

Two for the Road Program Notes by Kimberley Jones

Divorce, as depicted in the American mainstream cinema in the 1960s, ran the gamut, from the sweet but dippy *THE PARENT TRAP* (1961) to the Norman Lear-scripted *DIVORCE AMERICAN STYLE* (1967), with its sneering opening sequence that reduced matrimonial discord to a faceless chorus of complaints. For a more honest look at the hardships of marriage, with an emphasis on the unique, not the universal, one had to look farther afield – namely, to Europe.

For a series on the comedies of remarriage, the inclusion of *TWO FOR THE ROAD* (1967) is, I admit, a bit of a cheat: There's no divorce, hence, no remarriage. Instead, Mark and Joanna Wallace (played by Albert Finney and Audrey Hepburn) are constantly teetering on the precipice of a breakup, only to pull back at the last minute. In a sense, they are continually renewing their vows to one another, even as they are breaking them.

The British novelist and screenwriter Frederic Raphael (*DARLING*, *FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD*) conceived of the film while on a road trip with his wife through the south of France. Raphael recalled having the thought, "Imagine if we overtook ourselves on the road ten years ago. Ten years seemed a long time in those days. Then I said, 'Wait a minute. That's a movie.'" That slim idea sprouted into an ingeniously plotted portrait of a marriage, chronicled in a series of road trips through France set at different entry points and told out of order. There are Londoners Mark and Joanna, just barely out of their teens, meeting by happenstance and falling in love while hitchhiking together. There they are as newlyweds, on an ill-advised trip with Mark's American ex-girlfriend (Eleanor Bron), her supercilious husband (William Daniels), and bratty young daughter. There they are, still struggling to establish Mark's career as an architect when their ailing MG puts them in the path of a wealthy client. (The film cleverly helps signpost each period with a new car – the MG drop-top, a Ford station wagon, a Triumph Herald, a sleek Mercedes roadster). And finally, there they are years later, with a comfortable lifestyle and an awful chasm growing between them. Raphael pitched the film to the director Stanley Donen, who declared the finished script, with its inventive structure and arch, circular dialogue, just about perfect.

Donen, who started in Hollywood when he was only 20 years old, had at this point already enjoyed great success as the co-director and co-choreographer with Gene Kelly of song-and-dance films like *ON THE TOWN* (1949) and *SINGIN' IN THE RAIN* (1952). After their partnership fell apart, Donen went on to make *SEVEN BRIDES FOR SEVEN BROTHERS* (1954), *THE PAJAMA GAME* (1957, co-directed with George Abbott), and *FUNNY FACE* (1957), among others. But by the early to mid Sixties, the public demand for extravagant musicals was on the wane. Donen relocated to London and began to focus more on sophisticated comedies, including his second pairing with Audrey Hepburn, the much-loved light thriller *CHARADE* (1963).

Donen called on Hepburn again when the script for TWO FOR THE ROAD was completed, but she balked. Part of her resistance was because she felt it was too similar to her last picture, the ineffective PARIS WHEN IT SIZZLES, which was sunk in part by costar Gary Cooper's well-documented dissipation. But more to the point, at least according to biographers, was that Hepburn was skittish about the part. The character of Joanna Wallace hit awfully close to home – Hepburn, too, had been married for 12 years and had firsthand experience of the effects of infidelity on a marriage. Further, this was a very different kind of role for Hepburn. At 37, she knew she was aging out of the wide-eyed gamine roles that shot her to stardom, but she wasn't sure audiences wanted to see her stretch quite this far out of her wheelhouse.

Hepburn eventually agreed, largely on the advice of her business-savvy husband Mel Ferrer. But who to pair her with? Paul Newman passed. In later years, Raphael said he wanted Rock Hudson for the part. ("I wanted someone who could say lines," he explained. "I like lines being said correctly, and English actors are not all that good at film dialogue. They're quite good at acting, but that isn't the same thing.") Albert Finney, who'd had a hit with TOM JONES (1963), landed the role, but his own director ultimately decided that the casting fundamentally shifted the film's tone. "TWO FOR THE ROAD is not meant to be as downbeat as it is," Donen told his biographer Stephen M. Silverman. "If you read the script, you won't get the same feeling."

Finney has an almost overwhelmingly forceful presence in the film. His Mark is a heel. ("Albie doesn't like to play anything charming," Donen said.) He's bullying, even brutish, with a wolfish appetite for ambition, for sex, for getting his way. He's also incredibly sexy – a revelation for younger audiences who only know of the portly gruff goat of ERIN BROCKOVICH or THE BOURNE ULTIMATUM – and rumors of an intense on-set affair with Hepburn seem not only plausible but preordained, so electric is their connection onscreen. Certainly, Finney makes the character far less cuddly than one of his American counterparts might have. An unabashed Rock Hudson admirer, I shudder to think what TWO FOR THE ROAD might have played like with him as the lead – a frolicsome sex comedy, I imagine, and not the masterpiece of melancholy we have today. That might not have been the effect Raphael and Donen were going for, but through their own canny casting, they found actors unafraid of tapping the ugly emotions attendant to a marriage – his sourness, her palpable rage and helplessness – that makes the film feel so very true.

American moviegoers didn't know what to make of it. The studio, Fox, held a disastrous preview at Radio City Music Hall, stocking the theatre with college students, not exactly the target audience for a film about a long-married couple in distress. At a junket the next morning, New York Times critic Bosley Crowther savaged the film. As Donen recalled, Crowther unfavorably compared the film to Antonioni's BLOW-UP (1966), which, Crowther supposedly said, "had the courage to ... show pubic hair on the screen." Donen replied, "Bosley, if I had known that pubic hair would have gotten me a good review, I would have brought you a bucketful of it." His speech ended with him calling Crowther "an impossible son of a bitch," to a round of applause.

TWO FOR THE ROAD was better received in Europe, and Raphael was nominated for an Oscar for the script. Hepburn's performance, which Donen considered the best of her career, was ignored; she was nominated instead for WAIT UNTIL DARK (she lost to Katherine Hepburn for GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER). Donen, too, was overlooked; he'd have to wait 31 years for the Academy to give him an honorary Oscar for "grace, elegance, wit, and visual innovation" – all of which can be seen in abundance in TWO FOR THE ROAD.

SOURCES:

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Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood by Mark Harris (The Penguin Press, 2008)