

ICARUS IN CONCRETE

This Boy's Life, directed by Mark Caton-Jones.

In the tradition of the 18th and 19th century Bildungsroman, the autobiographical hero of James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is a sensitive adolescent alienated from repressive provincial surroundings. Steven Dedalus's vaulting ambition, his contention with narrow minded paternal authority figures implicitly identifies him with Icarus, that mythic overreacher who ignored his father's warning, and tumbled to death from flying too close to the sun on waxen wings.

The Oedipal dynamic and Icarean metaphor of Steven's angst-ridden journey towards autonomy amidst the philistines has powerfully influenced coming-of-age narratives in American literature and cinema diverse as Catcher In The Rye, Portnoy's Complaint and The Graduate. One of Portrait's more effective recent inheritors is This Boy's Life, Tobias Wolff's unflinching memoir of his Fifties' youth, filmed by Mark Caton-Smith from a script by Robert Getchell and the director. Getchell's earlier screenplay for Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore anticipates Wolff's compelling history of the not so halcyon days he spent on and off the road with his footloose mother.

Caroline Wolff left her older son with an affluent ex-husband, to pursue harebrained strike-it-rich schemes and no-win

romances across the American landscape. Tobias was a willing if intermittently traumatized partner in her rambling. When first encountered in the movie, Caroline's perennial enthusiasm is wearing thin. Her plan for a killing in uranium has gone bust along with her aging jalopy.

Her last man has proven an improvident abuser, and her twelve year old son is drifting into sullen delinquency. One theorizes that his acting out probably masked a substantive covert depression, fueled by Caroline's fragmented lifestyle, ongoing desolation over paternal loss, and buried resentment at his brother's supposedly more favored lot -- of which more presently.

The desperate Caroline allows herself to be wooed and won by Dwight, a doltish auto mechanic with an unnerving buoyancy and an inexhaustible supply of obsessional bromides ("Call me anything, just don't call me late for dinner!"). Dwight hails from Concrete, a dead-end town in Washington's Cascade mountains where grey skies drip endless rain. His name could have warned her of juiceless, soul-grinding days to come.

Dwight installs mother and son in a ramshackle house with three cowed children from his previous marriage. Caroline quickly discovers that Dwight's narrow soul is utterly devoid of tenderness. She has exchanged her precious freedom for the rule of a petty tyrant sufficiently cognizant of his mediocrity to detest (and fear) signs of excellence in others. But she's too depleted by the chronic ebb of her fortunes to much oppose his domination.

Besides, she knows he can put three squares on the table, and thinks he'll exert some kind of stabilizing influence upon the unruly Tobias.

Dwight does indeed take his stepson in hand, grimly forcing upon Tobias the icons of a sturdy working class boyhood with a miserly, sadistic spin -- endless bootcamp chores, brutal boxing lessons, a paper route the profit from which Dwight pockets and secretly spends. Eventually, Tobias comes to realize that Dwight's nasty competitiveness has been sharpened by awareness that Caroline quietly values her son above him. One recalls the skewed Oedipal configuration of D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers.

Tobias' yearning for a father of any stripe, his inherent strength of character, and pure desire to succeed make him endure Dwight's demeaning tutelage, even tentatively pull himself together. But at base he remains deeply dispirited, performs poorly in school, continues to hang out with crude losers.

As Dwight's children grow up and flee, his harassment fall even more heavily upon Tobias. With the help of a gay boy he bullies then befriends (a relationship etched with special poignancy), Tobias fiddles his high school record and wins entrance to a classy prep school.

Tobias' acceptance follows close on the heels of Caroline's decision to work for JFK's campaign, over Dwight's spiteful objections. He erupts into a jealous fury, murderously attacks Tobias. Caroline, now awakened from her debased passivity, knocks

Dwight unconscious and drags him off her son. The pair exultantly quits Dwight's miserable homestead and the barren confines of Concrete forever.

Caton-Smith's cinematic translation of This Boy's Life is thoughtful, often gripping. His perception of Concrete's reality is dark, but not condescending: the town is never made to seem as odious as Dwight's peculiar pathological corner of it. The director's vision of Tobias and his mother is equally balanced, lucid and unsentimental as the adult Wolff's. Caroline is an appealing character, but her casual overstimulation of Tobias is also clearly intimated. Sympathy for the hero's plight is tempered by acknowledgement of his less attractive features, his strain of duplicity and Icarean self-destructiveness.

Ellen Barkin admirably captures Caroline's flightiness and sensuality. In his impressive debut, Leonardo (then Leonard) DiCaprio conveys the vicissitudes -- and physical reality -- of Tobias' puberty across several stages with startling accuracy: he seems uncannily to grow up as the picture unspools.

Robert DiNiro has played damaged, dangerous borderline types before with exceptional subtlety. Unfortunately, in This Boy's Life he continues the gonzo wretched excesses of his Max Cady role in Cape Fear. DiNiro's Dwight is all surface, redolent with quirky shtick. Dwight is a contemptible man, but not beyond pity. One wonders if DiNiro's own contempt prevented him from inhabiting an unlikeable character as he did with such compassion in Taxi Driver

and Raging Bull. In any event, he remains curiously "outside" Dwight's persona.

The film's conclusion is not ambivalently upbeat, consonant with its refusal of convenient Hollywood platitudes. Caroline, one is told, remarried well, but Tobias' Icarean struggles towards the light continued: he dropped out of the prep school he had schemed himself into, served in Vietnam, then went on to become a writer - - and the teller of this tale.

Ironically, the real father whose absence he grieved so painfully, whose gracious patrician image spurred his longing for escape from Concrete's mean streets, was actually a charming scam artist. For Tobias' brother, living with the father was no less tortuous than Caroline and Dwight's existence. The Duke of Deception, Geoffrey Wolff's study of the man, and the harsh impact of his machinations upon the family Tobias never knew, comprises a remarkable companion piece to This Boy's Life. No one, as Jim Morrison said, gets out of here alive -- or at least, unscathed.

