

By Doug Smith

THE LIFE OF CHRIST, FROM THE miraculous conception to the tragic execution, dominates much of Western art. In that tradition, with its Adorations of the Magi and Stations of the Cross, the story has been idealized by artists of every century. But for the most part, cartoonists have given it a wide berth.

Which leaves Winnipeg cartoonist Bob Haverluck a relatively clear field. And in his recent show, *When God Was Flesh and Wild: A host of cartoons, tragic and comic, revealing the Bible as bad news to the mighty and the bossy*, Haverluck uses his lyric talent to play across this field with wild abandon. His Mary is a large, rough peasant woman who in the middle of her pregnancy smiles as she "enjoys her secret." Christ has a broken nose, matted hair and outrages "the protectors of morality and might" by getting down on his hands and knees and smooching with a pig. And in some drawings the crucified Christ lies splayed out across a businessman's tie.

As Haverluck wryly notes, "Tradition surrounding the life of Christ operates on the idea that we honor things by idealizing them." His work, as the show's title suggests, attempts to give Christ back his humanity—and his political punch.

"I think that, properly understood, the biblical narratives for the most part are quite subversive of authority and concentrations of power. So the connection between the Christmas story and the rise of kings and the victimage and points of resistance to victimage seem to me to be a subtext for the politics that goes on."

A twisting line: Now in his mid-40s, Haverluck came to cartooning through the most circuitous of routes. Born in rural Manitoba, he moved to Winnipeg when the local high school principal explained to him that if he came back the following year he would be kicked out of school. Once safely through high school, he embarked on a course of studies—philosophy and political science—that set him on the road to becoming a United Church minister.

Although he was immersed in the study of Marx—and was close friends with a number of prominent Marxist scholars at university—Haverluck says his politics are rooted in his observations of justice and injustice in his hometown. "I had an appreciation for some of the old Ukrainian folks. There were also some Indian people I got to know. There was a sense of asking, 'Why are these people getting pissed on?' From that I got a sense of the way racism works, of the way capitalism works. It was from those very ordinary experiences."

On his way to the ministry he studied in England, where his politics and his sense of humor were influenced by the theories of cultural criticism developed by Welsh



Haverluck drawn to a heretical humanity

novelist and social critic Raymond Williams. After being ordained in 1971, Haverluck worked in a number of rural Manitoba communities before going back to school to work on his doctoral thesis. But instead of writing his thesis, he became deeply involved with an interchurch committee publicizing the plight of Indian bands whose land was being flooded by huge hydro-electric projects. As part of his work on this issue he drew a number of cartoons for university newspapers.

His involvement with native issues led him to the Prairie Christian Training Center in Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, where he worked for six years. There he taught courses on racism, prairie culture and clowning—usually a series of dark monologues. And his work also required him to spend a lot of time in meetings. "I found myself doing a lot of doodling. Any time I would go to a meeting I would take along paper; then I started buying books of cartoons." He was beginning to find the form for his humor.

"I always knew the comedy was there, but I always felt it was cheap. But through the political stuff I began to discover that comedy could have a place. I went over to England to meet with some comedy writers who I thought were doing this kind of stuff." He met with playwright Trevor Griffiths as well as the writers of *Steptoe and Son* (which translated to *Sanford and Son* in the U.S.) and the BBC's Tony Hancock comedies. "It became apparent that I could be doing more with the comedy stuff and other people could be in the parish; other people could be teaching the adult education stuff. I had finally discovered the form."

Word-heavy tracts: It is only in the last few years that Haverluck has been able to devote himself to car-

toon on a full-time basis. In that period he's succeeded in selling work to Britain's *New Statesman* and *Harper's* in the U.S. His drawings also show up regularly in the *Ploughshares Monitor*, *This Magazine*, *The United Church Observer* and the *National Catholic Reporter*. His work has also received support from the Canada Council.

Even though his work appears in a number of left-wing publications, he jokes that, while the left talks a lot about the importance of culture, it is still fairly impatient with the directions of art. "There is something of the 19th-century Methodist in methodology of the left. Like the British Methodists, the left still focuses on word-heavy tracts."

For a very funny guy, Haverluck is deadly serious about humor. A fact that isn't all that surprising once you discover he wrote his thesis on Kierkegaard, comedy and community. "In our culture art is expected to be entertainment. It is one of the terrible things a cartoonist has to deal with—cartoons are supposed to be on the funny pages." To Haverluck this means we have lost touch with the rich comic traditions of everyday life.

Haverluck's at times fierce and scatological sense of humor (one series on business culture traces the career of someone making his way up the corporate ladder by starting as a Catchfart) is offset by works portraying a genuine sense of gentleness and vision that evoke a sense of solidarity. "My assumption is that we don't need assurances that things are going to work out or that things are going to be successful politically, but we really need a strong sense of being in company with others. I can put up with a lot of shit if I know I am not alone. I don't need to know if it is going to work out. But what I

cannot bear very well is that it doesn't matter to others, that one is not part of a tradition, either living or dead."

Much of Haverluck's work is a reclamation project—bringing Christ back into that tradition. In some of his writing he suggests there was a streak of stand-up comic in Christ, particularly the Christ of the parables. "There was a lot of encouragement to take all of Christ's parables as lofty stuff. Because comedy has to be frivolous and Christ could not be frivolous. But what do you have here? You have a peasant growing up in the northern part of Palestine, where they send missionaries from Jerusalem. His vocabulary would be rich. You would expect peasant speech to be rich.

"Then scholars get at it, with no sense of the community it comes out of, and they take the humor out of it. The parables are consistently super-exaggerations. For me, it is ordinary speech. I am just reclaiming the ordinariness of it all. Some people say, 'You must be making fun of it because you are making it ordinary.' No, no, no. The joke is on us

for expecting it to be other than ordinary. Mary is not a princess—she is a peasant woman with big mitts. What do you expect? She probably spent most of her life picking stones. I am trying to reclaim our companionship with these people who struggled against the political structures."

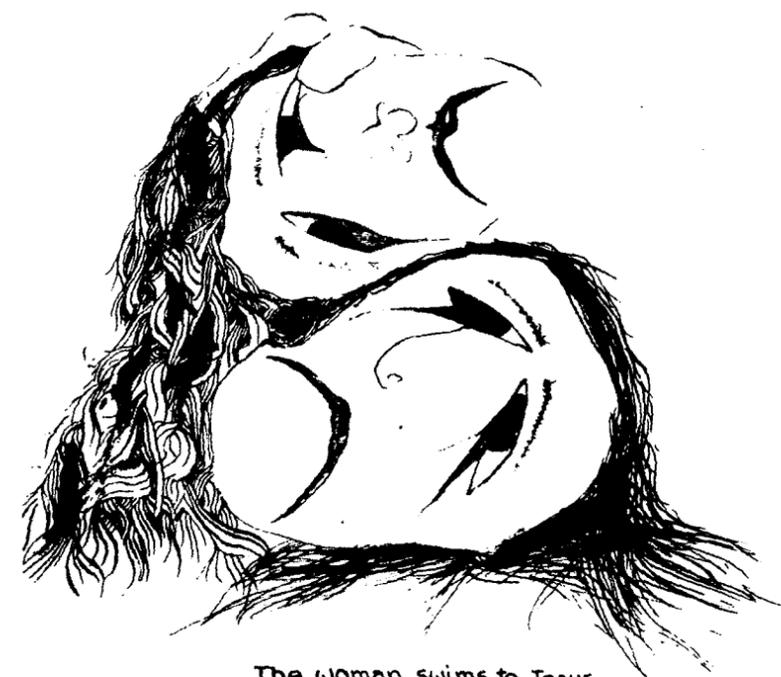
The theory and the ideas behind comedy and cartooning are very important to Haverluck. One of his latest projects is to develop a liber-

HUMOR

ation theology for comic art. "I want to do something to get people thinking, not only about art as progressive but as reactionary." He is also going to be publishing two books in the coming year: *Love Your Enemies and Other Neighbors*—a book of his writings that will include 50 drawings—and *Peace: Perspectives on Peace-Conflict*.

Doug Smith is a Winnipeg writer and broadcaster.

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The woman swims to Jesus on her tears, and he swims out to meet her.

Stella
Directed by John Erman

By Pat Aufderheide

IF YOU'VE EVER SEEN *STELLA DALLAS*—the 1937 version with Barbara Stanwyck—just thinking about it can choke you up. A sharp-eyed mill girl on the make seduces the runaway heir to a fortune. Infatuated with her innocence of high-class ways and her drive to escape her class, he marries her. But she can't buck her class origins. They separate, and the mill girl raises their daughter alone.

When she sees that her crude manners, crass taste and loud friends jeopardize her child's future, she selflessly lets the girl rejoin her father. Of course the girl won't go, and Stella has to force her out by

FILM

seeming to be the kind of person that people think she is. At the movie's end, everyone in the audience is in happy tears with Stella as she stands outside in the rain, watching through the window of a mansion her daughter's wedding to a prep-school boy.

Stella, the all-too-faithful remake starring Bette Midler, produces more guffaws than tears. And unfortunately people are mostly laughing at her, not with her.

But it's not all her fault. As the laughter builds, you can even feel as sorry for Bette as you did in the King Vidor version for the pathetic *Stella Dallas*, humiliating herself in front of the fancy toffs.

Two classes, two worlds: The 1937 film—already a remake of a 1925 silent film, also taken from a novel and the progenitor of a radio soap opera—was already a kind of pop cultural fossil of class relations. It married two myths of American class: you can rise out of your class, and you can't. It portrayed a class structure in which the industrial working class and the owning class were the whole world of class relations. They were firmly defined and culturally and politically worlds apart. When *Stella Dallas* shoves her daughter out of the nest, we admire her sacrifice because it's necessary. And somehow her daughter will make it, even though *Stella* can't.

Bridging the huge sociological gap and plot implausibilities in *Stella Dallas* is an emotional game with the audience. In the first third of the movie *Stella* is repellent and grasping. In the second third she's pathetic. In the final third she's a martyr. Our tears flow because we forgive her and feel bad for having judged her so harshly.

Fifty-three years later, much has changed in American class relations. Of course much has stayed the same: we still have our myths of class mobility, even though statistics show



Midler's less than stellar star vehicle

there is no more mobility in the U.S. than in Europe. But in the intervening years, popular culture—McDonalds, Madonna, MTV—has created a common language across class divisions. Post-World War II affluence gave families of industrial workers a small but significant piece of the pie. Ownership has been broadly diffused. And a sizable professional class has grown up, without real financial security but with great pretensions to a classless gentility.

From Bette to worse: As far as the makers of *Stella* are concerned, none of this ever happened. And as a result, poor Bette Midler plays a strong character in a series of implausible situations, which makes her look not the melodramatic victim but simply ridiculous.

Screenwriter Robert Getchell, who wrote such strong scripts as *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* and *Bound for Glory*, collaborated on *Stella* with Samuel Goldwyn Jr. But the real credit should go to the King Vidor version, because the structure—and much of the dialogue—is drawn directly from it.

True, this time around *Stella* is an aggressive single mother who—out of a fierce pride—never marries the kidney specialist who impregnates her. (It must be noted, however, that she's a single mom who rarely experiences, on screen, basic problems of single moms such as daycare difficulties and loneliness.)

Stella is never an unsympathetic character, and Midler is often funny. Midler has her best moment early in the film when, as the rowdy bartender, she does a spectacular bump

and grind on the bar counter. A later food fight also brings out her capacity to clown. The film is given currency with a slew of (presumably lucrative) commercial references from Continental Airlines to Parkay to Cap'n Crunch.

In the basic plot line, this film never left 1937—and the film does contortions to justify its fidelity. The kidney specialist manages to marry a woman who had earlier married into money and thereby lives in a rarified elite world. The claustrophobic propriety of a small mill town must be carried by a matron who is a caricature of snobbishness (Eileen Brennan); she manages to turn the girl's friends against her overnight. And *Stella*, in order to be as socially reprehensible as in the original (while still endearing from the start to the audience, as is ob-

ligatory in Hollywood's star-centered funding system), must be idiosyncratic, an offbeat sprite, and not just a victim of her class origins.

Stella also meticulously preserves, as if in aspic, aspects of the 1937 version that no longer fit reality. For instance, *Stella* here sews her daughter's clothes as she did in the 1937 version—it's a symbol of her devotion—although *Zayre's* these days would offer far more appealing stuff at working-class prices.

Not ready for prime time: It's too bad that director John Erman—whose background is in TV movies—didn't draw more from the best in television. *Stella* is neither fast-paced nor consistent in tone. It does have the maudlin ring of TV's social-issue-of-the-week films, though.

In the end, mom's sacrificial act doesn't convince. *Stella* is kooky, but

that doesn't seem like enough to ruin her daughter's chances of getting married to a nice boy. And if it is, then God help her daughter, who's into Madonna and new-wave hairstyles. But then, there are probably plenty of future stockbrokers who are, too.

Yes, there are still class divisions in America. But one of the characteristics of our class structure is denial of its existence. That may be a myth, but it's part of the fabric of popular culture. How poignant a modern-day *Stella Dallas* might have been if it had transformed instead of embalming the old script—maybe even exposing the myth of eternal middle-classness. Instead, all you can say is, poor *Stella*, poor Bette. ■

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