

MR. HOLLAND'S OPUS

[1996]

by

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Musician Glenn Holland (Richard Dreyfuss) takes a job teaching music in a high school, rather than playing clubs around the country because he believes it will allow him more time to devote to his true love, composition. At first, he finds the job far more demanding than he had anticipated – and unrewarding. Yet, he becomes a good teacher, deals with school politics, inspires his students, and falls in love with teaching. Through music, he often helps his students gain self-respect, accomplish life goals, or develop a talent. One very talented girl even asks him to leave his wife and come with her to New York. With a baby on the way, he buys a house and commits himself to a middle-class life as a teacher. He soon discovers his son is deaf and must go to a special, expensive school. He painfully divides his attention between his students and his wife and child. At age 60, the school board eliminates the whole art program from the high school curriculum, including music, and he is fired and loses his retirement. On his last day, many of his past students pack the auditorium to honor him and play the composition he has been working on these forty years. (Rated PG)

Mr. Holland's Opus is the heart-warming story of a man who, under great duress, finds personal success and happiness. It is also a recruiting film for the teaching profession, shouting at almost every moment, "Be all you can be." It is a celebration of the human spirit's ability to survive.

Hollywood wisdom had it (a few weeks ago) that this film just "wouldn't fly;" it might break even, but popularity – never. So much for industry wisdom. As I write this, it is the most popular film in America. No guns, no fights, no crime, no cops, no car chases, no special effects, no sex, no animals. Yet this

film obviously strikes a chord in the American psyche that resonates very deeply. This should be no surprise, for inspirational films have been popular for decades. However, there are several things about Mr. Holland's Opus that are surprising.

First, the role of the psychology and the sociology of the film (in terms of catching the public eye) have been reversed. In melodramas, it is usually the sociology of the film that catches the public imagination. For instance, in *Pretty Woman* [1990], it was the prostitute's rise from the gutter to the high-rise, from fashionable rags to ultra-fashionable rags, that was so attractive. *Wall Street* [1987] traces the psychological and social (in this case, economic) fall of a corrupt stockbroker, however, we pay more attention to the corrupt practices than the corruption of the soul. The same is true of most teacher films, from *Goodbye Mr. Chips* [1969] to *Blackboard Jungle* [1955] to *Stand and Deliver* [1987]. The social context is primary, the psychology is secondary – if considered at all. A melodrama that presents its psychology before its sociology is rare.

Thus, Mr. Holland's Opus is just the opposite from the usual melodrama formula: we respond to Mr. Holland's psychological journey and tend to ignore the sociological implications of the film (more on these later). And the psychology is fascinating. Mr. Holland's psychological growth is in the opposite direction to his physical growth: he begins the film a psychologically old man and ends up with his youth restored.

In archetypal terms, he begins as a Senex and ends up as a Puer. The Senex is the archetype of the Old Man (all this, of course, can be applied to women),

with both good and bad aspects. These two aspects are clearly seen in the English words derived from the Greek root. From Senex we get Senator, a wise older man or woman to whom, because of a lifetime of experiences, we entrust legislation and the running of the government.

On the other side of the coin, we also derive Senile from Senex. Here is the man or woman who takes things far too literally, is inflexible, and knows that he or she is right . . . always. While Mr. Holland is not the extreme of the negative Senex, he certainly exhibits many of its characteristics. His teaching is pedantic and inflexible; his music is “good,” while whatever his students like is “bad;” he cannot relate to any other aspects of the culture outside his own narrow niche.

Yet he does not remain this way – and this is the attraction of the film: watching his slow, steady, and very positive psychological changes. Through some magical process, the youthfulness around him rubs off, it begins to melt the walls he has erected, it begins to soften him into flexibility. While he retains two positive aspects of the Senex archetype (the wisdom and the experience), he begins adding to it the best of the Puer (youthful excitement and energy, an eagerness to explore, an openness to human contact). And these positive aspects of the Puer counteract the negative aspects of the Senex.

From an archetypal point of view, Mr. Holland winds up in the best of all possible places: he possesses the wisdom, education and experience of age while at the same time is able to manifest it through the energy, vigor and

inventiveness of youth. And this indeed is something to celebrate. (This idea of “the best of all possible worlds” will return when we consider the sociology of the film.)

But this is not the only aspect of growth we see in Mr. Holland’s Opus. The second attractive aspect of this film is Mr. Holland’s Job-like perseverance in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversity. He is punished by the higher powers in many ways: he has no time for his creative activities, he is embroiled in educational politics, and, worst of all, his son is born deaf. This is a horrifying irony: what he treasures most, his music, he cannot share with his son. The film clearly shows Mr. Holland not only surviving, often with great difficulty, but conquering and rising above these obstacles to living a full life.

Why is Holland subjected to these horrors? He suffers for no apparent reason. People are traditionally punished in proportion to their sins. Typically, artists and other creative people are punished for their hubris, for reaching too far, or trying to compete with the gods, or for denying their muses. But Holland is sinless. Like Job, he seems randomly chosen for punishment at some higher being’s nasty willfulness. And because so much of our cultural bearings are based on the myth of cause-and-effect, we find his situation unacceptable. Thus, we find Holland all the braver, all the more noble. for whatever is punishing him has chosen him unfairly, has broken the rule of just desserts. And, for the most part, he smiles through it all and wins our hearts at every turn.

Here is a brave man, Mr. Holland, a psychologically growing man, a creative man, a loving man we should all model our lives after . . . or so says Mr. Holland's Opus.

If all this sounds too good to be true, like a sugar coating which we intuitively suspect is hiding something a little less pleasant, it may well be so. While all these positive values and good feelings are undeniably there in Mr. Holland's Opus, I feel that underneath this melodramatic surface lies a tragic, bitter pill. We can uncover it quite simply: just ask, "What will Mr. Holland's life be like a few years down the line?"

Being a teacher myself (and I drive a Corvair), I get a rather frightening picture: a man past 60 trying to build a new career, teaching a few private music lessons in a world that doesn't value music, his meager income radically reduced, perhaps he can no longer make payments on his house, and so on. In sum, his future is bleak. And this after a lifetime of dedication.

In this context, we can see that Mr. Holland's name is well chosen. Holland is a land that was rescued from the sea by the hard labor of building dikes. It is constantly threatened by inundation. A "Holland life" is a precarious one; at any time someone might be needed to put their finger in a crevice to plug a hole to prevent a cataclysmic flood. And so, too, for Mr. Holland.

Once we realize this aspect of Mr. Holland's Opus, we might well ask if the film has some sort of hidden agenda. Films about the rewards of internal and personal victories over overwhelming odds (rather than the more popular and

socially approved myth of external victories) have peppered film history. Perhaps the most notable is Rocky [1976] which celebrates Rocky's loss of the boxing match and his internal victory. In 1976 this message was so needed by the public that not only was Rocky a hit, it also received (believe it or not) the Academy Award for Best Picture! Films with this thematic "schizophrenia" – disguising (and conflating) external loss as internal victory – appear at the times when there is a social or political need to reinforce that specific message. And so today.

In the mid-1990s there is much evidence that a film with this message will be sought out and accepted by a broad audience. The so-called Generation X believes they have nothing to look forward to. Older generations are becoming more and more discouraged not only by the economic distress they feel with the constant lowering of their buying power, but also in the deterioration of their political influence, by their inability to right the societal wrongs they perceive, be they from the political right or from the political left. Perhaps we have all come to realize that there are no solutions to our problems, there is no adequate reponse response to our era of diminished expectations. A year ago, through the ballot box, we instigated what everyone, friend or foe, thought would be the beginning of a Congressional revolution. Basically, nothing has happened. There seem to be no answers either within our grasp or on the horizon. One response is a Panglossian one, to convince oneself that this is the best of all possible worlds. And this, I believe, is what Mr. Holland's Opus does: convince us that, despite Mr. Holland's obvious suffering, this is the best of all possible worlds – and this is the reason behind the film's unexpectedly popularity.

With this in mind – and keeping in mind also that the film has some very positive aspects – we can look at its downside. It opts so obviously for a middle-class lifestyle that any threat to it must be ultimately eliminated. The very talented young woman who falls in love with Holland and asks him to run away with her conveniently disappears from the film. In the final convocation of all his students, she, the most talented of all, is pointedly missing. She is, after all, the only real threat to his commitment to the middle-class ethic. His son's disease takes on some dour implications – it is treated in much the same way the disease of the week is in a TV movie. All Holland's frustration with his son turns out well, as everything else in this film, when he matures into a total hunk. Where did those genes come from? Certainly not Richard Dreyfuss or Glenna Headly. But worst of all, Mr. Holland's Opus is a plea for the acceptance of an unacceptable status quo. We must not simply succumb to the diminution of all that America has been based on and all that has inspired so many of us to strive for the best, both internally and externally.

Mr. Holland's Opus. Directed by Stephen Herek. Written by Patrick Sheane Duncan. Music by Michael Kamen. Distributed by Hollywood Pictures, 1996.