

The Straight Story (1999) Lynch

P Michell, 2021

The Straight Story is based on the real-life journey of 73-year-old Alvin Straight, a man who decides to travel from his home in Laurens, Iowa, to Mount Zion, Wisconsin, to mend his relationship with his estranged older brother. There's a slightly quirky twist as Alvin insists on making the 317 mile journey on his lawnmower.

Starting as an unassuming story it is a beautiful homage to the mid American landscape of fields of corn and animals. This is a story about a peculiar idea. Alvin Straight cannot drive a car because of poor eyesight. Instead he hops on his lawn mower and rides it along for better or worse. It is the journey not the destination that is Lynch's take on this story.

Made some twenty years earlier than the recent *Nomadland*, it shows up the weakness of the latter film. Despite quirky things like Wall Drug and its dinosaur with the stories from the people she meets. The film is a real let down – possibly connected with it seemingly being filmed at sunset or sunrise. Weekly scripted. How glorious this Lynch / Freddie Francis vision is of American heartland! Many see connections with the early and much lauded *Blue Velvet* (1986).

For many who only know David Lynch for *Twin Peaks* and his more surreal film work, such as *The Straight Story* is simply considered “that one Disney/G-rated Lynch movie”. A shock to many at the time of its announcement, many considered it strange that a director known for making lurid, bizarre, and often disturbing films would make something as tame as a G-rated Disney film (halfway false considering the film was independently produced and Disney merely acted as distributor after its successful Cannes debut). It almost turned into a punchline. A Lynch movie without depravity, nightmarish imagery, and shocking scenes? How deliciously absurd, am I right? [except from David Lynch Retrospective link below]

This is one of the last significant films for: Richard Farnsworth (Alvin), Freddie Francis (cinematographer), Everett McGill, Harry Dean Stanton.

Lynch shot the film in an interesting manner: every single scene was filmed in chronological order, and on-location in the actual route that Alvin Straight took, whose 300-mile journey on a lawn mower was the true story that served as the basis for the film. [This is very, very rare in film making ...]

When Alvin Straight finally does make it to his destination, Lynch wisely underplays the reunion between Alvin and his brother Lyle, giving their interaction only a few small lines before fading to credits. “*Did you ride that thing all the way out here to see me?*” Lyle asks Alvin, who responds only with “*I did, Lyle.*” It's the final line of the film.

Creative Talent

David Lynch - Director

Interview at SBS:

<https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/video/11686467551/the-straight-story-david-lynch-interview>

When asked why he decided to direct a movie like this, which would seem very different from the rest of his projects, David Lynch said that when he read the screenplay for the first time, he felt such a strong emotion that decided to be the one responsible to try to bring that emotion to the screen.

[David Lynch](#) coined this his "most experimental movie".

The film was independently shot along the actual route taken by Alvin Straight.

A quick overview of Lynch's significant films [surprisingly from Germany]:
<https://www.davidlynch.de/films/>

[Angelo Badalamenti](#) – composer (96 credits)

Prolific worker. Lynch's preferred composer.

Did the music for *Stalingrad* (2013).

In addition to being a prolific composer of music for film, he has quite a career as a songwriter. His first successes were with [Nina Simone](#). He reportedly stopped by her office unannounced and asked if she would record his songs "I Hold No Grudge" and "He Ain't Comin' Home No More" by singing them for her A Capella. She said yes on the spot. Since then, he has gone on to write songs for or collaborate with many notables such as [Tim Booth](#), [Marianne Faithfull](#), [Julee Cruise](#), and [Dolores O'Riordan](#).

After scoring a variety of mainstream films, including *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* and *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, Badalamenti once again collaborated with Lynch and scored Lynch's cult television show, *Twin Peaks* which featured the vocals of Julee Cruise. *Twin Peaks* would become the score Badalamenti is perhaps best known for, one that helped define the overall style and mood of the show. The score features different themes patterned after specific characters in the show—"Audrey's Dance", for example, is an "abstract jazzy" theme that plays when [Audrey Horne](#) (played by [Sherilyn Fenn](#)) is on-screen.^[9] Many of the songs from the series were released on Cruise's album *Floating into the Night*.^[10] From the soundtrack of the television series, he was awarded the [Grammy Award for Best Pop Instrumental Performance](#) for the "Twin Peaks Theme".

[Freddie Francis](#) - Cinematographer

Noted British cinematographer with long history. for the Hammer films (1960 & 70s), *Room at the Top* (1959). As well as highly regarded films inc: *Day of the Triffids* (1963, u.c.), *French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), *Cape Fear* (1991). Much work with Lynch inc *Elephant Man* (1980). Was a director as well – 37 credits.

After the WWII he returned to Shepperton Studios to work for Alexander Korda and Powell and Pressburger. He also worked for John Huston on 'Moby Dick (1956)' for which he was responsible for all the second unit photography and special effects.

In addition to his Oscar-winning shooting of *Sons and Lovers* (1960) and *Glory* (1989), he was also a respected director of horror and science fiction.

Not very fond of special effects, which he thought diminished the cinematographer's art.

[on Peter Cushing]: *I think Peter is absolutely wonderful - there is not an actor in the world who can speak rubbish like Peter and make it sound real.* [Francis directed him eight times.]

Richard Farnsworth – Alvin Straight (93 credits)

For 20 years Richard Farnsworth was the oldest Academy nominee for Best Actor in a Leading Role, at 79. This record was broken in 2021 when Anthony Hopkins was nominated at 83.

He was the exact same age as Alvin Straight.

Sissy Spacek - Rose (65 credits)

Wonderful understated performance of Alvin's daughter. A whole history of loss and a disability are summarized in short screen time.

Sissy eventually broke into film and one of her first roles was as Holly in the classic Badlands (1973). The art director on that film was Jack Fisk, with whom she would marry in 1974 and ultimately collaborate on eight films. Sissy followed this landmark film with a star-making and Oscar nominated performance in Carrie (1976), in which she played a humiliated prom queen who goes postal with her telekinesis. Sissy has had an enduring and award winning career in movies and television, which includes an Oscar as Best Actress for Coal Miner's Daughter (1980).

Farley Brothers – Harold & Thorvaid.

Originally Chris Farley was going to be in the movie with his brothers. But sadly passed away in 1997 before he could get the chance.

Read about them here:

<https://www.nickiswift.com/242485/the-truth-about-chris-farleys-siblings/>

Everett McGill – Tom the John Deere dealer.

Was the leader of a popular Kansas City dance band prior to becoming an accomplished stage actor with more than 1300 performances on Broadway to his credit. He first acquired wide attention in film with his starring role in Jean-Jacques Annaud's Oscar-winning saga of primitive man, Quest for Fire. He went on to star in a broad range of movie genres playing characters that have been described in every way from malevolent to lovable. He is best known to fans of filmmaker David Lynch as the owner of Big Ed's Gas Farm in the town of Twin Peaks. He replayed the lovelorn Ed Hurley for the Showtime series Twin Peaks: The Return. He studied dance at the Kansas City Conservatory of Music and earned a BA in Speech and Theatre from the University of Missouri.

Analysis

Two rather thoughtful pieces. Both seeing the connection with Blue Velvet.

David Lynch oeuvre at:

<http://moviemezzanine.com/the-david-lynch-retrospective-the-straight-story/>

and ...

<https://www.theringer.com/movies/2019/5/23/18636764/david-lynch-the-straight-story-20-years-later-cannes>

Reviews

A gentler David Lynch. – From Amazon DVD
Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 5 July 2020

One of those important films to watch in your life and be aware that the film is a sequence of meetings between Alvin, played by the late Richard Farnsworth, and people who he meets on the road mostly played by non actors, just ordinary people, as Alvin trundles along on a ride-on lawn mower to visit his estranged brother. They come over as just ordinary folk but with a story to tell and their stories are poignant which is what drives the plot and director Lynch draws from Farnsworth equal poignancy.

A real trap for directors and writers you might think but it is carried off very well as long as you are prepared for the lack of car chases, violence, sex, nudity and CGI's ---- this really is a meandering little story of the interaction between people, the pain of their memories, their fallibilities and ultimately their search for redemption. I don't mean that to sound melodramatic because we all suffer and experience those feelings and the film explores those emotions through the passing interactions between Alvin and the people who try to help him.

Some beautiful music throughout by Angelo Badalamenti, more famed for his award winning melodic work on Lynch's 'Twin Peaks', and there is a certain 'flavour' that comes over very recognizable. Production design by Jack Fisk who has worked with Lynch and Terrence Malick many times (they're all in the same bunch with a related style if you know what I mean).

Cinematography by Freddie Francis (of Hammer film fame) ---- let me be honest and imagine that Lynch told him that this film has no vampires or werewolves and Francis may have replied OK I'll do plenty of roads and crops ---- there is a lot of that, quite beautiful. I'm reminded of a friend who was recently taken on a safari in South Africa by his wife and said, when I asked him if he enjoyed it, that when you've seen one deer you've seen them all. Please ! Please !

Sadly the late great Harry Dean Stanton's appearance is like a puff of smoke at the end of the film. But the film is what it is, perhaps best described as an observational road trip.

Roger Ebert (1999)

The first time I saw "The Straight Story," I focused on the foreground and liked it. The second time I focused on the background, too, and loved it. The movie isn't just about the old Alvin Straight's odyssey through the sleepy towns and rural districts of the Midwest, but about the people he finds to listen and care for him. You'd think it was a fantasy, this kindness of strangers, if the movie weren't based on a true story.

Straight ([Richard Farnsworth](#)) is a 73-year-old man from in Laurens, Iowa, who learns that his brother is dying and wants to see him one last time. His eyes are too bad to allow him to drive. He lives with his daughter Rose ([Sissy Spacek](#)), who is somewhat mentally

challenged and no good behind the wheel. Nor do they have a car. But they have a tractor-style lawn mower, and the moment Alvin's eyes light on it, he knows how he can drive the 300 miles to Mt. Zion, Wis. The first mower konks out, but he gets another one, a John Deere, hitches a little trailer to it, and stubbornly sets off down the road.

Along the way we will learn a lot about Alvin, including a painful secret he has kept ever since the war. He is not a sophisticated man, but when he speaks, the words come out like the bricks of a wall built to last. Like Hemingway's dialogue, the screenplay by [John Roach](#) and [Mary Sweeney](#) finds poetry and truth in the exact choice of the right everyday words. Richard Farnsworth, who was 79 when he made the film, speaks the lines with perfect repose and conviction.

Because the film was directed by [David Lynch](#), who usually deals in the bizarre ("[Wild at Heart](#)," "Twin Peaks"), we keep waiting for the other shoe to drop--for Alvin's odyssey to intersect with the Twilight Zone. But it never does. Even when he encounters a potential weirdo, like the distraught woman whose car has killed 14 deer in one week on the same stretch of highway ("... and I HAVE to take this road!"), she's not a sideshow exhibit and we think, yeah, you can hit a lot of deer on those country roads.

Alvin's journey to his brother is a journey into his past. He remembers when they were young and filled with wonder. He tells a stranger, "I want to sit with him and look up at the stars, like we used to, so long ago." He remembers his courtship and marriage. His Army service as a sniper whose aim, one day, was too good. And about years lost to drinking and nastiness. He has emerged from the forge of his imperfections as a better man, purified, simple, and people along the way seem to sense that.

My favourite, of all of his stops, comes in a town where he's almost killed when he loses a drive belt and speeds out of control down a hill. He comes to rest where some people in lawn chairs are watching the local firefighters practicing putting out a fire.

In the town are twin brothers who squabble all the time, even while charging him by the hour to repair the mower. And a retired John Deere employee named Danny Riordan ([James Cada](#)), who lets Alvin camp for a while in his backyard (Alvin won't enter the house, even to use the phone).

Danny is a rare man of instinctive sweetness and tact, who sees what the situation requires and supplies it without display. He embodies all of our own feelings about this lovable old--yes, fool. He gently offers advice, but Alvin is firm: "You're a kind man talking to a stubborn man." If Riordan and the deer lady and the dueling twins (and a forlorn young girl) are the background I was talking about, so are the locations themselves. The cinematographer, [Freddie Francis](#), who once made the vastness of Utah a backdrop for "The Executioner's Song," knows how to evoke a landscape without making it too comforting. There are fields of waving corn and grain here, and rivers and woods and little bed barns, but on the soundtrack the wind whispering in the trees plays a sad and lonely song, and we are reminded not of the fields we drive past on our way to picnics, but on our way to funerals, on autumn days when the roads are empty.

The faces in this movie are among its treasures. Farnsworth himself has a face like an old wrinkled billfold that he paid good money for and expects to see him out. There is another old man who sits next to him on a barstool near the end of the movie, whose face is like the

witness to time. And look and listen to the actor who plays the bartender in that same late scene, the one who serves Alvin the Miller Lite. I can't find his name in the credits, but he finds the right note: He knows how all good bartenders can seem like a friend bringing a present to a sickroom.

The last notes are also just right. Who will this dying brother be, and what will he say? Will the screenplay say too much or reach for easy sentimentality? Not at all. Just because you have to see someone doesn't mean you have a lot to gab about. No matter how far you've come.