

The True Meaning of Exotica

There is no doubt that *Exotica* is Atom Egoyan's breakout film. Winner of the International Critics' Award at last year's Cannes festival, numerous Genies, including Best Picture and Best Director, a successful commercial run right across Canada, 25 weeks in Toronto, including a one-week engagement at the IMAX theatre (all those naked bums on that huge screen!), world-wide distribution to critical acclaim, and an initial U.S. release of 500 theatres (40 in L.A. alone), *Exotica* has come to represent the very best in English-Canadian cinema—a small, art house film with tremendous commercial appeal. It has grossed \$1.75-million in Canada (which is very good for an English-Canadian film, not *Porky's* but very good) and \$5.4-million in the U.S. to date (excluding video). International sales include Australia, Japan, Germany, France, Italy (where Egoyan is especially popular) and U.K. (the marketing in London was extensive, and Egoyan's success rivals Cronenberg's, whom the British regard very highly).

Egoyan's film has attracted a wide audience without selling out his unique vision, a trick very few filmmakers manage to pull off, and certainly in the short history of Canadian feature filmmaking, a rare achievement only managed by Cronenberg and Arcand. The most telling thing about the film is that those who know and have followed Egoyan's work since *Next of Kin* immediately recognize *Exotica* as just another Egoyan film, slicker and sexier than the rest perhaps, but not substantially different from *The Adjuster* or *Speaking Parts*. Certainly not a commercial sellout, although one might argue that the wide appeal of the film is due to its liberal display of the female body in an exotic, anti-erotic club setting. This would certainly account for its appeal to a mainstream audience who attends only one or two films a year at best. A friend's boyfriend, a Toronto cop whose cinematic taste ranges from Schwarzenegger to Stallone, went to *Exotica* and enjoyed it, although he hadn't a

clue what it was all about.

This is all well and good for Egoyan's future career and Warner Bros. has signed him to direct a film based on a script by Amy Holden Jones (*Mystic Pizza*, *Indecent Proposal*). But what does this success mean? Is it a lucky break for Egoyan, or does it reflect something more substantial and say something about the burgeoning state of English-Canadian filmmaking? I would argue that *Exotica* means a great deal more than just a box office hit for Egoyan. It is a coming of age of English Canadian filmmaking—a marker, a point of reference. It represents not only the success of the Ontario Film Development Corp., but also of the Perspective Canada program at the Toronto International Film Festival.

Egoyan came on to the film scene in Toronto at the collapse of the much abused tax shelter financing in the early 1980s. He shot his first feature, *Next of Kin*, in 1984 for \$37,000. The film premiered in the first Perspective Canada program at the Toronto festival. Indeed, Egoyan's films were just the type of modestly budgeted feature which would become the mandate of the OFDC when it was incorporated in 1986. The whole thrust of English Canadian filmmaking moved away from the disastrous American

copy cat, tax shelter model of the 1970s and towards the director/writer-driven films of Egoyan, Rozema, McDonald, Mettler, Krishna and the rest of the Toronto New Wave of the 1980s.

Egoyan moved smoothly from film to film, each time the budget was a little bit more and each film a little bit slicker, but the vision remained the same. *Exotica* is the result and its success is the very justification for the OFDC and the Perspective Canada program. How ironic then that *Exotica* was not chosen to open last year's

Toronto festival. Instead, the ponderous *Whale Music* was accorded that honour, and *Exotica* opened the Perspective Canada program instead. It might be argued that this was an appropriate place for the film to be. After all, this was its main audience. But *Exotica* has taken Egoyan far beyond that very narrow audience. He was lionized at the 1994 Cannes festival. They called out his name, and in France he is considered a master of post-modern cinema. His name is spoken in the same breath as Cronenberg in England. It's about time the Canadian cultural establishment began to recognize and laud its home-grown cinematic talent. The opening gala at the Toronto festival (where international media attention is at its most intense) would have been a logical place to start. But I suspect there will many more opportunities for us to praise Egoyan. The success of *Exotica* has secured his place in Canadian cinematic history. He is not yet forty and he has only begun to take on the world.

The true meaning of *Exotica*, and the success of Atom Egoyan, is that we no longer have to cry for English-Canadian cinema. Thank you Atom for making the wait worthwhile.