



Sweet



Kissed, Lynne Stopkewich's auspicious debut feature about a young woman who prefers her lovers naked and dead in the embalming room where she works, premiered at the 1996 Toronto International Film Festival. The word-of-mouth was so hot and fast, the picture sold instantly (Malofilm Distribution in Canada; the Samuel Goldwyn Company in the U.S.; and the newly formed sales firm, Lakeshore International, for the rest of the world). The heat spread rapidly to New York's Independent Feature Film Market, where participants rushed to an early morning screening of the "necrophilia movie"; the Vancouver Film Festival (reportedly, *X-Files*-er David Duchovny was in the audience); and the offices of various American mini-majors, which immediately offered Stopkewich the kind of deals independent-minded moviemakers feel profoundly ambivalent about. The icing on the festival cake was Sundance, where the movie screened in January on the same program as *Lost Highway*, by Stopkewich's hero, David Lynch. Awards bestowed on *Kissed* include special jury mentions in Toronto and Vancouver, as well as the Telefilm Canada prize for the Best First Feature directed by a Western Canadian.

Necrophilia



Molly Parker and corpse: Parker is one of the most sympathetic deviants ever seen in a film. Her performance is a flawless interface between the actress and the character she is playing.

Based on "We So Seldom Look on Love," a witty and macabre short story by Barbara Gowdy, *Kissed* closely follows the original's bare-bones storyline. The protagonist, who has been attracted to dead creatures since she was a child, gets a job as an apprentice embalmer, comes to the full realization that she is a necrophile, and pursues her obsession with abandon. When she confesses her secret to a bright but troubled medical student, he falls head-over-heels in love with her, and she begins to use him as a sort of foreplay toy to get herself primed for her cadavers. Naturally, the mingling of the necrophile's fetish with the student's kinky longings for her leads to a volatile situation.

The creepiness of what's going on in Gowdy's story is modulated in the movie by the 32-year-old Stopkewich's cool, understated handling of the material. *Kissed* displays both control and taste in its David Lynchian small town ambience, tight pacing and strong performances. Despite the picture's moments of kitsch, or flashes of black comedy, Stopkewich approaches a potentially ludicrous subject in a manner that can only be called reverential. When Sandra Larson (Molly Parker) makes an electrifying contact with a beautiful young dead man, her methodically lit face tells us that there's more going on than just the gratification of a peculiar sexual preference.

Edgar Allan Poe once said that the best subject for art was the death of a beautiful woman. While *Kissed* breaks the male

monopoly on hidden or overt necrophilia stories, ranging from Poe's to *Vertigo* to Patrick Bouchitey's movie, *Lune froide*, Stopkewich aspires to the kind of haunted allure that accompanies tales about living males who love dead females. And the fulfillment of her goal was expedited when the director cast Molly Parker as one of the most sympathetic deviants you've ever seen in a film. Not only does the Vancouver actress come through as the sweetheart-next-door type Stopkewich was hoping to find, Parker has a changeable face easily sculpted by lighting and a body language that dignifies her character's perverse rituals. The performance is a flawless interface between the actress and the character she's playing.

Stopkewich hooked up with her indispensable star through the movie's cinematographer, Greg Middleton. Although Parker's agent was one of many who had been sent the screenplay (written by Stopkewich with Angus Fraser), he didn't pass it on to her. Why, the agent must have reasoned, should his client risk a blossoming career by appearing in a tiny-budgeted first feature about a woman who gets off on stiffs? In the end, Parker met Stopkewich, loved the script and eagerly participated in developing the character in pre-production.

During an interview with Stopkewich, I asked her whether the actress had to jump over emotional barriers on this assignment. Indeed, the extended scene where Sandra strips off her clothes, drops her panties on the embalming room

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floor, and makes love to a corpse was, Parker told her director, "challenging and scary." But the really tough moment came when Sandra confesses to Matt, the medical student (compellingly played by Peter Outerbridge) why an apparently normal young lady like herself would pick embalming as her number one career choice.

"When we sat down to shoot it," Stopkewich remembers, "Molly started laughing. Then the whole crew started laughing. Then her laughter became hysterical, and suddenly she burst into tears, started sobbing, and ran from the room. She had got to the point that she inhabited this character, realizing what this moment meant to Sandra, finally being able to share who she is with someone else."

A contact point between the audience and Sandra, Matt responds to her with instant empathy that helps you realign your take on behaviour that would normally make you cringe with disgust, or break out into your own gales of laughter. In *Kissed*, Sandra's obsession is an extreme metaphor for any kind of human activity, from chanting to bondage, that aims at transcendence, but is deemed weird or dangerous by mainstream society. Quite literally a crime, necrophilia is portrayed in this film as a sacred ceremony.

Like a saint, a visionary with truths to tell, or maybe a filmmaker who would do something like *Kissed*, Sandra insists that the apparent horror of dead flesh conceals its inherent light. In a voice-over taken from Gowdy's story, Sandra calmly tells us, "There is always energy given off when a thing turns into its opposite." Fired up by the power of life turning into death, Stopkewich's heroine dances nude around her embalming table and climbs onto her young princes. She's an astral stewardess who doesn't just satisfy a raging hunger; she also gives her lovers the soft kiss that carries them across the divide between life and death.

Kissed never explains how Sandra accepts her precarious identity without any conflict and transforms it into a calling. In fact, she's so resolute, there are moments when she threatens to become *Necrophile of Green Gables*. Stopkewich explains, "I like the character because she is self-determined and unapologetic about who she is. I didn't want to attach any kind of judgment, even if it was her own, onto her actions."

In Barbara Gowdy's story, the unnamed heroine shares Sandra's attraction to the magical energy of "cadavers shining like stars," but when she fully realizes she will never be able



Director Lynne Stopkewich:

The creepiness of what is going on is modulated by Stopkewich's cool, understated handling of the material.

to love a living human being, she plunges into despair and turns suicidal. "I'd got drunk in a seedy country-and-western bar," she tells us, "and debated going back to the funeral home and suctioning out my own blood until I lost consciousness."

In both story and film adaptation, the character is an ironic flip of the male urge to take control of women and turn their bodies into passive objects, but Gowdy's heroine is more cruel, more rapacious, more driven by a vampiric lust for absolute power. "I began to kiss his mouth," she says about one of her guys. "By now he might be drooling blood. A corpse's blood is thick, cool and sweet. My head roared."

Stopkewich asked her actors to read only the script, and not the original, because "we had developed the character in our minds in a way that would work for cinema. It's one thing to engage with a character for a short story, it's another to sit in a theatre for 90 minutes and care about this character. It was really a fine line to walk: between creating some sort of empathy, and going over the top by romanticizing."

Stopkewich retains some of the sinister undercurrents of Gowdy's story by funnelling them into one crucial, centerpiece scene. Picking up on a brief cue from the original, Stopkewich shoves the horror in your face during an episode where Sandra attends an embalming lesson given by her boss, the repulsive Mr. Wallis (Jay Brazeau). The unctuous Wallis is a necrophile himself, though one without respect for the bodies in his care. (If, as Stopkewich says, "The story is also about exposing what goes on behind those curtains in the funeral home," let's hope that the one in *Kissed* is a little eccentric.)

During the scene in question, Mr. Wallis demonstrates the "sword of the embalmer," the trocar, a creepy instrument used to draw out the body's fluids. Undercutting the film's overall tone, this passage is all ghoulish comedy and hideous squishing sounds as the perverse undertaker nonchalantly harpoons a defenceless body, his action highlighting Sandra's loving spirituality.

When the scene was filmed, the moviemakers were amused to note that the handle of the real trocar they used was engraved with the word "slaughter."

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Based on Barbara Gowdy's short story, "We So Seldom Look on Love."

Stopkewich remembers with a giggle. "We didn't know if it was Mr. Slaughter's trocar, or whether it was the Slaughter company, or whether it was just some embalmer with a twisted sense of humour." The producers of *Kissed* probably didn't relay this anecdote to officials at Telefilm Canada when they approached the funding agency for completion money. In fact, the Telefilm people told Stopkewich that although they loved her film, they objected to that "awful embalming scene," which they couldn't stop thinking about. She remembers "banging the table and saying, 'Exactly. I don't want you to be able to walk out of the film and talk about the weather. It has to affect you in some way or otherwise, what's the point?'"

Stopkewich sees herself as a moviemaker who needs to "go against the grain of preconceived notions." According to her, Sandra is like some real-life necrophiles who have "basically eschewed society's views of right and wrong. In my mind, she creates her own philosophy. She has her own particular way of seeing the world."

Like her character, Stopkewich grew up in an apparently perfectly normal environment—the Montreal suburb of Villes d'Anjou. Interestingly, her first exposure to the world beyond "shiny bungalows and fresh grass" happened through the teen-age volunteer work she did at a Montreal hospital. Stopkewich was a "candy-striper," meaning she put on a "little striped pinafore with a white blouse," travelled to the imposing Montreal General, located on a slope above the city, and "pushed the hospitality wagon up and down wards, selling magazines, chocolate bars, pantyhose, whatever. The thing that really struck me were the elderly patients, who were in the last moments of life. It was a completely different world for me, the underbelly of the suburban dream. You know, the death and decay."

Stopkewich links the impact of this excursion outside suburbia to her equally eye-opening stint in a junior college, where she "had a teacher who totally turned me around and got me excited



by cinema." In the late 1980s, after completing a film production degree and a couple of prize-winning shorts at Montreal's Concordia University, Stopkewich earned a master's at U.B.C., then settled in Vancouver, where she started a

personal and professional relationship with *Kissed's* executive producer, John Pozer. Her production design of Pozer's bonafide Canadian cult film, *The Grocer's Wife*, led to a design career that brought home the bacon while Stopkewich moved on projects of her own, particularly an edgy comedy called *Til Niagara Falls*. The film was funded and ready to go when the distributor (CFP) abruptly pulled out. "We spent two-and-a-half years getting this whole thing together," says Stopkewich, recalling the anger she felt, "and we were so close. At that point, even I started drinking very early in the morning." In the aftermath of what she calls a "crushing blow," Stopkewich pulled herself back on her feet, fired up more screenplays, and then one day in New York City, she read Barbara Gowdy's "We So Seldom Look on Love."

When it came time to raise money for *Kissed*, Stopkewich and Pozer thought they could avoid a mess like *Niagara* if they repeated what they did for *The Grocer's Wife*: invest in the picture themselves and approach people they knew. "We put a package together, and included in it was the screenplay," Stopkewich remembers. "The package basically said; 'You'll never make your money back, and don't expect it. If you support this project, you're supporting the filmmakers.'"

Stopkewich's parents, who still live in Villes d'Anjou, were the only investors who had no idea what the movie was about until just before its premiere. Although she's aware her family thinks of her as a bit of a black sheep, Stopkewich hesitated before breaking the news that their little "candy-striper" had come up with a film that portrays sex with dead bodies. "When the premiere happened in Toronto," Stopkewich remembers affectionately, "I was quite nervous about the whole thing. Ultimately, they're my major supporters and always have been. I wanted them to get the film. And I think they did."

From the outset, *Kissed* was a potential minefield. But Sandra Larson's story allowed Stopkewich to "explore some elements of my own definition of what love is, and what spirituality is, and what connectedness is. If love is connectedness, you would think that there could not be love between Sandra and a dead person because there's no way for them to literally connect. But ironically enough, she absolutely joins up with them in a more profound way than with the people around her. Part of the reason why this story fascinated me was because I've always been terrified of death. It was always something that I didn't really want to deal with. In some ways, I made the film in order for me to try and work through some of my fears and questions. What I discovered is that my viewpoint towards death is constantly changing. It depends on how you're feeling, it depends on where you're at in your life this month versus last month. That's the thing I learnt the most." ■



Natasha Morley as the young Sandra.