

## The maddest, 'Saddest Music'

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If you are the kind of person who orders unknown dishes at restaurants, aware that what comes out of the kitchen might not be to your taste, go see "The Saddest Music In The World." That's not a put-down of the film, just a warning: the film is not for the unadventurous movie-goer.

Not that there's sadistic violence or explosions in it, although there is a bit of sex. It's just that the film is a very dark comedy whose purposely grainy, out-of-focus images make it look like an old silent film that's been buried in a condemned salt mine for 80 years.

The storyline, about a beautiful brewery owner in Canada who sponsors a worldwide contest to determine the saddest music in the world, is the springboard for minor jabs at things Canadian and a major satire on things American. It moves along like a nightmare dreamed by a crazed anarchist gag writer whose knowledge of old films is muddled in his subconscious with his politics.

It turns out that the brewer lost her legs years before in an auto accident. A father and son, who both loved her, were responsible for the accident and the loss of her legs.


This son, Chester Kent, the film's protagonist, claims to be an American producer of musicals, although his father says he just has "the stink" of Americanism on him. In the scene before the viewer learns that, a fortuneteller tells a scoffing Chester he is going to die, concluding with the words, "See how much money your happiness can buy then."

Happiness and money, money and happiness: America's household gods. Chester tells everyone he is always happy. He is that American folk hero, the brash, overconfident, overly optimistic, arrogant go-getter who was extolled in the Horatio Alger success stories of the 19th century. He is epitomized in American film first by Douglas Fairbanks Sr., then Harold Lloyd, and after that by any number of fast-talking Hollywood leading men all the way up to Tom Cruise. And it's no coincidence that Jimmy Cagney played a fast-talking Broadway producer also named Chester Kent in 1933's "Footlight Parade."

In "Saddest Music," we watch Chester's headlong pursuit of money lead him to heartlessly cheat on women, lie, co-opt or buy the musicians of every country and finally burn down the town in the film's apocalyptic conclusion.

By that time, the comparison of Chester and his ways to our corporate free market practices and current foreign policy is uncomfortably close.

Studded with witty repartee and nonsequiturs reminiscent of '30s screwball comedies, the film, in the end, is a feast for film cognoscenti. They will recognize in the brewer's new glass legs and frowny blond wig a warped vision of Marlene Dietrich in 1930's "The Blue Angel," and in Chester's dad, the inventor of the legs, the mad scientist Rotwang, who creates the evil robot Maria for his capitalist sponsor in Fritz Lang's 1926 film "Metropolis."



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At the same time, the views of Winnipeg, as well as the makeup, looks and tantrums of Chester's sad, half-mad brother uncannily resemble the sets of Holstenwall in 1919's "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" and the character of Cesare, the somnambulist who murders at the evil doctor's bidding.

Add to this the many montages, iris and Dutch angle shots, and the copious intercutting of 1930s documentary footage, and the viewer seems to have been whisked back to an earlier time in film history, where scene after scene recalls a half-remembered film from the past, from the resemblance of the beer-hall footage to the saloon scenes in Chaplin's "Gold Rush" to several shots that recall Orson Welles's unhappy American millionaire in "Citizen Kane." And the echoes and references to old films go on and on.

In the end, what is cooking in director Guy Maddin's kitchen is a rich stew with everything in the world thrown into it and bubbling in the great American melting pot. The apocalyptic implications of that final dish is even more disturbing than this disturbing, wonderful film.

*Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program, "Cinema Scene," on Comcast Cable channel 27, every Thursday and Sunday at 8:30 p.m. He will lead a discussion on "The Saddest Music" this Saturday at 1:45 p.m. at the Nickelodeon. Admission is free.*

If You Go

WHAT: 'The Saddest Music in the World.'

RATING: Not rated: Could be PG-13 for adult themes, sexual situations and one scene of gore.

WHERE: Nickelodeon, 426-7500.

LENGTH: 1 hour, 39 minutes.

VERDICT: A.

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