



Down Under Milk Wood: Of Burton and Taylor, O'Toole and Others, Dylan and Me

Andrew Sinclair

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The impossible always happened in making *Under Milk Wood*. At times, its luck exceeded incredulity and vanished into Celtic mist. Like a necromancer juggling the elements, any Merlin of the screen had to mix the gold of the backers with the stars in their courses and come up a horoscope that guaranteed fair heavens and a safe return. To go at all, *Under Milk Wood* had to find a time when Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor and Peter O'Toole were all available to work and in this island, which was rather like fixing a week-end between Howard Hughes, Elizabeth the Second and Puck. Then the gold had to be conjured in double-quick time from the state and a merchant bank, both of whom were rightfully foolish enough to buck the wisdom of Wardour Street and think there could be enough profit as well as art in the wild warm words of that people's poet, Dylan Thomas.

We had forty days' budget about as fat as Our Lord's when he had the same schedule in the wilderness. What with sixty sets and seventy actors, we had to spend a quarter of our time just shifting from scene to scene. We shot on the run, with the mighty heroes of Lee Electrics humping the hundredweight brute lights as casually as kittens on their shoulders. Everything and everyone had to work too well, beyond normal and halfway to dream. The technicians would mutter about "Andrew the Luck." And I would answer, "Miracles happen daily." Frankly they had to, so they did.

There is a necessity in a film, once it has begun, which matches the resignation in a Celt, once he has decided to go for broke. There are so many shots to be taken each day, so many actors to play their scenes while they are still available, so many seconds of film to be put successfully in the can each week – or else, the boot. Considerations of art come a bad second to sheer endurance. One makes the script and hopes it works. Any improvisation on the set is a dangerous gift that may save the part, but throw the whole. The important thing, as Beckett once wrote, is to be done, to have done. And to have done well.

The problem of *Under Milk Wood* as a film lay in its bittiness, cross-cutting from voice to voice all the time without knowing whose voice it was. Seventy little stories to tell in ninety minutes in the life of a small fishing port. The connecting link *Two Voices*, their characters and connection with the town unexplained, *Voices* with the power to conjure up dreams, knowing intimately the private lives of all the sleepers in Cockle Row and Coronation Street, godlike in their comprehension and devilish in their mockery.

Richard Burton said to me that *Under Milk Wood* was all about religion, sex and death, but I did not understand his words until the film was over. Yet it worked because we were the servants of the dead Dylan Thomas, who caught the essence of Welsh sea towns and made an incantation of them. The film was the making of us. We were not making the film.

In the *New York Times*, Judith Crist called the movie an instant classic and 'Pure Poetry'. It also starred in the *DeBrett* of Welsh Acting. And Philip French in the *Observer* and the *Guardian* wrote that it reminded him of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*.

Dylan's *Llaregyb* is the dream sea village of us all, the myth and the memory of our grandmothers across the world.

Andrew Sinclair, director of Under Milk Wood.

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Todd Voss:

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