

The Long and the Tall of It.
Carefully Carefree, Amalie Atkins cloth-tale films
a review by Gerald Saul

With her two recent films, “Three Minute Miracle” [2008] and “Scenes from a Secret World” [2009], Saskatoon-based artist and filmmaker Amalie Atkins has woven together a fantastic world from fiber and sky. On the surface, these are prairie fairy tales featuring unrealistic costumed animals shot in faux silent film style. While the initial impression of them is frivolity, a closer examination reveals a multitude of discrete layers. Far from simple costume play, Atkins’ films are a sophisticated blend of art forms, all in service of a singular filmic vision.

My initial impulse when seeing projects in this style is to consider them to be based more in performance, design, or visual art than in film. However, with these works I do not believe this to be the case. To begin with, by using title cards and old fashioned music, Atkins clearly wishes to call to mind early naïve cinema. “Three Minute Miracle” even contains purposeful “flaws”; jump cuts, continuity breaks, flash frames, missing frames and other imperfections, evoking film damage and the early days of motion pictures. Her films exhibit a strong clarity of vision, pulling together these cinematic tropes and using them with purpose and consistency. Her shooting style is minimalist, using few camera movements, natural lighting from available sources, straight forward editing, and a soundtrack of music and occasional sound effects. The song “I’ve got a new set of teeth” is a welcome ear worm. These films are lusciously colourful and a delight to listen to. The medium of film gives Atkins the ability to mix the intimacy of small sewn objects with the epic grandeur of the prairie sky; contrasts which reinforce her stories in a way impossible in other artistic forms.

A dominant characteristic of Atkins’ films is the use of cloth in her costumes and props. They have a roughly made quality which constantly reminds the spectator of the disconnect film has from reality; the simple fact that what we are watching is not real. However, by *rough* I do not mean to suggest *crudity*, for in fact the objects Atkins presents have a bold and vibrant aesthetic that pulls us into a realm of the most delicious children’s storybooks. The designs impress their images onto the viewer’s eye, becoming iconic during the course of their own film.

Allegorical elements abound. Many characters and images are highly familiar such as: the lone girl in red traveling through the woods; witches and wolves; the actions of crossing of bridges and rivers, and picking ripe fruit. This iconography creates an initial comfort as we view the films. We feel certain that we will be capable of easily decoding them. Again, first impressions of Atkins’ films can be deceiving. The structure seems more a dream-like, random, stream of consciousness than a tight narrative. Atkins takes liberty with traditional tales, sampling where she wants. Notions of good and evil are displaced by connection versus indifference, isolation versus community, and generosity versus greed. In “Scenes from a Secret World”, the lone wolf in the woods, one of the most traditional folklore monsters, is not fearsome but is, instead, victimized. The girl must step out from her role of inactive spectator to being an active participant, literally taking the place of the wolf to avenge and eventually resuscitate him.

Even though we want to read these broad graphic strokes as easy signifiers of good and evil, protagonist and antagonist, prowler and prey, we quickly discover complexity. Atkins shapes a world which does not conform to the storybook or the art gallery or the stage conventions but is, instead, postmodern in both form and content. She requires that we

understand and move beyond our preconceived notions of what a fairy tale is. One thing that does remain from the traditional tales is the sense that our actions and activities have meaning. For example, a recurring motif is the *gift*. The importance of an unsolicited gift is central in “Three Minute Miracle”. The witch gives a tooth to the girl which later allows her to unlock the music. Other gifts, notable for their lack of motivation or reciprocity, are the girl giving icing to the birds, a cake to the wolf, and water to the tree.

The films are structured around journeys, a familiar trope in Canadian Cinema. However, the road leads from encounter to encounter rather than from place to place. Within “Three Minute Miracle” the girl’s walk through the landscape is punctuated by encounters with a wolf, a witch, a bird, and a community. These encounters not only emphasize the recurring dualities and binaries we see throughout the films, and the differences between individuals, but also suggest the possibilities for connections. The girl cannot see into the windows of the church but then crosses into the building and sees everyone from inside. The girl sees the wolf through the bushes and, when he is decapitated, puts on his head and fights his enemies with the combination of his strength and her wits. This journey/encounter structure also suggests further allegories with each event representing a challenge in life and an important choice. Simplified to one-on-one encounters, the choices of the character, and by virtue the filmmaker, are opened up to endless interpretations by the viewer.

Contrary to the binary separations present in these films, there also exists a fluidity of the social order. In “Three Minute Miracle”, the girl is able to enter the cultural group of animals inside the church and, while obviously an outsider, interact with them as an equal and leave again without hindrance. While the wolf does not reciprocate with gift giving in “Three Minute Miracle”, no resentment is held towards him. The wolf and the girl live peacefully near each other in “Scenes from a Secret World”, with her watering the trees and him attaching the apples.

At first, these two films by Amalie Atkins appear straightforward and undemanding. With closer examination, they are increasingly intriguing and reveal multiple layers of subtext which challenge audience expectations. Atkins’ unpredictable story structure combined with her use of simple graphic design and filmmaking style creates a dialectic which stretches the viewers notion of “fairy tale” innocence. The prairie landscape seems ironically lush as she populates it with characters and objects sewn from boldly coloured cloth. Perhaps it is this open air that keeps the characters true; they are masked but lack deception, utterly fabricated but somehow maintaining a balance of truth and idealism.