

# Higher ground

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [August 9, 2003](#) issue

Some movies like to stick their toe in the stream of allegory. *Northfork* jumps right in. Set in 1955, this film by brothers Michael and Mark Polish (*Twin Falls, Idaho*, and *Jackpot*) is about a small Montana town about to be flooded to make way for a hydroelectric plant. (Northfork is a fictitious burg, but in that era many towns were eliminated just this way.) As the story begins, Northfork is already deserted save for a few stragglers. Cleaning them out of their homes and taking them to "higher ground" is the responsibility of the "evacuation committee," six men in black suits and hats.

The lead team is headed by Walter O'Brien (James Woods) and his son, Willis (Mark Polish), who try to convince the remaining townsfolk to move on while arguing about whether to exhume the remains of their dear departed wife and mother from the local cemetery. (Walter argues that once the water rises, the late Mrs. O'Brien will be "the catch of the day.")

The story of the evacuation committee takes up the lion's share of screen time, but the heart of the movie is a sickly orphan (first-time actor Duel Fames) cared for by the grizzled Father Harlan (Nick Nolte). Irwin has been returned to the orphanage by weepy foster parents who complain that he is too ill to make "the journey."

As Irwin writhes in a sweaty fever, he dreams that he is an angel left behind after God finished his work in Northfork. Incorporating items from his bedside, he conjures up a family of four curious-looking angels who have come down to find the missing member of their clan and take him back to paradise. This celestial quartet includes Daryl Hannah as the androgynous Flower Hercules, who longs to be both mother and father to the boy, and Anthony Edwards (of *E.R.* fame) as Happy, a far-sighted scientist with magic glasses and amputated hands, who examines the scars on Irwin's body (has he been abused?) to see if they are the spots where his wings were removed. (Angels play a large role in *Northfork*. The Evacuation Committee presents wings to the remaining families to help them "fly away.")

Using a complex intercutting scheme, the Polish brothers move back and forth among their stories, wrestling with tone as they create their allegorical structure. A couple looking to adopt Irwin is called "The Hopes." A family unwilling to move until they get a sign from God is not only named "Stalling" but lives in an ark, and the husband has two wives. Even the premise of the film is allegorical: the reason Northfork will disappear is because it is being dammed (or damned).

The Polish brothers are talented filmmakers, clearly influenced by David Lynch and Terrence Malick. They are technical innovators willing to shoot outside the box. The drained color photography by M. David Mullen and the offbeat musical score by Stuart Matthewman are especially powerful. The brothers also have a well-honed sense of the land-the Midwest in particular-and a talent for presenting appealing characters that they like and respect.

But they also have shortcomings. One is their tendency to slip in the magic realism of Latin American novels. The ability to combine the real and the fantastic has more to do with culture than cinematic homage, and as a result the subplot of the traveling angels is the weakest in the film, with flimsy characters and a scattered story structure. (There is also a mythological creature on stilts who makes an appearance for no good reason.)

Even more problematic is the moviemakers' tendency to be cute. *Northfork* is filled with so many puns and one-liners that they drain the majesty from the earnest tale. For example, a faded welcome mat brings on the line: "It looks like they've worn out their welcome." On a larger scale of cuteness is the extended scene of the six evacuation committee members sitting in a lonely diner trying to guess what's on the menu. Funny, yes, but what purpose does it serve other than to provide an easy laugh?

One explanation is that the Polish brothers have taken a kitchen sink attitude toward the film: they toss in anything and everything that works for them. My gut feeling is that like "the Youngs," one of the Northfork families unwilling to budge, the Polish brothers have yet to attain the confidence to tell a serious, even spiritual tale without goofing off along the way.

As a result, *Northfork* is a flawed jewel. It has many moments of wonder, but as a story of faith and farewells, it refuses to get to the bare bones.