



Love Thy Neighbour

An American remake of a hit Swedish movie portrays the virtue of fraternity

by Gerard Condon

TOM Hanks stars in the latest film by Marc Forster, *A Man Called Otto* (Sony Pictures: 2022; 126 minutes). Hanks plays Otto Anderson, a 63-year-old grump who endures a litany of daily frustrations. I found myself nodding in agreement with what annoyed Otto: the neighbour's dog that urinates on his driveway; the jogger whose pretentious running style is matched by his loud clothing and the anonymous "idiot" who carelessly put the wrong items into the community recycling bins.

Otto wants everything on his street to run properly, and he snarls at those who do not meet his own fastidious standards. Just about everyone is an "idiot" or a "nitwit" or a "knot head." Most infuriating of all are the smarmy real estate agents who are gradually ousting the old timers, like himself, and replacing their houses with apartment blocks. Early on in the movie, during his

final working day at a Pittsburgh steel business, Otto storms out of a retirement party organised in his honour. His colleagues look relieved to see the back of Otto. It is with relish that someone slices through his face on the cake made to honour his departure.

Behaviour understood

The reasons for Otto's grumpy behaviour become apparent over the course of the movie. The most striking is the loss of his beloved wife, Sonya, a gifted high-school teacher. Their backstory is made known through a series of flashbacks. These present beautifully filmed slices of American life in the 1970s. A radiant Rachel Keller plays Sonya, while Tom Hanks' own son, Truman, plays his younger self.

Now that Sonya is deceased, Otto wants to preserve their empty house as a shrine to her memory, and he refuses to let go of her

things. He regularly visits her grave and talks to her for hours on end. He says of her that before they met, his life was black and white. "She was the colour." Her headstone has a blank space, obviously reserved for himself. Otto plans to "join her" by ending his own life. But, argumentative to the end, Otto has a dispute at a hardware store when buying the length of rope with which to hang himself.

Clinging to life

I had some misgivings about a movie which seems to make light of the idea of suicide. Thomas Newman's whimsical film-score adds to that atmosphere of not taking a serious matter seriously. But the message of this movie is clearly life affirming. Each time Otto threatens to end his own life, a neighbour surprisingly intervenes to prevent the tragedy. If only this was always the case in real life.

Most important of all are cheery new arrivals Marisol (Mariana Treviño) and her husband Tommy (Manuel Garcia-Rulfo). Earlier, Otto had reluctantly helped Tommy park his U-Haul truck. By way of saying “Thank You”, they had come over with the gift of some home cooking. Otto savours it, alone, straight out of its plastic container, before resuming his attempted suicide. A veiled reference to the Last Supper, perhaps? While this movie examines questions that are relevant to religion – such as the meaning of this life and the afterlife – it makes only passing reference to the religious values that underpin the dignity of human life.

Loneliness epidemic

Instead this movie focuses on the importance of community; it is an excellent teasing out of the Lord’s commandment to “Love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:39). It is through loving others and allowing ourselves to be cared by them, that we discover life’s many blessings. While Otto exercises social responsibility, he does so in a



Tom Hanks and Mariana Treviño make an enjoyable pair that can melt the coldest hearts

heartless manner, and refuses to allow himself to be loved. He presents a classic case of social isolation.

Last May, the Surgeon General of the United States issued a health advisory, declaring loneliness to be an epidemic, with effects on wellbeing that are as harmful as a poor diet and smoking. Loneliness is found in all the advanced economies; it is the consequence of our excessive reliance on technology and our cultural championing of individualism.

While it is principally Marisol, Tommy and their two adorable children that crack the shell of Otto’s feelings of isolation, other neighbours also play their part. Among them is kind-hearted Jimmy (Cameron Britton) and a delivery boy, Malcolm (Mack Bayda), who had been rejected from his own home. Even a feral cat, whom Otto initially treats with contempt, somehow inveigles its way into the widower’s heart.

In one especially poignant scene an unresponsive stroke victim called Reuben (Peter Lawson Jones) plays his part. A long-time rival to Otto, he won’t let go of a piece of hosepipe that Otto wants to use to poison himself with car exhaust fumes. The image clearly evokes the value and dignity of all human life, even in those who cannot live life

to the full. Eventually, all his neighbours band together with Otto to thwart the schemes of the estate agent (Mike Birbiglia) and his minions. Otto again finds his mojo and begins to direct his organisational skills in a positive manner.

Skilled actor

A Man Called Otto is a remake of the hit Swedish movie, *A Man Called Ove* (2015), which was based on a 2012 novel of the same name by Fredrik Backman. The Swedish film, with its many clever twists, are faithfully reproduced in this American version. However, the original has received better critical acclaim. Its pared-back Scandinavian mood suited the story. And it’s hard to picture Tom Hanks as a curmudgeon; he was a more natural fit for the lead role in *Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood* (reviewed in this magazine in May, 2020). It is a tribute to Hanks’ acting skills that, in this movie, he achieves the switch from neighbourhood crank to local hero so seamlessly. All he needed was a little help from his friends. **MSA**

