

Video Review

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A Review of "The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T."

Lee Bartel

Columbia Picture

Director: Roy Rowland

Screen Play: Dr. Seuss and Allan Scott

Starring: Peter Lind Hayes, Mary Healy,

Hans Conried, Tommy Rettig.

First Released: 1952

This little-known movie by Dr. Seuss, famous for rhymes like *Cat in the Hat*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, and *The Grinch*, may appear to be a "stream-of-consciousness, Dali-esque, hallucinatory, and psychedelic" bit of filmmaking; however, it is a scathing indictment of traditional music education. One movie critic observed that it is a fantasy movie with no moral. In fact, its 5 minute "exposition" lays out explicitly the "problem" of the movie.

A 90 second "overture" introduces the problem – a little boy going about his normal activities is pursued by adults attempting to "catch" him in their nets. The first theme is the piano teacher (Dr. Terwilliker): demanding, accusatory, arm-grabbing, key punching, ego driven, musically narrow-minded, and perfectionist. A short transition allows the boy (Bart) to address the movie viewer: "Well, that's my problem. Dr. Terwilliker is the only enemy I've got." The second theme introduces Bart's mother: as "hipped on the piano as Dr. Terwilliker," vigilant during practice, pleasant and smiling, hates to be a "mean old slave driver," but hypnotized by Dr. T. In the next transition, Bart plays the movie's theme song with a vengeance — "ten little dancing fingers... they're mine, all mine." It is a theme sung actively both by the teacher at some points and by the student – clearly a battle for whose fingers are they. The third theme is the plumber: "he knows all about the piano but is afraid to say so," questions the "discipline" justification for piano lessons, is Bart's friend (later assists Bart in escape, accepts Bart's child-ness, imagination, and engages in real accepting play with him).

Bart then falls asleep at the piano and the rest of the movie is the dream "development" of the problem stated so clearly in the exposition. Bart, played by Tommy Rettig of "Lassie" fame, becomes a captive held in a cell in the Terwilliker Institute (complete with dungeon where all non-piano players are kept). There Dr. T creates the perfect scenario: a place where no baseballs, tennis balls, footballs ... are allowed, where 500 little boys will practice 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, all under his commanding "baton" (which he symbolically keeps in a holster on his hip). The challenge is for Bart to lead the 500 boys (10 fingers each and hence the 5000 fingers of Dr. T) out of the captivity and away

from the brain-washing messages spewing from screens in the walls (“practice makes perfect,” “The years you spend with Dr. T will be the best years of your life”). Finally with the help of the plumber and sundry dungeon dwellers, he manages to escape Dr. T’s power but, the boys do not run from the piano. No, they stay and really “play” – “Chop-Sticks” as a symbol of the child’s independently controlled “playing” with music.

The musical score, nominated for an Academy Award in 1953, contains fascinating lyrics in true Dr. Seuss style, but strongly pushing the limits of conventional musical material. “Little Kids” raises the issue of the ethics of teachers and parents’ shaping and forcing “talent” development (Please see a discussion of this issue by Bartel, Bowman, Bellous, and Peglar posted at:

<http://www2.brandonu.ca/music/people/FacultyPages/bowman/Wayne%20Papers%20PDFs/Talent%20&%20Identity.pdf>

The song argues:

Now just because we're kids
Because we're sorta small
Because we're closer to the ground
And you're bigger pound by pound
You have no right
To push us little kids around.

But we'll grow up one day
And when we do I pray
We won't just grow in size and sound
and just be bigger pound by pound
I'd hate to grow like some I know
Who like to push and shove us little kids around.

The theme song of the Terwilliker Academy makes comparison with the “ivy league” schools like Harvard and Purdue, but points out that Terwilliker has “poison ivy” on its walls. The song cheers for the toughness, roughness, and cruelty of the place:

Terwilliker, we sing to thee,
Our cruel black hearts we bring to thee,
For crime and slimey villainy--
Terwilliker Academy!

Terwilliker, thy name we praise
We love thy foul and loathsome ways
They crummy criminality--
Terwilliker A-Cat-A-Me!

Although possible to “write this off” as a bit of fantasy and comedy, Dr. Seuss here is loading text and image with a focused message. One of the saddest aspects of lengthy

abuse is co-dependency—the reason why the abused stays. Dr. Seuss takes this to the extreme with the line “We love thy foul and loathsome ways.”

In “Doe-me-doe duds” Dr. Seuss has a bit of fun as the very stern villain, formally attired Dr. Terwilliker, cross-dresses for the final concert.

I want my undulating undies with the maribou frills!
I want my beautiful bolero with the porcupine quills!
I want my purple nylon girdle with the orange blossom buds
Cause I'm going doe-me-doe-ing in my doe-me-doe duds!

I want my lavender spats and in addition to them
I want my honey-colored gosset with the herring bone hem

A kids movie? That’s where you find it in the video rentals. But, probably aimed at the adult viewing audience. This movie, like his critique of the school education system in the book, *Diffendooper Day*, should be used for reflection and an examination of our values and practices.

A page for describing YMMV: 5000 Fingers of Dr. T. Big-Lipped Alligator Moment: The Dungeon of all the non piano playing musicians Terwilliker has captured. An antropomorphic bust of Terwilliker's head gives Bart this advice: Bartholomew Collins, the years you spend with Dr. Terwilliker will be the happiest years of your life! But if you get homesick, don't try to escape. The barbed wire around the Terwilliker institute, is ELECTRIFIED! By Brian Kramer. "The 5,000 Fingers of Dr T" was the first Dr. Seuss film that was ever made and it was a live action feature, believe it or not. It wasn't "The Grinch who Stole Christmas," as most people think. And it is also the only feature film Dr Seuss ever wrote. "The 5,000 fingers of Dr T" is one of my favorite films (that you have may have never seen) that was released in 1953, and directed by Stanley Kramer, although he's listed as producer. The heart of the movie is Dr Seuss's lyrics and wacky over the top characters. Dr T., or Terwilliger, is a minimalist dictator who casts spells over people and serves them spectacular vintage pickle juice. Watch the film you'll get it. I have been lucky enough to see this film in the theater a few times.