

My antonia: film review



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

My Antonia, a film produced by Victoria Riskin and David Rintels, was released in 1995. It stars Neil Patrick Harris in the lead role. The cinematography and music are handled by Robert Primes and Lori Slomka respectively. Based on a classic literary novel of the same name by Willa Cather, the screenplay is adapted by Victoria Riskin. Directed by Joseph Sargent, the movie stars Jason Robards (Josiah Burden), Eva Marie Saint (Emmaline Burden) and Neil Patrick Harris (Jimmy Burden) in lead character roles.

The script of the film manages to retain most key aspects of the original written work. Set in the late nineteenth century Nebraska, the story revolves around the travails of orphan Jimmy Burden, who moves into his grandparents' (played by Jason Robards and Eva Marie Saint) farm that is located nearby Black Hawk, Nebraska. Young Jimmy is immediately drawn to 15-year neighbor Antonia Shimerda (played by Elina Lowensohn) and they become close friends. Conflict arises when Antonia's father wants Jimmy to teach her English, whereas Jimmy's grandfather is concerned about his grandson's own education. But soon the Shimerda family meets a tragedy and contact with the Burdens is severed as the latter move into town.

As the ageing grandparents pool their resources into making their grandson a graduate, Antonia renews her contact with Jimmy as she also now lives in town. The subsequent narrative is about the evolution and endurance of their friendship, which lasts for many years, even as Jimmy takes further strides in his academic and professional life. The relationship between Jimmy and Antonia has a romantic basis to it, but neither of them expresses it in overt ways. The intrusion of the beautiful Lena also disrupts the harmony of

their relationship. As Jimmy takes greater interest in Lena, he drifts further apart from Antonia. This element of the relationship adds suspense and intrigue to the narrative and keeps audience interest alive throughout.

The adaptation to film comes off well, although some of the smaller characters in the novel do not find space in the shorter film format. Yet, the essence of the novel is fully captured through the strong impression that the character of Antonia makes on the audience. Even as the film moves toward the final denouement, the benevolence and kindness of Antonia lingers on the mind of the discerning viewer, standing as a testament to the film's overall success. For example, even as she realizes that Jimmy is lost to her, Antonia does not cry foul and neglect her duties toward her family. She carries on bravely and reconstructs her life in a manner fitting the circumstances. When Jimmy eventually meets Antonia toward the end of the film, he finds her living a happy married with children. The film ends upon this note of implicit regard and goodwill for each other.

As for the performance given by lead actors, excepting for Elina Lowensohn's stand-out central performance, none of the other actors evince much energy, especially Neil Patrick Harris in the lead role. Even accommodating for the fact that Jimmy Burden is a reserved character in the film, he nowhere nearly capture the emotional turmoil that Cather portrayed so eloquently.

One of the larger themes covered by the movie is the disparate treatment meted out to immigrant communities. This is most evident in the ordeals of the Shimerda family in assimilating with the local community in Black Hawk, Nebraska. Willa Cather was a writer of great cultural and social sensitivity.

And the film *My Antonio* successfully captures the thrust and emphasis of her presentation of American social problems. For example, reviewer Tom Wiener correctly notes in his review article that

“ The strongest portrayal in the film is the plight of European immigrants and in particular the young women. As Antonia plaintively says, “ Girls like me don’t get chances,” and although she almost blows what she thinks is her best shot, she does land on her feet–no thanks to the self-absorbed Jimmy. A longer film might have given more screen time to the liberated character of Lena Lingard, Antonia’s Swedish friend and Jimmy’s first real lover, to enhance this point. Victoria Riskin’s script is adequate, but it’s forced at times to resort to voiceover narration that spells out what adroitly composed dialogue and more forceful direction might have dramatized.” (Tom Wiener, Rovi)

The director Joseph Sargent has to be given a credit for pulling off a fine balancing act. If any faults are to be found, they lay in the technical aspects such as cinematography and background score. Apart from this, only some minor elements of the novel could not properly be translated into the film version, which is a reflection of the low budget that went into production. Moreover, considering that the film was intended for a television audience, the parameters of critical assessment are slightly different for this film. This is one reason why many scenes of intimacy were either cut short or entirely cut-out from the film, making it easy to gain a PG viewer rating and as a result a broader reach.

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