A Thousand Clowns

A Thousand Clowns has long been at the top of my favorite movie list. Based on the play by Herb Gardner it is the story of Murray Burns, a former television writer for a local Children's show and his nephew "Nick." There is a reason for the quotes around Nick's name which becomes apparent as you watch the movie. Murray has been unemployed by choice for a considerable length of time because he wants to have fun in life. His philosophy can be summed up by the following exchange between Murray and Nick at the beginning of the film,

Murray: "Nick, you are about to see a horrible thing."
Nick: "What's that Murray?"
Murray: "People going to Work."

All is not well however, the child protection agency has noted Nick's living conditions and is investigating Murray. There is a chance that he might lose custody of Nick. While this does not sound like the start of comedy... it is. Every role is perfectly cast. Murray is played by Jason Robards, the role of Nick by Barry Gordon and Sandra, a member of the Child Protection Agency, by Barbara Harris. The cast is rounded out with Martin Balsam who won a best supporting actor Oscar for his role as Murray's agent brother, and then there's William Daniels.

It is hard to describe A Thousand Clowns. It is fun, sad, and wonderful all at the same time. There is in me a desire to be like Murray Burns but sadly, I am just a bit too practical. A Thousand Clowns isn't a laugh a minute film. The humor is dry and at times the film is as sad as any good comedy should be. The film is in B&W but don't let that scare you away. Did I mention it was based on the play by Herb Gardner? Perhaps I should add that it is one of the best play-to-film transitions I've ever had the pleasure to watch... perhaps because the script was also written by Herb Gardner and he retained all the best bits. In closing I will leave you with this Murrayism.

Murray Burns: "If things aren't funny then they're exactly what they are; and then they're like a long dental appointment."

A Thousand Clowns is definitely not a dental appointment.
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Posted by Keith C. on Oct 4, 2011

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