



REVIEW of *Used and Borrowed Time* by Sophia Romma

When I was asked to write a review for *Used and Borrowed Time*, I read the synopsis and thought it sounded cool. It's a period piece and I happen to enjoy period pieces. It has a bit of a fantasy supernatural element. I like that too. Then I glanced at the run time... three hours and forty minutes! I about had a stroke. I double checked to see if it wasn't a Bollywood film. It isn't.

Once over my initial shock, I sat down and began to watch it and instantly several things became clear. For one, writer and director Sophia Romma is a strange bird... which is a good thing. She's also very progressive and takes a rock solid stance on big issues like racism, politics and religious hypocrisy. All very good qualities. This lady doesn't pull punches, but for the faint of heart and those who shy away from dark humor and profanity, this may be a bit gritty and won't be your cup of tea. Thirdly, which explains the lengthy runtime, Romma is a playwright and this film has the stage written all over it. From lengthy monologues and scene dynamics that often run the clock, to over the top performances and lyrical sounding dialogue, it is a theater production caught on film.

Don't get me wrong. I think the lady is brilliant and daring, because taking something tailored for the stage and MacGyvering it to the screen doesn't always work. *Cats* is a good example. The question is, does this film work? I've just finished watching it and although there was a lot I loved, there was some I didn't and I still haven't reached a verdict. The truth is, what works for one may not for another. There really is no right or wrong... just taste. So, this review is just one man's opinion.

Eva Gold, a blind woman in the twilight of her years, encounters a cast of magical and kooky characters at an enchanted country fair. After gorging herself on apple pie, she is magically transported back to her youth where she revisits a past love and the horrific night when he was suddenly snatched from her. The concept is wonderful and the flavor is captured by a



tremendously talented cast. Emily Seibert plays the young version of Eva and Clas Duncan is her black civil rights warrior boyfriend, Steadroy Johnson. Both do a great job as the biracial couple, alone in the woods and full of passion, debating whether to make love right there in the forest. The clichés and stereotypes are amazing. Clas actually knocks it out of the park, fearing retaliation if caught with a white girl in a small town in the Deep South. The young lovers sneak into a shed and are caught by a family of rednecks who put them through hell.

The family matriarch, Blanche Woods (played by Maureen O'Connor) is spectacular as a bible thumping racist with tunnel vision. Her brother, Wade (played by Grant Morenz) takes things beyond most comfort levels as a sadistic gay rapist. Blanche's slow witted son, Jed (played by Gavin Rohrer), is also a rapist, though a conflicted one.

The family forces the couple into their house at gun point and debates whether to rape, murder or release them, all while remembering to say grace, exchange gifts and enjoy Christmas dinner. Constantly at odds and threatening to kill one another, a lone voice of reason and bearing a glimmer of humanity arrives in the form of Blanche's eldest daughter and Jed's sister, Lorna, who is visiting from up north. Lorna (played by Alice Kelly Bahike), while a bigot and hypocrite herself, pleads on deaf ears for their release. "It's the charitable thing to do." An interesting note, Alice also plays Kitty O'Neill, the carnie who baked the magic pies that send Eva back in time. I only picked up on that while scanning the credits.

At three plus hours, I could go on for pages about all the clever references and buried treasures tucked away in the story. The writing is solid, though very stylized. As I said, I felt I was watching a Broadway play. The dialogue is full of rhymes and 'schtick' with lots of period references. It works, but for many, it could be too much and get tiresome very quickly. There's nothing worse than a film that pushes too hard. *Used and Borrowed Time* teeters on the edge.



To be completely honest, it felt like two entirely different films to me. There's the present, where Eva encounters the kooky carnies at the fair where she battles the sorcerous pastry chef that sends her back in time and then the scenes that take place in 1960's Alabama. The two timelines look and feel very different with the scenes at the fair appearing a little small and staged.

The film opens with some sweeping aerial shots of a bustling amusement park with rides and a crowd. We then cut to passersby stopping at a few kiosks. We still hear the noise from the crowd, but we lose those reference shots tying it all together and suddenly we're left with two or three people on screen at a time. There are no reverse angles showing crowds in the background. Those opening shots just aren't enough. You need multiple angles and geography to maintain the illusion. Understood, in a theatrical production, you do your best with limited space and much is left to the imagination. With cinema, you can create a much deeper world with multiple angles.

As well, the dialogue felt a little hokey and forced. Sophia Romma makes an appearance, stopping by a fortune teller and saying, "Lot's of nice things you're selling here, like these candied apples. Wow... how much? \$2, huh... that's reasonable. Those look delicious!" A minute or two later when Eva and her granddaughter are strolling through the park, "I'm glad you've taken me here, the fair, this festival, it's your past... it's so awe inspiring," Romma says, disguised in a mask, this time portraying Eva's granddaughter. The opening sequence just doesn't match the same level of excellence as the rest of the film. I get it's supposed to be a little hokey and over the top. Sometimes that works and other times, not so much. The use of computer graphics to add to the flavor of magic with a snake and giant cat and circus strongman appearing from nowhere was very cool!

For those period scenes where Eva is sent to the 1960's, the movie shifts gears and things instantly ramp up. I won't give all the credit to the talent because, in my opinion, the acting in this film is top notch across the board.



I don't think it's a case of one group being better than another. They all worked with what was given. Sometimes, the dialogue was spot on. Other times, I felt it was too hammy or in need of tweaking. Again, this is just an opinion. I personally think the script was close to genius, just slightly off the mark in places.

The cinematography is great. Vladzimir Taukachou knows his stuff. The fair scenes are missing those needed reference shots to give credibility, but I don't think I'm telling him anything he doesn't know. Again, we work within the limitations we're given and I suspect this was shot the way it was by design. The audio, for the most part, is great. The voices are clean and mostly don't sound 'affected'. Alex Voronin and his team did a great job. Lighting is also excellent. Yani Kouros keeps things clean and natural looking, which must've been time consuming with much of the film taking place in low light. As well, color grading is uniform and consistent. Good job by Kirill Vlassov.

In my opinion, Kevin MacLeod's score contributes beautifully to the mood and pacing of the film, providing tension in all the right spots and adding to the dark comedic atmosphere carried throughout much of the film. Very nicely done.

The editing is solid, but this is where taste and preference comes into play. Arthur Karaulov and Sergio Voronin did a great job bouncing us from past to present and maintaining solid continuity and flow throughout. But as a filmmaker myself, I would've chopped a lot of the repeat and run-on dialogue. In the intro, there is just too much chatter that doesn't drive the story. This is a monster of a film. It's a stage production without the 'vibe' one gets from being at a live performance. For a film to keep the viewer riveted to their seats things have to move at a faster pace. We all love *The French Connection* and *Deer Hunter* epics from the 1970's, but 2020 sensibilities have changed cinema and what people are willing to sit through. There was just a lot of repetition and unnecessary dialogue, in my opinion. I also noticed camera angles that lingered too long and locations



that seemed to be shot from only one angle. Camera movement builds intrigue and connects the viewer to what's happening on screen.

There is nothing more difficult in this world than to take an idea, put it to paper and then seek out a group of misfits willing to help you put your vision to screen. It's an agonizingly long and often lonely process. Sophia Romma has an extensive list of credits in the entertainment world, no doubt, but this was her first time in the driver's seat for a feature. I think she's an incredibly gifted writer and director. This is truly a wonderful film and I believe I laughed and cringed at all the right spots. Amazing things will follow this film and I can't wait to see what Sophia comes up with next.

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November 22, 2020

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