



Finding Your Way: The Films of Peter Weir

Witness

Witness

Director: Peter Weir

©: Paramount Pictures Corporation

Producer: Edward S. Feldman

Co-producer: David Bombyk

Associate Producer: Wendy Weir

Production Manager: Ted Swanson

Location Manager: Michael Meehan

Production Assistants: Cara Giallanza,

Diane Schneier, Ruth Tighe, Lynn Stewart

Assistant Directors: David McGiffert,

Pamela Eilerson

Screenplay: Earl W. Wallace, William Kelley

Story: William Kelley, Pamela Wallace,

Earl W. Wallace

Director of Photography: John Seale

2nd Unit Photographer: Chuck Clifton

Camera Operator: Dan Lerner

Special Effects: John R. Elliot

Editor: Thom Noble

Production Designer: Stan Jolley

Set Designer: Craig Edgar

Set Decorator: John Anderson

Costume Supervisors: Shari Feldman,

Dallas Dornan

Costumers: Paula Cain, Michael W. Hoffman

Make-up Supervisor: Michael Hancock

Make-up: Marie Delrusso

Titles/Opticals: Pacific Title

Music: Maurice Jarre

Supervising Music Editor: Richard Stone

Music Editing: Segue Music

Sound Recording: Barry D. Thomas,

Humberto Gatica

Sound Re-recording: Robert Knudson,

Bob Glass, Don DiGirolamo

ADR Supervisor: Fred Stafford

Supervising Sound Effects Editors:

George Watters II, Cecelia Hall

Sound Effects Editors: Norval D. Crutcher,

Frank Howard, Alan L. Nineberg, Andrew Patterson,

Paul Bruce Richardson

Foley Editors: Pamela Bentkowski, Allan Bromberg

Stunt Co-ordinators: Glenn R. Wilder, Gary Epper

Stunts: Gary Epper, Bob Minor, Anderson Martin

Police Adviser: Eugene Dooley

Amish Adviser: John D. King

Amish Dialect Adviser: Nora Dunfee

Cast:

Harrison Ford (*John Book*)

Kelly McGillis (*Rachel Lapp*)

Josef Sommer (*Deputy Commissioner Schaeffer*)

Lukas Haas (*Samuel Lapp*)

Jan Rubes (*Eli Lapp*)

Alexander Godunov (*Daniel Hochleitner*)

Danny Glover (*McFee*)

Brent Jennings (*Carter*)

Patti Lupone (*Elaine*)

Angus MacInnes (*Fergie*)

Frederick Rolf (*Stoltzfus*)

Viggo Mortensen (*Moses Hochleitner*)

John Garson (*Bishop Tchantz*)

Beverly May (*Mrs Yoder*)

Ed Crowley (*sheriff*)

Timothy Carhart (*Zenovich*)

Sylvia Kauders (*tourist lady*)

Marian Swan (*Mrs Schaeffer*)

Maria Bradley (*Schaeffer's daughter*)

Rozwill Young (*T-Bone*)

Paul S. Nuss, Emily Mary Haas, Fred Steinharter,

John D. King, Paul Goss, Annemarie Vallerio,

Bruce E. Camburn (*Amish*)

William Francis (*town man*)

When you get down to it, all Peter Weir's films have been horror movies in disguise. Like the Harkers (Jonathan and Mina), Weir's heroes have been simultaneously mesmerised and repelled by their various Draculas. Arthur Waldo (Terry Camillieri) sucked into the orbit of Paris and its cars, the schoolgirls drawn inexorably on to and into Hanging Rock, David Burton (Richard Chamberlain) discovering the 'dream time' of *The Last Wave*, even the graduated Australian innocents of *Gallipoli* and *The Year of Living Dangerously* meeting their respective overseas nemeses – all have been more or less willing victims of a world fascinatingly at odds with their own. With *Witness*, Weir changes genre – the film is a thriller – and tells a tale in whose genesis he had little part: it reached him third hand, via producer Edward Feldman and star Harrison Ford, the latter exercising his by now well-established prerogative to choose his own director. And yet, the same sense of a hero torn between two worlds is central to the film. The difference here is that the hero, John Book (Ford), a Philadelphia detective, starts out in hell and finds himself, provisionally, in paradise – the strict, repressive but oh-so-solid world of the Pennsylvania Amish.

Called in to investigate the slaying of a fellow cop, Book discovers that the only witness to the crime is an Amish boy, Samuel Lapp (Lukas Haas). When Samuel casually identifies another cop as the killer, the boy, his mother Rachel (Kelly McGillis), and Book himself become the targets of a cover-up campaign. Wounded, Book flees to the Amish community of Lancaster County, to which he has already returned mother and child, and is himself slightly improbably taken in, healed and, having been dressed as an Amish, allowed to stay.

A relationship develops between Book and Rachel, which hovers on the brink of sensuality. But it is a plunge which Book finally rejects. 'If we'd made love last night,' he tells Rachel, 'I'd have had to stay, or you'd have had to leave.' It is a turning point for Book: his new sensitivity to the values of the Amish makes him aware that he does not belong.

It is this clarity of motivation and simplicity of theme that makes *Witness* Weir's tightest film to date. There is none of that flamboyantly woolly flirting with cultural antipathies and personal-versus-political revolution that made *The Year of Living Dangerously* so compulsive and so maddening. And there are none of those oneiric touches (the sudden hysteria that greets Irma when she returns to the school in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*; the water that floods down the stairs in *The Last Wave*) which turn out to be just touches – hints of a deeper meaning which Weir cannot or will not pursue.

This tendency in his films, often noted, to suggest rather than deliver has led to them being dismissed as mood pieces – the work of a talented director who just cannot tell stories. To be sure, *Witness* is strong on mood, largely thanks to John Seale's brave and intelligent cinematography, which is as little daunted by excess of darkness as by excess of light. But to use it to prove that Weir cannot tell a story is manifestly absurd. Take the scene in which Samuel discovers the identity of the killer. Left to his own devices in the Philadelphia squad room, the boy is first caught in the ebb and flow of police activity. Then, in one of the continuous takes which are the film's most striking trademarks, he begins to explore, ending up in front of a glass trophy case in which, after a

Tom W. Kennedy (*ticket seller*)
Ardyth Kaiser, Thomas Quinn (*couple in garage*)
Eugene Dooley, Victoria Scott D'Angelo, Richard Chaves, Tim Moyer, Nino Del Buono, James Clark, Joseph Kelly, Norman Carter, Craig Clement (*detectives*)
Robert Earl Jones (*custodian*)
Michael Levering, Cara Giallanza, Anthony Dean Rubes (*hoodlums*)
Bernie Styles (*counterman*)
Blossom Terry (*mother in station*)
Jennifer Mancuso (*little girl*)
USA 1985
112 mins
Digital 4K

The screening on Tue 14 Apr will be introduced by season curator Elena Lazic

With thanks to

Peter and Ingrid Weir

The Cars That Ate Paris and *The Plumber* will be released on BFI Blu-ray on 25 May

Become a BFI Member

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

Sight and Sound

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*
* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info:
sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk/subscribe

**SIGHT
AND
SOUND**

BFI Player

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

25 & Under

We want to open up great independent and classic film and TV for all, making it as accessible as possible. If you are under the age of 26, you can get discounted tickets for BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. BFI Southbank cinema tickets are £4, with festival tickets £6, so you can enjoy the very best of cinema from around the world at an affordable price.

Sign up today and verify your age online, and you can start enjoying discounted tickets immediately.

casual exploration of the contents, he suddenly spots a photo of the killer. The fluency with which he passes from onlooker to witness, and from innocence to involvement, is handled with a skill that is nothing if not narrative.

The film's real fascination, though, comes from the ambiguous position in which it places Book and, by extension, us. Like other Weir films, it draws us in to the point of disorientation. Shortly after a telephone call has informed him that his partner has been murdered, Book finds himself caught in a confrontation between a group of Amish and a party of taunting rednecks. He observes the humiliation of Daniel (Alexander Godunov) and, like us, waits for Daniel to respond. Daniel, of course, does not. But Book does, giving in to his (and our) frustration, meeting violence with violence. The action, as he knew it must, fatally distances him from the Amish. Not just ideologically, either: by making him conspicuous, the incident leads directly to his being tracked down by his pursuers, and thus triggers off a far greater outburst of violence, which sets Book further at odds with both himself and the Amish. Paradise is lost, as it always will be, through its inevitable incompatibility with the 'real' world.

Witness is a more than competent, watchable, even inspired film – one of those quintessentially American movies in which story, theme and visual style coalesce; a film rich in both skill and suggestion. If anything, though, one misses those rough moments which in *Gallipoli* and *The Year of Living Dangerously* – his bravest and worst films – showed Weir reaching, perhaps overreaching, for something more.

At the same time, it is worth reflecting on why, in a period dominated by films of pubescent passage or self-fulfilment through dancing, it should have been *Witness* that has taken the prize at the American box office, in a way in which Weir's other films, not to mention the more obviously meaningful rural dramas like *Country*, *The River* and *Places in the Heart*, have not. For that, after all, is what *Witness* is 'about' – the values of the city and the late twentieth century (to which we all, of necessity, subscribe) being thrown into doubt and rendered hollow by contact with an older, stricter, more confident order – a horror movie in reverse, in other words.

The film allows us, in the company of Book, to take a sort of holiday from our normal concerns, to visit other values *en touriste*, drawing the strengths from a strange and alien tradition without really immersing ourselves in it. It is a vicarious visit – time spent down among the Amish – until, like Book, we return, reluctantly but inevitably, to the ordinary world of cars and phones, guns and earthly retribution. Thus *Witness*, in addition to dramatising our own responses, above all the temptation to meet violence with a juster and more effective mirror of itself, also parallels the experience we have in watching it: for Book a few weeks, for us two hours, in another world.

Nick Roddick, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1985