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Film review

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FILM REVIEW

A job at healthcare

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***The barbarian invasions* (Miramax, 2003). Director: Dennys Arcand**

This movie has won an Academy Award. The director is a celebrated talent. The characters in the movie are from an earlier, feted oeuvre (*The Decline of the American Empire*, 1986). So when I sat down to review *The barbarian invasions* the daggers were drawn. A few minutes into the movie, however, all this has changed. In fluid tracking shots I am whooshed through a long line of beds with patients hooked to saline bottles and assorted beeping medical contraptions. It took a while for it to hit me. This is the corridor of the hospital where the rooms are literally overflowing with patients. And it is in Quebec in Canada, where according to Michael Moore's *Sicko*, you get the best medical care in the world! Clearly, director Denis Arcand has chosen shock therapy.

Here, Arcand tells the story of terminally ill Remy (Remy Girard) who seeks to make peace with the world he has lived in. So you see him pinned down in a hospital bed while his family and friends reach out for him in spite of the fact that he has had a rather self-serving existence until then. Remy has been an adulterer, a poor father and, by his own admission, had a lacklustre career. He is fortunate to find compassion in his support group.

But not in the healthcare system. In scene after scene the director seeks to satirise the apathy inherent in a health care

system that is creaking with overload. So you see amusing sequences like the Holy Communion going to the wrong patient, or a doctor comforting a patient without knowing his name or ailment. The scenes where the union-led workers are willing to do anything after a little greasing of the palms seem very similar to the malaise in India.

In one sweeping statement the director declares that the system is sick. Forget cure, it is even unable to deliver a compassionate death. Which is why we see the family deciding the course of Remy's treatment much against medical advice. The son actually smuggles in cocaine to ease his father's pain.

The characters uniformly suffer from verbal diarrhoea. The reminiscences reek of baby boomer yada-yada. The tales of sexual conquest drip with pre-AIDS syrupiness. But the film has huge merits. One has seen many flicks where individuals discontent with the system take the law into their own hands. This one has them commandeer medical treatment. While the major part of the film is about how Remy is eased into a peaceful death, what really linger are the jagged moments at the hospital. And, herein lies the true worth of this film. It forces you to ponder over the real state of healthcare. Can compassion ever be delivered on an assembly line? Can empathy be administered intravenously? Does the health bureaucracy have a heart? These indeed are the piercing questions.

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