

At the Top of His Game

Teresa Stolarskyj — *The Manitoban* — March 10, 2004

Something is amiss in the town of Exceptional Vista. The closure of the nut factory has left the town a shambles, boarded up and nearly devoid of people. Those who remain find themselves faced with a crisis: strange remains have been discovered in the “lumpy bumpy part of town outside of town,” and worse, an unnatural atmospheric disturbance has interfered with the TV signals. Enter the brilliant Dr. Karel Lamonte, who “dreams of science and how it can save mankind.” An atomic specialist in pursuit of the secrets of cool fusion, Dr. Lamonte appears to be Exceptional Vista’s only hope.

If it sounds like a scene out of a ‘50s sci-fi movie, it’s for good reason. Former Winnipegger John Paizs’ 1999 hip and surprisingly intelligent b-movie spoof *Top of the Food Chain* has enough send-ups to make *Airplane* look like a serious drama. Screened recently as part of the *Road Maps and Fireworks: tales from great Canadian Cinema* series, the film was introduced by budding film ingenue deco dawson as being the funniest Canadian film ever made. While dawson and the Cinematheque are hardly shy about touting the riches of Canadian film, Winnipeg itself remains largely and ironically oblivious to many of its finest artistic treasures, including Paizs, whom dawson lauds as “the resplendent creative force behind the birth of all films Manitoban.”

Indeed, it was Paizs’ 1985 feature film debut, *Crime Wave*, which he wrote, produced, directed and starred in, that definitively placed Winnipeg on the proverbial filmmaking map. A deliberately absurd ‘50s pastiche, *Crime Wave* made waves at the 1985 Toronto Festival of Festivals and has since become a cult favorite. Subsequently, Paizs embarked on a 14-year hiatus from feature-length work and focused on short film and television projects. When *Crime Wave* coincidentally re-surfaced on pay-per-view, it’s uniquely “Paizsian” artistic sensibility inspired *Food Chain* writers Phil Bedard and Larry Lelonde to approach Paizs to direct their film.

Made on a budget of \$3 million – almost posh by Canadian standards but paltry on the whole – the end result of *Food Chain* is something frequently described as either “brilliant” or “stupid.” While one critic further describes it as “a ‘50s monster melodrama conceived, produced and acted out by mental patients,” Paizs’ own description may be at least as accurate: “*Twin Peaks* meets *Petticoat Junction* meets *Alien*.”

According to Campbell Scott, who plays the stunningly straightforward and unflinching Dr. Lamonte (and who is the son of the infamous George C.), Paizs himself embodies the sentiment of the film: “quite...sweet (and) totally insane.” Paradoxically, Scott also noted that Paizs managed to be “one of the sanest people on the set...very encouraging to our zaniness but very stable.” Such unabashed and eccentric enthusiasm seems to be a mainstay in Paizs’ projects, threading together his early days as a member Winnipeg Film Group some twenty-odd years ago, his mentoring of such talent as renowned fellow Winnipegger Guy Maddin, and his current position as director-in-residence at the Canadian Film Centre in Toronto.

Creative adjectives aside, *Top of the Food Chain* is a deadpan and stunningly accurate homage to its b-movie forerunners. It is available for rent, but masquerades under the title *Invasion!*. Of course, watching it, with its brilliant underlying critique of the effects of television on family life and moral and social structure may mean the greatest joke is on you.