

*The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2002)

Directed by Robert Redford, written by Jeremy Leven

In no other Western nation is the irrational force of fundamentalist Christianity as pervasive as in the United States. Sociologically, the persistence and strength of religious institutions in the U. S. has been an incomprehensible anomaly in an otherwise increasingly secular West. American Christianity, however, has always been peculiar, intimately connected with the belief that American capitalism is God's righteous economic system and that America has a divine mission to remake the world in its image. Jingoism, profit, and material success express American's faith in God and themselves as much as the rise of contemporary evangelicalism.

The absurd nature of American religiosity is at the root of the common cliché that Americans have sacrificed spirituality for their prodigiously wasteful material life. As Leonard Cohen puts it in *Democracy*, "It's here they got the spiritual thirst." This is not the kind of desire that can be satisfied by fire and brimstone. It reflects the pantheistic sense that America is out of whack with nature. Balance must be restored. In The U.S., passing up the fundamentalist potion often means swallowing the fantasies of new-age spiritualism, especially when they are mixed with aboriginal mythologies.

Consciousness of the burden of collective guilt caused by the slaughter of First Nations peoples and the suppression of their culture, native religion has been afforded a kind of validity that goes beyond cultural relativism. In *The Horse Whisperer* (1998), his sophisticated answer to *Dr. Do-little*, Robert Redford straddled the line where neo-faith is legitimated by native spirituality. He inflicts his new film, *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000) with a more Romantic, Western pantheism.

*Bagger Vance* is about how Randolph Juduh, a fictional Southern golfer, got his swing back. When it is not buried under the clichés of a sports come-back movie, the film articulates a subjective and Romantic anti-rationalism that reflects a potentially dangerous rather than progressive politics.

According to Redford and screenwriter, Jeremy Leven, golf is a metaphor for life: the rhythm of the game mirrors the rhythm of life. The movie is told in flashback. Hardy Graves (Jack Lemmon) is suffering his fifth heart attack on the fairway, playing the game he loves. As he collapses, he recounts the legend of Bagger Vance, telling the story occasionally in voice-over from his point of view, age about ten.

Randolph Juduh (Matt Damon) was the local hero of Savannah, Georgia, with a golf swing that was "so sweet". In 1916, in the Georgia Open, he hit a ball so far that play was stopped for twenty minutes to measure it for a record. He and Adele (Charlize Theron), the eligible daughter of John Invergarden, a rich pillar of the Southern establishment, became a hot item. Randolph Juduh was in the middle of his groove, but not for long. When the United States entered World War One, Juduh enlisted, expecting to find another field for his heroics. Instead, Juduh was shattered mentally – figuratively he "lost his swing". He didn't return home after the war and disappeared, part of the Lost Generation of disillusioned ex-pats lingering in dissolute Monmartre.

His legend, however, lived on in Savannah, nowhere more strongly than in the mind of young Hardy Graves. As a lad, Hardy (J. Michael Moncrief) would sometimes

sneak onto the local links and, anachronistically, call golf play-by-play as he imagined competing for a championship.

Eventually, Juduh returns to Savannah, to forget and be forgotten. He rents a room and spends his evenings drinking, playing cards, and listening to jazz with a racially mixed set of down-and-out acquaintances.

As the depression sets in, Hardy's father, Frank, finds a job sweeping the streets, much to his son's embarrassment – it's "beneath his dignity". For the sudden;y bankrupt John Invergarden, life without money or social standing is unbearable. His suicide makes Adele suddenly the heir of a new but nearly bankrupt golf course named Crew Island. Refusing to sell at ten cents on the dollar, Adele stages a \$10,000 golf tournament between the two biggest names in American golf, the southern gentleman from Atlanta, Bobby Jones (Bruce McGill), and the arrogant northerner, Walter Hagan (Joel Gretsch). The Savannah establishment swings behind Adele's scheme but wants to add a third, Savannah golfer to the field. Who better than Randolph Juduh, "our gentle born chevalier"?

Hardy Graves knows where to find him, but his boyish hero worship doesn't fully erode Juduh's lassitude. Next it's Adele's turn. Improbably still single and hanging on to faded memories, her tactics are more direct. She had subtly plied her sexuality to lure Jones and Hagan into the tournament. Her offer to Juduh is more blunt. But their groove is off, too. Juduh has lost his grip on his whole life, not just his golf grip because, Redford suggests, everything is connected spiritually.

For the typical sports movie, success in the game is equated with success in life. If Juduh wants Adele and his self-respect back, he has first to recover his golf groove. Juduh's experiments with some practice swings. Fortunately for him, golf balls are cheap.

Then, out of the dusk and gloom, Bagger Vance (Will Smith) appears, strolling nonchalantly down the middle of the fairway – the safest place, he tells Juduh, considering where his shots are going. Bagger Vance's mission is to bring balance back to Juduh's life.

Bagger Vance is a figure of myth. He swings like a pro, can read the lay of a green at different times of the day, knows exactly what shot will work, and can predict stormy weather from a few cirrus clouds high in the blue sky. It's spiritual help Juduh needs and Bagger Vance is unearthly

With Bagger as his caddie and muse, Juduh gets to work preparing for the tournament. At first, the comeback trail is arduous and as uncertain as it can possibly be in a sports movie, which has a predetermined trajectory.

His two opponents are formidable, but he's a local hero – the pride of Savannah is riding on his score. True to script, round one has to be a disaster. No moral victory is ever gained easily. Juduh falls twelve strokes back. Under the coaching of Bagger, however, he turns it around in round two, closing the gap by four strokes, and then hits his groove in round three, complete with a hole-in-one on the eighth hole – as angels sing on high. The news spreads: "God bless Savannah and the men she propagates!" The fickle crowd senses victory and storms the course. Juduh's every stroke merits

applause, autographs, and a tip of the hat to the crowd. The girls swoon; the Mayor promises a big parade. At the end of round three, both Jones and Juduh are plus one.

In the final round, Juduh pulls even with five holes to go. The standard storyline, of course, can't allow so easy a victory. There is more to be learned and more adversity to face. Arrogance and ambition intervene. Playing a long par five, distracted by the audience (who have become mere "paying customers"), Juduh disregards Bagger's strategy and chooses to "close the door on those guys" by reaching the green in two strokes. Naturally, excessive pride precedes a nasty hook. A huge first shot ends in the sand, the second rebounds off the lip of the bunker, and the third splashes in the drink. As Juduh drops the ball behind his back to take his penalty, the faith of everyone in Savannah falls with it. After all, only winners are admirable.

Soon Juduh is three strokes back and, following another off-balance slice, faces an impossible lie in the trees. On a difficult shot back in round one, Bagger had tempted him with quitting – just hook your shot in the water and creep off, he says. "I'll tell everyone you're sick". Juduh's pride wouldn't let him give up then. Now Juduh is tempted by his own celebrity demon. Should he move the ball for a better shot in the hopes of winning, or play it as it lies?

Alone in the forest, the sounds of trench warfare crowd into his brain. Shaking, he is just about to pick up the ball to find a better lie when Bagger tells him to loosen his grip up a smidge – he means the grip he has on life. Life is a game, he says, "a game that can't be won, only played." It was a lesson John Invergarden hadn't learned before he destroyed himself. What matters, then, isn't material wealth or vanquishing your opponents, but how you play and, by implication, how you live. Life is not essentially a matter of reason but, rather, of feelings. It's not something to be understood: you "don't need to understand," Bagger Vance says.

"Ain't a soul on this entire earth ain't got a burden to carry he don't understand. You ain't alone in that. But you've been carrying this one long enough. Time to go on, lay it down."

"I don't know how."

"You got a choice: stop or start.... Start walking right back to where you always been."

Juduh has only to remember, Bagger Vance advises. But, Juduh complains, it was too long ago. No, Bagger says, "it was only a moment ago". Time is relative—the years haven't eroded his abilities, Adele is still available and willing, and Hardy's hero-worship can still be multiplied many-fold. It was time to choose. I'll always be with you, Bagger says: "Play the game." It was given to you when you came into this world, a divine gift. Juduh adjusts his grip on the club (a close-up shot)—this is the cathartic moment—and strokes the ball through the trees and onto the green. All you have to do is believe and the impossible becomes possible—the spiritualist side of the American Dream.

"Interesting match", says Juduh to Adele. "I always thought so", she replies, clearly meaning the game of life rather than golf. This romance ends predictably.

But before it does, there is a second test of character. Clearing some debris from around his shot, Juduh's ball shifts position, if only to the slightest degree. It means

that he has to call a stroke on himself. At this point in the match, it likely means defeat. Hardy pleads with him to keep quiet because it doesn't change the lie and, besides, no one will know. "I will, Hardy," says Juduh, "and so will you." When Juduh passes this test, his spiritual guide has finished his work – it wasn't the outcome of the game of golf that mattered. Bagger surrenders his clubs and walks back down the fairway into the sunset.

But the match must continue, if only for the other paying customers—us—and the film must fulfil the success recipe. Lying one stroke back on the 18<sup>th</sup>, all three face long putts, but only Juduh sinks his, tying the match. It's a spiritual victory, in the many senses that Director Robert Redford means it to be. Similar to the original *Rocky*, the battle ends in a draw that is a victory for the underdog. Life is a game that can't be won; it can only be played.

Two other spiritual quests intersect with Juduh's. Adele has been waiting a dozen years. Being with Juduh just feels right – "I like the way we dance," she purrs. It is not something that can be explained; it just is.

Then there is young Hardy. His father has come down hard in the world and Hardy shuns him. He admires his friend, Wilbur's dad, Raymond Charles. Unlike his father, who does menial work in the streets "where everybody can see him", Raymond would "rather do nothing at all than something beneath his dignity."

It's Juduh's time to provide spiritual guidance. People like Raymond Charles declared bankruptcy, he explains, leaving their creditors out in the cold, while Frank Greaves, Hardy's Dad, sold everything he had to satisfy his debts. "Your dad stared adversity in the eye and beat it back with a broom. Raymond sits around all day on his dignity." Following Juduh's celebrity endorsement, Hardy stands with his dad in reconciliation. Redford closes the final, emotional and spiritual circle.

According to Redford and screenwriter, Jeremy Leven, there's a place where everything is spiritually whole – your grip on life as well as your grip on the club, the place where you can find your swing. "Seek that place with your soul," Bagger counsels Juduh, where everything is one. With his integrity intact, everything falls into place for Juduh: his swing, his golf game, his fiancé, his life – all are connected spiritually. The message of *The Legend of Bagger Vance* is romantic, spiritual, and anti-rational: "Don't think, feel," is Bagger's philosophy: "Your hand is wiser than your head is ever going to be." Juduh has to learn, "How to stop thinking without falling asleep". Romantic intuition, though, is hardly a recipe for good golf, let alone for life. Modern spiritualism is meant to be an indictment of gross materialism and the me-first ideology of American society. Its anti-rationalism, however, aligns this version of pantheism squarely with Christian fundamentalism and material success.