

The Hanging Garden

A Triptych Media/Galafilm/Emotion Pictures Production.

Louise Garfield, Arnie Gelbart and Thom Fitzgerald, Producers;
Mark Hammond, Assoc. Producer;
Teew Sooder, Production Designer;
John Roby, Music; Susan Shanks, Editor;
Daniel Jobin, DOP;
Thom Fitzgerald, Writer and Director.
Featuring: Chris Leavins (Sweet William);
Troy Veinotte (Teenage Sweet William);
Kerry Fox (Rosemary); Seana McKenna (Iris);
Peter MacNeill (Whiskey Mac).
1997.



● *Credit Sequence*: A young boy and his father are identifying the flowers in their garden. The tender scene grows ugly as the boy can't identify the seasons of the flowers. The father hits the boy as the screen turns red. The father begs for forgiveness. It is 10 years later. The boy is now a teenager and grossly overweight. He is still watering the garden, noting in which season they flower.

The Lady in the Locket: Another decade has passed. Rosemary, in her wedding gown waits for her brother, William, who still hasn't arrived. Iris, Rosemary's mother, urges her mother-in-law, Grace, who has Alzheimer's disease, to get ready for the wedding. Sweet William, a slim 25-year-old, returns after a long absence. The wedding, a madcap rural affair, has already started in the garden. Fletcher, Rosemary's husband, flirts with William, who is dressed in clothes intended for someone far heavier than him. Rosemary rescues him. They banter, then go outside, where Whiskey Mac, their dad, is already in his cups. William meets Violet for the first time and they establish an immediate rapport. As dusk turns to evening, William hauls in Mac, who has passed out, into the shower. Iris takes care of the distracted Grace, then she and William put Mac to bed. Iris and William argue about Mac and their dysfunctional family history. Iris gives up trying to clean up the mess left outside from the wedding party. She gathers a few things and leaves.

Lad's Love: It is 10 years earlier. William and Fletcher are best friends. Mac, Iris, Rosemary and William fight violently before dinner. Rosemary and William go to a high school dance where Fletcher and William smoke dope and avoid dancing. When the boys come home, they are caught by Grace playing with each other's privates. Laurel tells Iris about Dusty Miller, who "takes care" of virgin boys. Iris and her son visit Dusty. The next day, he lies in bed with a "sexually transmitted stomachache." He calls Fletcher who refuses to see him. In despair, William hangs himself in the garden.

Mums: In the present, William wakes up, gasping from a nightmare. He uses his inhaler to get his breathing under control. Mac wakes up, looking for Iris. She is nowhere to be found. The police question the family as everyone argues. Rosemary tells William, in the garden, that Violet is his child. They argue while feeding Granny. In the dusk, they see Mac holding the hanged William. Rosemary held the

wedding in the garden, to bring him back. Fletcher, Rosemary and William get drunk in the garden. Fletcher comes on to William who refuses his advances. He races off and cuts down his former self. Willie buries his former self. Willie comes back in and Mac realizes that the body has been buried. Mac tries to dig up the adolescent William, but the new one won't let him. Violet and William leave for Halifax. They bind a purple flower to the stairs as a reminder for Iris.

● Festooned with awards at Canadian film festivals from coast-to-coast, this film is as auspicious a debut as Clement Virgo's *Rude*, Srinivas Krishna's *Masala* and Mina Shum's *Double Happiness*. However, bold as the film appears to be, Thom Fitzgerald's first solo feature moves into territory that those filmmakers have already mapped out. Once again, a dysfunctional family is placed on view. Like Shum, Fitzgerald centres his drama around a love/hate relationship between a youth who tries to move out of the family web and a loving but angry father. The rite of passage from youth to maturity, and from a tightly knit community to the Canadian mainstream, is one that Fitzgerald's William shares with the protagonists of *Double Happiness* and *Masala*.

The world of Sweet William, Iris, Rosemary and Violet is a garden, but not one of earthly delights. Though the family are all named after flowers, and even Whiskey Mac is called Poppy by Sweet William, they never have the chance to bloom. They are buffeted by the violent moods of the alcoholic Whiskey Mac and the intractable force of Catholic dogma. When Sweet William, as an adolescent, realizes that he is gay, there is literally no way for him to survive as a family member. He can run or he can hang.

Though it is tricked up with time shifts and floral chapter headings, *The Hanging Garden* is a finely wrought melodrama. A young person, gifted but misunderstood, has to run away from home in order to

reach maturity. Returning home after a long time away, this character finds everyone waiting for him to complete the circle of events that had started many years before. Fitzgerald's film has all this and more: sexual intrigue, enough emotion to delight anyone who thinks Canadian cinema is cold, and, of course, one Big Secret.

The Hanging Garden also tries to be an art film, although it may dissatisfy some viewers. There is the matter of the hanging overweight lad in the garden. Who is he? Did Sweet William die 10 years before the majority of the film takes place? We do not see the adolescent boy being cut down from the tree. Much of the film is seen through the eyes of the 25-year-old William. It is his perspective the viewer shares when the younger versions of Sweet William are introduced in the first and third chapters of the film. The revelation that Mac and Rosemary also can see the hanging Sweet William may only confound the issue. Is William a ghost, or a real man with a breathing difficulty who has come back to reclaim his sister and brother-in-law and claim his daughter?

The hanging Sweet William can be seen as Fitzgerald's metaphor for gay youth. Abandoned by their parents, perhaps too many Williams have a past that is permanently unresolved. As a narrative device, the hanged youth does not work; yet, apart from this caveat, Fitzgerald's lushly produced and well-acted film should take its place as one of the finest first features made in Canada this decade. ■