

Kitchen Party

Gary Burns Returns to Suburbia

By Craig MacInnis



Gary Burns

Kitchen Party photos courtesy of Complex Odeon



With his 1995 movie *The Suburbanators*, director Gary Burns framed the exploits of a group of young Alberta males as they whiled away their day in time-honoured fashion: getting their hair cut, making runs to the beer store, meeting girls, trying to score dope, traipsing through shopping malls, visiting video arcades and hiding from the cops in dumpsters.

Anyone who has spent time in the bleak maze of tract housing known as suburban Calgary—an arid developer's grid strewn with 7-11s, Co-op stores, ranch-style bungalows and ersatz cowboy culture—would have recognized the featureless canvas on which Burns's teen protagonists played out their dunderheaded dramas. To say that Burns "frames" the characters' comings and goings is, on reflection, a bit misleading. It's as if he merely tagged along on their trippy, aimless adventures, coaxing admirable vignettes from the shapeless hurly-burly of their lives.

The way Burns catches the drab locality of the suburban West—a slacker's repudiation of the nearby Rockies and their postcard grandeur—was, arguably, the best thing about *The Suburbanators*. Without trying, Burns tweaked the twin myths of modern Alberta: the oil-rich Eden hyped by captains of industry and the Marlboro Country platitudes of its tourism board. (When Premier Ralph Klein appears in photo-ops in his white Stetson, he serves both myths at once: the jaunty business maverick and the high-plains rider.) Neither world is much in evidence in *The Suburbanators*, which—except for a shopping-centre cowboy and the appearance of so many back laneways, a staple of Alberta's urban planning—could be set anywhere that malls and houses proliferate.

There seemed, too, a kind of genius in Burns's meandering, offhand camera style, as if the film's very technology had been

Tygh Runyan & Dave Cox in *Kitchen Party*: Burns is unsurpassed at describing the inventiveness of the adolescent mind.



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infected by his post-teen characters' stop-start rhythms. In their 1996 pop-culture book *Mondo Canuck*, Geoff Pevere and Greig Dymond put *The Suburbanators* on their list of "English Canada's Coolest Movies." And, as if to jinx poor old Burns for next time, called his debut feature "the most promising first feature by a Canadian director to come along in years," an endorsement that conjures visions of the sophomore hex that's plagued other promising first-timers (Patricia Rozema, John Pozer, Mina Shum).

In its way, *The Suburbanators* was a quintessentially Canadian artistic statement. Debuting the same year as American filmmaker Larry Clark's *Kids*, which pell-mell hurled its fuzz-cheeked protagonists through AIDS crises, gang beatings and sexual depravity in New York City, *The Suburbanators* came across as a vaguely comforting report on the state of modern late-adolescence, Canadian style. Suburban living might be an interminable drag and the prospects for meaningful employment next to nil, but no one ended up dead, stricken with an incurable sexual disease or OD'd on their parents' carpet (although one character gets hit by a car and pees himself as he lies injured on the road).

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A subplot involving a group of Arabic-speaking kids who try to get into a friend's locked apartment to reclaim their musical instruments (and the building manager's refusal to grant them entry) alluded, faintly and comically, to the racism that stains the multicultural mosaic. Still, as tribal conflict goes, it wasn't exactly *Do the Right Thing*.

Neither was it Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused*, the American movie with which *The Suburbanators* has most often been compared. While Linklater built an astonishing *fin-de-siècle* story around the last day of school in a small Texas town in 1976, Burns quite deliberately builds nothing; or anyway, nothing much. There's a drug bust involving minor players, and the culminating accident scene ends with an ambulance carting one of the characters off to hospital, but we're not given to believe his injuries are life-threatening. (The ambulance scene seems more like a brief intrusion of reality into the characters' hermetic lives, a subtle metaphor that suggests if they don't watch themselves, the adult world to which they remain oblivious will mow them down.)

Rather than create conventional dramatic momentum, as Linklater did, or set his characters against a profound moment in history (*Dazed and Confused* occurs during the American bicentennial, a post-Watergate doldrums ready-made for fictive massaging), Burns seems content to present small, trivial dilemmas in an airtight Anytime, then set about having his characters solve them—or fail to. If there was a "message" contained in *The Suburbanators*, it was that the characters' nihilism was rooted in the vagaries of the socioeconomic system of which they are products. Jobs are scarce, demeaning or menial: one young male, employed by a liquor outlet, dresses as a giant chicken to entice customers in from the street.

The film has at least one set piece that transcends the rest of the movie and is arguably the most poignant and blackly amusing riff ever committed to celluloid on the theme of early-20s inaction. It's an encounter between Bob (Stephen Spender) who runs into Stewart (Jim Travis) outside a liquor store. Bob, a beer-drinking cynic who wears his *sang froid* like a badge, asks Stewart what he's been up to lately. Stewart is at the opposite end of the social spectrum—a gawky, sweet-faced doofus who avidly recounts his recent attempts at finding work. "I almost had this one position with this packing company," Stewart tells Bob. "I talked to this one woman, she was really nice over the phone. I think she was in charge of the department I was supposed to start in." (Bob, sipping beer from a can, holds a blank, uninvolved expression as Stewart continues with his job saga.) Stewart: "It was just a manual labour job but she was saying there was a lot of room for advancement. Anyway, she sounded really promising. She was really nice, had a nice voice." Bob continues to avert Stewart's gaze, nodding in a way that suggests a general queasiness with the whole issue of work. What's wrenching about Stew's soliloquy is the conflicting hopelessness and optimism that tug his story in opposing directions, often within the same sentence. "The job? Did you get the job?" Bob finally asks Stewart. "No, it fell through, unfortunately," Stewart replies. "But I was close though. It was the closest I've been for some time. I don't think I'll get that close again, not for a while. I'm thinking I'll stay out of the job market for a while and let things cool off a bit. It was promising though. I think they were impressed by the fact that I hadn't had a job before. I was a fresh slate for them. I think they liked the fact that I hadn't been under too many thumbs at this point in my career."

Improbably, Burns refuses to play the scene for easy laughs, seeking instead a tone that balances poignance with something approaching empathy for Stewart's plight. Stewart might be a goof, but to Burns, his story deserves to be heard. Kevin Smith's *Clerks*, another nihilist teen comedy from the same period, earned more praise than *The Suburbanators* (it's an American film and was accordingly hyped as the *sine qua non* of slacker comedies), but Burns crammed more meaning—desperation, humour, existential angst—into the aforementioned scene than Smith put in his entire movie. In ambition if not tone, *The Suburbanators* was less *Clerks* or *Dazed and Confused* than its own thing—a *sui generis* essay on postadolescence. Neither judgmental nor desperate to entertain, it presented its characters with a wry matter-of-factness that cleaved nicely to the movie's lax, unhectic tempo. Which raises the question: What does Burns do next? How does he build from the exquisite "nothingness" of *The Suburbanators* without repeating, or inadvertently parodying, himself?

The answer is *Kitchen Party*, a movie that attempts to mine familiar themes while trying to bridge the generation gap. Sort of.

Adults were all but invisible in *The Suburbanators*, but in *Kitchen Party* they're fully half the movie. The dark, disturbing half, naturally. By and large, Burns's grownups are portrayed as bigoted, sexually neurotic, overly demanding, class-conscious cretins who, of course, are busy passing all their least savoury traits on to their kids. The film, shot in British Columbia, but set in the same featureless suburbia as its predecessor, is essentially divided into two parallel narratives, or "parties." While his parents are away at an overnight dinner party, university-bound Scott (Scott Speedman) invites some of his friends over to drink beer and hang out in the family kitchen. Scott's imminent departure for Queen's University is still a matter under review by his martinet of a father, who has threatened to cancel his son's out-of-province college plans if Scott doesn't "show a little respect." It's a threat that hangs like a pall over the teen's late-summer mood (and by extension, the film's), which runs from low-anxiety to fretful fussing over furniture arrangements: "My dad could still pull the plug on me like that," he says, snapping his fingers. "He's waiting for the last fucking second."

Cleverly, Burns uses the architecture of a single suburban dwelling to create a *mise en scène* of gaping social and family divides. The living room is off-limits to Scott and his party guests because it's the white-glove preserve of his obsessively neat parents, who'd kill him if he so much as left a beer cap on their spotless salmon-pink carpet. The basement is *verboden*, too, because it's home to Scott's older brother, Steve (Jason Wiles), the proverbial troll under the bridge whose reputation ("He's a fucking loser," Scott tells his friends) is actually less daunting than the character himself. At first, it seems a safe bet that Burns will keep us from ever seeing Steve, that he functions as a bogeyman who works best as an unseen threat to the other characters, or as an off-camera joke. But it turns out that subtlety isn't *Kitchen Party's* strong suit. When Steve emerges from his lair about halfway through the movie (coaxed above ground by one of Scott's female party guests), he's every bit as deranged and dangerous as his younger brother has been claiming. Whereas in *The Suburbanators*, Burns used snatches of conversation and found incident to speak for his characters' motivations, in *Kitchen Party*

Laura Harris as Tammy in *Kitchen Party*



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Scott Speedman as Scott in *Kitchen Party*

he seems determined to find a root cause for the way everyone behaves.

If Steve is a maniac who shreds the pristine fairways of the local golf course with his motorcycle, and whose rampage through the suburban night brings the movie to its dramatic climax, it's because his controlling parents have made him so. While the kids pussy-foot around Scott's parents' place, afraid to mar the Sears Catalogue sterility of the house, the grown ups are getting drunk and nasty with each other at a party across town. In what might best be described as a lower mainland version of *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*, Scott and Steve's parents, Barb (Gillian Barber) and Brent (Kevin McNulty) mix and mingle with two other couples. The three wives (appliqué-sweater-wearing, Prozac-addled, helmet-haired, alcoholic, emotionally brittle ciphers) nervously cluster together while their even-less-appealing husbands trade macho quips over cocktails in another corner of the house. The evening's host, Lester (Jerry Wasserman) gives the other dads an update on his son that pretty much catches the testosterone-charged tone of the trio's discourse: "Les Jr.? Ah, he's a good kid. Not the brightest on the block, he takes after his mother, but he's a good kid. I trust him. I let him drive my old Beaumont. I make him take good care of it though. You could eat off the hood of that car." Burns cuts from this paternal endorsement to Les Jr. (Dave Cox) behind the wheel of said Beaumont,

as he accidentally demolishes several other cars in a liquor store parking lot. And so the film goes, a litany of cause-and-effect scenes where dramatic nuance is sacrificed in the interest of quick juxtaposition.



Burns, who wrote his own script, leaves nothing to chance when it comes to connecting *Kitchen Party's* generational dots. If the kids at the kitchen party are listless, sensation-craving miscreants—or alternatively, nervous Nellies paralyzed by their fear of parental punishment—there's plenty of reason for it. Burns describes *Kitchen Party* as "a darkly comic look at suburban dysfunction. The children are mirrors of their parents and vice versa, teen foibles mirror parental foibles." He adds: "I was interested in showing awkwardness, naiveté, mean-spiritedness, callousness, follower mentality, but also the possibility of

empathy and insight. It's an open-ended narrative of observations that doesn't provide answers."

Burns, 37, took fine arts and drama at the University Of Calgary before attending Concordia University in Montreal, where he graduated from the film program in 1992. At Concordia, his 20-minute short film *Happy Valley* won the Bellevue Pathé award for outstanding achievement. After graduating, he received a Kick Start award from Telefilm Canada/Directors Guild of Canada which resulted in the short film *Beerland*, described as "a deadpan comedy of cultural alienation." Most of the aforementioned details are gleaned straight from the director's press bio, but more than anything, I was struck by the filmmaker's age. Thirty-seven puts him in an odd chronological category, far removed from his late-teen characters and still safely shy of their middle-age parents. In trying to keep one foot in each camp, he loses his balance, or perhaps it's fairer to say he fails to plant himself on firm ground, always shifting perspective instead of staying with the things he knows best.

Kitchen Party doesn't represent a serious failure for Burns so much as a strategic miscue. His writing, particular in the passages that relate to the teen characters, is occasionally sharp and comical. Burns is probably unsurpassed at describing the inventiveness of the adolescent mind, even if that invention is only dedicated to finding ever more mind-expanding ways to ingest drugs. In one sequence, Scott and his pals use "hot knives" to smoke hashish, suctioning the harsh fumes into their lungs by covering their heads with canvas postal bags: "Heroin's for fags, man," giggles one blissed-out hash-head as he succumbs to the buzz.

On the whole, however, Burns seems less intent on delivering an ambient essay on teen mores (his creative long suit), than he is on constructing a blistering indictment of the middle class. The affection he showed for his characters in *The Suburbanators* here seems replaced by a cantankerousness, the attitude of someone itching to make a big artistic statement. Or who knows? Maybe he's just sick and tired of the 'burbs. His next feature, *Banff* (a working title that suggests the wide open expanses of the Rockies) should at least offer a fresh locale for his ideas. Sometimes a change is as good as a rest. ■