

*Little Orphans*. Directed by Ruth Lawrence; written by Emily Bridger; produced by Jennifer Hawley, Sherry White. Imagine That Productions, 2020.

Your wedding day is supposed to be one of the happiest days of your life, but for those whose parents have passed on it carries mixed emotions. As a central day in most people's lives, it is a moment that you wish to share with your mother and father, but what if you are an orphan? *Little Orphans* is a film written by Emily Bridger and directed by Ruth Lawrence, both having worked previously on the multi-director/writer feature film *Hopeless Romantic*. *Little Orphans* is the story of three sisters who are not actually orphans, but whose mother has abandoned them to such a degree that they may as well be. A father, or more likely fathers, to the three girls is never mentioned, other than near the end of the film, when Gwen (played by Bridger) is told by her surrogate father, Uncle Bill (Des Walsh), that she does not remind him of either of her parents. High praise.

The movie is anchored by equally strong performances of each of the sisters — Janet (Marthe Bernard), Kay (Rhiannon Morgan), and Gwen (Bridger) — as the story follows the three of them over two days in the lead up to and marriage of the youngest sibling, Janet. Although these three characters are solid and well-rounded, and each has a strong storyline, this is ultimately Gwen's story.

All three sisters have suffered greatly from their absent mother, and they all show residual effects to varying degrees. Kay appears to have suffered the worst repercussions, as an addict who is irresponsible and who has abandoned her own daughter, Billy (Anouk Cornelissen-May), leaving her with the woman who raised the three sisters, Aunt Maureen (Kyra Harper). As Janet's wedding weekend approaches, she shows signs of feeling unworthy of her new husband and his family, and is constantly embarrassed by the choices of her siblings and her absent mother. It is Gwen, however, who ultimately confronts her past and her future in *Little Orphans*.

The film opens at the St. John's International Airport, where

Gwen awaits the arrival of both of her sisters: Janet from town, to pick her up; and Kay, who is arriving on a flight shortly after her. Gwen stands awkwardly in the airport, framed in a medium close-up, as two children play nearby, over her right shoulder. As the focus is pulled away from Gwen to one of the children leaving the play area, the camera tilts down to follow the child as she passes behind Gwen. Almost imperceptibly, Gwen tilts her head and raises the phone she has been peering into to her chest. When the camera tilts back up to a medium shot of Gwen, she frantically looks at the child, and then back for the missing parents. With no other adults in sight, Gwen does not know what to do. She opens her mouth, but no words come out. We discover later that she grew up without a bedtime, and really learned no mothering skills from her own mother on the odd occasion that she was around. When the child stands next to Gwen, she does not know how to respond.

This short scene is essential in establishing that Gwen is not sure around children, and arguably not ready to become a mother herself. This is important, as later we discover that Aunt Maureen, who essentially raised the three sisters, is now raising Kay's daughter, Billy. Early in the film it's revealed that Aunt Maureen is dying, and she thinks that Gwen should become Billy's mother.

As an audience, we're never really sure why Janet is not considered as a potential mother for Billy, but many reasons are established why Gwen should take on this role. First of all, however, it becomes glaringly obvious why Kay should not parent her own child. When Kay arrives at Aunt Maureen's house her first move is to seek out her old stash, hidden in the bathroom. As an addict, she probably has stashes throughout the house, and throughout her life. Inside a small red box in the wall are cigarettes, and a lipstick, which she stole in her youth. The lipstick is a reminder of one of the favourite days of her life, when she and her sister Gwen were caught stealing it. It comes into play on a number of other occasions in the film, such as when she shows her continued immaturity by rubbing it on the bathroom mirror, like an angry adolescent girl, or more importantly, when Gwen goes to look

for the stash but it's gone. As Gwen searches for the small red box, we realize that Kay will be leaving soon and will not be back. An addict would not leave this place without a stash to come back to later.

Kay's failure as a parent is foreshadowed when she goes to pick up Billy from daycare. Aunt Maureen doesn't want Kay to do this on her own, and Gwen agrees to go with her. The film then cuts away to a car driving over a toy frog. When Kay and Gwen get to the daycare, it's Gwen who knocks on the door while Kay stands on the sidewalk below. This low-angle shot of Gwen foreshadows the role she will play in Billy's life. When Kay finally climbs the steps, she's not seen by the preschool worker, played by Nabila Qureshi, as a legitimate caregiver for Billy, and Kay can only look into the preschool through a small glass window. As it turns out, Aunt Maureen has to pick Billy up after all, and when she does, the camera tilts down from the roof of the house as Aunt Maureen and Billy exit. The camera shows the sign for the preschool, "Mother Hubbard's Daycare," which suggests both that only mothers are allowed inside, and that the film has a thematic connection to fairy tales. As they leave, Billy is carrying a stuffed frog. It becomes obvious that frogs are her favourite toy, as we see her with two other frogs at other points. One is a large, Kermit-the-Frog-style frog, and the other is a small frog she sleeps with at night, and takes comfort in when her mother doesn't properly say goodnight. There is a leitmotif of children's fables running through the film, and their meanings are left open for interpretation. The frog could mean a few things: that her mother is always "hopping" away or "hopped up," though this is probably a stretch; that Billy feels alone and isolated, like a frog on a lily pad alone on a pond; or, most likely, that she is waiting for her "Prince" to come. In this case, however, it won't be in the form of a literal or figurative prince; she's waiting for a mother.

The second fable alluded to in *Little Orphans* is "The Goose That Laid the Golden Egg." Janet's future in-laws' home is filled with golden ducks and geese. This is the decor throughout the house, including in their basement rec room, where they hold a pre-wedding party. Someone of Janet's ilk is not suitable for the upstairs living room. The

theme of Janet landing the “Golden Goose” begins immediately, as the three sisters open the front door to the house. The first shot of the interior has a golden goose positioned in the lower left third of the frame. It’s sharply in focus, with strong light reflecting off its back, while the in-laws (Patricia Andrews and Peter Halley) kiss out of focus, in the background. Janet then enters the frame, still out of focus, with the goose juxtaposed over the shot. Moments later Kay picks up another golden goose, only to have it pulled away by the mother-in-law. Obviously, Kay will not lay claim to the “golden” son in this home, although she does try later in the film.

The fact that Janet is marrying into a rich family may well be the reason that she is not considered as a potential mother for Billy. She has found her way out of the despair of her own family, and Aunt Maureen doesn’t want to burden her at this moment in time. As the surrogate mother of the three sisters, Aunt Maureen has obviously made a huge sacrifice bringing up the girls, and with no recognition or reward. She is the true definition of a real mother, who loves unconditionally. When Janet is upset that her mother doesn’t arrive, and tells her two sisters that they are her only family, you can see the pain this causes Aunt Maureen, but she remains silent for their benefit. None of the sisters is exactly what we would call stable, and this leads to an incredible amount of tension in the film, accentuated by the non-arrival of the mother of the sisters. Not one of the sisters would make an ideal mother, but ultimately Gwen does seem like the best choice.

During the course of the film, Gwen reconnects with her old boyfriend, Tom (Andy McQueen). It turns out that Gwen left Tom when he suggested that they become Billy’s parents together. Gwen rejected this idea and left for Toronto, where she has worked as a bartender, and where she may or may not have a boyfriend. Tom takes Gwen out to a location in Portugal Cove where construction is beginning next week on his new house; obviously he would like it to be their new house. Tom declares his love for Billy, but also his continued love for Gwen. Tom and Gwen lean up against the hood of his car, looking out at Tom’s land but avoiding eye contact. The camera cuts in to a shot of

their hands, as Tom holds Gwen's. They both take off their mitts, and the camera tilts up and we see them kissing in a medium close-up. The camera then dissolves to the lights of the city, which stand in for the old-fashioned fireworks, as they kiss. Panning left from the blurry city lights to a medium close-up of the two lovers, we now see them wrapped in Tom's dog blankets and smoking. Obviously, they have re-consummated their love for each other. At this point Gwen reveals to Tom that she was carrying his baby, unbeknownst to him, when she escaped to Toronto, where she aborted the fetus. This creates a temporary rift between the couple, but nothing serious. Tom also has been visiting Billy since Gwen's departure, and has developed a real bond with her. Most likely, this is a primary reason that Aunt Maureen sees Gwen as mother material. Gwen, however, continually rejects the idea, although at one point in the film we know that she is considering the prospect, as she looks lovingly in on Billy as she falls asleep.

Uncle Bill and Gwen run into each other on occasion in the greenhouse, where ideas grow and gestate. This is where he tells her, in a shot-counter-shot sequence, she's nothing like her parents, and that she's more like Aunt Maureen, a serious caregiver and someone to emulate. Throughout this sequence, a slide can be seen over Gwen's shoulder, foreshadowing her future as a mother. This conversation "plants the seed" in Gwen that perhaps she is capable of this stewardship, or even of becoming the child's mother. Gwen departs for the airport where, sitting in front of a rack of "Toys by Yarnia," she decides to take a risk and become Billy's mom. We see her make two phone calls, one (we assume) to Aunt Maureen; and the other (it's obvious) to Tom. The latter probably revolved around the idea that she wants to be with him and bring up Billy together. Before she leaves the airport, she grabs a toy to take to her new daughter. The expectation is that she will grab a frog, but she doesn't. She grabs a dragon. We know then that Gwen is going to bring up a fierce and strong daughter.

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