

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

honour the Assumption of the Virgin Mary as an angel with a beautiful pair of snowy white wings. However, because her single-parent mother moved out of the parish in the heart of Little Portugal to a basement apartment to escape an abusive marriage, Monica misses the opportunity to be picked as an angel in the parade. Her response is understandable, if imprudent. She steals a pair of archangel wings.

On the streetcar home, Monica loses the wings. She finds them a few days later on the back of a homeless woman who lives in the ravine below the bridges that cross the Don River valley. The woman believes she is the Virgin Mary, and has a mission to cross three bridges—and oncoming traffic—spanning the valley as if to pay the price for some unforgiven sin. Monica and Mary, the homeless woman, strike up an odd friendship as she tries to trade her collection of Virgin Mary statuettes for the wings. Mary won't trade because she has one more bridge to cross. When she has successfully completed her mission, she will return the wings.

By chance, Monica learns from a television news story that Mary has been picked up by the police for trying to cross the Bloor Viaduct, the largest and busiest of the bridges, and was taken to a psychiatric hospital. It is also revealed that Mary had been in the news 10 years before, when her son jumped to his death off the Viaduct. Monica visits the hospital, but Mary is lost in her own world and can't communicate. Her mother's brother Albert, however, retrieves the wings for her and promises to drive Monica to the parade. Albert keeps his word, and Monica returns the wings, but has a last-minute change of heart and runs off with the wings to the hospital again. This time, with Mary in a wheelchair, they leave the hospital together. Monica puts on her wings and proceeds to push Mary across the busy Viaduct as the traffic miraculously stops, like the waters parting for Moses, and the camera pulls back, as if to Heaven.

It would be rare in the Canadian canon to find a film as authentic as *Saint Monica*. It's a little gem of a movie, but not a polished gem. This one is rough around the edges; however, its heart is luminous. Genevieve Buechner, who has never acted in a film before, steals the movie and assures herself of many more to come. Her performance as Monica—all wide-eyed and curious—is an absolute marvel, so natural that she never misses a beat. Brigitte Bako as Icelia, Monica's mother, is altogether believable with her Portuguese accent and working-class temper, and Maurizio Terrazzano completes the family triangle with a solid, loutish performance as uncle Albert. Only Clare Coulter as the guilt-ridden, crazy Mary seems hammy in yet another of her *Mad Woman of Chaillot*-roles, with matted hair and crazed eyes.

Terrance Odette's first feature, *Heater* (1999), was invited to Sundance, won numerous festival awards and garnered great reviews, but had a very limited theatrical release.

Saint Monica demonstrates that *Heater* was no fluke. Odette, a director of more than 100 music videos and documentary shorts, is so evidently—and at times masterfully—in charge of the material that to say he is a natural-born film director would be stating the obvious. His script is nuanced and fully developed, although a subplot about a hole in the mesh screen, which Monica uses to escape her basement bedroom to avoid leaving by the front door, doesn't work nearly as well as the main storyline.

Yet, this is only a minor distraction in what otherwise is one of the most realistic depictions of an ethnic working-class family in contemporary Canadian cinema. This, plus the strong underlying themes of redemption through martyrdom and personal salvation versus church indoctrination makes *Saint Monica* a heady mix. How does one keep one's faith after suffering irreparable loss? Mary and Monica bond over their worship of the Virgin Mary. Mary wants to join the angels as penance for the death of her troubled son; Monica wants her wings to be closer to Jesus, and, of course, she wants to lead the parade.



Genevieve Buechner.

Saint Monica is one of the most authentic films about Toronto as a city of separate, distinctive neighbourhoods. Remarkably, it shares this quality with Edoardo Ponti's *Between Strangers*, although this is the only thing the two films have in common. *Saint Monica's* use of the natural east-west divide of the Don River valley with its four spanning bridges as an integral part of the story makes for some great shots of the city, particularly the last one as the camera pulls back from Mary, Monica and the Viaduct to take in the skyline, the islands and the great expanse of lake and sky. It's a beautiful shot to end a touching film, which, if it had come from Brazil or Italy with subtitles, would be hailed as a minor masterpiece in the style of classical neo-realists such as De Sica or Visconti. As a low-budget Canadian film, it will get limited release, but even more critical praises for Odette. Let's hope it also allows him to make the next one. He's the real deal.

Paul Townend