

Margaret's Museum (1995)

Finding Signs of Hardy Life in Tough Surroundings

By JANET MASLIN

Published: February 7, 1997

With a strong and colourful sense of its Nova Scotia setting, "Margaret's Museum" describes life in a remote coal mining community. It's an existence that the film's reckless, earthy heroine knows all too well. Rough-hewn Margaret MacNeil, played spiritedly by Helena Bonham Carter, has lost a father and brother to "the pit," as the miners call it. And she works as a scrubwoman in the village hospital. Periodically throughout the film, which is set in the late 1940's and early 1950's, alarm bells sound as the hospital staff braces for new accident victims from underground.

Growing up in this atmosphere has left Margaret wary of men. But the film involves her in a sweetly offbeat courtship once she meets Neil Currie (Clive Russell), a gentle soul who speaks Gaelic, plays the bagpipes and nicely embodies this film's quirky charm. (Heard on the soundtrack: traditional Scottish and Irish melodies with names like "Jenny's Chickens," "Boy's Lament for His Dragon" and "The Wedding Reel.")

Neil is also the namesake of Sheldon Currie, a professor of English who grew up in a mining family on isolated Cape Breton Island and eventually wrote the stories on which Mort Ransen's film is based. The relative popularity of "Margaret's Museum" in Canada owes a lot to the film's novelistic eye for Cape Breton, thanks to the author's keen evocation of his childhood home.

Beyond its picturesque aspects, the film means to decry the hardships that the miners endure. The title image is a reference to their suffering, and it starts the film on a macabre note. A couple of tourists stop at Margaret's house, and when the woman sees the bathroom, she runs away screaming. What's in there? It's Margaret's form of protest against atrocious mining conditions. Still, if you're not Wes Craven, you may not want to know.

Mr. Ransen directs this scene as an unsteady mix of horror and slapstick, which hardly bodes well for the rest of the story. But after this bizarre opening, "Margaret's Museum" slowly begins working its wiles. Ms. Carter so thoroughly shakes off her usual refinement that she plays this first scene in a flour sack looking like Little Orphan Annie. But she brings a headstrong exuberance to her wild, rebellious role. Mr. Russell, who stoops his 6-foot-6-inch frame down toward tiny Margaret as he beguiles her, makes himself a surprisingly romantic presence in Margaret's otherwise humdrum life.

"Margaret's Museum" surrounds Margaret and Neil with a solid set of supporting characters rather than embroiling them in a vigorous plot. (It remains clear that the characters come from separate short stories of Mr. Currie's.) The standout is Catherine MacNeil, Margaret's widowed mother, played by Kate Nelligan with a deadpan, caustic wit. "I'm sure you'll be happy or miserable, as the case may be," Catherine says, by way of congratulating Neil and Margaret when they marry. "Fair enough?"

Also floating through the film and flirting dangerously with life in the pit are Margaret's staunch Uncle Angus (Kenneth Welsh) and her impressionable young brother, Jimmy (Craig Olejnik), who finds himself dangerously attracted to the daughter of the mine's owner. In a company town full of debts to the company store, this isn't liable to work to Jimmy's advantage.

Meanwhile, he must also contend with the determination of Catherine and Margaret to keep him out of the mine at any price. Jimmy's grandfather has such advanced black-lung disease that he needs to be whacked on the back periodically to keep him breathing.

Using music, wry anecdotes and hefty jugs of moonshine to capture the village atmosphere, "Margaret's Museum," which opens today at the Quad, contrasts Margaret's craving for freedom with the grief she feels closing in. The film's sense of tragedy is as simple as a folk song's, but its hearty resilience is what makes it worth remembering.

"Margaret's Museum" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes brief nudity, mild profanity and discreet sexual situations.

MARGARET'S MUSEUM

Directed by Mort Ransen; written by Gerald Wexler and Mr. Ransen, based on "The Glace Bay Miner's Museum" and other stories by Sheldon Currie; director of photography, Vic Sarin; edited by Rita Roy; production designers, William Flemming and David McHenry; produced by Mr. Ransen, Christopher Zimmer, Claudio Luca and Steve Clark-Hall; released by Cabin Fever Entertainment and CFP Distribution. Running time: 118 minutes. At the Quad Cinema, 34 West 13th Street, Greenwich Village. This film is rated R.

WITH: Helena Bonham Carter (Margaret), Kate Nelligan (Catherine), Clive Russell (Neil), Kenneth Welsh (Angus) and Craig Olejnik (Jimmy).

