

THE FULL MONTY [1997]

by

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Unemployment has hit the steel manufacturing town of Sheffield, England in Yorkshire very hard – and we meet its frustrated and emasculated victims. Divorced Gaz (Robert Carlyle) faces losing joint custody of his son Nathan (William Snape) for non-payment of child support; overweight Dave (Mark Addy) is rendered impotent by his feelings of physical and economic inadequacy. After seeing the turn-out at a Chippendale's male strip show, entertaining most of their wives, mothers, daughters, sisters and girlfriends, Gaz decides to form a male striptease revue of his own to earn some quick cash. To teach them how to dance, he recruits their former foreman, Gerald (Tom Wilkinson), who has always self-confidently lorded it over them yet now can't bring himself to tell his wife he was fired six months ago. Rounding out the troupe are Horse (Paul Barber), now pushing 50 and with a bad hip but an expert at some outmoded '60's dances; suicidal Lomper (Steve Huison); and Guy (Hugo Speer), who dreams of being Donald O'Connor but has only one thing to offer, his prodigious endowment. Realizing they're out of shape (at best), pale white, and can't compete with the professional dancers' torsos, they figure their edge is to provide a more daring finale to their act – the film's title is a vernacular reference to full frontal nudity. Unable to raise funds, Gaz's son, Nathan, robs his savings to provide his father with a new start. After a series of adventures and disasters, and a round of unexpected support from their wives, girlfriends and the town's women in general, they succeed. (Rated R)

The Full Monty is about the changes that take place over time in men's characters when social and psycho-sexual pressures commingle. Economic issues are on the surface of the film, but more complex problems of sexuality and gender issues form the subtext. The economic issues are made clear during the opening titles. Behind the titles, we get an optimistic view of Sheffield in its heyday, probably in the 1960s, in the form of a kitschy, but totally believable, tourist come-on film that touts Sheffield as a "city on the move."

After this film-within-a-film, the real film begins, a quarter century later. The optimism and confidence of the past are in sharp contrast to the present reality of closed factories, decaying neighborhoods and rampant unemployment. The homes of the future turn out to be ugly housing blocks, dozens of stories high. However, *The Full Monty* doesn't stop here – too simple – it goes on to investigate the effect of these events on the human beings concerned. *The Full Monty* is the third recent British film to deal with unemployment (along with *Brassed Off* [1996] and *The Van* [1977]), but it is the first to universalize the idea by taking it beyond its specific location and time, and therefore to use the concept of unemployment as a metaphor for something much more universal, something we can all relate to, employed or not.

The Full Monty offers a clear correspondence between unemployment and psychic damage, specifically in men's sexual and gender self-images. However, rather

than just documenting it, the film takes it further through a series of clever tactics. Briefly, unemployment means loss of masculinity, loss of masculinity means exposure of inherent femininity, and this newly harnessed femininity leads to psychic healing. There are three aspects of this film I want to consider: the mythology, the men, and the women.

The Full Monty is full of surprises, not the least of which is how much it follows the archetypal arc of the Hero's Journey. It is fascinating to see how a film can so closely follow the map set out in the ancient Hero's Journey as described by Joseph Campbell without the appearance of what we most commonly consider mythological heroes. We expect swashbuckling or daring do. At least a lot of action *a la Star Wars*. None here. The depth to which our conscious (and our collective unconscious) is possessed by archetypal configurations is clearly demonstrated by *The Full Monty*, a film that, at its surface level, is about as far as one could imagine from anything resembling "The Hero's Journey."

The film follows the classical arc of the call, the denial, the acceptance of the problem, the gathering of the allies, training, tests, help from an unexpected source, apparent failure, facing death, and final success. While most of the film is spent in the "build-up" phase, with Gaz auditioning dancers, recruiting his repressed former foreman, Gerald, to be the choreographer, and practicing with his motley crew, the other elements are clearly there.

And there are other surprises here, especially in the way symbolism is used. For instance, garden decorations may be metaphors for capitalist culture. At Gerald's house, seven statuettes reminiscent of the dwarfs from Disney's *Cinderella* [1950] occupy his garden. Every morning on his departure and every evening on his arrival home, they remind him of the importance of work, for each dwarf is shown with a work implement (and their song, "Hi Ho, Hi Ho, it's off to work we go," echoes unbidden through our minds).

Men's sexuality and the way we perceive gender roles are, ultimately, at the heart of *The Full Monty*. It is treated at so many different levels and from so many points of view that it is difficult to organize a coherent analysis. For this reason, what I propose is a series of (unfortunately) disconnected observations; like the film, these may add up to a point of view or they may not.

That both the text and the subtext of *The Full Monty* are about sexuality is obvious from the opening scene in which Gaz tries (unsuccessfully) to steal steel. The film associates the manufacture of steel with manhood. Thus, the closing of the steel mill can be seen as a symbolic castration (more on these men "acting like women" later). Gaz's attempted theft of an obviously phallic iron girder from a derelict warehouse is a crude symbolic attempt to regain his masculinity. But to regain lost aspects of the psyche is never that simple. The attempt to recapture masculinity actually summons its opposite – the feminine.

Here, the second major subtext enters. Gaz's robbery attempt is interrupted and indeed unintentionally almost foiled by a marching band. Thus, the film sets up music and dancing (we find out shortly) as symbols of the feminine as opposed to the symbolic lost masculine in the form of steel girders.

While symbolism this complex may be unexpected in what appears to be a light comedy, it is nonetheless there as we see in the very next scene. Gaz and his friend David are stuck atop a mostly submerged auto in the middle of a canal. They are stranded on an isolated, rotting and sinking piece of masculine steel in the middle of the feminine water. Their attempts to get the contraband (and thus incorrect) steel/masculinity to the shore (the area of the masculine) causes them instead to sink deeper into feminine water. Message: the masculine must be submerged into the feminine – the Anima – in order to reconstruct itself. (Another noteworthy aspect of this scene is that Nathan, Gaz's son, on the shore, is the only "grounded" male character in the whole film.)

The desperation which Gaz feels at the loss of his masculinity is symbolized not only by all "his" women flocking to a Chippendale's show, but by the exact nature of his spying on the proceedings. He breaks into the club by climbing through a window into the men's toilet. The true nature of Gaz's predicament is clearly expressed in his dread when, hiding in the man's toilet, several women cavalierly use the men's room and – horror of horrors – one of them urinates standing in front of a urinal! This practically signals the end of Gaz's world. He never tells his friends, but this experience is clearly a driving force to regain his own male sexuality.

It is pretty obvious that male stripping is a metaphor for what the steel industry has done to these men by firing them – stripping them of not only their future, their hope, their commitment and their trades, but also of their masculinity. Thus, by showing "the full monty" at the end of the film, they have demonstrated to the world that they have regained their masculinity despite all the efforts of the corporate world to keep them psychically castrated. What is particularly significant from the psychological point of view is that these men plunge into the enemy camp, they become "women," that is, objects for visual scrutiny devoid of any other attributes. And from this plunge into the "other" comes healing.

However, this psychic road is never simple or linear. For instance, the men find it easier to take off their clothes in front of strange women than before each other. The obvious answer is homophobia, discovering an unexpected and unacceptable (to that society) gender inclination within oneself. Yet the film defuses all this by actually demonstrating it – two of the men suddenly find each other attractive – with no ill effects. In fact, in one scene, the five of them, stripped to their underwear, confront some working-class blokes and actually scare them away with the power of their unashamed and naked sexuality. Bare male flesh has a masculine power that is at once rather different and similar to the power of female flesh.

The women in the film are also fascinating. The first time we see them, they are howling at the dancers at Chippendales. They are capable of understanding their own sexuality, bordering on the animal, and releasing it in appropriately safe surroundings.

The women here work at two levels: as the characters in the film and as a general panoply of feminine symbols. For instance, Gaz's wife keeps offering to get him a job in the factory in which she works. She seems insensitive to his needs as a father. She is also blind to her son, Nathan's, love for his father, however poorly Gaz reciprocates it. When we finally see her at work, it turns out to be a spinning mill and all the threads and yarns about her are intentionally photographed to form a web-like structure which envelopes her. Two readings: first, she, like the men, is caught in the web of the industrial revolution and as trapped as they are; second, she is a spider and the factory is her lair; she is trying to seduce the men back into the factory so that it (and she) can, spider-like, suck out their life's blood. (Like almost everything and everyone else in *The Full Monty*, she turns out to be more complex than we expect. By the end of the film, she is in the at the strip show audience rooting for her ex-husband. Indeed, she has brought not only her current husband, but also her son!)

In addition to characters, the women also appear as symbols. Death, for instance, appears literally in the death of the mother of one of the guys. Interestingly, the funeral of this mother is a turning point of the film, seemingly a transition from a complex older reading of the feminine to a more modern, but equally complex, interpretation. Under the rulership of the old-fashioned feminine, their scheme was doomed from the start. However, at the funeral the homosexual relationship of two of the men is affirmed (the death of old sexuality and the birth of new freedom?). And immediately, the plight of these novice strippers appears in the tabloid press and the female public (the feminine collective?) becomes not only interested in their predicament, but actively supportive. (Simultaneously, Dave's wife discovers his leather briefs and believes he's been visiting prostitutes. When this is straightened out, again a new approach to sexuality is born and Dave's wife becomes the most supportive of all.)

Where *The Full Monty* is at its best is when it considers the interactions between the men and the women, between the masculine and the feminine. This is often at the level of gender politics. For instance, while perusing a *Cosmopolitan* magazine, one of the men comments on a model's breasts. Another comments that they can never be "too large" for his taste. The chuckles of masculine camaraderie suddenly give way to a cold silence when they realize they will soon be gazed at in the same critical way. While this is one of the film's most blatant messages about gender roles and issues, the film doesn't dwell on it. Having made its point, it quickly moves on. However, it has laid a foundation for what follows, which is a subtle, extended, almost subtextual examination of these same issues.

The women readily admit what most men, apparently hopelessly under the thrall of advertising images, cannot – that there is no single body type that is attractive. The film makes it very obvious that there are women – a good number – who find Dave's classically unattractive body quite appealing. And they are quite vocally willing to make

their feelings known. (Unfortunately, the film never inspires the men to look beneath their Calvin Klein body-type brainwashing into their true erotic hearts to identify the type of woman he might find attractive.) While the men's sense of desperation continues almost unabated to the end of the film, there is also a dawning sensitization toward others and an acceptance of the self as it is, not as idealized by society.

More. One of the traditional representations of both music and dance in our culture is the feminine – witness that the muses are all female. And it is into these traditional feminine areas that the men plunge headlong – with fascinating psychological consequences. That this aspect of the feminine veritably infects these men is evident in one of the film's most hilarious moments. As they stand in line in an unemployment office, a radio begins playing Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff," the men begin moving unconsciously to the beat, first individually and then in synchrony, eventually easing into their bump-and-grind choreography for the song. This spontaneous and optimistic burst of energy is a physical manifestation of their unconscious entry into a new psychic state. And that psychic inner connection between the masculine and feminine is catching: in the police station, while watching a surveillance tape after being arrested, their self-critique sucks even the police into appreciating dance.

One troubling note. The proof of a film that deals with gender issues is to perform an imaginary dialectical reversal, exchange the roles of the men and the women and see how the philosophy sits. (Doing this to a film like *G. I. Jane* [1997] quickly reveals its weakness and transparency.) As soon as the men resolve their own self-images regarding their bodies, they are self-accepting and have no trouble in taking off their clothes in public and being objectified. What happens to the outside of the body is irrelevant once inner problems have been resolved. What is this saying about the objectification of women? Is the film saying that if women could just get their acts together as well as these men, they would have fewer problems? Do we have another film (like *Mrs. Doubtfire* [1993]) in which the sensitization of men to women's problems turns into a declaration that men are better at everything, even at being women?

At bottom is the experience the audience has with the film. *The Full Monty* isn't a comedy because we laugh at physically unattractive men. After all, these are men of dignity – they are ordinary workers who insist their women regard them as men – job or no job. If they're reduced to stripping to pay the bills . . . well, a lot of women know all about that. It is an effective comedy because the film clearly distinguishes between character (which *is* attractive), and the more mundane body (which may or may not be attractive). Somehow, the film makes it easier for our culture to swallow this message when it is applied to men rather than to women. But this is a good start to evening things out.

The Full Monty. Director by Peter Cattaneo. Screenplay by Simon Beaufoy. Produced by Uberto Pasolini. Cinematography by John de Borman. Music by Anne Dudley. Distributed by Fox Searchlight, 1997.