

THE VAN [1997]

by

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Dublin bakery worker Bimbo Reeves (Donal O’Kelly) gets fired and joins his long unemployed pal Larry (Colm Meaney) “on the dole.” Larry tries to show Bimbo the advantages of a life of leisure – more golf, more hanging out in bars, etc. Bimbo, associating his own masculinity with his power to make money for his family, buys a completely rotted-out fish-and-chips van, and together with Larry, refurbishes it. They make a minor go of it for a while until their friendship begins breaking down because of the business. Bimbo, valuing his friendship with Larry more than the business, “kills” the van.

This is the third filmic installment of Roddy Doyle’s Barrytown Trilogy (preceded by Alan Parker’s 1991 *The Commitments* and Frear’s own 1994 adaptation of *The Snapper*). It continues with Doyle’s penchant for colorful local characters and the humorous episodes they find themselves embroiled in. But while *The Commitments* provided energetic musical numbers and *The Snapper* provided a sweet father-daughter relationship as anchoring principles, *The Van* offers little more than Irish national pride in World Cup Soccer and a glancing, weak look at the embarrassments of unemployment to the masculine ego.

The politics of the film seem a little timid on the surface and even disturbing below that surface. Beyond the charm and good-natured wholesomeness of the relation between Larry and Bimbo, there is an overall mood of depression holding the film down. At the end, nothing is resolved. However, the film’s ending seems to celebrate a reaffirmation of the status quo: the boys are unemployed again, still deluding themselves that somehow their masculinity precludes worldly success; they are destined to be aging bums in a hopeless world.

The effect of unemployment is central to the film, yet undeveloped. Bimbo, recently out of work, obviously is in need of a job to structure his life and his masculinity. This is stated but never really explored. Larry seems to be getting along quite well after years of unemployment. In perhaps the film’s most subtle comment, we learn how stressed he is when his wife has to untie his shoes because he has bitten off his fingernails.

The answer to their problems is money. With a little money everything works better: Larry's marriage, his family, he even lightens up on his constant stream of vulgarity. But their new-found self-esteem is short lived (as we know from any sitcom's standardized trajectory of small victories, huge reversals, and personal resolution without real outer-world gain). Their lives are like the soccer semi-finals they watch on TV: they win, they win, they lose.

The villain of the film is capitalism. Once the duo begins to taste financial success, they become tainted with an evil absent in the "purity" of unemployment and poverty. Bimbo begins to play the boss, doling out a salary to Larry rather than sharing the proceeds of their partnership. Larry joins a union and insists on taking his breaks at the most inopportune of times.

In many ways, they become the caricature of fat-fingered capitalists: when one customer is missing a few pennies for a hamburger, Larry takes a bite out of it and gives him his "money's worth" – to the penny. All this is in sharp contrast to the Horatio Alger positivism American audiences have been fed over the past decades. The final insult is when the Health Department threatens to shut them down because they have dirt under their fingernails. Of course, they have dirt under their fingernails – they're working class blokes, after all!

Business and personality, according to *The Van*, don't mix well. The two friends' disparate temperaments begin to interfere with their business goals. Bimbo is sweet and quiet, while Larry has a hair-trigger temper and wildly says the first thing that comes to mind (most often when he should keep quiet). Fortunately, the film doesn't portray the men as one-dimensional: we see Bimbo's assertive side and Larry's tenderness toward his family and friends.

In addition to *The Van's* politics, it has difficulty in treating the psychological underpinnings of the two protagonists. For all its charm and wit, *The Van* may be implying some rather questionable ideas in this area, too. ("Implying" because Steven Frear's films rarely come out and state anything bluntly.) When the men undertake the job of nurturing (that is, feeding), a traditionally feminine task, they fail. Yet they don't seem to be out of touch with their emotions – they are certainly capable of both loving their wives and families and each other, each time with the seemingly appropriate emotions. Bimbo even "kills" the van in a (successful) effort to restore their relationship.

Their customers – sometimes enthusiastic, sometimes aggressive and sometimes hostile – are what every mother meets in her children. And the best part of the film is the way that Bimbo and Larry deal with their surrogate progeny: they never imitate a mother feeding her brood; they find their own masculine ways of fulfilling feminine goals.

Perhaps the best (and most disturbing) social/psychological comment in the film is the inevitability of their status quo. In the outer world, they seem destined to be Job's companions on a downward spiral to who-knows-where. On a personal level, however, their destiny is happiness. This is seen in the film's most subtle scene: The boys go to an

over-priced wine bar and try to pick up some women. At the last minute they think twice about their enterprise and go home to their wives. The two women they were attracted to look and behave like only slightly distorted versions of their own wives – they already have what they are looking for . . . and fortunately recognize it just in the nick of time.

We've met the non-Celtic versions of these characters before – Laurel & Hardy, Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton, even Ricky and Fred. The problem with *The Van* is that the filmmakers seem to think that by making them Irish, they give these worn-out clichés new life. They make them exotic – at least to American audiences, but whether there is really anything new here is doubtful. Is this, then, a nostalgia for things American? The characters within the film certainly express it – a fascination with John Wayne is evident throughout. But is the film itself no more than a bit of imitative nostalgia for a better time, as envisioned by the American dream, a time that never existed, a celebration of the victory of the personal and a failure of the public that so pervades American films?

The Van. Directed by Stephen Frears. Screen play by Roddy Doyle from his book. Music written and performed by Eric Clapton. Distributed by Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1997.