

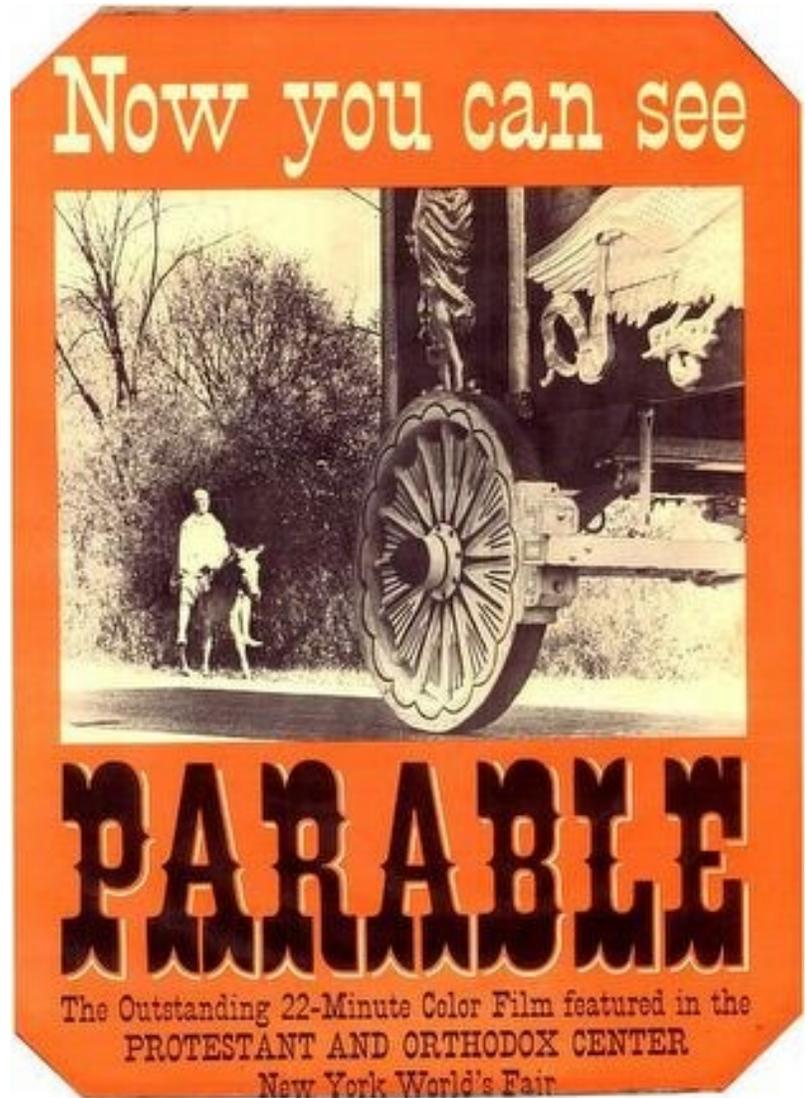
Parable

By Mark Quigley

The concept of a benevolent, all-powerful being that knows all, sees all, and controls all has long provided comfort to a significant cross-section of the masses struggling to make sense of a world that often seems out-of-control. To the rest of the human race, the mere notion of such a reality, where unseen hands cruelly pull the strings that determine our collective destiny, embodies the stuff of bad dreams. Over a pioneering decades-long career producing, writing and directing unorthodox religious shorts, filmmaker Rolf Forsberg managed to reach both constituencies, tunneling into the psyches of the faithful and non-believers with his outré cinemascapes of heaven, hell, and the fog in-between -- perhaps most effectively in his landmark expressionist short "Parable," produced for the World's Fair in 1964.

Born in 1925, Rolf Forsberg began his career in the arts as a playwright and director in Chicago theatre, becoming a long-time, distinguished fixture on the local stage scene with his wife of two decades, noted Second City improv master, Josephine Forsberg (1921-2011). Following extensive runs helming original plays and Shakespearean productions both in Chicago and off-Broadway, Mr. Forsberg would later enjoy a meaningful stint in television as a lead writer and occasional director of the syndicated Lutheran TV series, "Light Time" (1960-64) -- an imaginative, sometimes mildly expressionist series of 15 minute morality plays for children that gently foreshadowed the unusual vision that Forsberg would soon bring to the genre of religious sponsored films.

By mid-century in 1964, as once mighty religious institutions such as the Lutheran church saw their pulpits unsuccessfully competing with mass media for minds and hearts, Forsberg was commissioned by the New York City Protestant Council of Churches to create a motion picture attraction for their World's Fair pavilion. The ambitious film project, "Parable" written by Forsberg and co-directed by Forsberg and Tom Rook, was met with threats of protests and violence before it was completed as word leaked during production that the allegorical work, primarily set in the tent of a traveling circus, would dare to depict "Christ as a clown." Robert Moses,



The film's poster shows a scene of a white-faced mime riding a donkey following behind a circus wagon.

President of the Fair, formally objected to the film in the press, with the "New York Times" reporting that Moses had "grave misgivings about the propriety, good taste and validity of the film." The Reverend Dr. Dan M. Potter, executive director of the Protestant Council, stood by Forsberg and the daring work, rebutting in a formal statement that "the most interesting thing about Mr. Moses' criticism is that he hasn't seen the film." Moses was later invited to a preview screening of the completed film, which he reportedly declined to attend.

Illustrating key influences including Bergman, Fellini, and French painter Georges Rouault, Forsberg's risky, off-kilter appropriation of European art house sensibilities to the realm of an American religious "educational" film turned out to be as innovative as it was controversial. Told in pantomime, sans dialogue, the haunting and dark-themed "Parable"

concerns a white-faced, Christ-like mime that follows a traveling circus, assuming the burdens of an African American man, and others that are oppressed, before meeting a violently stark crucifixion-like fate at the hands of the cruel overseer or “puppet master” of the troupe. World’s Fair-goers’ positive reception of the off-beat, visually-told tale was in direct contrast to the initial hostile, reactionary press accounts as “Parable” become a notable, well-attended attraction at the Protestant pavilion with audiences and reviewers unexpectedly embracing the strange, powerful short. Mainstream press now lead the accolades, with “Newsweek” stating that “Parable” was “very probably the best film of the fair,” as “Time” magazine hailed the work as “an eloquent little film... thoughtful and beautifully handled.”

With “Parable,” Forsberg managed to transcend expectations for a didactic religious short, employing enigmatic symbolism and poetic lyricism that allowed audiences to project their own interpretations and spiritual experiences onto the film, a phenomenon that carried over to subsequent screenings at prestigious festivals including Cannes, Venice and Edinburgh. For decades after the ’64 World’s Fair, “Parable” remained polarizing as it retained its hypnotic allure, earning its way back into negative press as it was named to a banned film list at the Los Angeles County Library in the 1970s (as the “Los Angeles Times” reported, for promoting, “anti-establishment type things”) while simultaneously enjoying frequent Sunday school screenings on 16mm prints as an evergreen best seller to the religious film market well into the 1980s. In 2012, Forsberg’s lasting “Parable” was named to the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress.

The unexpected world-wide attention generated by “Parable” in ’64 set the stage for Forsberg’s subsequent commissions from major religious organizations to create wildly independent-minded cinematic explorations of the spiritual—his unique, mind-bending visions an oasis of originality and creativity among catalogs of traditionally staid classroom films designed for religious education. Across decades in

dozens of films, from the horror-tinged chase that is the “Twilight Zone”-esque Lutheran short “Stalked” (1968), to the hellish, post-apocalyptic landscape of the eerily prescient “ecological shocker” “Ark” (1970), Forsberg’s work demonstrated a consistently committed, uncompromising experimental artist operating in the most unlikely of milieus, striving to illuminate the humanist core of spiritual concepts to those both in and outside of the revival tent. Forsberg’s prolific canon would also extend to the co-direction of the 1979 cult-classic feature documentary, “The Late Great Planet Earth,” narrated by Orson Welles, to the writing of a series of documentaries about the U.S. National Parks.

In 2006, the UCLA Film & Television Archive acquired several 16mm film prints from Mr. Forsberg’s personal collection for conservation and access purposes, some of which have since been enjoyed by new audiences in numerous public exhibitions. Significant recent tributes to the filmmaker have included a screening of Forsberg’s dystopic classroom discussion film about post-Watts rebellion race relations, “One Friday” (1973), as part of Dr. Dan Streible’s Orphan Film Symposium at the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, Queens (2012), and the following retrospectives: “The Outré World of Rolf Forsberg” (2013) at the UCLA Film & Television Archive’s Billy Wilder Theater; “Xtian Xperiments: The Films of Rolf Forsberg” at Cinefamily, Los Angeles (2014); and BAMcinématek’s “Four by Rolf Forsberg” as part of BAM’s “Migrating Forms” series (2014).

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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