



by Marc
Glassman

getting eclipsed

SEX REARS ITS HYDRA head in Jeremy Podeswa's first feature, *Eclipse*. Throughout the course of the film, ten liaisons are depicted between characters of remarkably diverse cultural, social and sexual orientations, all of whom are living in Toronto during the two-week period before this century's major solar eclipse. Structuring his narrative in the form of a *ronde*, Podeswa follows one character from each pairing through to another encounter with the next protagonist. He juxtaposes these fictional encounters (shot in black and white), with both real and fake documentary footage (shot in colour) of the eclipse and the mania that surrounds it. All of this is a lot for one film to do, and once the viewer realizes what the setup is, the question becomes: can it work in a meaningful way?

If politics sometimes makes strange bedfellows, so can desire, at least as played out by the colourful character types portrayed here. Their appearance – and couplings – are in the following order, as described in the film's production notes: Henry, a young Asian Canadian hustler; Brian, a middle-aged businessman; Sylvie, a mid-twenties French-Canadian domestic; Gabriel, a

Central American refugee; Sarah, a Venezuelan-born professor living in Canada; Norman, a refugee lawyer; Angelo, a sexually precocious teen-ager; Michael, a self-absorbed artist; Jim, a contemplative actor; and Carlotta, a relentless party girl.

By parsing the film into discrete erotic tales, Podeswa has put an enormous responsibility on himself and his actors. Each scene has to function the way that a good short story does. Character, plot and incident must be developed quickly because the audience has to understand and care about the situation as it unfolds. The director also has to overcome a burden of predictability which invariably descends through the repetition of erotica.

Thanks to inspired casting, the bulk of *Eclipse* rises above this potential trap. All of the actors are physically right for their roles and seem capable of indicating the kind of nuances and emotional charges necessary for these vignettes. Some of the performances are absolutely riveting, particularly those delivered by Daniel MacIvor as Jim, Matthew Ferguson as Angelo, and Earl Pastko as Michael.

Take the scene between Michael and Jim, for example. Michael comes to Jim's country cottage to "go rural" for a day. The two go out for a nature walk at Jim's insistence. Michael, clearly an urban sophisticate, plays up his disdain for anything to do with country life. He hears gunshots, asks what the sound is, and Jim, without blinking an eye, says "Wabbits," in his best Elmer Fudd imitation. After waxing nostalgic about their long friendship, which had started as a sexual relationship, they suddenly find themselves embracing each other. Michael says, "You're really my best friend," to which Jim replies, "I love you, too." After they have sex, Michael is eager to return to "prance around the campfire," only to discover that Jim is sitting on the ground weeping. Everything in this sequence works for me, the emotional banter, the camaraderie, and the knowing physicality between two friends. Pastko and MacIvor, two veteran stage actors, create indelible impressions, beautifully contrasting the differences between characters and the reasons why each in his own way is attracted to the other.

Regrettably, it is these strong performances that underscore one of the major problems of the film. Very few scenes achieve this kind of emotional and dramatic effect. Probably few films with the complex structure of *Eclipse* could successfully maintain such a high level of performance and direction throughout. In any anthology production, whether it be book, theatre piece, or film, one will inevitably find high points that indicate in the purest way the artistic intentions of the whole project. In comparison to

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the Pastko-MacIvor scene, for example, the story of the refugee lawyer, played by Greg Ellwant, and his Venezuelan-born wife Sarah, performed by Maria Del Mar, ends up looking perfunctory and flat.

Then there is the question of the actual eclipse, the other key element of the film. At the end of each sexual coupling, *Eclipse* moves to footage of either the emerging phenomenon itself or of the gradually increasing hysteria surrounding the event. Angelo is tied into the depiction of the eclipse through the documentary home video that we see him

shooting for a school project. Other characters refer to it during their conversational foreplay. The audience is made to feel that everyone in the film is in some way linked to this major celestial configuration.

An accomplished documentarian, Podeswa handles both the fictive and real coverage of the eclipse with humour and style. We are shown examples of eclipse paraphernalia: a woman selling plates, bottles, and other items is interviewed; a record store sales clerk tells us that songs like *House of the Rising Sun* and *Total Eclipse of the Heart* have suddenly become big sellers again; a pixel-board saying "Get Eclipsed" and "Five More Days" counts down to the film's climax. An interview with a scientist illustrating the eclipse through models is given extended play.

It is this scientist who is given the greatest opportunity to discuss the larger issues surrounding the eclipse. He tells us the word is Greek for abandonment. During the Middle Ages it was believed that an eclipse represented the killing and devouring of a heavenly object by celestial demons. "A world without light is a reminder of how precarious our life really is," he intones. Weighty stuff, indeed. Do the vignettes play well against the backdrop of an eclipse? Emotionally, they do. Certainly, from a structural stand point, it is important to have a linking device to tie together the disparate characters depicted. But does the celestial phenomenon of the moon either making love to or devouring the sun correlate to the stories we see being played out on Earth? In every vignette, there is a process of seduction and abandonment. In some cases, for example when Michael refuses to treat Angelo or Jim seriously, there is a feeling of a beam of darkness being shone upon characters.

The problem for me arises with the deeper philosophical issues that a film structured around an eclipse naturally raises. The stories that Podeswa chooses to follow here are miniaturized – fully in keeping with the vignette format. An eclipse, on the other hand, is a major scientific and, indeed, mystical phenomenon that more closely resembles an epic. The disparity between the two is too wide to bridge, and the film falls short in the attempt. The successes of *Eclipse* are those associated with seeing fine performers delivering witty, sarcastic dialogue tinged with an element of sadness. Fortunately, those pleasures far outweigh Podeswa's over-arching ambition, which unfortunately has marred this film ●

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