



Nicholas (Jeff Sutton)

Jeff Erbach's
The Nature of Nicholas:
Repressed Desire and Macabre Acts

It's significant that the first shot of *The Nature of Nicholas*, before we've even seen any credits, is of a wheat field stretching back to the horizon. Next, we get a shot of the inside of Nicholas's workshop, occupied only by a small beetle stuck in some sort of surgical clamp on top of a workbench with its little legs flailing uselessly as it attempts in vain to escape.

That's Winnipeg for you: an oasis in the centre of the great expanse of prairie Canada, filled with an angst-ridden populace longing to escape the seemingly eternal sense of isolation. Plagued by harsh winters that last for about 11 months a year and freakishly intelligent mosquitoes for the 12th, we huddle in our little dwellings unable to move, doomed to spend eternity in a constant state of introspection, producing artwork from decaying rabbit corpses, and films in which repressed desire manifests itself in macabre acts.

At least, that's the official explanation offered during the course of any discussion about Winnipeg cinema. It comes up whenever anyone asks why John Paizs's films are so funny, why Guy Maddin's films are so weird, and even why Cordell Barker's cartoons are so squiggly.

No doubt, much of the same reasoning will be used to explain why Jeff Erbach's *The Nature of Nicholas* is so effortlessly eerie and evocative. It would be a rather compelling notion if it were entirely true. In reality, Winnipeg, like any other city, is a land of American television, popular culture, fast food and soccer moms. Still, when it comes to indigenous film it's hardly atypical for a feature to germinate from the idea of a young child quickly rotting in a field and evolve into a coming-of-age story about a pubescent boy, his sexual confusion, his zombie dad, and his ghoulish, decaying, homo-

erotic play pal. *The Nature of Nicholas* follows in a great Winnipeg tradition.

Twelve-year-old Nicholas (Jeff Sutton) lives in a little house by the side of a road in the middle of nowhere. He's an introverted, straight-A student whose father's passing has left him without a male role model. When he's not busy dissecting bugs in his workshop (a hobby that is curiously not as sinister as we originally surmise) or engaging in resentment-filled conversations with his doting mother (Ardith Boxall), he spends time with his friend Bobby (David Turnbull) on whom he just might have a little crush.

Bobby is more attentive to the opposite sex, particularly to their worldly classmate Jenna (Katherine Lee Raymond), but his feelings about Nicholas are ambiguous. He gets himself invited to a party at Jenna's, hoping to try his luck at spin the bottle, but insists that Nicholas comes along. Despite all of Bobby's talk about girls, the overtones as he helps Nicholas fix his hair are hard to miss.

"It's not really so much about being heterosexual or homosexual," insists Erbach who, taking a page from the book of David Lynch, hesitates to discuss any of his characters' specific motivations. "Those are polar opposites, but sometimes things exist in between. Sexual identity is sort of on a sliding scale and I don't think anyone is ever really 100 per cent either/or." From there, Erbach launches into the surreal. First, Nicholas has a vision of his recently departed father (Tom McCamus). Next, there's a moment of indiscretion over the bug-dissection table. Nicholas gives Bobby a quick peck on the lips, apparently causing Bobby to split into two physical bodies: a particularly macho persona brandishing a baseball bat, and a sickly, decaying figure that takes up residence in Nicholas's workshop.

The significance is hard to pinpoint, and a conversation with the director doesn't help much. Erbach remains silent about why any character behaves in any way, or why any given scene takes place. He's more concerned about mood and emotions than plot and behaviour. "I just hope people pay attention to it and come up with their own ideas," he says. "Movies like this are complicated. Just talking about a 12-year-old boy's sexual identity, it's complicated. It's not 'Well, he likes girls. He's gonna sneak a Playboy out of his mom's room. He's gonna masturbate.' There's much more at work than that. If he got the Playboy from his dad there's some other things at work. There are issues around what fatherhood means, around what manhood means, authority, and all those things get sucked into sexuality. They can't help but not."

In a way, *The Nature of Nicholas* is the culmination of everything that the young director has done up until now. Erbach comes from a crop of 20-something filmmakers who have resigned themselves to non-commercial (read non-Hollywood) efforts with a disdain for obvious, linear narratives; a healthy contempt for strip mall culture; and a penchant for the odd bit of gore. One of his early shorts, *Soft Like Me* (1996), was set on a farm run by scythe-wielding pedophiles who kept young boys in bondage gear tending the fields. *Under Chad Valley* (1998), the story of two butchers who harbour secret desires for one another, seemed more like a blood-soaked technical exercise in horror. His follow-up, *Monday with the Martins* (2000), explored a day in the life of a man who had a third hand where his penis should be.

His work shows little influence from other Winnipeg filmmakers, lacking the warped humour that John Paizs and everyone who followed him would put on the most bizarre of situations. If Erbach's films seem off-putting or esoteric, it just might simply be a by-product of living in the city. Drive for an hour in any direction and you find yourself in a wheat field. It's not a question of whether a farm worked by slave children could exist here, but how long it would take before anyone would find out.

The contradiction is that Erbach doesn't have a car, and rarely makes it out of the city. His settings and situations exist in his imagination, and the small local community reinforces his storytelling style. "If you think about it, what's considered successful in Winnipeg is not considered successful in Toronto," he notes. "In Toronto, there's an industry and you see it and feel it every day because you have friends who direct music videos and commercials and movies of the week. You can make a living being a director. But in this town what's considered successful is when you make something that's personal, that is a piece of visual art. So people here pursue their own passions because that's what [they're] told to do."

How audiences will react to Erbach's opus remains to be seen. Perhaps they will recoil in horror at the sight of McCamus sticking his hand in surgical incisions to use other characters as ventriloquial dummies. Maybe they'll be repulsed when the ever-decaying version of Bobby leaves the confines of the workshop and begins sleeping in Nicholas's bed. Erbach quite humbly says that he hopes that people like it, or are at least open to discussion if they don't. He knows he has made a film that will shock some people, but he expresses a desire to have audience members wonder why it is they are shocked. He does stress that he didn't make the film for shock value alone.

"I don't know how to do it a different way," he comments. "If I sit and I write it, that's how it comes out. I just write it and to me it makes lots of sense. Of course, I can recognize when something is difficult or abstract, and I know it's abstract but I don't shy away from that. I like that because it opens it up to new possibilities and it opens people up to seeing it in new ways."

Just how abstract the movie becomes is emphasized by the fact that Erbach views Nicholas's father, who brings along his own surgical clamps just in case he needs to keep the hole in the base of somebody's spine open wide enough for him to get in up to the wrist, as "comforting." Perhaps the closest one can get to comprehending his maddeningly aloof film is to understand his love of apparent contradictions. His films exist in the grey space between polar opposites so that a character can be both comforting and menacing, good and evil, homosexual and heterosexual, and naive and wise beyond one's years. Perhaps that is why Winnipeg, which lies smack dab in the longitudinal centre of Canada and in the midst of typical middle-class suburban values, can produce a film like *The Nature of Nicholas*. **TAKE ONE**

BY Peter Vesuwalla