



GUY MADDIN

The Saddest Music in the World

The Saddest Music in the World is set in Winnipeg during the Great Depression of 1933. Chester Kent (Mark McKinney), a once successful Broadway impresario now on the skids, arrives back in his home town with his amnesiac girlfriend Narcissa (Maria de Medeiros) in tow, and plunges straight into a maelstrom of difficult family reunions and encounters with his now legless ex-lover Lady Port-Huntley (Isabella Rossellini) – a queenly beer magnate who's running an international contest to find the 'saddest music in the world'. Chester and his father were both implicated in the accident that led to Lady Port-Huntley's double amputation (her legs have been replaced by glass ones filled with brew).

According to the director, 'There was no pressure to conform to commercial acceptability; we Canadians don't have the strongest grasp of what that is anyway. There was some concern among my Canadian distributors when they found out a week before shooting that the film was in black and white. They'd assumed it was in colour; I'd assumed a film about the Depression was to be monochrome. To avoid marital arbitration I was happy to throw some colour into the funeral scenes and a dream. I had these paint chips kicking around anyway and was dying to try out some combinations.'

About a third of the film is shot in narrow-gauge, ultra-grainy Super 8. 'Luckily, when you shoot in remote Winnipeg, almost no one comes to see you at work. But my producers always endorsed my Super 8 photography. One of them, Jody Shapiro, is one of the best photographers I know. He was always grabbing one of these hornet-sized toys and buzzing away – he has some of the best shots in the movie. We wore out a platoon of these eBay purchases – they're just not used to the amount of work we made them do or to the low temperatures.'

The key themes of *The Saddest Music in the World* are evoked by the title: grief, music and cultural conflict. These elements are delivered via a Eurovision-style 'cavalcade of misery', sponsored by Port-Huntley. Competing to come up with the saddest music in the world, contestants square off in two opposing teams, armed with a range of instrumental exotica from Siamese flutes to Scottish bagpipes via sitars and accordions, with the victors sliding into a giant vat of beer to celebrate.

Appropriately, this multicultural medley sprang from Anglo-Japanese and Canadian-Icelandic minds. Kazuo Ishiguro's original screenplay, written a decade earlier (placing it between 1989's elegiac *The Remains of the Day* and 1995's darkly dreamlike *The Unconsoled*, novels suffused with wistful melancholy), was set in late-1980s London, after perestroika opened Eastern Europe up to western capitalism. Adapting it, Guy Maddin and regular co-writer George Toles turned the clock back to Depression-era 1933 and the location to their native Winnipeg, whose Muskeg brewery is itching to flood America with beer come Prohibition's repeal.

Typically with Maddin, the formal approach evokes the period setting. Aesthetically, the film resembles an early talkie, its visual texture recalling a grainy, much-abused print. The film is mostly in black and white, with garish interludes mimicking early experimental colour processes. The sound pops and crackles, occasionally lapsing into disconcerting silence. While rejecting accusations that he's a mere *pasticheur*, Maddin resurrects long-abandoned film forms, stirring into the mix with admirably straight-faced conviction German expressionist lighting, Soviet montage, 'golden age' Hollywood melodramatics and Busby Berkeley's more fetishistic choreography.

Although Maddin's eccentric sensibility is much in evidence (who else would reinvent 'Skip to My Lou' as a funeral dirge?), *Saddest Music* advances on *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* (1988), *Archangel* (1990), *Careful* (1992) and the disappointing *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* (1997) for two main reasons. Not only does it tap into a genuinely melancholic seam beneath the surface eye-catching weirdness, it also aims a neatly satirical sideswipe at Canada's largest neighbour.

The various competing nations are convincingly heartrending, but all are systematically picked off by the US, represented by failed Broadway producer Chester Kent, a spats-sporting, slippery-haired sleazeball given a nuanced portrayal by Mark McKinney. Becoming a finalist not through sincerity but by bribing losing contestants to join his increasingly elaborate stage confections which transform real-life disasters into grotesquely upbeat song-and-dance numbers, Chester seeks to convey 'sadness, but with sass and pizzazz'. The climactic 'Alaskan Kayak Tragedy of 1898' routine comprehensively skewers any pretensions towards genuine sorrow as Lady Port-Huntley triumphantly reveals her beer-filled glass legs.

If Chester lacks a heart, brother Roderick has one too many: he carries his dead son's organ in a jar filled with his own tears, and is hypersensitive to a point where physical contact and inappropriate sounds make him shriek in agony (shades of Glenn Gould?). His former wife Narcissa blocks these memories through psychosomatic amnesia and an imaginary talking tapeworm, each absolving her of personal responsibility. Meanwhile, his father Fyodor is haunted by his wife's death, his Great War memories and his botched amputation attempt on Lady Port-Huntley, who also has ample cause for lamentation. They truly understand sadness, at a level Chester only appreciates when confronted by his own imminent demise.

Original, often hilarious, *The Saddest Music in the World* hails from a parallel universe whose technologically backward film culture is more than compensated by its sparkling creative vim. If there's any justice, Isabella Rossellini's involvement (in her most distinctive role since *Blue Velvet*'s Dorothy Vallens) will make it Maddin's most accessible film.

Michael Brooke, *Sight & Sound*, May 2004

THE SADDEST MUSIC IN THE WORLD

Director: Guy Maddin
©: 1551265 Ontario Inc, Melancholy Pictures Inc
©/*Production Company:* Ego Film Arts
Production Companies: Rhombus Media, Buffalo Gal Pictures
Produced with the participation of: Téléfilm Canada,
TMN - The Movie Network, Super Écran,
Manitoba Film & Sound, Astral Media
Produced in association with: Bravo!, Movie Central
With the participation of: Government of Manitoba, Manitoba Film and
Video Production Tax Credit, Canadian Film or Video Production Tax
Credit Program, The Government of Ontario, Ontario Film and Television
Tax Credit Program
Initially developed with the assistance of:
Channel Four Television Corporation
Presented by: Rhombus Media, Buffalo Gal Pictures, Ego Film Arts
Executive Producers: Daniel Iron, Atom Egoyan
Producers: Niv Fichman, Jody Shapiro
Co-producer: Phyllis Laing
For Rhombus Media (Co-producer): Sheena Macdonald
For Rhombus Media (Associate Producers): Larry Weinstein,
Barbara Willis Sweete
For Rhombus Media (Business Affairs): Philippa King
For Rhombus Media (Production Associate): Jennifer Weiss
For Rhombus Media (Distrib Executive): Sarah Baird
For Buffalo Gals Pcts (Business Affairs): Sara Lazer
Production Manager: Anastasia Geras
Production Co-ordinator: Kimberly Mikoluff
Production Accountant: Colette Desjardins
Location Manager: Bernard Narvey
Post-production Supervisor: Matt Cahill
Creative Consultant: Ruben Guzman
1st Assistant Director: Richard O'Brien-Moran
2nd Assistant Director: Danielle Dumesnil
3rd Assistant Director: Mike Peleshok
Script Supervisor: Alanna Mills
Casting: John Buchan
Casting (Winnipeg): Jim Heber
Written by: George Toles, Guy Maddin
Based on an original screenplay by: Kazuo Ishiguro
Director of Photography: Luc Montpellier
Super 8 Photography: Ruben Guzman
Additional Camera: Guy Maddin, Jody Shapiro, Dominique Balcaen,
David Fox, Jason Heke, Mark McKinney, Ross McMillan, Richard O'Brien-
Moran, Mike Peleshok, Len Peterson, Larry Spittle, Shauna Townley
Video Graphic Co-ordinator: Gary Barringer
Still Photographers: Diah Pera, Peter Rohde
Additional Rearscreen Photography: Gisèle Gordon
Special Effects: Mark Gebel
Graphics: Greg Gardner
Editor: David Wharnsby
Production Designer: Matthew Davies
Art Director: Réjean Labrie
Set Decorator: Stephen Arndt
Key Scenic Artist: Lloyd Brandson
Scenic Artist: Lawrence van Went
Props Master: Larry Spittle
Costumes: Meg McMillan
Costume Supervisor: Paula Dunfield
Key Make-up: Doug Morrow
Key Hair: Barry Olafson
Title Designer: Sean Scoffield

Video to Film Transfer: Film Effects Inc (Toronto), John Furniotis
Music: Christopher Dedrick
Original Score Composed by: Christopher Dedrick
Cello Soloist: Roman Borys
Featuring [Orchestra]: The Canadian Film Orchestra
Featuring [Musicians]: The Muskeg Combo
Concertmaster: Mark Skazinetsky
Original Score Conducted by: Christopher Dedrick
Original Score Orchestrated by: Christopher Dedrick
Music Supervisor: Brenda Blake
Music Co-ordinator: Erin Hershberg
Music Editing: Rebecca Pellett
Source Music Editor: Craig Mann
Score Recorded by: Gary Gray, Rebecca Pellett
Score Mixed by: Gary Gray
Winnipeg Musicians Recorded by: Don Benedictson, Robert Stewart
Choreographer: Sofia Costantini
Sound Designer: David Rose
Sound: Russ Dyck, David McCallum, Lou Solakofski, David Rose
Boom Operator: Stan Mak
Re-recording Mixer: Lou Solakofski, Martin Lee
Supervising Sound Editor: David McCallum
Dialogue Editor: Ronayne Higginson
Sound Effects Editor: Mark Shnuriwsky
ADR Recordists: Dave Yonson, Darcy Kite
ADR Editor: Ronayne Higginson
Foley Artist: Sid Lieberman
Foley Recordist: Kirk Lynds
Film Diarist: Robert Enright
Special Thanks to: Don McKellar, James Di Salvio
Publicist: Leslie Stafford

Cast

Mark McKinney (*Chester Kent*)
Isabella Rossellini (*Lady Helen Port-Huntley*)
Maria de Medeiros (*Narcissa*)
David Fox (*Fyodor Kent*)
Ross McMillan (*Roderick Kent, 'Gavrillo the Great'*)
Louis Negin (*blind seer*)
Darcy Fehr (*Teddy*)
Claude Dorge (*Duncan*)
Talia Pura (*Mary*)
Jeff Sutton (*young Chester*)
Graeme Valentin (*young Roderick*)
Maggie Nagle (*Chester's mother*)
Victor Cowie (*man in bar*)
Jessica Burleson (*lady's secretary*)
Wayne Nicklas (*boardmember*)
Nancy Drake (*American mother*)
David Gillies (*American father*)
Daphne Korol (*widow*)
Adriana O'Neil (*Agnes*)
Jeff Skinner (*reverend*)
Craig Aftanas (*old sleepwalker*)
Mark Boiselle (*guard*)
Brock Macgregor (*Roderick's son*)
Daniel Hawkins (*amputee double*)

Canada 2003©

100 mins

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