

TOUCH OF PINK

Kyle MacLachlan as Cary Grant

A CANADIAN
CROSS-CULTURAL
COMEDY

Location, location, location.

Absent or present, it seems to be as important to the Canadian film industry as it is to the real estate business. Canadian expatriate Ian Iqbal Rashid, who wrote and directed the soon-to-be-released romantic comedy *Touch of Pink*, is fully cognizant of the politics of location in his feature directorial debut. Alim (Jimi Mistry), an East Indian/Ismaili Torontonian living in London, England, resists telling his judgmental drama queen of a mother (Suleka Mathew) that he and his white British roommate, Giles (Kristen Holden-Reid), are a gay couple. The central character, however, in this, yet another in a long tradition of border-crossing Canadian

movies, is not only American but a movie icon—Cary Grant (impersonated surprisingly well by Kyle MacLachlan). Here the American cinematic sensibility—living inside the Canadian national imagination and colonizing Canadian culture for almost a century—manifests itself physically in a manner reminiscent of the Humphrey Bogart character in Woody Allen's *Play It Again Sam*, dispensing advice on style and romance.

Rashid has written Alim's mother, Nuru, as a former Doris Day wannabe, drawing heavily on references to Day's 1960s sex comedies, especially *That Touch of*

BY JANICE KAYE

JUST WHO ARE WE, ANYWAY?

Mink (1962) with Grant, which Rashid and his mother watched together when he was a boy. In addition to referencing other famous Grant movies such as *Gunga Din* (1939), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) and *An Affair to Remember* (1957), *Touch of Pink* includes a musical montage in which Nuru, dressed as Doris Day, dances and drinks champagne with her son's lover as though he were her own. "I wanted to make an old-style romantic comedy, with someone like me as the star, and pay homage to all those films I loved," says Rashid. "We have a young man who wants to be white and imagines himself as a guy living in a Hollywood movie. Real life intrudes and he can't sustain it. But the mess, pain, shame and difficulties lead him to a better place."

Ever since the infamous tax-shelter era (TSE) of the late 1970s and early 1980s, journalists, critics, filmmakers and politicians have lamented the use of Toronto and other Canadian cities as stand-ins for American locales, as though that were the main factor resulting in a good or bad movie. There has been endless talk about location and "telling our own stories." Very few discussions, however, have focused on the most difficult and important part of any film, the actual craft of writing a screenplay.

And just who are we, anyway? Raised in Toronto, Rashid has lived in the U.K. since 1990. Is the quintessential Canadian movie one that takes place in Britain and Canada, written and directed by an expatriate, gay, immigrant Torontonion living in London, England, and featuring an American movie star inside the head of the gay Canadian hero? Asked whether he and his movie are British

or Canadian, Rashid answers, "The movie has the same nationality I do, but I don't know what that is! I feel Canadian in the U.K. and vice versa. The film really belongs to both countries but it is not a forced co-production. It's hard to give it one national identity. It belongs to other places as well—East India, Africa. It was a specific strategy." The majority of funding and crew on *Touch of Pink* came from Canada and most of the shooting was done in Toronto with a 90-per-cent Canadian cast. "Canada is much more confident in its identity now," Rashid says. "And Toronto is coming into its own. It's a very exciting city."

Toronto plays Toronto, although it also stands in for London, where the production could afford only three days of shooting. "I love Toronto," the Cary Grant character tells Alim, adding, "Does time always drag here like this?" It's reminiscent of Sandy's musings in the opening line of *My American Cousin* (1985). "Dear Diary: Nothing

ever happens." Canadian movies have often depicted Canada as a boring place that becomes exciting only when Americans, such as Sandy's cousin Butch, arrive on the scene. Unlike Hollywood, "Toronto is not a tourist destination," Giles tells Alim. In still-swinging London, they can openly celebrate the anniversary of the first time they had sex.

However, Toronto ultimately and ironically serves as the location where they

are empowered to reveal their relationship to Alim's family. While Rashid's U.K. people (you know you've arrived in the film business when you have "people") suggested setting the film in New York so it would travel, he refused. "These are my two countries," he says. "It was my perverse pleasure to use Toronto as Toronto, and Toronto as London, the seat of the Empire. It felt really important to name Toronto as Toronto."



MacLachlan with Jimi Mistry

Rashid likes Canadian movies and lists some of his recent favourites: *Les Triplettes de Belleville*, *My Life without Me*, *Les Invasions barbares*, *Marion Bridge* and *New Waterford Girl*. He is a particular fan of Don Shebib's older films, and he also praises as "ahead of its time" Claude Jutra's TSE movie *By Design* (1982), which is about two lesbian fashion designers who want a baby. "Canadian filmmakers are privileged; they're so well-funded," says Rashid. "This sometimes leads to great works of art but they don't think of the audience first. They seem to resent it. But it's so much more effective if you connect with the audience. There are lots of political messages out there, but I want to entertain. Trashy movies have a kind of energy and life."

The way Canadian filmmakers have dealt with issues of gender, sexuality and family are at least as important as location. Peter Harcourt and others have noted the importance of coming of age as perhaps the key Canadian genre, and *Touch of Pink* follows that seemingly unconscious tradition. Alim's many colonial parents—Cary Grant, Giles, his

mother, and his aunt and uncle—help him grow up, sexually and nationally. No matter what the protagonists' age, the coming-of-age dynamics frequently take place within the family. And if a dysfunctional-family genre existed, it could easily form the

basis of a subset in the Canadian film canon. Key to this is the mother/son or parent figure/child relationship, often creepily sexual, as in *The Wars* (1983), *Double Negative* (1980), *Dirty Tricks* (1981) and *Middle Age Crazy* (1980), as well as a great deal of incest, as in *Explosion* (1969), *Blood Relatives* (1978), *Summer's Children* (1979) and *Alligator Shoes* (1981). In many Canadian movies,

the young male hero sits in a bathtub with the mother figure nearby; in *Touch of Pink* it's Cary Grant in a bubble bath with Alim's mother present. When she leaves London to return to Canada, Grant steps in, telling Alim he'll always be there for him. When Giles, in competition with a movie phantom, is driven to have an affair with another man, both he and Alim have a hidden lover. At the end of the film Alim learns to confront his mother, defy his family and find his own gay way.

It is remarkable how many other quintessential Canadian film images are contained in *Touch of Pink*: the absent father; the overbearing mother ("I'd like to get you off my back," Alim tells his mother); the homoerotic/homosexual subtext; parties with unhappy family overtones (here a sexual anniversary party held in a gay bar); the closet ("I love him so much I'm in the closet," says Alim); the Watcher (a character hidden from most, as Grant

"TRASHY MOVIES HAVE A KIND OF ENERGY AND LIFE."

— Ian Iqbal Rashid



The ladies of *Touch of Pink*

is hidden from all but Alim); a delusional hero/heroine (often going over the edge into madness); the inclusion of religious imagery/discussion; and colonial references.

Sexual masquerade in Canadian film often shows itself in drag, with explicit examples of feminized male characters playing dress-up, from *Explosion* (1969) to *Outrageous!* (1977) to *The Silent Partner* (1978) to *Perfectly Normal* (1992) to *The Five Senses* (1995). Alim's masquerade is his gayness in the face of his family's desire to arrange a Muslim heterosexual marriage for him. Grant refers to his own masquerade as a charade in *Charade*. The American cinematic icon is represented as an insecure imaginary character fearful of being exposed as not as stylish and perfect as he seems. In fact, he's not even visible. In Canadian film, there are often things that are hidden: lovers, family members, relationships, plot lines, dialogue, names. Canadian cinema is itself a hidden cinema, one that few people see.

Rashid will undoubtedly have to field criticism about the use of the Cary Grant role and the casting of MacLachlan. "He's not the real Cary Grant," Rashid explains. "What was of interest to me is the energy created by his body of work. U.S. cinema has nothing to do with the reality of America. That's what my film is wrestling with—that idealized state of being American. Rich, glamorous, sophisticated, able to handle any situation with panache. The best of all things American, but also a fiction. 'The whole world wants to be like Cary Grant,' an interviewer once said to the real Grant. 'And so do I,' responded the Grant." Even Cary Grant wasn't Cary Grant. And Hollywood cinema is not America. It's Canada's hidden, unspoken lover.

However, one key difference between *Touch of Pink* and the majority of Canadian films is that there is a



classic plot structure, coherent character development and, most significantly, a happy ending so elusive/evaded in Canadian films. Happy endings seem to be considered by Canadian screenwriters to be pandering to simplistic

American solutions despite the repeatedly stated desire in vari-

ous industry and government sectors to compete in the American marketplace. "There's not going to be a happy ending," Alim, the Canadian, tells Grant, the American, "and there's nothing you or I can do about it." Grant counters: "A happy ending justifies everything," as he sits astride a wedding ice sculpture, dressed in a pith helmet à la *Gunga Din*. Colonial identities may be conflated but they are consciously addressed. Even more effectively plotted movies such as the marvelous *The Snow Walker* resist conventional romantic closure. So do the very different *Seducing Doctor Lewis* and *Foolproof*. Harcourt has referred to Canada's cinematic output as pointing to a fragmented, unfinished, postmodern nation, and the fact that Canadian movies deny closure seems to support his opinion.

Regarding the American influence, Rashid understands and understates the case when he says, "It's a pretty potent force on our doorstep." He adds, "Until Canadian film changes the next generation's lives, it's not going to happen. Danish film is now colonizing other countries with its Dogme. I've probably seen more movies than most and yet my reference points seem to be American. They're the films that stayed with me. The Italian and French also reference American cinema quite a bit. It's the meat and potatoes of the film world, and the rest are just

competing for room on the plate." Rashid is well aware of the seemingly inextricable connection between Canadian feature films and the Griersonian documentary tradition. "I always found it weird that it was a Brit—a Scot, in fact—who gave Canadian film an international profile. He had entrepreneurial energy and pushed these films out into the world. Suddenly we were at the forefront. Now we need two or three great films to come out at once like the Australians." In *Touch of Pink* Grant frames his hands as a director might, telling Alim when he finally reveals to his mother that he is gay, "You told the truth. The documentary approach." Yet, the truth can be manipulated and what looks seamless—classic Hollywood cinema—is actually full of holes.

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Suleka Mathew with director Ian Iqbal Rashid

Alim reminds Grant that in *The Bishop's Wife* (1947) he tells David Niven that an angel leaves only when he's not needed any more. Grant, resisting banishment, retorts paternalistically, "I made you what you are today. You need me." Alim responds in an uncharacteristically courageous way for a Canadian hero: "I made you." With that statement, he retakes

his life. Grant wonders how he'll survive. Later, Alim turns to the audience, breaking the fourth wall, and says that since he's "with you" (the viewer), "tell him I miss him sometimes."

The quintessential Canadian movie will probably turn out to be the one that cracks open the box office, the one that Canadians pay money to see. It remains to be seen whether *Touch of Pink* has the Midas touch. At Sundance, it set off two standing ovations and a bid-

ding war won by Sony Pictures Classic. Rashid has been bombarded by U.S. agents with three or four scripts a day. "It's a bit stunning actually," he says. Is the American angel still needed? "I hope not," says Rashid. "He served a very useful purpose and he's valued. It's our turn now. Having said that, I'm going to L.A. tonight."

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