

GREEN CARD

Directed by Peter Weir
Produced by Peter Weir
Distributed by Touchstone's Buena Vista Pictures
Released in 1990

In romantic comedies the pleasure is found not in the ending, but in the surprises along the way. Ten minutes into *Green Card* the audience knows that Bronte and Georges will stay married, and rather happily at that. This quality of the genre enables the audience to relax; they know the picture will not lurch into the horrors of a slasher film or the tension of a political thriller. But *Green Card* is full of surprises (its biggest one coming at the end), and that's what makes it effective. In this version of the age-old tale, he's smitten with her from the first moment he lays eyes on her, while she is, alternately, dismissive, repulsed, and intrigued.

He waits....

But before we get to the surprises, let's examine the set-up.

Though it would be hard to bridge the cultural divide, an American romantic comedy about an arranged marriage in India is quite conceivable. But in that circumstance the parties are intending to make it work. In *Green Card* tension stems from the fact that both the man and the woman are intending from the very beginning to be divorced! They don't want it to work. From a storytelling perspective, this is the key reason to have them married from the outset. The marriage, appropriately enough, is what keeps them together. They are forced into a series of productive confrontations.

Indeed, the director's rich conceit is that, to justify their marriage to immigration authorities, Bronte and Georges are forced to learn everything they can about each other. And along the way they actually begin to care, deeply. When the pair are interviewed separately, we cut from one to the other, and we see how they speak of each other with unfeigned tenderness. In spite of their differences, they are comfortable with each other.

Along the way, the surprises are varied and delightful. For the first half of the movie we're not sure that Georges is a composer. He seems bewildered when Bronte wishes him success in his composing, after they are wed. The INS interviewer says she has no record of him being a composer. Then at the dinner with Lauren's mother Georges seems unfamiliar with the composer Gabriel Faure when a smitten female dinner guest asks if he is a relation, this coming fast on the heels of his humble reaction to Lauren's introduction of him as a "famous French composer." Finally he tries to beg-off playing the piano for his fellow guests. As he sits at the keyboard, the collective dread experienced by all concerned is richly comic; we're embarrassed for Georges and the guests, and we have no idea what is going to happen.

The silence is shattered when Georges begins his cacophonous improvisation. This is the turning point in the movie. We realize that Georges is not a liar, that he is talented, and, with his delicate tribute to the urban garden projects Bronte loves (and he dismisses as a well-meaning distraction), Bronte begins to acknowledge her love for him.

Remember, it is just a few hours later that night when we're given the heart-stopping tease that Georges (with his question of what side she sleeps on) is about to seduce her. Andie

MacDowell's expression as she watches the bedroom door is a perfect distillation of fear and longing.

Green Card's climax takes an idea from Peter Weir's previous film *Witness* and improves it substantially. In that film Harrison Ford, a cop and a fugitive from injustice, is hiding out on an Amish farm. One night he encounters Kelly McGillis, the rebellious Amish widow, sensuously bathing with a sponge. She's left the door ajar, welcoming his prurient interest. He beholds her naked form. She silently offers herself. He passes by.

Green Card ends with Bronte revisiting the Afrika Café, where she met Georges before their marriage-of-convenience. She has accepted his gentle summons in a music-manuscript love letter. This time, unlike their initial meeting when he looked away sheepishly, he holds her gaze through the glass, intently searching her face, looking for the truth. She, finally deciding, rushes to the door to embrace him. The scene is surprisingly erotic and demonstrates the unappreciated capacity of cinema to explode minimal gestures into something epic. In *Witness* the tension of the exchange has no release, the unnecessary shot of McGillis's exposed breasts is too jarring, and there's no music to emphasize the unspoken feelings of the characters. The director gets it right on his second try.

The actual decision of two strangers to get married is thankfully kept off-screen. It's almost too much to accept, even though it happens in real life. The closest we get to the seriousness of the situation is when Bronte's lawyer decides to coach her on how to lie to the INS. He tells her she's committing a crime, but helps her to cover it up by committing perjury!

There's been a lot of feckless lawyers in movies but this guy pales in comparison to Harrison Ford's attorney in *The Fugitive*, whose only lines are:

- "We can't find the guy!" (This would be the one-armed man, whom Richard manages to find in a less than a month with no help, no money, and while being chased by the U.S. Marshalls.)
- "Richard! Jesus, why did you run? Running only makes you look guilty." (Quit stalling, and get executed so I can close my file!)
- "Tell me where you are so I can come meet you and you can turn yourself in. [...] Richard, you're asking me to harbor and aid a convicted felon. I can't help you that way. My advice both as your friend and legal counsel is—is for you to give yourself up. Now, tell me, *where are you?* [...] Give me an address and I'll get there as soon as I can." (He probably just wants to know where to send his bill.)

Finally, Gerard Depardieu is extraordinary. Director Peter Weir wrote the script with only Depardieu in mind for the part and delayed production for over a year until the actor was available. It's fair to say that star power *is* universal. Despite his thick accent, his natural self-assuredness carries over in the character of Georges Faure, a man at peace with himself, but not with the world...until he meets Bronte.

But Andie MacDowell is the one with the killer character arc. Her greenhouse is her sacred space where she's to be left alone. She breaks numerous laws to get a hold of it. Indeed, just as Georges says, she loves plants more than people. Lauren observes at the dinner party that Bronte is doomed to a lonely future because she cannot face the reality that, for all the faults that people have that plants do not, the benefits of a sacred *human* connection cannot be overstated. So when he tells her at the movie's end that he's made a deal to leave without a fuss so she can stay and keep her apartment and her plants, and she replies that she doesn't want them anymore, it's a wonderful life-affirming moment.

The plants are here for us. We're not here for the plants.