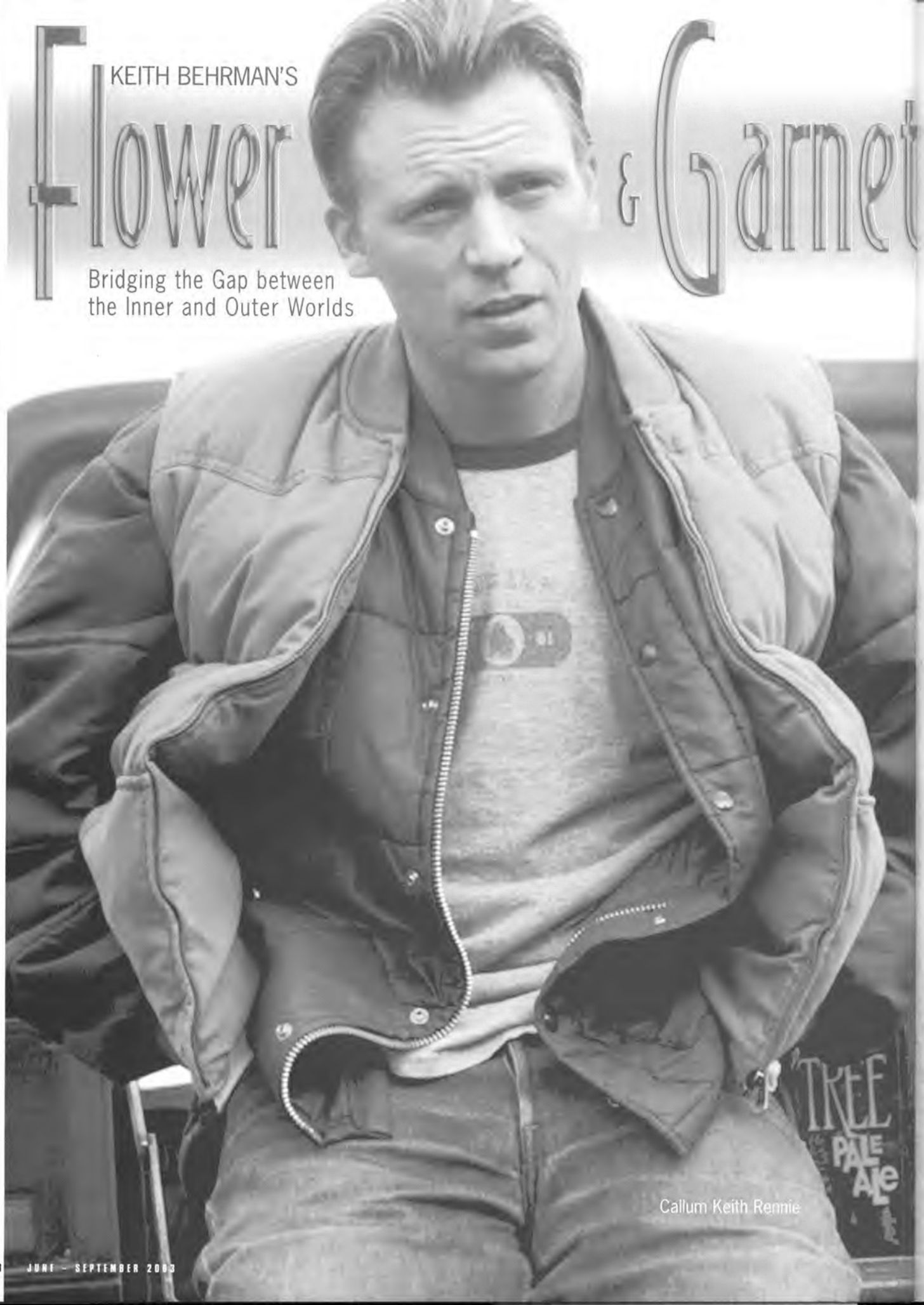


KEITH BEHRMAN'S Flower

Bridging the Gap between
the Inner and Outer Worlds

& Garnet



Callum Keith Rennie

"A study in contrasts." That's the note I make to myself as I slide into the booth of a Vancouver restaurant. Perhaps it's because the man who is sitting across from me, film director Keith Behrman, manages to look both young and middle-aged at the same time. He's dressed in a tidy denim shirt, corduroy pants and carries a peaked cap, protection from the city's inclement March weather. But it's his eyes that are at the root of my confusion. Although the creases around them betray his 40 years, the eyes themselves are those of a child—clear, curious and trusting. My conflicting impressions are further entrenched when he orders a beer followed by a chocolate milkshake.

Behrman is celebrating, and he has every reason to. At the time of our interview, his feature debut, *Flower & Garnet*, is about to open across the country and the critical response has been tremendous:

a Genie Award for best first feature, the Telefilm Canada Award for best emerging Western Canadian director at the Vancouver International Film Festival, three Vancouver Film Critics Circle Awards and a place on the Toronto International Film Festival's 2002 Top Ten list. The debut director is finding it all a little overwhelming. "Sometimes all this attention is too hard," Behrman says. "It takes a lot of energy to deal with that for one thing, to always remain open to the attention you get under those circumstances. And there is also something about just accepting it. Sometimes it's hard to accept praise."

That praise is well deserved. *Flower & Garnet* is a gem of a film, a quiet tribute to one family's struggle with loss and love. A mother dies in childbirth,

leaving her devastated husband, Ed (Callum Keith Rennie), to cope with a new baby boy. But Ed has grown incapable of caring, and Garnet (Colin Roberts) is brought up by his sister Flower (Jane McGregor). The story, often shown through Garnet's young eyes, takes us on a strangely compelling journey into a world of emotional isolation and fear, a place Keith Behrman is well familiar with. "I grew up feeling like the world I lived in made no sense to me and I made no sense to the world. I had a lot of conflict growing up, and I always felt that, when I was speaking, I was speaking in a bubble. People would give me these weird looks and no one seemed to understand what I was saying. So I felt that I had something to prove, to set the record straight. I think that my films were somewhat motivated by an attempt to create a world where the things I thought and felt actually made sense."

Behrman grew up in the small farming community of Shaunavon, Saskatchewan. Although he failed grades three and eight, he excelled at English, and his mother suggested he become a novelist. In 1984, he moved to Vancouver and began work on a book. "I was writing a novel," he says, "and I was writing every day for about six hours and I was getting more and more frustrated with the fact that I couldn't articulate what I was seeing in my head. One day I was in my room and I said to myself, 'if this were a movie I would just show that, that, that and that, and it would be done!' Then I thought, maybe I should look into film. But, since we had only one movie theatre in Shaunavon, I thought John Wayne was the height of cinema."



He enrolled in Simon Fraser University's film program where he began working with actors and was thrilled to finally discover a way to accurately reflect the goings-on in his head. "We have this sort of inner world," he says. "It's one that we are in, and no one else is. We have experiences in that world, perceptions of ourselves and other things, and then there is the outer world. My films are about trying to bridge that gap, connect the outer world to the inner world, and to communicate across that chasm."

Keith Behrman's first short film, *Thomas*, deals with a family waiting for a snowstorm to abate in order to bury their eldest son. It's a stark, lonely story and more than a little reminiscent of Claude Jutra's classic *Mon oncle Antoine*. His second short, *White Cloud, Blue Mountain*, was equally well received, and Behrman was encouraged to apply to the Canadian Film Centre in Toronto. "I had this whole story in my head about how I shouldn't bother applying," he admits, "because they weren't really going to get my style, they'd want to change me and they wouldn't really understand me. It was just sort of a narrow-minded point of view of what would happen. After I really examined it, I realized I was just afraid. I wasn't afraid to apply because I'd be rejected. I was afraid to have to go there and say this is what I do."

Behrman did apply and was accepted, but he held on to that sense of being an outsider. Shortly before the Centre's industry screening of his short film *Ernest*, "I was talking to someone," he recalls, "and I said 'I don't

see my films are ever going to be embraced by the mainstream. They'll never be appreciated.'" When the film screened two days later, "it was really successful, and I was getting calls from producers," he says. "I realized my excuses weren't working anymore. So it's been a slow, gradual thing of understanding that it's all a bunch of bullshit. It's just this veil that keeps me from being in the world and with other people."

Trish Dolman produced *Flower & Garnet*, and although their initial meeting in 1995 was ill-fated (Behrman says she stood him up; Dolman claims he had the wrong day), they've been work-

ing closely ever since. Ironically, it is their ability to communicate with one another that sealed their relationship. "One of the most important things to me when I go to produce something with someone I don't know,"

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Dolman says, "is their ability to communicate and their ability to take responsibility for their own shit. When I met Keith, I knew that he could communicate and I knew that he was a sensitive, kind and caring person. I think we taught each other a lot about believing in ourselves, not being afraid and dealing with conflict."

The office windows of Dolman's company, Screen Siren Pictures, look out over a busy rail yard and Vancouver's Sky Train. It's the scene inside, however, that's worth watching. *Flower & Garnet* has just opened across the country to great reviews and, in Vancouver, excellent box-office numbers. The phone rings frequently, and Dolman is plowing her way through a score of congratulatory emails. But this critical success began with a financial crisis. Preparations for shooting were to begin in October 2001, but by late September Dolman had still not heard back from the Canadian Television Fund. The film's nearly \$2-million budget was in the balance, and Dolman had to make a decision. "I took all the money

out of every business account I had," she admits, "and put it in the *Flower & Garnet* account. I cashed a term deposit of my own and lent it to the production so that we could make payroll when we were in prep." The money did eventually come through, and Dolman is philosophical about the process. "I make this joke," she says, "and I have to qualify it because I don't want to complain. I go to the U.S., and I go to markets there and see the thousands of people trying to make a film. They make it on their credit cards, and I didn't have to do that. But, in Canada, it's a bit like making a film with the post office! It's a Canadian, federally funded government organization and it's so bureaucratic, and the people in the States know it's bureaucratic, so that's okay, but it does have an effect on your ability to make a film."

The funding for *Flower & Garnet* wasn't the only thing up in the air. With just three days before principal photography, Behrman still hadn't found his Garnet. "I just kept holding out for this special kid," he recalls, "because I knew that if I didn't find someone who could be the foundation of this film—who could have enough depth and presence to quietly anchor it—I knew it would flounder. But when Colin [Roberts] walked into the room, I thought this might work. As soon as he spoke the first line, I actually started to get tears in my eyes. I looked at my casting agent and we were both thinking: 'Oh, thank you!'"

It's pouring rain, but Callum Keith Rennie prefers to sit outside so he can smoke. Dressed in a green baseball jacket and a red ball cap, he looks like a Christmas tree

that's just stumbled out of bed. I last interviewed Rennie six years ago on the release of Bruce McDonald's *Hard Core Logo*, and it was a tough exchange. "I was chippie back then," he admits. Rennie has made his living playing the bad guy and was in the running for just such a role when the September 11th tragedy occurred. "I just didn't feel like that was what I wanted to do," he says. "I wanted something more positive, sweeter and kinder. So I just held on to *Flower*. It was exactly what I wanted to do. I knew it was going to be miserable. It was going to be cold. And it was not going to be as much money." He was dead right about the cold. Although *Flower & Garnet* was originally intended to be shot in Saskatchewan, financing kept it in British Columbia. It was eventually shot in the interior town of Ashcroft in the chilly month of November. "When I'm watching the film," Rennie says with a shiver, "I'm not going, 'that was a brilliant scene.' I'm going, 'God, that was a cold morning,' like the scene when we were in the boat. The day started out sunny, but then it turned cold and it was just too hard to focus."

Ironically, the scene he describes is one of the best in the film. Ed, in an effort to connect with Garnet, has dragged him out of a warm bed to go fishing. Although Ed has packed a cooler full of beer, he's forgotten to bring worms, and Garnet must fish with a gummy bear for bait. Unable to restart the boat's motor, and fueled by alcohol and pent-up frustration, Ed throws the outboard overboard. Playing the broken and emotionally crippled Ed was an enormous challenge for Rennie, and he says the experience transformed him. "It was really hard for



Flower
(Jane McGregor)
and Garnet
(Colin Roberts)

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me to drop some of my shtick and be vulnerable. I can protect myself and do roles without being touched by them, but this one wasn't like that. This was like peeling the onion, and don't do anything you don't need to do. Just stand and deliver, and be as open and honest as you can possibly be."

Before filming began, Behrman told Rennie he couldn't really prepare for the role, that they would build on moments that worked, and leave behind anything that felt false. "So, with Callum, it was a process of continually just saying 'no,'" Behrman says. "No, that's not what we want. No, that's not good enough, I want more from you. I want you to just take that away and be more of yourself. Be Callum." "Then Callum would come over to me," Trish Dolman says laughing, "and say, 'Keith wants me to be me. I don't know who me is! What am I supposed to do?'"

Rennie laughs at the absurdity of it all. "It's all true," he says. "That's one of the odd things about actors, I think. Complete self-obsession, with no understanding of ourselves. Because when Keith did ask that, I had no idea what he wanted. I thought, what does that mean? Who wants to see that? I don't even want to see that. That's why I'm doing this for a living, so I can be other people that I might get along with."

Colin Roberts's young age meant that he was on-set fewer hours per day than the rest of the cast, so Rennie, in his scenes with Roberts, was often playing off an on-tape Garnet. In one particular scene, a tense and emotionally charged moment between father and son, Rennie was having trouble responding to the tape.

Behrman offered to sit in, taking what would be Garnet's place behind the bars of a baby's crib. "So Callum was looking down at me through these bars," Behrman says, "and it was a really neat thing because we just looked at each other and kept up eye contact until this thing started to develop, this energy and connection started to build up and it was really very beautiful and nice. It was toward the end of the shoot. It was fascinating because there was so much of him having to trust me, and me asking him to be vulnerable, forcing him not to rely on his little tricks in acting. I think it all culminated in this moment of just staring at each other."

When I asked Rennie what Behrman had said to him, he laughed out loud. "That's private!" he responded. "There are people in the world," he continued, "who see through my bravado, my blustery, flippant kind of attitude. Keith sees through all that, saw another quality and trusted that I'd be right for the movie. That's what he was constantly trying to get out of me. Stop that other stuff and be honest with myself. It became a piece that transformed me, because I was allowed to work as an actor in a different way and I was given something to do outside of that harder exterior that I normally present."

So, while the rest of us are just catching up to Keith Behrman and his remarkable skills as a director and writer, he is already moving on, leaving behind, at least for the moment, the strange and interior world of *Flower & Garnet*. "I feel like I've explored that aspect of filmmaking," he says. My next film [*Guided by Wire*] is going

to have more movement, more energy, more dialogue and will take place more in this world. I think I've left my childhood behind and now I've entered my 20s."

Something tells me he'll still celebrate with a beer and a milkshake chaser.

Dale Drewery is a Vancouver-based journalist and television producer.

Callum Keith Rennie and Colin Roberts

