

# FOCUS ON CRITICISM

## Follow That Rainbow: Operation Update

Keyan G Tomaselli

The first South African film, The Kimberley Diamond Robbery was produced in 1910. In 1916, De Voortrekkers/Winning a Continent, acclaimed worldwide, dramatically married a sense of locale and history. 1949 - Jim Comes to Joburg (African Jim) portrays a powerful rendition of life during the 1940's. Seven years later, Jamie Uys' Daar Doer in die Bosveld marked the first pure Afrikaans film offering. 1974 - Boesman and Lena - a statement on bulldozers, squatters, demolition and homelessness.

1979AD. Stage entertainer Loius Burke speaking on his first movie, Follow That Rainbow: "I set out to make a big, entertaining musical like the dazzlers of the 1940's". The result is operation update. R1.2 million later we have a mechanically engineered "spectacular family Christmas musical", a sugar-coated 'wholesome' entertainment with old fashioned values and tearjerker (as opposed to snot en tranen) sentiment - a Brickhill-Burke follies parade with a bit of celluloid thrown in.

The obsession of some filmmakers to resurrect something called "family entertainment" which is aimed at a mass market has its roots in the Hollywood studio system of the 1930's and '40's when production lines were geared to producing uniform and standardised products. The idea of a segmented market or sub-cultures of taste horrified producers who took umbrage at the suggestion that their films did not have mass appeal. Consequently, they made expensive extravaganzas which, in order for them to make a profit, had to be aimed at as wide an audience as possible. With the decline of the studio system, however, this was no longer possible, for audience tastes together with consequent changes in financing, production methods, and competition from industries showed up the built-in obsolescence of the Hollywood production line which restricted progress and experimentation outside established formulas. The result was that where previously one large budget movie was made, now three or four could be produced for the same cost. Only one had to be financially successful to recoup a profit on the budget laid out on all four. Thus, Hollywood initially ensured a high standard for the average product that few other national film industries could emulate. By inducing higher expectations in their audiences, however, Hollywood forced the world to meet its standards of professional competence if other industries wanted to compete at all. When several countries did, in fact do as, the heyday of Hollywood was over and the studio system dismantled in favour of a more flexible, more innovative structure of production, and hence the quality of film.

On the completion of operation update Burke states that he is "happy with the result". Follow that Rainbow is formulaic, rigidly following the Hollywood genre established during the '30's and '40's. Where That's Entertainment extracted the extravagant and the indulgent, Follow That Rainbow is thinner, more stagey than cinematic, a mixture of a watered down Sound of Music and a simplified Stars over Broadway. The viewer is transported into a world of operetta cheerfulness and calender art, a predictable "It will all come right in the end".

In order to fully assess the cinematic value of Follow That Rainbow, it is first

necessary to examine the structure of the typical Hollywood musical. The 1930's saw the vintage years of the child performers, Shirley Temple in particular. Like Follow That Rainbow's Memory Jane, she sang, danced, showed a rare independence and generally got everybody organised. Most musicals incorporate singing and dancing and often the instrumental performances lack sufficient visual imagery to justify the interruption of the story. Often too, they are without thematic relevance to the action. Follow That Rainbow avoids this trap. Musical are generally characterized by simple story lines which lack the complexity found in dramatic films. The result may be a superficiality of theme, a linear predictability and a dull story. Rainbow, although offering a fairly complex plot, remains however, entirely predictable even down to the 'good baddie' and the 'bad baddie', so typical of South African films. Some situations are oversimplified and lack credibility as exemplified in the ridiculously amateurish kidnapp payoff.

Like most musicals Rainbow is primarily realistic in character. Obviously, the musical numbers are not, but the connecting narrative material remains realistic in both environment and characterizations. The continuity of the story depends on a contemporary and recognizable setting while the musical interludes may indulge in a fantastical discontinuity, as for example, where the orphan girls are singing and dancing in the orphanage gardens. Here behaviour is fragmented, characters jump from one place to another, reappear in yet a different location and generally descend upon the camera in a fragmented way during the same song.

The heroes of musicals often behave in a devious manner, but since the viewer knows that they are by nature good people, he expects that their better judgement will eventually show itself and that their inherent characteristics of honesty, integrity, compassion and kindness will prevail. In Follow That Rainbow we first see Johnny Madison as an arrogant, unconcerned, selfish playboy who is irritated and bored with his wife, Carrie. Amongst other things, he accuses her of riding his back to success. Johnny has an eye for the dancing girls and a quick temper with the stage hands. Carrie is portrayed as an overly made-up insipid sort of Mae West, the driving force behind Johnny's career. Her unselfish and generous spirit is evident in her efforts to repair a damaged marriage and guide an ungrateful and ungracious falling star. Carrie also devotes some considerable effort to the happiness of the orphan girls and incorporates them in Johnny's show, much to their delight. When Melody is kidnapped, the real character in Johnny emerges and he agrees to pay a ransom for a girl who, despite what the kidnappers mistakenly think, is not his daughter. He later identifies her real father and takes Melody to see him in hospital at the risk of being late for his show in another city. Everything comes right in the end and everybody lives happily thereafter (except Melody's father who dies).

In Follow That Rainbow, the hero, Johnny Madison, exhibits musical talents somewhat out of keeping with the musical environment of the film. He is an ageing star, a diluted sort of big-bandsman with dancing girls, a style that is out of place and dated when seen against the upbeat supporting cast. However, the premonition of a happy ending is entirely predictable. The child orphan finds a new set of parents. The squabbling couple, Johnny and Carrie make up. The theatre audience acknowledges the continued star quality in Carrie despite a 15 year retirement, and Johnny is shown to human after all. The whole plot is neatly tied up on the stage in front of the spectators, and the cinema viewers.

It is now necessary to return to the issue of the mass market. A decade ago film director Jans Rautenbach lamented that the proven formula script will advertise itself as "Entertainment for the whole family". He went on to state that this recipe is gelled from a little love, a few songs, a couple of jokes, a little heartbreak, a bit of drama, a few mountains and is decorated by an attractive face and a pretty figure. Follow That Rainbow has all this - and a

advertise itself as "Entertainment for the whole family". He went on to state that this recipe is gelled from a little love, a few songs, a couple of jokes, a little heartbreak, a bit of drama, a few mountains and is decorated by an attractive face and a pretty figure. Follow That Rainbow has all this - and a bit more. Instead of the Drakensberg, we have the Swiss Alps, for example. No doubt this has something to do with tapping the international market place.

By South African standards the budget is astronomical, possibly too high to make a profit in the local market. Consequently, it must be aimed at the widest audience possible to break even with the help of the state subsidy system. It is unlikely to appeal to Black audiences, for unlike Jim Comes to Joburg which revealed the music and life of an era, Follow That Rainbow is bland, totally bypassing an indigenous musical ambience. This quality, earlier musicals like Kom Sam Vanaand and Song of Ceylon accomplish more successfully.

Follow That Rainbow will appeal to people who think that Third World cinema is Bruce Lee and who measure a film's worth in terms of formula rather than innovation, genre rather than deviation and probability rather than information. Its links with South African society are not as tenuous as might appear at first glance, for though seemingly sterilized of local influences and occurring in a cultural vacuum, the film does unconsciously reflect the values of White English speaking South Africans - its preoccupation with money, prestige and economic power. Like most South African films made in the English language, Follow That Rainbow is basically a rootless experience. It could be set anywhere - much as the English speaking population follows the stock exchanges of the world, the international cash flows and its overseas banking accounts. This rootless experience, however, is indicative of a deeper structural relationship: the English speaker's lack of identification with the social history of South Africa and his continuing position as an outsider, if not an outlander. The social sterility of South African English culture is a recurring reflection in local cinema, a perpetuation of the English colonial mentality. Unlike Afrikaans film, naive as it may be, English renditions generally avoid any kind of reference to the history or diversity of cultures found in this country. Instead, the deeper meanings have to be identified, not through their existence in the text, but through their omission. More noticeably so than in Afrikaans film, English language films appear to exist in a state of cultural limbo and social sterility where anything which connects it with indigenous culture is ruthlessly excised from the text. On the rare occasions that Blacks are seen, for example, their roles are restricted to stereotyped interpretations (eg. 'witchdoctor', 'rickshaw boy' etc.), even more so than in Afrikaans film. Follow That Rainbow is self-contained within the confines of the genre which is slavishly followed to the point of cliché. This genre, which is totally American in orientation, behaves like a safety mechanism which filters, controls and ultimately eliminates any desire or need to consciously examine the social significance or musical environment of the South Africa the film is apparently set in.

Nevertheless, this film is a lot more sophisticated technically than earlier musicals made in South Africa. Apart from some flaws in dubbing and sound perspective it exhibits a high standard of technical competence. Thematically and dramatically Follow That Rainbow is reminiscent of a 1930's Hollywood. This is both its strength and its weakness. It looks to Hollywood for inspiration, for slickness, for set design and costume. The photography is pacy and adventurous, although in a sentimental greeting card sort of way. Rainbow's strength is that it successfully fulfills the rules of the early musical genre - no more, no less. Its weakness is that it lacks a sense of place and social location because of its over-reliance on Hollywood style imagery, techniques, themes and values.