

✓ **The Straight Story (U)**

19th February 2007

Director: **David Lynch**

USA/France/GB 1999

Running time : 111 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Richard Farnsworth** (Alvin Straight), **Sissy Spacek** (Rose Straight), **Harry Dean Stanton** (Lyle Straight), **Everett McGill** (Tom the John Deere dealer), **John Farley** (Thorvald Olsen), **Kevin Farley** (Harald Olsen).

SCRIPT: **John Roach, Mary Sweeney**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Freddie Francis**. EDITING: **Mary Sweeney**. MUSIC: **Angelo Badalamenti**.

This untypically gentle offering from Mr Lynch has been a source of collective astonishment, even perplexity. And yet he is a director interested in Americana in all its forms, and it is to me of little surprise if a guy who talks like Jimmy Stewart should find inspiration in this story of human frailty accomplishing great things in the great outdoors.

The Straight Story – the title works on three levels – concerns an ailing widower who, on hearing of his brother's stroke, determines to travel the distance from his home town in Iowa across the border to Wisconsin in order to visit him and patch up a long standing disagreement. The fact that he cannot drive – and this is the hook, or not, for the financiers – means that he sets about getting there on a lawnmower. Needless to say his daughter, Rose, and others try to dissuade him from this crazy scheme but he is one stubborn son of a gun and goes anyway.

And there is a sort of persuasive logic to his plan. It becomes a sort of defining Odyssey, a last gasp of self-justification; as such it is a story pregnant with mythical resonance, in particular western mythology. On his way Alvin camps out under the stars and meets an array of people and there is an exchange that takes place, of sentiments, of human contact, with the result that the journey itself ultimately becomes just as important as the destination. Those looking forward to what happens when Alvin gets to his brother's may be disappointed. Road movie fans will need no such caveat, and I apologise for stating the obvious.

The pace of the film is as steady as Alvin's means of locomotion but the interest never flags. This is one of those films where a synopsis is certainly not a reliable guide to viewing pleasure. There is Badalamenti's customarily easy-on-the-ears music and the widescreen

cinematography of veteran Freddie Francis, himself in his seventies. (Responsible for wonders like *The Innocents* in the 1960s, he turned director for Hammer but returned to his DOP role for *The Elephant Man*, Lynch's second film, since when he has spent most of his time in this capacity.)

But it is the acting that affords the greatest pleasures; often full-blooded or wacky in the director's other films, it is low-key here, though the film does boast one or two cameos out of Lynchland (the bickering brother mechanics, played by brother actors). In the title role Farnsworth, a veteran stuntman turned actor in his later years, is required to do what he does best: play it straight. He is the quiet, dignified old-timer of countless westerns or near-westerns, and the fact that he is so believable is partly down to his ease in front of the camera, the ease of non-acting that the likes of Duke Wayne had off to a tee, and partly because he is playing a version of himself. For Farnsworth was in fact fighting against cancer at the time of filming and would, soon after finishing the picture, make his own stand against fate, by turning his gun on himself.

David Clare