



A PRYOR ENGAGEMENT

Some Call It Loving

+ Pre-recorded introduction (Monday 20 September only)

The reasons why one thing haunts where another fades may not be fully present to consciousness. Sometimes only a few misremembered lines or a tiny gesture make an otherwise shoddy film glow in recollection. When asked last year to choose my ten best ever films for *Sight & Sound*, I realised a notable majority of my shortlist were films I had seen only once, many years ago, obscurities I had been surprised by on television and never seen again.

Some Call It Loving is one of those films. I've only ever seen it as a VHS copy I made off late-night TV in the late 1980s and so far as I know it's never been revived or climbed into the lower divisions of cultthood. I don't think it's even officially available on DVD (Amazon lists only a 1980s VHS priced at \$203!). And yet it seems a work made for cultthood: a highbrow erotic fable made by Kubrick's producer, featuring kinky auteur Zalman King, Richard Pryor (in perhaps the most convincing of his rare serious roles) and Tisa Farrow (she of the bruised forehead in James Toback's *Fingers*). It seems more like a film Clare Quilty might have planned in reverie than a work that was actually written, cast, directed and invited to Cannes. (As is so often the way, it was celebrated in Europe and ignored in the States.)

I often hesitate to revisit such fondly recalled strangers but this title has held its strange allure. I suspect the only reason I taped it at the time was the presence of my hero Pryor – how come I'd never heard of this early role? As titles go, *Some Call It Loving* suggests some clammy porno that ran for five years straight in a semi-legal Soho jerk-pit and, objectively speaking, it is easy to lose patience with this 70s soufflé. Female viewers especially might find the clichéd male wish-list hard going: fetchingly empty hi-moderne pads by the ocean, groovy sax solos and obliging (and fetchingly empty) dream women. *Some Call It Loving* may indeed be read as an indulgent Hef-cat dream of untroubled *ménages à trois* in an airless bachelor pad; yet it's clearly (or fuzzily) also a critique essaying the impossibility of turning such wan fantasy into real-life exchange.

King plays a (very) rich, (very) white sax player whose home life is ultra tasteful, stylised, bordering on inert – as is King's performance, which seems so glazed you worry he's been drugged or hypnotised. Initially, I was baffled by his presence – I only knew him as the reigning king of 80s video-erotica and wasn't aware he'd started out (like Cassavetes) as a tough-kid actor in 60s US TV. Was *Some Call It Loving* the thing that planted the seed, so to speak, of his future career in tastemaker erotica? (Nudge-nudging aside, King is a far more interesting auteur than he's often given credit for.)

Shouldn't it be Pryor playing the incredible bebop saxophonist and peaky, geeky Zalman, with his perfectly awful post-hippie hair, as his craven friend-cum-fan, instead of the other way round? I used to watch all the Pryor cameo bits together on VHS – his performance as a pitiful street junkie is like some strange jazz track that could be a risible leap too far or some kind of brave new way of playing. The character is suspiciously similar to one Pryor did as part of his stand-up act at the time; in both cases, it's something of a

tightrope walk between black cultural in-joke and channelling the genuine tragedy of wasted potential.

Things proceed as if in a dream, which is to say now worryingly vivid and now chimingly flat. King pays a visit to a heavily symbolic carnival where he ‘saves’ (well, buys) the young soft-porny Sleeping Beauty of the film’s alternative title. I won’t unwind the subsequent plot twists but the film does recall other vaguely contemporaneous films like *Performance* and *Celine and Julie Go Boating* – in a way, it’s pitched exactly halfway between the former’s dark-suited male fantasy and the latter’s dress-up dream house. In each case, house or home becomes a strange theatrical point of transit, escape or regression, in which the sexual politics of the time are thrown in the air like so much glossy confetti. There are boxes inside boxes, dolls within dolls, and the film makes you feel uneasy about your complicity as watcher or voyeur. In the end, we’re all gawky spectators in this thin carny tent.

I wonder if Alan Rudolph ever saw *Some Call It Loving*, because it’s not such a stretch from here to the stoned perfection of mid-career Rudolph classics like 1984’s *Choose Me*: the same jumbled-up aesthetic of exact contemporary observation and fairytale trapdoor; the same attention to the flirty italics of background music; and possibly a similar moral pay-off – sex is the easy part, it’s the rest that’s hard to parse or arrange. Also, *Some Call It Loving* is like a softcore dry run for the first half of Lynch’s 1997 *Lost Highway* (the hi-moderne pad, the white sax player, the glazed-to-dummyish wife/women, a Richard Pryor cameo). The two films share an oscillation between unlikely drama and chilly banality: a kind of fugue (in both senses) in which nothing fits. Likewise, *Some Call It Loving* doesn’t really fit easily into any one genre box. (In this it also resembles Harris’s own mystifyingly ad-hoc career as director.)

The film’s final pay-off is interesting but in the end it’s odd details that lurk longest in the memory: Pryor’s performance, the mysterious ‘fata morgana’ jukebox, the unlikely carny. Have you ever gone to take a long draught of water one hungover morning and realized too late it was a glass of last night’s vodka? *Some Call It Loving* is a bit like that – all the signs indicate a rather bland and predictable period piece but it has a real unexpected sting in its allegorical tale.

Ian Penman, *Sight & Sound*, June 2013

Spectators who like to keep their fairy tales innocent, their pornography sordid, their allegories obvious and their dreams intact are bound to be disconcerted by James B. Harris’ haunting *Some Call It Loving*, which pursues the improbabilities of dream logic to clarify rather than mystify, and toughmindedly concerns itself with the processes and consequences of dreaming as well as its objects. Unique and alone, it remains obstinately and superbly unclassifiable. Its only plausible precedents are the quite dissimilar short story by John Collier, ‘Sleeping Beauty’, which served as its starting point, and the film of *Lolita*, which Harris produced and helped to script.

It was significantly during the production of *Lolita* that Harris reportedly first located the kernel of his theme, some twelve years before he realised it; and *Some Call It Loving* bears all the earmarks of an intuitive conception that has been developed, sifted and refined over a long period of time, reduced to a hard algebra of essentials which carries total conviction within its own rather singular terms. Conventionally filmed, acted as though under a glass bell –

discounting only Pryor’s remarkable disassembled performance – and accompanied by a score (by Richard Hazard and Bob Harris) so sensually right that it reverses the usual pattern and seems accompanied by the images, it has a style that can be comfortably described only through musical analogies: one of disenchanted lyricism, or of circular lament. And viewers unable to catch this melody remain stranded on the elements of artifice which compose it, looking for naturalism in a film whose verisimilitude is wholly internal and whose narrative – once the threads are properly identified – is completely functional.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1975

SOME CALL IT LOVING

Director: James B. Harris
Production Companies: James B. Harris Productions
Producer: James B. Harris
Assistant Producer: Charles Roven
Associate Producer: Ramzi Thomas
Assistant Directors: Jerome M. Siegel, Terry Carr
Screenplay: James B. Harris
Original Story: John Collier
Director of Photography: Mario Tosi
Editor: Paul Jasiukonis
Art Directors: Rodger Maus, Ray Storey
Sculptures: Patricia Knop
Costumes: Jax
Music Composed and Conducted by: Richard Hazard
Choreography: Alex Romero, Alex Ruiz
Sound Re-recording: Lee Alexander

Cast

Zalman King (*Robert Troy*)
Carol White (*Scarlett*)
Tisa Farrow (*Jennifer*)
Richard Pryor (*Jeff*)
Veronica Anderson (*Angelica*)
Logan Ramsey (*Dr. Samuel Clements*)
Brandy Herred (*Cheerleader*)
Ed Rue (*Mortician*)
Pat Priest (*Nurse*)
Joseph De Meo (*Bartender*)
Leroy Vinnegar (*Band member*)

USA 1973
103 mins

A PRYOR ENGAGEMENT

Richard Pryor: Live in Concert

Wed 1 Sep 20:50; Fri 1 Oct 18:00

Some Call It Loving

Thu 2 Sep 20:40; Mon 20 Sep 18:00

(+ pre-recorded intro)

Lady Sings the Blues

Sat 4 Sep 11:30; Wed 15 Sep 13:50; Mon 27 Sep 20:20

The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars & Motor Kings

Sat 4 Sep 20:30; Sat 25 Sep 14:45

Blue Collar

Mon 6 Sep 14:30; Fri 17 Sep 20:40 (+ pre-recorded intro); Tue 5 Oct 17:35

Jo Jo Dancer, Your Life Is Calling

Tue 7 Sep 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro); Mon 4 Oct 20:45

African Odysseys Presents: The Black History of Comedy

Fri 10 Sep 18:15

Wattstax

Fri 10 Sep 21:00; Tue 14 Sep 18:00; Sat 18 Sep 20:10

Car Wash

Sat 11 Sep 17:50; Tue 28 Sep 20:50

Blazing Saddles

Sat 11 Sep 20:45; Wed 22 Sep 18:15

Silver Streak

Sun 12 Sep 15:15; Wed 29 Sep 20:45

Which Way Is Up?

Wed 15 Sep 21:00; Sun 26 Sep 18:10

Lost Highway (unconfirmed)

Thu 16 Sep 17:30; Tue 5 Oct 20:30

Richard Pryor: A Comedy Genius

Thu 16 Sep 18:15

Stir Crazy

Sun 19 Sep 18:10; Fri 1 Oct 20:30

Bustin’ Loose

Mon 20 Sep 21:00; Sun 3 Oct 18:10

Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip

Tue 21 Sep 18:00 (+ discussion); Mon 4 Oct 18:20

Richard Pryor... Here and Now

Wed 22 Sep 20:45; Sat 2 Oct 18:00

Brewster’s Millions

Thu 23 Sep 20:45; Sun 3 Oct 15:15

A Pryor Engagement was originally programmed by Nellie Killian for BAMcinématek in 2013

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