when Kristofferson’s Quebec Bill meets Rusty DeWees’ Frog Lamundy and fails to convince the tight-fisted sawmill operator to lend him enough hay to get through winter. Empty-handed but unbowed, Quebec Bill puts a positive spin on his troubles.

“At least we won’t lose a fortune making maple syrup this year,” says Kris Kristofferson’s Quebec Bill. “That’s one worry I and Wild Bill don’t have.”

LaMundy lunges forward to set the record straight. “You know those maple trees you sold me,” Lamundy says. “They still had spouts. Nothing chews up and saw blade like an old sugar spout. Cost me pretty money.”

Some audience members chuckle in recognition of these distinctly Vermont phrasings and character sensibilities. Likewise, when inscrutable whiskey smuggler Henry Coville’s bullet-riddled Cadillac limps to a stop by the lake. Despondent, Henry doesn’t miss a beat when Quebec Bill volunteers himself and his son, Wild Bill, to help fix Henry’s battered car.

“We’ll do it, too, Hen,” says Quebec Bill.

“No we won’t,” replies Henry, almost to himself. “I will.”

Howard Mosher snagged hundreds of vivid phrases and character beats on the fly, while working the woods or traveling the Northeast Kingdom’s back roads during the early 60’s and 70’s. A few are familiar but most carry the fresh imprint of an original, adapted but clearly rooted in a North Country that’s unique even as it may be vanishing.

Think of Rat Kinneson’s retort after being offered some freshly cooked trout. “I don’t eat nothing that don’t walk on four legs like a man,” he says.



Or Wild Bill's school teacher and aunt, Cordelia, who addresses the boy as "young sir" and tells him, "it does no good for your mother to treat you like a prize fish."

"Mister man!" Quebec Bill exclaims to Henry, outside the hotel.

I avoid pushing Vermont accents on characters, since few actors can do them effectively. Kris Kristofferson can never sound like Fred Tuttle, but don't forget that Quebec Bill left Vermont for 30 years, looking for his father and working Texas oil rigs and the tall timber out west. I accept his voice and believe that the language itself conveys a fluid regional specificity.

French Canadian actress Genevieve Bujold's Cordelia provides much of the film's magical realism, and her mystical character is grounded in an eccentric turn-of-the-Century sensibility. She drills kids in Greek and classic literature in her one-room schoolhouse. Living isolated on a Northeast Kingdom farm since the 1870's, her imagination is enlivened and her spirit transported by her intense cultural interaction with the likes of Shakespeare, Milton, and Emerson.

In the woods, Cordelia describes the whiskey outlaw Carcajou to Wild Bill as a "loup garou," the mythic French Canadian bogeyman Quebecois kids learn to fear from harrowing bedtime tales.

At a recent screening in South Hero, one woman picked up a stray comment from Cordelia and ended up seeing "Disappearances" as a ghost story.

"I loved a man once, William," Cordelia says to Wild Bill while sharing some family history. "A fine brave soldier whom I killed on the Common before I ever saw his face."

Wild Bill can't make sense of it. "Pardon?" he says.

"Maybe Cordelia killed her father," said the woman in South Hero. "Or thought she did. Or wanted to. After he returned from war."

"Could be," I said.

The South Hero woman's comments grew on me over the next several days. I reflected on Cordelia's fatalism which could have been prompted by an unresolved past incident. And I'd always imagined a Civil War connection for Carcajou, based on Howard Mosher's image of the haunted outlaw, dressed in a Union officer's coat and firing a cannon from a cliff overlooking Lake Memphremagog.

Vermont suffered more Civil War losses, per capita, than any other state. I imagined Carcajou as being old enough to have fought in that devastating war. Perhaps he fled back to his native Canada to endure a lasting "curse" from all he experienced. Audiences can take this or leave it—or find their own ideas, as the woman in South Hero did.

After our show in Enosburg Falls, a farmer sent me an e-mail: "I saw your film last night and had to write. I am a third generation Vermonter on my father's side; my mother was Canadian. I was



brought up on a dairy farm and my wife and I are still running the same farm, milking 30 Jerseys. I feel I can give some perspective on your film.”

“Although the hills of Vermont are outwardly very pastoral and full of grandeur, I have always believed them to be full of mystery and secrets. As a teen, I thoroughly enjoyed reading “Mischiefs in the Mountains,” a compilation of mysteries and ghost stories from the Green Mountain State. Also, smuggling stories abound here in this region and the woods, swamps, and hills have hidden and still hide those who have something to get from one political line to another. The story hits close; it is a good tale.”

Urban critics often dismiss films that treat the natural world as being inherently nostalgic. This strange notion ignores what those of us who live here know as an outdoors that is grand and intimate, powerful and unyielding. In “Where the Rivers Flow North,” protagonist Noel Lord can not let go of this spectacular natural milieu. But neither can he tame it.

In “Disappearances,” the natural world’s power is less physical than magical, as we see through Cordelia’s connection to the snow owl and woods—and Quebec Bill’s half-baked rain making device. But Kristofferson’s Quebec Bill is clearly comfortable in the Kingdom’s physical world of lakes, hills, and streams. He catches trout, cooks it over a campfire, and advises his son on how to cut stakes and lash rope for a hand-made travois to transport him home. Even in April, he plunges into the frigid waters of Lake Memphremagog. He’s a true Vermonter.

The film’s natural world has many facets and as we face environmental crises in the 21st century, urban and suburban folks would do well to re-connect with the rural natural world as more than a nostalgic reflection or convenient backdrop.

A Champlain Valley Union school girl commented after one screening about this sense of place. “When I watch a Hollywood film that’s been shot in Vermont, I say, ‘it sort of feels like home,’” she said. “After watching “Disappearances,” I say, ‘It is home.’”

Of course, Mosher’s characters aren’t intended to be “typical” Vermonters but they do show qualities that a keen writer would surely observe. At a recent screening at the Woods Hole Film Festival, a man rose to ask a question. “I’m puzzled by Quebec Bill,” he said. “He’s smart and cunning but also irresponsible and doomed to failure.”

Before I could say a word, a marine biologist in the front blurted out. “Have you ever lived in northern Vermont?” he said. “I have.”

I like how Howard Mosher is drawn to flawed and even doomed characters because he celebrates



their spirit, intelligence, imagination, and indefatigable spirit. I have found much in his stories that connect to very specific notions of Vermont—ideas and images that I’ve been pleased and privileged to shape as my own.

“Disappearances” – A Revisionist Vermont Western?

Jay Craven

A recent editorial appeared in the Littleton (NH) Courier, following a “Disappearances” 100 Town Tour date. The editor kindly praised the film’s performances but lamented its depiction of the violence that occurs when protagonist Quebec Bill Bonhomme leads his son and sidekicks on a high-stakes whiskey heist across the Vermont/Quebec border.

The editorial made me reflect on what I intended in the film—and whether I had achieved what I was after. I have always seen the film as a “Vermont western,” replete with the kind of action that we associate with those classic American films. Like many western heroes, Quebec Bill is a rough-hewn individualist and a quasi-outlaw himself. As in “The Wild Bunch” and other westerns set after the rise of technology, the “Disappearances” characters use a motorized “horse” (Henry’s ’32 Cadillac) to elude a sophisticated foe (Carcajou with the latest weapons and a power boat). In Sergio Leone’s “Once Upon a Time in the West” a family secret is revealed at the end. This also happens in “Disappearances.”

The Magog tavern scene offers another western archetype—the saloon where our heroes enjoy some music, meet women, gather information, and set the stage for adventure. There’s even a fist-fight that ironically takes place between allies instead of enemies.

As in “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence” and “Shane,” “Disappearances” captures a moment just prior to the demise of the frontier. In “Liberty Valence,” when they return to the former frontier town years after it’s tamed, Vera Miles tells Jimmy Stewart, “the wilderness has become a garden.” In “Disappearances,” school teacher Cordelia suggests the opposite when she teaches her nephew Wild Bill how Milton’s “Paradise Lost” says “the Eden we once had has disappeared.”

Westerns frequently include family themes and they often tell simple morality tales set against beautiful scenery. “Disappearances” spins a classic coming-of-age story set in the stunning North Country. In it, Quebec Bill, an elder father, hopes to instill his own daring and “wildness” in his son, Wild Bill, while Cordelia instructs the boy on her ways of intuition, imagination, culture, and family history. Together, the boy’s father and aunt usher him the threshold of his maturity—but they ultimately leave Wild Bill to cross it alone.

Quebec Bill’s urge to dominate in the physical world is juxtaposed by the visionary Cordelia’s mysticism, magic, and inspired connections to Shakespeare, Milton, Emerson, and the Greek poets. Wild Bill hears a dizzying dose of Cordelia’s cryptic aphorisms and experiences an equally dazzling succession of aggressive confrontations during his father’s last great whiskey run.

But what do the film’s violent incidents say? Apart from being conventions of the genre, I’d argue that they reveal rather than indulge Quebec Bill’s impulsive ethos of “shoot now, ask questions



later” and his belief that he can prevail through simple cunning and force. Indeed, isn’t one of story’s messages about the futility of this violence? No matter how many times Quebec Bill wields his shotgun or battles his foe hand-to-hand aboard a speeding train, his nemesis re-appears for another round.

Still, Quebec Bill’s adventure quest provides valuable life lessons for Wild Bill—and the kid unexpectedly needs his heightened instincts when he’s forced to defend himself in a tight bind.

In most westerns, characters are unaffected by violence and emotionally detached from killing. In “Disappearances,” Quebec Bill fits this mold but the kid is clearly different.

“Dad, I killed one of Carcajou’s men,” Wild Bill tells his father atop Carcajou’s boat.

“Good,” says Quebec Bill, without missing a beat.

Still upset, Wild Bill solicits his dad again the next morning. “I can’t believe I killed a man,” he says.

“You had a decision to make,” says Quebec Bill. “Other than myself, I never met anybody who could think faster than you.”

“I had no choice, Dad,” the kid says, reaching for empathy.

Quebec Bill chooses to miss the point. “You’re a good whiskey runner son,” he says. “I know that and I’m proud of you.”

Unable to engage his father, Wild Bill looks off into the forest and tells his dad to go along without him. Walking into the woods, he conjures/encounters Cordelia who comments disapprovingly on Quebec Bill’s tumultuous caper.

“Beware young man,” Cordelia says. “Hell is empty. All the demons are here.”

It takes the mystical Cordelia to finally vanquish Carcajou. As she tells the kid in the woods, she knows how to break the madman’s curse—not through force but from her intuitive power, rooted in her knowledge of nature, culture, archetypes, fables, signs, and her family’s legacy.

We’re all exposed to too much violence, especially through electronic mass media that dish it out with dispassionate excess. Strangely, a growing number of Hollywood pictures even take the position that “violence is fun.”

My friend Rick Winston runs Montpelier’s Savoy Theater and he’s commented to me how many audience members steer clear of films like Oscar-nominees “Capote” and “A History of Violence” that include bloodshed. I understand this reaction but “Capote” explores a dozen potent themes and “A History of Violence,” while graphic beyond anything you’d see in “Disappearances,” comments profoundly on the nature and character of violence.



Legendary film critic Pauline Kael's 1974 essay, "Killing Time" provides insight into this complex issue, which she approached according to how violence is depicted.

"It's the emotionlessness of so many violent movies that I'm becoming anxious about," Kael wrote, "not the rare violent movies (*Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Godfather*, *Mean Streets*) that make us care about the characters and what happens to them. A violent movie that intensifies our experience of violence is very different from a movie in which acts of violence are perfunctory."

I've used elements from the western to spin a North Country yarn—and to comment on some of the genre's conventions, including its use of violence. Violence surrounds us in this time of war, transgression, and unrest. Sometimes its depiction can lead us to understand and even mitigate its grip on us.

The filmmaker's job is to pose questions rather than answer them. I hope my "revisionist western" stimulates audiences to consider some of these ideas—and others.