

Bruce Sweeney Gets

DIRTY

By Jack Vermees



Photos courtesy of Behaviour Distribution

There is something mildly surreal and strangely off-putting about walking down a Berlin street in the middle of the night and running into a gaggle of fellow Vancouverites. It's like running into a dead relative or friend. Last February's edition of the Berlin International Film Festival was replete with such moments. Nettie Wild and Kirk Tougas were there with their documentary *A Place Called Chiapas*; Claudia Morgado Escanilla attended with her short *Sabor a Mi*; Christine Haebler (*Hard Core Logo*) was in

town with a platoon of fellow producers participating in an exchange program; however, the biggest group of West Coasters eating bratwurst and drinking frozen Moskovskaya on the Ku'damm was the contingent attached to *Dirty*, the sophomore feature from 35-year-old writer/director Bruce Sweeney, whose first feature, *Live Bait*, captured the \$25,000 Toronto-Citytv Award for Best Canadian Feature at the 1995 Toronto International Film Festival. Accompanying Sweeney were

executive producer Stephen Hegyes and actors Tom Scholte, Babz Chula and Nancy Sivak. After watching the world premiere of their film go over with little fanfare at the Sundance festival (apart from a positive *Variety* review), none of them were ready for the glowing reception accorded them at the film's sold-out screening.

The fact that the Berlin audience liked *Dirty* is not a surprise. Berliners—especially those who attend the more adventurous fare on offer outside of the main competition—are knowledgeable filmgoers with a pronounced taste for visions tending toward the dark. And certainly *Dirty* is a dark work, much darker than *Live Bait*. Gone is the Woody Allen-like penchant for one-liners favoured in Sweeney's debut. (Well, almost gone: one character in *Dirty*, when asked if he's ever considered Prozac, replies, "Me? Uh, no, I'm from Port Alberni.") Gone, too, is the overt use of Vancouver and the wonders of the West Coast as a beautiful backdrop. While the film does retain chunks of the humour—albeit of a more desperate kind—that made *Live Bait* a treat, *Dirty's* take on dysfunction cuts a little deeper. It's as if the lead character from *Live Bait* (a sexually dysfunctional young man [Tom Scholte] who falls for a much older woman) had spent three or four very bad years wandering in the wilderness before turning up as a sex addict (again played by Scholte) whose life is coming apart in *Dirty*.

The film focuses on four characters, two young men living on the west side of Vancouver and two women living on the east side. David (Scholte) is a struggling student with a predilection for sexual masochism while his roommate Tony (Benjamin Rattner) is an unstable ex-logger, new to the big city and frustrated by the coldness he encounters

on a daily basis from people of all stripes. Across town, fiftyish Angie (Babz Chula), who sells dope for a living, lives with her violence-prone, long-haired son and septuagenarian mother. She rents her basement apartment to the bulimic, shopaholic Nancy (Nancy Sivak), who is on the verge of bankruptcy. The affair between Angie and David serves to bring

the main players into contact, setting the stage for what Sweeney calls "a collision between two houses."

Starting in total darkness, the film immediately jumps to a frantic sex scene between David and Angie, signalling that we are in for a much less sunny ride than we experienced with *Live Bait*. All of the characters are deeply flawed, flawed to the point where you just about lose sympathy for them. But just when their selfishness, aggression or plain old dysfunction approach critical mass, Sweeney brings out the humanity in his characters, revealing them for what they are: unhappy, neurotic people just trying to get through their lives without killing themselves or anybody else. Although a pall of moral, spiritual and financial bankruptcy hangs over everything—exacerbated by David Pelletier's claustrophobic, washed-out cinematography and Tony Devenyi's appropriately cluttered production design—the welcome injections of humour serve to liven the proceedings somewhat.

What sets *Dirty* apart from so many other Canadian features is its serious attempt to deal with adult themes and issues without pandering to preconceived notions of what constitutes a "Canadian" film. Sweeney and company eschew more traditional ways of alerting audiences to—or rubbing their faces in—*Dirty's* "Canadianess." Consciously avoiding the use of signifying West Coast settings is one such way. Although a staunch lover of the West Coast and a believer in the possibilities open to West Coast filmmakers, Sweeney, the director, and his cast and crew are confident enough to say what they want to say. For them, mature cinema takes its "Canadianess" for granted; however, the paradox that arises is that *Dirty* is profoundly West Coast in its attitude, the behaviour of the

cast, even in its visual style. Not "West Coast" in the way many Easterners see it, which, let's face it, has as much to do with *The Beachcombers* as it does with anything else. "Urban West Coast" is a more apt description of the film, which delineates a place where premillennial anxiety, anomie, hopelessness, longing and confusion is made even more palpable

and contradictory by occurring in a region of such limitless natural beauty.

Leonard Cohen once sang of people "oppressed by the figures of beauty," and that description is appropriate for many Vancouverites of a certain predisposition. The city and its surroundings are so lovely that sometimes you just can't convince yourself to get out of bed. *Dirty's* visual style, which is, frankly, pretty dirty, captures the "fucked-upness" of a certain substrata of Vancouver society—the rootless transplants from out of city or province; the dope dealers and their clients; the Gen X-ers with no thoughts for anything other than how to make next month's rent—better than anything I've yet seen on film.

Asked to comment on what his intentions were with *Dirty*, Sweeney rattles off his now-standard reply of "bankruptcy, bulimia and sexual addiction." But a little more probing reveals that the story has a much more personal meaning for him and his actors. Sweeney says the film was a way of "getting something off my chest, of exploring the dark side of my own psyche." He goes on to say that some of the things dealt with in the film have come directly out of his experience with his own family, while each of the actors have contributed bits from their personal histories. For example, Tom Scholte wrote a play about a disturbed relationship between a young man and an older woman, and Nancy Sivak herself went through the bankruptcy proceedings chronicled in the film. For Sweeney it all comes back to the family. "In North America a family has only a 50-50 chance of staying together. But the way Hollywood treats the family it seems that despite their ups and downs, all families end up together, which is patently false. The family is a huge facet of my life that I can't ignore." When asked if his illness (shortly after the completion of *Live Bait*,

Sweeney had an operation to remove a blood clot from his cerebellum) also contributed to a darker vision, he offers a curt, "Yes." But adds, "my take on death has changed dramatically and my views on life are even more entrenched. Let's just say I have even less regard for money now."



Above: Babz Chula with Tom Scholte; right: Chula;
Below: Director Bruce Sweeney (right) with D.O.P. David Pelletier.



Sweeney's major influences include American indie filmmaker, John Cassavetes (himself not known to care all that much for money) and the French master, Jean Renoir; however, his most obvious debt—especially in the way he works with his cast—is to Mike Leigh (*Secrets and Lies*). Sweeney was one of the few students to attend a directing

workshop with Leigh (cosponsored by the Vancouver International Film Festival and Praxis Film Workshop) arranged in conjunction with a retrospective of Leigh's television work at the 1992 Vancouver film festival. Seeing the films and learning about Leigh's working methods opened Sweeney's eyes to what he wanted to do. Like Leigh, Sweeney devises a scenario, brings it to his cast, and everything arises from improvisation and the personal histories of himself and his actors. Rehearsals go on for months before shooting is ready to commence, and like his cast, going in Sweeney has no idea where the film will end up.

Obviously, this way of making films requires actors who trust the director implicitly and have day jobs that allow them to engage in months of rehearsals for little or no money. The standouts are Scholte and Chula. Whereas in *Live Bait*, the story fell on the shoulders of Scholte, in *Dirty*, Chula comes to the forefront, treading a fine line between personal revelation and acting in a performance that is both fascinating and unsettling to watch. Her character—funny, harried, sexually frank—is at the core of the film.

As for the future of *Dirty*? Sweeney, notorious for not really caring what

happens to his films after he's finished making them, is sanguine. Sure he's hopeful the film will sell in foreign markets (Behaviour Distribution has the Canadian rights), but "if I don't make any money on my films, and people refuse to give me any more money to make films, I'll shoot on video," he says, shrugging. That's not going to happen yet, though. He has gathered his usual stable of collaborators and is currently in rehearsals for his third, as yet untitled, feature. He figures they've got the first act nailed down and promises that the new film will be lighter in tone. The focus this time is on three couples and the disintegration of their various relationships. "It's not a question of whether or not they'll make it. They won't. But it's how they won't make it that interests me," says Sweeney. He laughs. "I called Stephen [Hegyés] and said that everything was going very well. I told him I was about to make another film he wouldn't be able to sell." ●