

Cult Film Review #56: The Book of Hans

ABOUT THIS FILM

Release Date: June 4th 2001 (Worldwide)

Director: John Aland (No previous filmography)

Studio: Ancien Regime Film Productions

Genre: History

Look folks, I promised Theresa I wouldn't make any "*Book of Hands*" jokes, so I won't make any. Besides, this is a film screaming to be taken seriously. It's directed by a *poet*, for chrissakes. And a famous one at that – John Aland has published five collections of his poetry, all renowned internationally, and demonstrated his abilities in a wide array of fields from farming to still life sketching. Now his hometown, the island nation of Havland, has given him what was rumoured to be an unlimited budget to produce the ultimate arthouse film, a screen adaptation of a medieval manuscript known as the Book of Hans, named (unsurprisingly) after its writer, who likely lived and died in the 13th century.

John Aland has worked with the Book before, translating sections and rearranging them into poems for his third collection "Poems of Yesteryear", itself a sufficiently obtuse reference to a collection of late-Qing Chinese poetry, but now he faces the challenge of relaying the lives and deaths of people 700 years ago in a manner that allows

for some kind of shared empathy across the time space continuum. In a two-hour film, nonetheless.

The film opens, like all good films, with a title screen informing you briefly of the original book's origins and provenance, ending with the ominous phrase "It is now your turn to experience these stories, written in ink and blood." Smash cut to a close up shot of a mumbling, bearded elder's face, riddled with scars. The rhythmic chanting is in what we are told is reconstructed Old Havlandic, a pidgin mixture of Old English, Middle English, and their Danish equivalents. Needless to say, it's not the easiest to listen to, but guided by the subtitles one soon begins to pick out a few "nei"s and "god"s ("no" and "good" respectively).

Then you realise that the whole movie is set like this, and your heart drops a little. Surely, you think, the gimmick will wear thin, and we'll want the once-commonplace luxury of hearing what we see on screen. Finally, however, you meet Hans.

"It is now your turn to experience these stories, written in ink and blood"

Cleverly, for the first five minutes or so that Hans is on screen he almost doesn't speak at all. He's listening to stories from the aforementioned elder, who conjures up a time when they were Ye Olde Englishmen and not mired under the Danish boot, so his entire performance (brought to life by an appropriately boyish Simon Petrarch) has an

almost silent quality, conveyed entirely through body language and the odd mutter. It's a great way to get us to relate to someone in a world of foreign tongues, if only because we empathise better with silent characters emoting through a set of universally understandable gestures.

Han's main crime is that of curiosity, and it's that curiosity that drives him to sneak into the thriving merchant port of Tandhafn (what will, in the future, become the capital of Havland) and steal something forbidden to the descendents of Viking slaves like him – a book of letters. Our brave boy becomes the first “sagamann” of his village, a joint chronicler-storyteller who writes down their lives, aspirations, and traditions in a makeshift “tonbog” crafted from animal hide. The tonbog, of course, becomes the Book of Hans, but in the world of the movie it's a thrilling secret to be kept from the Danish overseers (“jarlmanns”) at any cost.

Soon, however, our Tom's dreams get a little too big for his breeches. When he tries to share his stories with men from the other towns, he is rejected for telling unlucky tales about lowly Englishmen like them, rather than aspirational sagas about Viking heroes. The authorities peg him as a troublemaker, and he decides to burn the tonbog. In the grand finale, every villager whose story he's recorded comes forward, offering to take a page of the tonbog instead of letting it be burnt, explaining why parts of the Book of Hans were found in no less than 20 separate locations. The end-card, as if a final exam, is written and spoken in Old Havlandic, but without subtitles provided. It's easy enough to understand –

“I am Hans. Dis is min godsaga.”

Throughout the movie, we see the clash of these two ideas – the “tale”, lowly, another word for speaking, a simple story – and the “saga”, the epic that stirs up emotion and edifies the reader. Of course, there are “godsagas” (noble tales that instruct) and

“mirkesagas” (dark tales that corrupt), but the moral quality of the saga isn't the point. The fact that some stories, good or bad, are just judged to be societally more important than others mirrors the two-tier world Hans lives in, one where some people are just *lesser* than others by design. But enough of this moralising. How much did it live up to our expectations as the ultimate in art cinema?

“I am Hans. Dis is min Godsaga.”

In many ways, watching this film is a strange experience. You see meticulously recreated period dress, clothing, speech, and mannerisms, all in service of a central plot that seems, at least on first viewing, painfully basic. The basic Hollywood plot structure is preserved: boy learns to write, boy records stories, boy discouraged by authorities and poor reception, boy tries to burn stories, people boy helped save boy and stories. At least there's no boilerplate romance shovelled in, although “I love you” might sound slightly different in Old Havlandic.

On the other hand, Aland's directorial hand is strong, especially for a first time director. Shots are long, patient, and moody, never rushed or hurried. Even in the most action packed scenes we won't see the wanton introduction of a running camera or shaky footage to heighten the mood. The music is almost entirely historic recreations set diegetically. Whatever problems I may have with the plot, *The Book of Hans* draws me into its world with seductive skill, and that's more than I can say for a lot of big-budget high concept movies this year. **H**

Review provided by Harry Norman.