

Best In Show (12)12th November 2001Director: Christopher Guest
USA 2000

Running time:- 90 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: Parker Posey (Meg Swan), Michael Hitchcock (Hamilton Swan), Catherine O'Hara (Cookie Fleck), Eugene Levy (Gerry Fleck), Bob Balaban (Dr Theodore W. Millbank III), Christopher Guest (Harlan Pepper), Michael McKean (Stefan Vanderhoof), John Michael Higgins (Scott Donlan), Patrick Cranshaw (Leslie Ward Cabot), Jennifer Coolidge (Sherri Ann Ward Cabot), Don Lake (Graham Chissolm). SCRIPT- Christopher Guest, Eugene Levy. PHOTOGRAPHY- Roberto Schaefer. EDITING- Robert Leighton. MUSIC- Jeffery C.J. Vanston. SOUNDTRACK- "God Loves a Terrier", "Terrier Style" - Eugene Levy, Catherine O'Hara; "Piano Seduction" - Paul Vanston; "March of the Mayflower", "Mutt's Strut" - The Martini Brothers; "Louisiana Nights" - Christopher Guest.

Anyone who saw Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), (also with Guest) or Tim Robbins's *Bob Roberts* (1992), will be familiar with a sly sub-genre of the documentary, the 'mockumentary'. In this a handheld camera follows a group of enthusiasts around and records their earnest reflections on how they came to be where they are today. The only clue to the irreverent intent of our tenacious reporters is the disarming candour with which the interviewees display their inanity, or their dangerousness.

Best in Show concerns the preparations for the Mayflower Dog Show in Philadelphia. It follows five sets of contenders as they journey to this prestigious event, probing them about their hopes and motivations and eavesdropping on their occasional losses of control. Guest directs and co-writes, whilst also casting himself as one of the contestants, a fishing-tackle-salesman-cum-amateur-ventriloquist bloodhound owner.

Christopher Guest (aka Christopher Haden-Guest, Fifth Baron Haden-Guest of Saling) has had some varied credits as actor. (Director credits include *The Big Picture* (1990).) But most of us remember him best as Spinal Tap's lead guitar/vocalist Nigel Tufnel, ever so proud of the amp. with that little extra power, because its dial went up to eleven.

Tufnel's naïve adherence to his own fallacious logic in that scene typifies the humour of much of *Best in Show*. There is, for example, the scene in which Guest's character, Harlan Pepper, recounts his childhood habit of naming all the nuts and avers that his bloodhound can do the same; which he proceeds to have it demonstrate to singularly unconvincing effect.

Pepper is normality and stability incarnate compared with the film's other subjects, however. Most manic are the Swans, whom we first witness confiding in their pet psychiatrist

that their Weimaraner may have been traumatised by seeing them have sex. (By being present at their neurotic fights and recriminations more likely.) Less well matched, and that is the joke, are the Flecks, Gerry and Cookie (Catherine O'Hara wonderful as ever). Wherever they go Gerry has to put up with total strangers approaching his wife and revealing themselves to be former lovers. The gay couple, Stefan and Scott, are predictably endearing and as camp as you like. Finally there is the champion poodle owner who hopes to retain her title; she is the buxom young wife of a moribund millionaire and hires a dog trainer to ensure success. There is more than initially meets the eye to their relationship, too.

Best in Show is slow to build but really gets going at the show itself, thanks largely to Fred Willard's turn as the commentator. His wistful observations and excited questions, directed at the bemused expert at his elbow, provide the film's biggest laughs. In his character, with his amused and yet genuinely interested attitude, we have a surrogate for the film's creator and viewer alike, and the key to its success: Guest never makes the mistake of despising the people who make up this eccentric closed world of narcissism.

The film's one lapse is in occasionally betraying its 'mockumentary' format. Documentary by its nature lacks the closure of fiction and derives its power from the impression it gives of seizing reality unawares. Editing can lend structure to interview scenes in documentary, but comedy structure is inimitable: it has to be written. Once or twice Guest allows a line to creep in because it is a good pay-off rather than because it is true to his (mock) reality.

Basically, though, *Best in Show* is a delight and somewhat unique: for all its dogs the animals have a tough time upstaging the humans.

David Clare