

they finally meet and sit together at the airport. Olivia is leaving for Florence, Italy, to pursue her life's dream; Catherine turns down a recording contract in New York to return "home"; while Natalia gives up photography and bids her father goodbye. As the three women sit together, they witness a young girl—who has previously appeared in the film twice before—laughing at them. She is then picked up by her father. The three women laugh, and the film freezes on Olivia.

To say this film is a love letter from a loving son to his movie-star mother would not be a stretch, considering in this case the son is Edoardo Ponti and the mother the incomparable Sophia Loren. With an extremely light touch, first-time director Ponti—whose father is, of course, the legendary Italian producer Carlo Ponti—guides his mother through her 100th film. Remarkably, the age-defying Loren is made up to look older than her 68 years, yet her radiant beauty still shines through the darkened eyeshadow. She is one of the last of a dying breed, a true cinema goddess whose mere presence lights up a room or a film.

However, *Between Strangers* needs more than a screen goddess to liven up the material. With only the slightest hint at dramatic tension, the stories meander along as a series of vignettes built around the theme of father-daughter relationships, or in the case of Loren's character, the dynamics of an abandoned child (Wendy Crewson) and her mother who meet briefly at a book signing. Natalia (Mira Sorvino) needs to break out of the shadow of her overbearing father (Klaus Maria Brandauer), while Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger) needs to see her father (Malcolm McDowell) dead before she can break free from her troubled past. The performances are uniformly good, if not outstanding, and the international cast is rounded out by Pete Postlethwaite as the bitter husband and Gérard Depardieu as the friendly gardener. But there is no script to dig into, and director Ponti takes no chances, giving his three female leads generous lens time but precious little to say that isn't clichéd or dull. Their individual performances are wasted.

This Italian-Canadian co-production, the second Canadian film starring Loren (her first was the far superior *A Special Day* directed by Ettore Scola in Montreal in 1977, which went on to secure an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign-Language Film) is unique in the sense that despite its "Euro-pudding" casting—Loren is Italian, McDowell and Postlethwaite English, Brandauer German, Depardieu French, Sorvino American, and Crewson and Unger Canadian—no one seems out of place in multicultural Toronto and astonishingly, Toronto is not disguised. In fact, *Between Strangers* just might be one of the finest depictions of Toronto ever put on film, and for that reason alone the film can be embraced as Canadian. It's too bad Ponti failed to capture the emotional depths of his complex characters as well as he captures the city.

The film is surprisingly passionless and the ending is false, even trite. Ponti holds onto the reins too tightly during his

first time out and moves too cautiously. With such a high-powered cast, *Between Strangers* is weighed down by its own importance and fails to rise above the mediocre. It might be a love-letter from a loving son to his adored mother, but, unfortunately, the sentiments are pure Hallmark.

Paul Townend



Yellowknife

2002 110m prod Films de L'Isle, Transmar Fiilms, Buffalo Gal Pictures, exp Ian Boyd, Rodrigue Jean, p Ian Boyd, Phyllis Laing, d/sc Rodrigue Jean, ph Yves Cape, ed Mathieu Bouchard-Malo, pd Gabriel Tsampalieros, cos Caroline Poirier, s Yves Corbeil, Claude Beaugrand, Hans Peter Strobl, Bernard Gariépy Strob, mus Robert M. Lepage; with Sébastien Huberdeau, Hélène Florent, Patsy Gallant, Philippe Clément, Brad Mann, Todd Mann, Glen Gould.

Moncton, New Brunswick. Present day. Max sneaks Linda out of a psychiatric hospital where she has been committed for reasons unknown to us. Max drives north in a

last-ditch effort to introduce some much needed normalcy and stability into their lives. Max's plan? To settle in the film's eponymous city in the Northwest Territories. As they venture into the unknown, the pair pick up twin male, English-speaking strippers who seem normal enough, but soon reveal themselves to be cynical hustlers.

Stopping at a club somewhere down the road, and booking into motel, Linda takes in a set by an aging lounge singer, who immediately elicits Linda's admiration. However, the singer's sleaze-ball manager takes a rather unwholesome interest in her. Linda decides to hit the road with the singer, but is scared off by the manager and soon resumes her journey with Max. Returning to the motel that they share with the twins, Max and Linda steal the strippers' bankroll and head back on the road.

Sometime later, they are pulled over by the highway patrol for speeding after hitting a deer. Linda is taken to the station for further questioning but it is soon apparent that the officer is infatuated with her and angles for a date. It is revealed that Max is her brother, and she is free to date whomever she chooses. They head for the local casino where the lounge singer and her manager have settled in for a short stay. The manager still has a thing for Linda, lures her to a lonely spot, and masturbates while she stands fascinated and naked against a tree. The police officer appears, kills the pervert, and manages to frame Max for the crime. When Max arrives in Yellowknife, he is arrested for murder.

Yellowknife is the second feature from Rodrigue Jean, a follow up to the acclaimed *Full Blast* (1999). It sets itself up to be a seminal Canadian road movie—Max (Sébastien Huberdeau) and Linda (Hélène Florent) are driving north not south; people are polite while screwing each other over; and the film is about as bilingual as you can get—and in some ways, it is quite successful. It's photographed in a sparse and beautiful style, its muted tones echoing the landscape to a "T." Its pace is very much that of a road trip. The constantly forward-moving rhythm as things pass by is broken up by the occasional pit stop where any action, a change from the unbroken scenery, seems heightened. The ambience of the piece is so pitch perfect that while watching the film, you can almost taste the clean fresh air and feel the scenery slipping past you.

For the most part, the performances are good, especially Florent, who creates a very subtle yet highly conflicted character, and Patsy Gallant, whose pathetic lounge singer seems positively noble, albeit in an abstract way. Unfortunately, the script calls for both principals to be ciphers, and

Huberdeau can't quite seem to pull that off. Furthermore, the story loses all of its energy after the first half. It starts with a definite purpose, but gets caught up in too many small-town-noirish goings-on that fall into one of two categories: confusing or unbelievable. In the case of Linda's and Max's relationship, it's both. We see them together in bed, then later Linda tells her cop boyfriend (Glen Gould) that they are siblings. It is never fully understood whether they are either (a) brother and sister who have sex together, or (b) they are a couple and Linda lied to the cop.

In essence, *Yellowknife*, like its protagonists, gets lost somewhere down the road. It has some beautiful elements, but probably needed another few drafts to have them fully realized. Still, credit must be given for the attempt. *Yellowknife* is a unique, laconic picture that simply tries to swallow more than it can chew. As a road movie, it certainly sets itself apart from its counterparts south of the border. If it had been an American film, the slow, sensuous feeling of alienation probably wouldn't have been allowed to develop, and I'm sure there would have been a lot more blood-soaked bodies along the way.

Simon Ennis



Saint Monica

2002 82m prod Sienna Films, Rave Film, p Jennifer Kawaja, Julia Sereny, Sharon McGowan, Peggy Thompson, dlsc Terrance Odette, ph Arthur E. Cooper, ed Lenka Svab, pd James Phillips, cos Sharmon Luchuck, s James Genn, mus Carlos Lopes; with Genevieve Buechner, Clare Coulter, Maurizio Terrazzano, Krista Bridges, Brigitte Bako.

Set in Little Portugal and south Riverdale in downtown Toronto, *Saint Monica* follows the travails of Monica, a 10-year-old Portuguese-Canadian girl determined to appear in a parade to