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REVIEW: *Luck* (2003)

by Collin Smith
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LUCK
(2003)

Written and Directed by
Peter Wellington

Cinematography by
Luc Montpellier

Edited by
Christopher Donaldson

Produced by
Susan Cavan
Atom Egoyan
Daniel Iron
Simone Urdl
Jennifer Weiss

Starring
Luke Kirby
Sarah Polley

Peter Wellington may have made the quintessential Canadian guy movie. By adding a healthy dose of self-deprecating irony to equal parts sentimentality for hockey lore and fascination with unattainable women, Wellington constructs a coming of age tale rich in Canadian ambivalence and contradiction. The movie is at once unconventional and non-threatening; simultaneously comic and tragic. Wellington, using a legendary moment of national pride and collective identity creation to tell a story of personal tragedy and loss of innocence, constantly merges apparently opposing ideas, blurring the lines between these solitudes and managing to bring richness to what could have been a fairly bland, straight-forward cautionary tale.

LUCK follows the story of Shane (Luke Kirby) as he gambles on his ultimate financial and romantic jackpot during the 1972 Canada/Russia hockey series. Shane's pursuit of the woman of his dreams plays out against the backdrop of his descent into financial ruin due to his compulsive gambling and his stubborn pursuit of elusive luck. In the end, Shane must bet it all against Team Canada winning the gold and, in good Canuck form, manages to both win and lose despite his bumbling.



Beginning at the start of the famous hockey series and inversely following the emotional trajectory of that period, the story climaxes with the Canadians winning and with Shane on the brink of losing it all. A young, unmotivated, suburban, average Joe, he's got a shot at the woman of his dreams, but as the series gets underway, he discovers gambling and his shot at making it big. Team Canada's fortunes have direct bearing on Shane's: they lose, he wins; they win, he loses. Wellington plays the euphoria of the nation against the personal loss of our hero and cleverly inverts our assumptions about the nature of luck.

Rife with these dramatic ironies, Wellington's movie revels in the complexities of contradictory feelings and consistently disconnects the expected emotional response from the event. Shane's fortunes bring him heartbreak; his suffering produces revelation. Canadian films have a tradition of not supplying the anticipated outcome and LUCK runs with that convention.

On some level, what we get is an accurate and artful portrait of addiction, but Shane's compulsive gambling is just the backdrop. Despite how well the film makers paint the picture of this destructive yet alluring affliction, Shane's problem is bigger than that: his uncontrollable need to go for broke overwhelms every facet of his life. To the film's credit, we aren't provided a neat resolution; his gambling—financial, romantic—neither brings him ultimate destruction nor does he come out the other side necessarily a changed or better man. Instead, Shane remains an addict—a little wiser for the experience, but still an addict.

Where the film falters is in the portrayal of the object of his affection, Margaret (Sarah Polley). Her role is slight, so there is never any real attempt to fully define her, which makes it hard to understand why she is so significant in Shane's life. This is in stark contrast to how intricately the film portrays his other love, gambling. Polley brings whatever life and intelligence to the part she can in the short time she is onscreen.

Certainly the strongest element of this film is Luke Kirby's performance. This role is the perfect vehicle for his charming neurotic shtick that was so wasted in the silly MAMBO ITALIANO. It also allows him the opportunity to fully create the character and develop a complex set of motivations. Shane is about as real and realized a character that has been seen for a while and this is due to the combination of Kirby's performance and Wellington's skillful script.

Wellington earned a well-deserved Genie nomination for the screenplay. The character of Shane is a writer and his voice-over narration possesses the clever kind of dry wit that is at once accessible and intellectual. However, the strength of the script is in the way the characters speak like real people. The dialogue is littered with beautiful non-sequiturs, pregnant and not-so-pregnant pauses, awkward verbal fumbles and moments of occasional brilliance. Effortlessly, we are brought from humour to pathos and back again.

The story of Team Canada's rise to victory in 1972 is just context for Shane's story. The parallel national obsession provides the perfect foil for his manias. The film makers don't become too obsessed with the historical details of the early 70s and leave most of that to the background. Instead they tell a compelling and funny story of a regular guy dealing with real problems. LUCK is the kind of film that's easy to enjoy but hard to forget. In the end, the audience wins out with a rewarding experience at the movies.

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