

HUMOR

Michael Hollister

(1938-)

Jonathan Edwards Biopic (2004)

That Sunday afternoon, winding along streets lined with palm trees, Ryan Eisley passed mansions that looked down on the city amidst eucalyptus and cypress and tropical vegetation, with lawns that stretched as wide as fairways. He found the address in Beverly Hills not far above Sunset Boulevard, a white hacienda with an orange tile roof and wrought iron railings. He drove up into a circle of mosaic tile driveway in front, parked his roadster and wiped his palms on a clean handkerchief, retaining the fresh one peeking up from the breast pocket of his tan checked sports jacket. This could be his break. He had to be charming, he had to adapt. Grab the opportunity when it presents itself. With the biography and his screenplay in hand, he climbed the steps.

In response to the bell, a Filipino house boy in a white serving jacket admitted him and led the way back through the house. They passed framed photos of scenes from theatrical productions and autographed publicity shots of stars. Eddie Devlin had directed plays in London and New York before getting hired by Metro. He was known as inventive, a writer who improvised songs and made up bits on the set. Warner Brothers had a biopic unit, the star Paul Muni was playing every hero and the supervisor assigned Devlin to develop a script from Eisley's screenplay for Henry Fonda. Devlin had just directed young Fonda in a melodrama he wrote and wanted to use him again as Jonathan Edwards.

They entered a sunny room at the back of the house that looked out on a swimming pool surrounded by jungle. In a corner sat Devlin like royalty in a high-backed wicker throne, smoking a cigarette and marking a script with a pencil. He did not look up until Eisley came within ten feet and then only glanced his way.

"Hello, chum," his voice resonant and British with a stagey lilt. He gestured with his pencil, "Have a seat."

"I'm honored to be here, Mr. Devlin."

Devlin had the face of a boxer gone pudgy and working as a chauffeur or a bouncer, thick-necked with thin sandy hair slipping backward and a flattened nose. He wore a blue sweatshirt with a lighter blue silk handkerchief tied around his neck, white slacks and loafers. Eisley sat down on a cushioned wicker chair, trying not to think about Devlin with Fay, yet feeling it in his stomach. His mouth felt dry. Everything went queasy as Devlin sized him up.

"Fay said you can get along."

"You bet. I'm an adapter."

"Well," Devlin stared at him. "Not bad for a start." He pulled a drag from his cigarette. "Let's go through it. I'll show you what I've done and you can tell me to go to hell for ruining your script--"

"It's your script. You bought it."

Devlin squinted at him. He took another drag from his cigarette and looked at the script.

"You want a drink?"

"Oh, no thanks."

"Have a drink. And pour me one, that's a good chap. The bottle on the bar. There's some ice there."

They sat in the corner of the sunny room with their drinks and went through the scenes depicting the birth of Edwards in Connecticut in 1703 and his study of science as a young boy, on his knees in the woods inspecting insects. They decided to do a montage of him constructing the hut in a swamp where he went to humble himself and pray, then show him reading theology by candlelight at Yale. They envisioned a long tracking shot of Edwards on horseback meditating in the countryside, a lonely figure writing his thoughts on pieces of paper that he pinned to his long black coat, returning at night all covered with notes.

"You cut his second conversion."

"One is plenty."

"But he realized his first one was false, just immature enthusiasm." Eisley leaned forward, "That was the basis of his whole critique of the Great Awakening. That most people were phonies, actually."

"We're not doing a documentary, old boy."

Eisley sat back again in the cushions of the wicker chair and noticed a recurrence of sounds coming through the open door from outside, from beyond where a path curved into shrubbery--a *boing!* like a tennis racket hitting a ball, followed by the sound of thumping off a wall, sometimes followed by another *boing!*--achieving only a feeble series of hits, with long intervals between attempts, like some elderly producer taking his exercise.

They were editing through the scene of Edwards stepping up into the pulpit for the first time as a minister when outside a woman in a white tennis outfit carrying a racket emerged through the shrubbery and came toward them along the path at a casual pace, almost dawdling, as though she wanted to be seen.

"You have a visitor."

Devlin looked out, "That's Annie."

Taking her time, she came through the open door like it belonged to her, an attractive woman in her thirties with dark frizzy hair, taut looking skin especially on her neck and an attitude that took over the room, an electric intensity of expectation.

"Hello, love," she sang out to Eddie.

Then she looked at the two men back and forth, sizing them up as though looking to challenge one to a game.

"This is Mr. Eisley," Devlin told her. "We're working on a script. This is Annie Hutchinson, my neighbor."

She looked intrigued, "How do you do, Mr. Eisley."

He nodded and kept his silence, not to risk sparking the tension in the air with a word. She put her racket and two tennis balls down on a table. Then she went around behind the bar.

"I didn't know you had company, Eddie."

Ice rattled into a glass.

Devlin flipped a page of the script and continued reading it aloud while she watched, her breast in the white tennis blouse rising and falling with an agitated patience. She tossed down a drink. Devlin read aloud the speech where Jonathan Edwards proposes marriage to Sarah Pierrepont. Annie Hutchinson poured another drink and then sauntered around with her glass and sat down near Eddie on a couch with a big palm leaf print in green on white. She crossed her legs and her short white tennis skirt exposed her thighs.

"Now after the wedding," said Devlin, "we need a scene with his wife that gives him some juice. You know what I mean, old boy. They had three nippers, now didn't they. Give us a bit of juice here."

"You mean just make something up?"

Annie got up for another drink.

"Maybe his wife is shy." Devlin sucked his cigarette and blew. "You know, the bloke is frustrated sexually. They're puritans, aren't they. So we have this montage of conversion orgies. All that rolling in the aisles, you know. Lots of camera angles, inter-cuts and zoom close-ups. Bloomers and petticoats. Young girls squirming around on the floors of churches all over New England. Same as the witch trials. Like an orgy, really. Edwards had to fancy these sexually deprived girls just a bit, now didn't he, mate. Close-ups of his face in torment. Maybe he molests one."

"Jonathan Edwards?"

"His wife forgives him. After his church boots him out and he has to go off as a missionary to the blooming Indians. You know. The wilderness loosens them up and he planks her. Close-up of her smiling at him during breakfast."

"Is this a blue movie?" asked Annie.

"Not a bit, love," Devlin said. "It's very religious."

"Sounds wild to me, Eddie."

She pulled off her white tennis shoes, then her socks. She set them aside with a slow, deliberate anticipation, as if she came next door on a regular basis for a foot massage.

"Annie is a religious teacher herself, aren't you, love."

"Oh really?" Eisley smiled, "What kind?"

She held her drink on her knees like a sacrament in a private ritual, full of faith in her wide smile. "I teach spiritual body awareness, don't I, Eddie. You should come sometime, Mr. Eisley."

"Well, I could always be more aware."

Her leg across her knee began to jog.

"Now the turning point," Devlin took a drag from his cigarette butt and studied a page, "is this big conflict he has with his congregation. They boot him out as minister after--what, a quarter of a century serving the parish."

Eisley sat forward, "The people weren't having what Edwards considered authentic religious experiences. But they wanted to be accepted in the church as saved anyway. Edwards opposed phony salvation. That was too strict for most people."

"That won't play."

"What won't?"

"None of it. The audience will turn against him. This is America. We have to include everybody now."

Annie slipped down and sat on the floor, holding her drink in her lap with a look on her face that suggested to Eisley she might be passing out. Her legs splayed out. Her knees came together rising and she rested her forehead on them, sitting on hipbones and heels, making a pyramid of her body that exposed its nether sanctum.

"So let's say they boot him out because he planks one of the depraved girls in the parish."

"Jonathan Edwards?"

Annie reached up for her racket and the two balls rolled off it and fell on the floor. They bounced and ricocheted, rolling away. Eisley started to get up to retrieve them for her, but Devlin raised his hand and gave him a look, shaking his head.

"Everybody will understand sex," Devlin chuckled. "They can sympathize with Fonda and forgive the bloke like his wife does."

"That would change his whole character."

"Nobody cares about that. Listen, chum. If you want this script to be produced, we bloody well better not bore Jack Warner to death with old puritan doctrines."

"What if he's falsely accused?"

"Ah," Devlin sat back with his cigarette.

"Then at least you preserve his good character."

She crawled between them with slow deliberation, pursuing the errant balls, her white tennis skirt hanging as a frame to her exposed posterior. She must have taken off her underpants behind the bar, or maybe she played tennis that way to distract male opponents.

"That might work," Devlin nodded.

"He'll be a victim of social injustice."

She crawled around on the carpet, mooning them from various angles as she pursued her balls. Eisley tried not to look. Devlin took a swallow from his glass and watched her.

"With no doctrines," Eisley tried to save Edwards, "he'll be just as vague as most other clergymen in the movies."

"He represents God, that's all people want."

She revealed herself slowly and deliberately by extending one leg behind her and backing up. By the time her white skirt hung back where it ought to be, Eisley had seen all the secrets under there she had to show. She rose to her feet with a ball in each hand. Standing above them, breathing heavily now, she took both of the balls in one hand like holding a pair of eggs. She squeezed them. Then she came drifting toward Eisley, her bleary eyes swarming with intentions.

"Does your husband play?" he took a leap.

"Mr. Hutchinson travels," she volleyed back. "He has his life," she scanned him from the crotch up, "I have mine."

"Sit down, love," said Devlin.

She turned to him with an air of woozy defiance and squiggles of hair dangling on her forehead. He sat back in his wicker throne with a leg across one knee, smoking and jiggling his drink.

"You always have to direct, don't you, Eddie."

"Not at all."

"Is it my turn then?"

"If you like."

They stared at each other.

Annie had the downward angle on him and he looked away, sitting back comfortably, blowing smoke. She continued to stare at him until he glanced up and then she almost spat.

"Do you have any balls?"

Devlin looked away from her at Eisley. He exhaled smoke from his flattened nose, then he squinted back at Annie.

"Yes, love."

"Sometimes two balls isn't enough," she spoke with a slowly building intensity. "It's hard to get anything going sometimes, isn't it, Eddie." She turned to Eisley, "I don't like having to chase after balls so much. You know what I mean?"

"I don't have any balls."

"What a shame."

She tossed them onto the couch.

"Look, Eddie," said Eisley. "I'll get back to you."

"Sit still, chum. We're just getting started. Annie is performing for us, aren't you, love."

"Don't worry," she assured Eisley, floating closer until she stood at his feet, smiling down at him with a softness that disarmed him.

"I'm not going to bite."

"What do you have in mind?"

Eisley sat at eye level with her flat white abdomen thrust toward him above swishing pleats.

"You're blushing," she whispered.

He thought this must be a joke, the sort of prank that directors liked to play on the newly employed as a ritual subjugation for the amusement of the initiated. She thrust herself closer to his face. People were going to jump out and laugh at him.

"I've got something more for you, Eisley," Devlin said behind her. "If you're interested."

Annie poked her toe up his pant leg.

"I have a doctrine, Mr. Eisley," she insinuated.

"What? What, what is it?"

She lifted her pleats in a curtsy like a little girl in innocence revealing her panties. With a cock of her head, her very adult eyes challenged him softly.

"Do what feels good."

The wicker chair flexed as he pulled back into the cushions with a feeling she had done this before. She prepared to straddle the low arms of his chair and lifted her skirt for a splash into the shallow pool of males. Eisley pulled a cushion around from behind himself and protected his privates. Annie let go of her skirt with one hand and flung away the cushion across the room, knocking over a lamp. She groped for his zipper and he grabbed her wrist. Devlin approached her from the rear. All his conditioning as a son of Ohio raised in sexual puritanism reflexed in Eisley away from Annie Hutchinson so extremely that his chair went toppling over backward, dumping him out on the tile floor.

Devlin peered over her shoulder at him.

"You scared him, love."

"Is he a homosexual?"

"You can't force these things."

"Oh, shut your trap!"

Eisley seized the opportunity to leave for another appointment that he made up on the spot with a promise shouted over his shoulder to call Devlin as soon as he finished a rewrite. Outside as he climbed into his roadster, a silver Mercedes eased into the circle of driveway with his wife sitting in the backseat. Eisley waited until the chauffeur opened the door for her and carried her packages up the walk. She wore a drooping hat with flowers on it, a stylish figure high-heeling to the front door.

from *Hollywood* (2004)