

Elvira Madigan

Film review

Thomas Haroldson

1968

“Elvira Madigan,” as advertised, may well be the most beautiful movie ever made. In any event, it is one of the most popular foreign films to come to Detroit in quite a while. However, I have a feeling that the capacity crowds that fill the Studio-North each night are not completely satisfied with what they see.

The night I saw it only a few people walked out, but those who remained were restless and vaguely unhappy. The picture was simply not getting through to them.

Something seemed to be missing. It was as if the audience and the film were operating on different wave lengths.

However, there is, for once, a simple explanation of why this happened. The Swedish version of the picture (it is now in English) was preceded by a fairly detailed summary of the true story of Elvira Madigan. It was the sort of thing that Arthur Penn might have done if he had wanted to give an account of the real Bonnie and Clyde before showing his interpretation of them.

But somewhere along the line someone decided that American movie-goers preferred surprise endings, and so the introduction was dropped. As a result, the audience and the film do indeed operate on different wave lengths: the audience keeps waiting to see where the picture is going, while the picture operates under the assumption that the audience already knows. No wonder people get restless.

Needless to say, it is helpful to know that “Elvira Madigan” is a tragic love story that can only end one way.

In the 1890s the real Elvira Madigan was a beautiful and famous tight rope dancer who could have had any man she wanted. Instead, she gave up everything to run off with a young Army officer. He in turn, deserted his wife, his children, and his career in order to be with her.

When it finally appeared that society and poverty would drive them apart, they made a suicide pact. Thus the picture ends with the ex-officer killing Elvira, and then himself.

Once the moviegoer realizes that he is expected to know this, it is easier to understand why the movie is presented as it is. The film, since it is locked into an unchangeable ‘tragic framework, is more an impression of a story, than a story itself.

In fact, the movie is so impressionistic that the color photography takes on the quality of French impressionistic painting: But the photography also suggests the light antique gold works of Rembrandt and Turner, and at times the landscape even has a certain Andrew Wyeth strangeness about it.

The scenes are generally so short, and so carefully composed, that the movie often seems to be a series of still shots as if the camera were in an art gallery passing leisurely from one painting to the next.

The simple, even child-like, mood of the picture reflects the mood of the young runaways who, in an effort to escape society, return to a state of childhood innocence. They become flower children in a fantasy world of their own making. It is a beautiful world, but a world that is obviously much too beautiful and much too fragile to last.

Some people may feel that the picture is a bit slow—that it sometimes drifts aimlessly without purpose or direction. While this is probably a valid objection, the film is so short that it never becomes painfully boring. And, of course, the picture is less frustrating if you know what it is about and how it will end.

When I was leaving the theater I heard a fifteen-year-old girl say: “I didn’t like the ending. I didn’t like the ending AT ALL!”

What she didn’t realize is that no one likes such endings. Youth, innocence and love should go on forever, but they do not. Perhaps that is what the picture is all about—like it or not.

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