**Small Wonder**

Philip Horne

*DOWNSIZING* [February 2018, *Sight & Sound*]

There has been a long and somewhat anxious wait among admirers of Alexander Payne's films since *Nebraska* in 2013 – a bleak, beautiful, drily funny picture of the post-industrial Midwest and sad, haunted lives. Four years later Payne, who still lives in his native Omaha, has come out with a grand, astonishingly daring movie – a satirical fable, or blackly comic science fiction epic, or unexpected love story.

As it goes on, there's a serious, even tragic side to the film, but its main premise is treated with such inventiveness both visual and verbal that we get constant jolts of pleasure at the imaginative scope of its makers' conceptions. The absurd technology that scientists concerned with 'Human Scale and Sustainability' and climate change develop for reducing the size of the human population – by making them five inches high – is in effect like a giant microwave: it even pings when the transformation is complete. It's deliberately low-tech. The process, invented by idealistic Norwegians to produce a 'self-sustainable community of the small', is imagined being then commercialised and normalised in familiar ways by global/American capitalism, sold to punters as a time-share-like 'heaven' called 'Leisureland', which is 'like winning the lottery every day'. This because a modest nest-egg of $152,000 when transferred (unshrunk) to its newly-tiny owner's account in a 'small city' translates as the equivalent of $22,5000,000: it's an American dream.

The script is full of delicious size jokes, as downsizing becomes absorbed into idiom and things get re-scaled, so that we see 'the first small baby ever born'. The process is linguistically normalised. Someone hasn't seemed 'the kind of guy who'd go get small'. You can travel first-class for a fraction of the fare – 'The airlines are getting more and more small-friendly'. Omaha occupational therapist Paul Safranek (Matt Damon), our Candide-like hero, says 'getting small' was 'the biggest mistake of my life': he's the traditional 'little man' literalised. When a full-sized lawyer brings him divorce papers to sign, it's made more bitter when he's given an enormous pen and told, 'As large as you can, please.' The shrunken kids of Leisureland have problems because they're 'freaked out by grandpa and grandma being so huge and scary'. When Paul as a phone worker for Land's End – small workers don't require big salaries – loses his temper with a tetchy customer back in the big world, he tells her, 'Don't get short with me!'

Payne and his co-writer Jim Taylor insinuate a sharp-edged political satire here: the full-size economic system, with luxurious bourgeois lives supported by legions of immigrant workers, turns out to be replicated on the small scale (mainly Hispanic slums just beyond what seems the very Trumpian wall of Leisureland). Downsizing technology is abused by oppressive regimes, so a Vietnamese dissident, Ngoc Lan Tran (Hong Chau) is shrunk against her will and barely survives her escape to America as a stowaway in a TV box. She ends up as a drudging member of the support class. As the small, charming but sort of despicable Eurotrash mogul Dusan (Christoph Waltz) says of Tran, 'She almost died so now she can clean my house. America! Big land of

opportunity.' Paul is gradually sucked into Tran's orbit – which changes him, and changes the film, in a thrilling way.

When I met Alexander Payne at a London hotel on the day of the film's screening in the London Film Festival, he was urbane and alert, as ever.

*Downsizing* took some time to grow, he recalls. 'The urge came when Jim Taylor and I had had some modicum of success with *Sideways*, in '04 and bleeding into '05. Around that time Bush the Second was re-elected – we have Trump now, but even then thirteen years ago we thought things were bad – and I had within me somehow the urge to make a political film… But you can't make a literal one, it has to have some kind of metaphor.'

The film derived early in 2006 from 'an idea which Jim and his brother had discussed for years… they hadn't really thought it through. I was on a plane, and thought 'What about that idea of Jim and his brother's?' We would treat it very earnestly, as a solution to the problem of overpopulation and climate change. And then the narrative dominoes started to fall a bit in my mind: Oh, well it could touch on this, and it could touch on this, and it started a chain reaction of 'What ifs?' I proposed that to Jim and he agreed and then we just started writing. It took us a long time I think to come up with a dramatic premise: a central character who guides us through, you know, a bit of an episodic structure, through a world in which this is happening. And if the story which then touches on, let's say, political aspects doesn't have extremely sharp teeth at least we're acknowledging a lot of things. It just took us a while to crack that screenplay, if nothing else because we kept having chain reactions … In essence we were writing like an 8-hour mini-series. But we still wanted to make it as a movie. So how do we corral that screenplay? And life was intervening,… and we were having trouble finding financing, and then I made a TV pilot [*Hung*] and two features [*The Descendants* and *Nebraska*]… And then finally after *Nebraska* it came together – and fell apart – and then came together finally, and *then* I was able to make it. In hindsight you can see benefits. Oh, we waited so damn long, but… now with Trump in power there are certain images in the film that have more potency than they might have had… None of the elements of the film is new, but a couple of them, particularly the idea of Mexicans living behind a *wall*, have a certain resonance which they might not have had previously.'

There was another, serendipitous, benefit to having waited, Payne adds – finding 'this remarkable actress Hong Chau, who – to my mind – steals the movie. In a way the whole movie, up until her arrival, is like a prologue to her arrival.' I agree: it's an extraordinary performance, both harsh and tender, boldly comic and acutely observed. How did he find her? 'Well, I knew she had to be Vietnamese. I had begun throwing out a casting net to Vietnam, to Paris, to Canada, and it turned out she was right in Los Angeles. She was born at a refugee camp of Vietnamese people in Thailand and then they emigrated to Louisiana… I had seen her only in *Inherent Vice*, the Paul Thomas Anderson film. But she just knocked me out in the test… She understood the rhythm and she understood the poignancy and she understood the comedy.'

I recall his comment in an interview about *The Descendants* that he liked the way introductory scenes can give an impression of a character that doesn't hint at what's to come, and how that gives you a sense of depth and richness. We just don't see what's coming with Tran. 'We wrote her and Hong played her with great tenderness,' he says. 'We had a real soft spot for that

character. And it's always nice to show someone who's deeply compassionate but not necessarily nice.' I mention how much I enjoyed her to-the-point Vietnamese English – most memorably, 'What kind of fuck you give me?' and 'You make fuck with me, now you go down stupid hole'; and he says, 'She was fun to write. You know, it's a ridiculous movie, full of ridiculous things taken very seriously.'

I note that Dusan, the wonderfully enjoyable Christoph Waltz character, also shifts interestingly through the film, from apparently loathsome and despicable to quite sympathetic, in a way that helps hold the film together through its changes of tone and milieu. He laughs. 'It's Han Solo. Luke Skywalker with Han Solo and Princess Leia. All over again.'

Was anything lost in the editing process? 'The one element that halfway through editing I made the decision to lose, which I very much liked, is that the entire story is being told by a tiny storyteller 5000 years in the future. All of this world as we know it *did* end, and those Norwegians down the hole *did* end up being the only ones who survive, and eventually emerge and repopulate the planet, and an old storyteller, clutching a gnarled staff, tells children, "You know, aeons ago, the world was ruled by giants." "Ohhhh!" "But they chopped down all the forests, and fished all the seas, and their breaths and fires made the land unbearably hot…" "Ohhh!" "Well one of the giants…" It was a voiceover film, with a lovely narrative structure throughout. And I miss it. But the film was running long, and also there were commercial concerns – because it was an expensive picture – and in an early test screening or two… – Oh, we had a wonderful linguist named Brendan Gunn, who did a magnificent job of inventing a language which is half Norwegian half English as might be spoken 5000 years from now. So it was a *subtitled* voiceover picture" – Payne laughs at their temerity – 'and just maybe for a commercial audience distinguishing between "Norwenglish" and Norwegian and English was, sadly, asking a tincture too much. But it's a device that we can still use if we ever do anything else with the idea in the future – so if Jim and I ever happen to conceive a sequel or mini-series, this device might make a comeback. But that's the one thing that I miss.'

I ask if *Gulliver's Travels* was a model – or other movies. 'Not really. No previous film about small people. I've still never seen *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, I'm just not interested. And when you make a film different influences drift by from time to time. The episodic nature of the screenplay for me, not to compare this film to those great films, but in Fellini films you see a central character going through a series of often very unrelated episodes, and then coming out at the end with a close-up on that character's face. Maybe there's been some shift. So I thought about that with this film. With an idea of ultimately striving for some kind of tough compassion toward others, I always very much liked Kurosawa's *Redbeard*. Again, those are great films, this is whatever it is. Still, we see the great films and we think, "Oh, that's a nice notion."'

I'd found myself remembering Frankenheimer's *Seconds* (1966), because of the treatment of the new-life procedure the hero goes through. 'Yes, I adore that film. And I did think a bit about *Seconds* with this. Because one is given in a way a second chance.' I mention that there's a whole bureaucracy and sales pitch for the second life in Frankenheimer that recalls scenes in *Downsizing*. 'There is. Yeah, it's a way in, and Jason Sudeikis says it in a way:

'No, it's not about saving the planet, it's about saving yourself. You get a whole new start in life.' And then of course that old idea that the more steps you take to avoid your fate, they're the very steps that bring it about.' He laughs.

There's a building in the film called 'Transitions', and Payne is interested in how films move from one scene to another. 'It's what separates the wheat from the chaff among filmmakers, I feel, considerations of transitions. It means the structure is there, and you've thought about it. So, in this film, it's like, "Well we want the film to have this element, and this element, and this element", and I trust in the fact that it's all being filtered through me that it will have some sense of unity, even if it has disparate elements. You don't always succeed, but you hope. Incidentally, Kevin Tent and I do one thing that many contemporary filmmakers do not, *and I do not understand it*: dissolves. We love dissolves, and long dissolves – and you don't see dissolves in movies very much anymore.'

I comment that the movement of the film might look as if it's following a classic Hollywood character arc, like *Close Encounters* or *Terminator*, and that Paul, needing to choose whether to go underground forever with the colony of Norwegian little people as environmental catastrophe approaches, has a speech near the end where he lists all the things that have happened to him and says, "I'm obviously *meant* to go down this hole." But then the film rejects that, and offers a different sense of purpose. 'Yes,' says Payne, 'you put your finger on that scene – and what's wrong with the screenplay is that some element of that aspiration to something larger than himself should ideally have been articulated in Act One. And in fact it *was*, when we had the voiceover character telling us about Paul Safranek – in fact his name had become Safrapool: "Safrapool wished" – you know, when he's in the middle of the night with his calculator, trying to pay his taxes – "Safrapool wanted nothing more than to please his wife, but found only frustration, and he wished for a life greater than he had." Something that's not quite right about the screenplay is that that urge, which has maybe been tacit or latent throughout, is articulated a bit too late.'

In the movie's defence, I point out that Paul in *Downsizing* is throughout alive to the relation between one's own pain and other people's: 'Lots of people are in pain, Mom', he says Paul when his mother moans about her fibromyalgia. In *Sideways*, the sad-sack hero Miles has spent years caring for his sick father; in *Nebraska* David (Will Forte) is looking out for *his* father (Bruce Dern); here Paul too gives up a medical career to be a good son. 'In all those cases,' I say, 'your heroes are doing this altruistic thing but they feel depressed and…' Payne completes the thought: '…plagued by it' – and laughs. 'They're doing good but feeling bad about it,' I say, 'and in a sense that impulse is what comes out at the end, isn't it? He's helping people. Isn't that last shot, which is quite lowkey, of Paul watching the old Hispanic man just eating his meal, and not looking fantastically grateful or happy, a sort of downsizing of his *expectations*?'

'Or he is at long last falling back into himself,' says Payne. 'Like so many of us, he has gone around the world to come home again.' He goes on, 'The other idea which really no one has asked me about yet, which I think is an interesting one, is her line as they're heading back to Leisureland. Tran says, "When you know death is coming soon you look at things more closely." And

that very much relates to an idea in the film about global warming and climate change, which is that only when you accept that you will die, only when you accept that things will end, are you then armed with the tools – perhaps – to defeat them. That's an idea I wanted to get across too, however subtly – and I hope elegantly – about the larger things in the film. That we have to accept these things.'

I note that the film seems very gloomy about climate change. 'Gloomy?', he retorts. 'What is there to be optimistic about? I see nothing. The only good thing going on right now is that it's a little warmer. But yeah, things look grim. And now with this asshole in the White House – oh forgive me…' Even so, at the end of the film the emphasis falls on the present and the need to get on with life. 'Well, and we have to care for each other. Sorry to be so corny-sounding. But I certainly believe what Dr Asbjørnsen [the Norwegian scientist in the film] says, it's now an actuarial certainty, we don't know if it's going to be in ten years, or 200 years, but it's coming.'

I recall that on a previous occasion he has mentioned his wish to make a film about the many Hispanic workers in Nebraska. 'I still think about it… [*Downsizing*] scratched that itch a little bit. I still want to do something with a more genuinely documentary feel, rather than have everyone *play* those people. Really I'd like to make a film in Nebraska largely in Spanish, using non-actors. That would be quite interesting. I have one idea for a screenplay, but have not written it yet.'

I ask if he sees himself as an ironist. 'I think there are different forms of irony,' he says. 'There's an irony which is deathly afraid of anything emotional. But then there's Bunuelian irony, you know, or Mario Monicelli irony, or Wilder irony or Kubrick, which is where you see they're using irony to say we're not living in the best of all possible worlds, and can't we care for each other. They may not admit to it, but you know… Like Chekhov: his early sketches were verbal caricatures of others, but over time it deepened. He never lost that sense of irony, the sense of humanity widened, and his net grew wider. I mean in his short stories.'

What is his next project? 'I have no idea. I am, I won't say devoid of ideas; all I know is that I want to do something terribly different… Because I've heard about this one, "Oh, it's such a departure for you…" No, it's just like the other movies. The *next* one I want to do something very very different, and I don't know what.'