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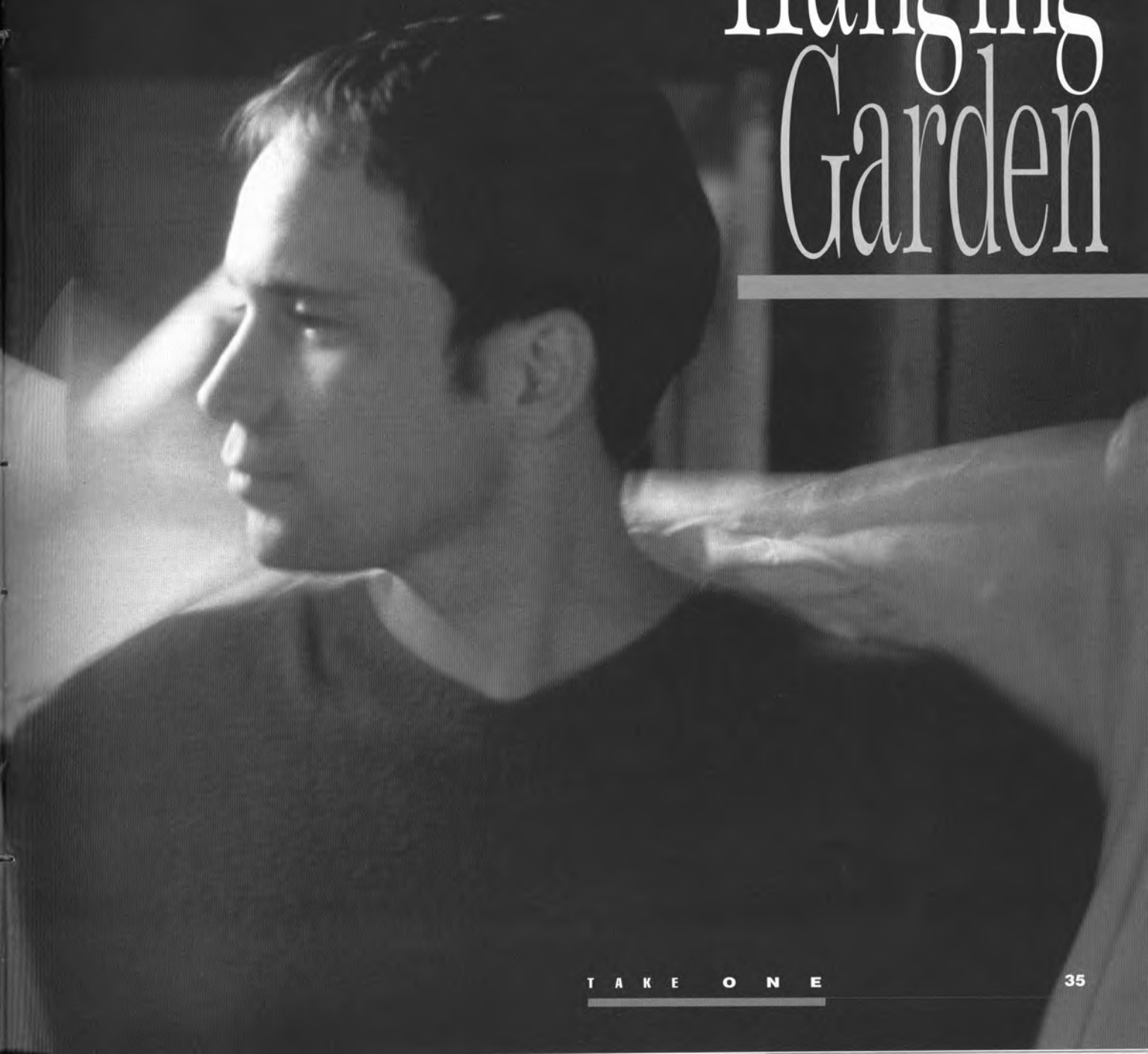
By the time they're 29, a lot of people have settled into serious jobs and are contemplating mortgages and life in the familiar lane. Thom Fitzgerald, a quietly ambitious Halifax filmmaker, enjoys no such security. But then again, he's marking a career milestone in September that every young wannabe director-writer would envy—his first dramatic feature, *The Hanging Garden*, opens the prestigious Perspective Canada program at the Toronto International Film Festival and then moves on to the San Sebastian Festival in Spain. Not bad for a guy who wasn't even a Canadian resident until 1988.

Thom Fitzgerald grew up in New Rochelle (the New York suburb that was the setting for *The Dick Van Dyke Show* in the 1960s) and attended Manhattan's Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, studying film and performance. Turned down for a study exchange in Italy "because they didn't like my paintings," he moved to Halifax instead to study with media artist Jan Peacock at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. His artistic output since arriving in Halifax has been steady and eclectic. Besides writing, directing and producing film, Fitzgerald has been a highly visible performance artist and actor as well as serving time in various arts collectives, notably as coordinator of the Atlantic Filmmakers' Cooperative and managing director of AIMedia, the region's independent film and video distributor. Along with Renée Penney and Michael Weir, he is a member of the Charlatan Theatre Collective, which workshops and performs original stage material.



Thom Fitzgerald's

The Hanging Garden





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Fitzgerald values both the collaborative aspects of his work and the input of a live audience, and says that "Most of my films are derived from stage performance." Two years ago, for example, he directed a Penney stage piece called *Cherries* as part of the Film Co-op's film training program, and he and Weir both perform in Penney's upcoming video *Season of My Discontent*. When *The Hanging Garden* began shooting last fall, both of Fitzgerald's Theatre Collective partners joined the cast.

Fitzgerald's most noted film work to date is *Movie of the Week*, an experimental almost-feature about a young man whose perceptions of the world are so filtered through television that he loses the sense of what's real and what isn't. A favourite at the Atlantic Film Festival in 1991, Fitzgerald jokes that "it went from surprise hit to overrated." He and then-partner Dreux Ellis distributed *Movie of the Week* themselves. The film, which Fitzgerald says was "too weird for TV," played art cinemas across the country, and while it didn't make any money, it didn't lose any either.

Getting his first feature produced was a matter of being in the right place at the right time with a good script. The right place in this case was the Sharing Stories Conference in Glasgow, Scotland in 1995, where Fitzgerald won a development commission from Britain's Channel Four. The broadcaster's gay and lesbian programming department liked *The Hanging Garden* script, and with Canadian distribution already secured, the resulting deal enabled Fitzgerald and *Lilies* co-producers Louise Garfield and Arnie Gelbart to put together the \$1.5-million production.

Shooting took place in Nova Scotia in the fall of 1996. Working with so many people simultaneously was a challenge, and the set had more than the usual dividing lines—French-English, gay-straight, technical-art Department. Fitzgerald insists he got along well with just about everybody, including producer Louise Garfield, "who was always full of

good ideas of what to cut. But if I could explain why something was a challenge she relented." Is he happy with the film? "It's not what was in my head," he says, "but the story's intact, so my intentions survived. It's a good feeling." But he calls "horrible" the loss of creative control that came along with other people's money. One thing that particularly rankled was the distributor approval of casting, which denied a key role to Penney, for whom the role of Rosemary, William's earthy sister, was written. The part went instead to New Zealand actress Kerry Fox (*Angel at My Table*, *Shallow Grave*), who Fitzgerald says "is terrific in the part." Penney took the decision with typical grace, and plays the gift-shop nun in the film. For the male lead Fitzgerald eventually selected *Traders'* Chris Leavins, who gives a subtle, understated performance, unnerving to the film's director, as it turned out, because much of it was based on the actor's observations of him. Casting young William took the longest time. Nova Scotian newcomer Troy Veinotte came to the film after answering a casting call for a 300-pound teenager who is required to appear naked in the film. "He blew me away with his dedication and bravery," Fitzgerald says. Other actors in the film are Seana McKenna, Peter MacNeil, Joan Orenstein, Jocelyn Cunningham, Sarah Polley, Joel S. Keller, Christine Dunsworth, Heather Rankin and Martha Irving.

The Hanging Garden is the story of a gay man named Sweet William who may or may not have, as an unhappy 15 year-old, hanged himself in the garden behind his Nova Scotia home. Returning to the scene after a 10-year absence for his sister's wedding, William begins to see visions of his former selves. As the past increasingly intrudes upon the present, the film gradually undermines the subjective nature of William's second sight, so that by the end of the film the family is sharing it. What appears initially as a conventional psychological device becomes more complex and enigmatic. "I wanted to take the conventions of the genre and stand them on their head," Fitzgerald says, adding that the film's refusal



Veinotte; Thom Fitzgerald with Ashley MacIsaac; Kerry Fox.

to provide a definitive explanation of the point-of-view shift (or indeed of its key event) resulted in a dispute with the distributor who demanded recuts to the film to make things clearer. Fitzgerald won that fight, partly because he simply didn't have the footage to replace the requested cut.

"As a filmmaker, I need to impose the subjective view through poetry and magic," he explains. In the film, for example, William feels that the icons of his religiously zealous grandmother are condemning him with accusatory frowns, and Fitzgerald clearly embraces the imaginative subjective truth of that assumption. "The idea that a statue of the Virgin Mary watches you is as true as the idea that she doesn't," he says. And the layering of the real and the surreal, the waking and the dream, has found its ideal eyes in *Lilies'* cinematographer Daniel Jobin and production designer Taavo Soodor. Fitzgerald, Soodor and costume designer Jim Worthen worked out a colour scheme for costumes and set dressing based on the flowers and plants that give the film's characters their names. Lilia, the character played by veteran Stratford actor McKenna, wears purple throughout the film, and the three "acts" continue the horticultural metaphor with their titles "The Lady in the Locket," "Lad's Love," and "Mums."

As to the inevitable question of autobiography asked of first-time novelists or feature filmmakers, Fitzgerald insists on the integrity of the fictional universe he's created, although admitting it's partly based on things he knows and people he's met. Some characters are composites of friends and relatives, and the Down East locale is certainly his adopted Nova Scotia (bad-boy fiddler Ashley MacIsaac is on screen, providing wedding music). "But William's problems are not my problems," he says.

Fitzgerald was particularly concerned about the reality of growing up gay or lesbian, as well as the suicide rate among adolescents with no approved role models or support systems. "I'm wary of how previous films have represented those issues, and I wanted to show a character who grows up and becomes all the things he wants to be. I wanted to show that if the kids can get through now, then later will be worth it." One of the film's most poignant moments is when William says to the dangling corpse of his 15-year-old self, "I bet you never thought you'd be skinny."

Along with its central conundrum, there are lots of gothic touches to keep the plot of *The Hanging Garden* moving. There's a doddering grandmother confined to an upstairs bedroom, an abusive alcoholic

father, a bisexual wedding groom, at least One Big Secret, and the usual beleaguered women trying to hold the whole social unit together. But at heart "it's a kitchen-sink drama," Fitzgerald insists, "about everyone's need to find their place in the family." Those who succeed in life are those who honour the past but refuse to let it hold them moribund. Fitzgerald admires the way that MacIsaac and many others are redefining traditional music in a modern idiom. (The film's soundtrack spills over with Celtic fusion, including music by Mary Jane Lamond, the Rankins, as well as tracks by Holly Cole, Jane Siberry and others.) The Cape Breton fiddler, he says, "is a young gay man trying to make his parents' traditions relate to his life," just as William and some of the other characters in the film have to reinvent their definition of family. And it's an ongoing process; the ending of *The Hanging Garden*, although upbeat, resists conventional closure. It leaves you wondering, as good drama will, about the characters' subsequent lives.

These days Fitzgerald is sharing a small downtown Halifax office with filmmaker Shandi Mitchell, with whom he is developing two projects: hers, a feature called *Still*; his, a film entitled *Beefcake*, which he describes as "a feature entertainment." It's an homage to the soft-core muscle magazines that were many men's first secretive contact with gay culture in the 1950s and '60s, and will be produced again with Channel Four and its French and German partners in ARTE. Having been through the hoops of co-producing his \$1.5-million feature, Fitzgerald is convinced of the need for self-reliance. His working relationship with Mitchell is typical of his other collaborations: both write, direct and produce. "I see other filmmakers who appear to be waiting in vain for a producer to finance their film. I have more respect for people who take the bull by the horns." At the very least, this do-it-yourself approach would seem to safeguard artistic integrity, if not necessarily financing. "There are hundreds of options for a talented producer," he says, modestly adding that "I don't expect my proposals to stand out." He credits the making of *The Hanging Garden* to co-producers Garfield and Gelbart, calling them "notable exceptions" to the rule that producers don't necessarily share a director-writer's vision.

While it's true that luck plays a part in getting ahead in the film business, it's equally true that talent does too, and that the creator of *The Hanging Garden* seems blessed with both. There will always be art to make, and his Halifax base is secure. But don't be surprised to see him showing up with increasing frequency at festivals around the world, and his films appearing on big and small screens everywhere. As he approaches 30, it appears that Thom Fitzgerald has only begun to shape his bright future. ■