

Valentine's Day

directed, written and produced by

MIKE HOOLBOOM

with BABZ CHULA, GABRIELLE ROSE

distributed by CINEMA ESPERANÇA

The opening images of *Valentine's Day* are of a roadside cemetery where the dead and the memories of how they died are neatly tucked away. The closing credits thank the taxpayers of Canada, via several cultural funding agencies. Bracketed between the verities of death and taxes is a dystopic parable about love, memory and dying.

In the not too distant future, Canada, led by Prime Minister Wayne Gretzky, declares war on Quebec, abolishes civil

B Y H E L E N L O V E K I N

liberties, and allows gangs of soldiers to go on bouts of pillage and rape. A skull-headed news anchor with a mellifluous CBC voice imparts information against a backdrop of archival war footage, well-dressed dogs and a pig-faced Mona Lisa. We learn from him that Prime Minister Gretzky is adept at political double-speak and animal impressions. Later in

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the film, he announces that the ozone layer has more perforations than an old screen door, representational art is illegal, and there are no more vegetables. There have been better times to be alive.

Love, however, has no respect for historical flux. Alex and Barbara, played with breath-taking range and intelligence by Gabrielle Rose and Babz Chula, live within that hermetic realm of intimacy that couples in love are able to create for themselves. Nothing that goes on outside their home has any importance or relevance for them. The war is a tiresome fact of life, and the atrocities committed by Canadian soldiers on their POWs are blandly explained away. They have dissociated themselves from the social and ecological disintegration that exists beyond their doorstep, preferring instead to occupy themselves with lovemaking,

painting and mutual revelation through the sharing of their deepest memories.

It is only when Barbara contracts HIV after being raped by soldiers that the outside world finds a way of infecting the women's sanctuary. The virus's intrusion into their lives is rapid and profound. "It's as if there are three of us in here now," whispers Alex in horror.

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Along with the looming possibility of death, there is the added terror of enforced quarantine for all those who test HIV positive. When soldiers come crashing through the front door to take Barbara away, both women escape out the back and run desperately towards an uncertain future.

Interspersed with Barbara and Alex's story are three sets of recurring images which reinforce director Hoolboom's fascination with media, icons and memory. The first is a NASA astronaut whose seven appearances are wrapped in the soundscape of control room chatter and radio crackle. On a cinderblock wall he spraypaints such pithy aphorisms as "Cunt=Memory, Cock=Forget," and "Imagine Finding Out Making Love Could Be Fatal." An emissary from a technocratic, patriarchal world gone wrong, the astronaut and his graffiti reduce profound, devastating experiences into trite slogans for easy digestion.

Juxtaposed against this masculine image is the war bride. She is emblematic of ideals let loose in an unworthy and desolate environment. With a flowing veil and billowing satin gown, the bride stumbles and flails her way down a stairwell, across a barren, rocky landscape and down railway tracks. Unlike the colour footage deployed to characterize Barbara and Alex, the war bride's

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appearances are hand processed and treated in various baths to give them distinct light and textural qualities. They jump about like sepia-tinged dreams or bad television reception, and have all the intrusive characteristics of commercials spliced into the really good bits of a late night movie.

Finally, there are the four guys. They are a dream that Alex repeatedly paints. The quartet crouches and huddles in deep chiaroscuro, as if they can ward off disasters with their bare shoulders, haunches and outstretched palms. They stare out at Alex, defiant and arrogant. She repeatedly attempts to trap them on canvas; however, they refuse to remain trapped and become, instead, the realization of her nightmares.

Hoolboom's juxtaposition of AIDS and war in *Valentine's Day* allows the director to examine how death can be organized in mass society much the same way that individuals seek to contain death in cemeteries. The more totalitarian a society, the more it will attempt to deny the death pervasive within it, for the denial of death and the obliteration of memory is an instrument of raw power. The insistence of memory is thus a subversive act, as anyone radicalized by the AIDS epidemic will tell you.

Those familiar with Mike Hoolboom's extensive catalogue of short films will know that he is adept at weaving together numerous complicated ideas with cogent images. In this instance, one wishes that Hoolboom had put *Valentine's Day* together as a bundle of inter-related shorts, rather than creating a feature length film with elements that never really cohere. Despite the striking avant-gardism in the war bride, astronaut, and news-cast sequences, the truly original device in this film is the feminization of a gay couple's confrontation with AIDS. After numerous films and videos on the subject of AIDS, there remain a plethora of things that need to be stated or reiterated about the disease. With superb actors like Rose and Chula to drive the crucial points home, Hoolboom could have easily forsaken the brittle devices that clutter and flaw a film that has, at its core, genuine heart ●

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2225 WEST BROADWAY,
VANCOUVER
BRITISH COLUMBIA,
CANADA V6K 2E4

TELEPHONE (604) 736 7997

FACSIMILE (604) 736 7290

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