

LOVE Hurts

Canadian
Romantic
Comedy

By Steve Gravestock



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hen I told friends that I was writing an article about Canadian romantic comedies, I was met with blank stares or apprehensive grimaces. Some wondered if there were any; some scrambled for titles; others flatly stated that the few Canadian entries in this genre were neither romantic nor especially funny. And, until recently, it would be hard to disagree. Canadian romantic comedies have been few and far between.



**Sean Astin and Emily Hampshire
in *Boy Meets Girl***

But in the last two years, there's been a virtual explosion of homegrown comedies—coming from almost every region. The list includes: Mina Shum's *Drive, She Said*; Denis Villeneuve's *Un 32 août sur terre*; Piers Haggard's *Conquest*; John Kalangis's *Jack & Jill*; Bruce McCulloch's *Dog Park*; Michael Kennedy's *Joe's Wedding*; and Jerry Ciccoritti's *Boy Meets Girl*. Yet, not a single one of these films actually plays by the rules. Separately, they all maintain an uneasy relationship with the format, but, together, they suggest a surprisingly consistent Canadian antipathy towards the genre, at least in its classical form. Unlike their American counterparts, Canadian comedies seem far more cautious and forlorn. If the Hollywood version ends by finding stability in couples (no matter how mismatched), the typical Canadian comedy leaves its participants alone and

somehow fulfilled. Perhaps even more interestingly, they take off from a point that invokes their Canadian predecessors, as few and far between as they are.

The romantic comedy hit its creative peak in the United States in the 1930s and early 1940s with the screwball comedies of Howard Hawks, Frank Capra, Preston Sturges and the Astaire-Rogers romances. James Harvey, in his classic study *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood*, outlines a few key characteristics: these films were overwhelmingly urban, revelling in city life; they abhorred pretension (a trait they normally associated with class and privilege) while valorizing bedlam and anarchy. Screwball comedy was, as Pauline Kael pointed out, "the comedy of a country which didn't yet hate itself."

As Harvey notes, these films also reflected an uninhibited self-confidence. The couples made (or usually broke) rules as they went along, and they functioned as stand-ins for the American psyche itself. They were a mixture of self-assertion and self-criticism, a combination that exuded a sense of possibility and freedom.

The key Canadian romantic comedies came in the 1980s, but from the outset they defined themselves in opposition to their American cousins, rewriting or reversing the course they introduced. In films like *Bringing Up Baby* et al., the anarchic elements or characters are almost always incorporated into the film's conclusion, establishing a risky, but workable (and usually sexual) duality. In the Canadian version, the anarchy is almost always summarily dispelled and almost never split along sexual lines. In Yves Simoneau's *Perfectly Normal*, the life-force Turner (Robbie Coltrane) rescues his near-catatonic buddy Lorenzo (Michael Riley) from a lifetime of insomnia and loneliness. (After his mother's death, he falls into a deep depression, spending every night driving a taxi to escape himself.) Lorenzo picks up Turner in his cab and the latter moves in, convincing him to open a restaurant—and sing Bellini's *Norma* in drag. Eventually, Turner instils Lorenzo with enough courage so that he winds up in the arms of Denise (Deborah Duchesne) who's been obsessed with Lorenzo for quite a while. In turn, Turner is forced to beat an extremely hasty retreat out of town. (Something similar occurs in Don Shebib's underrated and underseen *Heartaches*. Margot Kidder's pushy, anarchic Rita is left in the cold at the conclusion—despite having saved the timid heroine Bonnie (Annie Potts). *Perfectly Normal* is also important for another reason—it introduces the Canadian romantic hero, a man who's acted on by others in his best interest.

In Bruce McDonald's *Highway 61*, the set-up screams romantic comedy; but the film quickly turns into a voyage of self-discovery. Mildly catatonic, slightly stuck-up, small-town barber Pokey (Don McKellar) is conned by an exuberant, immortal roadie (Valerie Buhagiar) into helping her transport a suspicious corpse across the border. After being separated and threatened, the pair reunites, both wiser and less selfish. Yet, unlike their American counterparts, they mature independently—not because of one another. The film's key point isn't so much that the two get together; it's that Pokey comes out of his shell and goes to places he probably would have only dreamed about. (See also Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* where the romance is more backdrop than foreground.)

Each of the romantic comedies made in the last two years grapples with this tradition, and their inability or refusal to accept the premises of American romantic comedy—then and now. Among the current crop, Michael Kennedy's *Joe's Wedding* is the only film that adheres to the conventions of classic screwball comedy consistently. Failed alternative rocker Joe (D. W. Moffet), a distant, slightly brawnier cousin of Lorenzo, abandons music after one disastrous booze-fuelled performance. A few years later he's about to marry Melissa, the uptight daughter of Rankin (Harvey Atkin), a sleazy developer who likes to tear down buildings and put up parking lots. But four days before the wedding, Joe is kidnapped by the seemingly deranged Uta (Kate Vernon), a performance artist who has been victimized by Rankin and now wants revenge. Soon enough Joe falls for Uta and the wedding is off.

Joe's Wedding is curiously divided—representative of a peculiarly diffident Canadian tendency. It almost seems as if it's ashamed to be part of such a commercial genre. This division shows up in a certain amount of confusion about just who's being satirized and why. Art and artists get it big time—but they also represent a freedom lacking in the workaday world. An arts council jury is too dim-witted to realize Joe is being held against his will; Rankin's wife, Barbara (Jayne Eastwood), is obsessed with her filmmaking classes and tries to turn the wedding into a bad experimental film. There's also a nasty (and very funny) gibe at performance artists. Yet the most successful, energetic scene in the film revolves around Uta's dreaded performance piece; similarly, Joe's ongoing interest in head-banging music is lauded. Uta turns out to be depressingly sane with her own career path. In other words, it's good to get crazy but not too crazy. Probably the most telling thing about the film is the couple's decision to take off for Venice immediately. They find true love, in anywhere but Ontario.

In the underrated *Drive, She Said*, Mina Shum again subverts the conventions of romantic comedy in the name of self-discovery. Bank clerk Nadine Shipp (Moirá Kelly) is trapped in a nowhere relationship with co-worker Jonathan (Sebastian Spence). Then she meets the enigmatic Tass (Josh Hamilton), who's obviously very interested in her. A few days later, she's abducted by a bank robber who turns out to be Tass. A scant few miles down the road he takes off his LBJ mask and asks her to help him escape. She fumes a little, then agrees. The next few days are virtually idyllic until Nadine gets involved in a shoot out. Overcome by guilt, she turns herself in (after allowing Tass to escape).

Drive, She Said has a beautiful, ethereal quality. The film begins with hypnotic, overexposed flashbacks to Nadine's childhood, and the atmosphere carries over to Nadine's reverie with Tass. However, Nadine's idyll with Tass has a fatalistic, doomed quality—it's just too much like lotus eating. The real point of the movie isn't the relationship with Tass, but Nadine's

decision to take responsibility for her own actions. (The flashbacks aren't just atmospheric; they're there to outline how Nadine let her life get away from her.) Everyone, or rather every man, tells her that she's not responsible and that things are going to be fine—even when they won't be. Her victory comes when she refuses to listen to them and makes her own decisions. The point is driven home by the theme song which features the plaintive lyric "all I want to do is belong." At the film's conclusion, she turns the song off. Nadine's character suggests a female Lorenzo, but she represents a real break from it. Tass doesn't rescue her so much as he wakes her up.

John Kalangis's low-budget *Jack & Jill* takes place in a very different milieu than Shum's film, but like *Drive, She Said*, Kalangis's film has a doggedly antiromantic outlook. Kalangis depicts a Toronto so overrun with neediness and neuroses that it's amazing anyone can purchase a carton of milk without major psychic damage. That appears to be a conscious decision on Kalangis's part. Only one major character is seen working;

everyone is stripped to his or her need for love and attention. Every major character is insanely selfish, egotistical, cowardly or simply oblivious to anyone else—especially Kalangis's Jack (played by Kalangis himself). The film opens with Jack telling Jill (Shauna MacDonald) that he can't marry her by leaving a message on her answering machine. (In a neat reversal, Jill later tells Jack, through voice mail, she's marrying someone else.) Jack waffles over his relationship with Jill until it's too late. In the interim, he dallies with a beautiful young woman he picks up in a bookstore, and his friends pair themselves off to all and sundry. (At times, the film seems determined to disprove Shelagh Kelly's *Singles* dictum: "Desperation is the worst sort of cologne"; in this film, everyone gets laid no matter how sad sack they seem.) Most memorably, Jack's sardonic waitress friend falls for a demented hoodlum who tries to steal a kid's football. There's no conventional happy ending, at least for Jack, who finally decides it's probably better if he tries to grow up a bit before he gets involved in another relationship. At heart, *Jack & Jill* hearkens back

to pre-screwball comedies. It's less about finding love than about the infantile lengths we go to get it.

Bruce McCulloch's winsome *Dog Park* also takes place in the realm of the ultraneedy and romantically doomed. As one might expect from a sketch comedian and satirist as experienced as McCulloch, the film is jammed with sharply observed bits and some truly stellar pieces. Sleepy-eyed Andy (Luke Wilson) is unceremoniously dumped by his hipster girlfriend, Cheryl (Kathleen Robertson). Friends Jeri (Janeane Garofalo) and Jeff (McCulloch) try to offer him solace and advice. Jeri tells him that he's always been in a relationship—a tendency she considers rather destructive—but Andy finds it hard to listen. (It doesn't help that Jeff and Jeri are a hideous, cooingly perfect couple; it's like they're taunting him.) Eating at a bar one night, he runs into the depressed and hostile Lorna (Natasha Henstridge). He falls for her heavily, but she's terrified of any





***Dog Park*: Left to right Kathleen Robertson, Luke Wilson, Janeane Garofalo and Bruce McCulloch. The film takes place in the realm of the ultraneedy and romantically doomed.**

sort of relationship. (*Dog Park* one-ups its predecessors by having two near-catatonic principals. Both Lorna and Andy are acted on rather than active. The few times they do act, they screw up.) Despite still being hung up on Lorna, Andy falls in with gorgeous nutritionist Keiran (Kristin Lehman), who exudes desperation. Cracks begin to show, not only in Andy and Kieran's lifeless relationship, but Jeri and Jeff's as well.

Like *Jack & Jill*, *Dog Park* focuses more on neediness than romance. One of the film's key moments comes when Cheryl pleads with Andy to take her back because she knows what she wants now. Anyone in the cast could have said the same thing. The characters' obsession with dogs underscores their self-absorption. When Cheryl and Andy take their dog to a canine shrink (Mark McKinney, who along with Harland Williams as a freaky New Ager, practically walks away with the film), they turn it into a session about their own problems and past history. Not surprisingly, McCulloch ends up placing self-discovery above everything else. It may be the only thing that can prevent you from making a disastrous choice—a fear that runs underneath the entire film and that's brought home by the film's muted, sombre climax, when Jeri and Jeff's relationship hits the skids and we actually encounter the dog shrink's family. (They're cowed and extraordinarily shallow.) Andy and Lorna hook up, but very tentatively.

Piers Haggard's *Conquest* is a kind of inverted version of *It's A Wonderful Life* or maybe a comic variation on *Psycho*. Lothaire Bluteau plays the local bank manager, Pincer Bedier, who is determined to save the small Saskatchewan farming town he grew up in—despite overwhelming disinterest from the townspeople themselves. He keeps them there by offering them credit when they've far exceeded their limit; by backing people in the most ridiculous schemes; and by tricking newcomers into staying on. His latest catch is the peripatetic Daisy MacDonald (Tara Fitzgerald). When her car breaks down, Pincer tries to convince her to stay and run the hardware store. (He already has someone to run the café.) Meanwhile Pincer's nemesis, the monumentally disgruntled Grace (Monique Mercure), keeps needling Daisy about why she hasn't left yet.

The inhabitants of *Conquest* like to see themselves as rugged individualists and the film half-lauds them for their apparent refusal to form anything but the mildest and most tentative notion of community. (Pincer admires the town's inhabitants for giving him a hard time.) But director Haggard also undercuts all of this rampant individualism by setting his characters against some rather sweeping, forbidding land and sky scapes. Their crankiness and eccentricity grow inversely to their lack of control over the environment—and because of it. Pincer also represents the zenith of the Canadian dreamy, catatonic male, and exposes



what's behind him. His obstinacy and refusal to communicate is less a character flaw than a bargaining strategy. It's his way of manipulating the environment around him and defending himself. Of course, it's as sincere as it is cunning. Haggard and Bluteau never suggest that Pincer could operate any other way. *Conquest* inverts the traditional arc of the classic 1930s romantic comedies, elevating a sense of place and purpose over freedom. Finally, *Conquest* is less about the romance between two people than it is about the pull of the past and our desire to preserve it. Pincer seduces Daisy into staying by telling her about his ancestors' struggles. Daisy falls in love with the place—a location that overtly mocks our obsessions with our own problems—as much as Pincer.

Denis Villeneuve's *Un 32 ao t sur terre* is probably the darkest of all the entries. It's also one of the most assured and deft first features to be produced in Canada in decades. But if the plot and the execution identify it as romantic comedy, the despairing tone comes from somewhere else entirely. Driving down a deserted country road, model Simone (the astonishing and beautiful Pascale Bussi eres) falls asleep at the wheel and rolls her car. Terrified, she decides to quit modelling and have a baby. Her only choice for the father is her best friend, Philippe (Alexis Martin). Unfortunately, Philippe isn't exactly free of attachments or baggage. For one thing, he's seeing Juliette; for another, he's had an unrequited and unacknowledged crush on the mercurial Simone for years. Reluctantly, he says he'll do it—but only in a desert. A couple hours later, they're headed for the desert outside Salt Lake City.

The setup suggests countless romantic comedies—a confused, harried man must defend his chastity against a sexually rapacious, anarchic female. And the execution is pure Lubitsch (with a touch of Antonioni). Villeneuve returns repeatedly to the old standby, a two-shot revealing completely adverse reactions. When they finally board the plane, Simone dozes off happily; Philippe twitches frantically, with a horrified look on his face. Villeneuve oscillates between stasis and frantic motion, creating a sense of uneasiness. When he first shows the plane that's taking them to Utah, we see it from beneath in slow-motion, looking like it couldn't possibly be going anywhere. He plays this dreamy feel off against Philippe's anxious paralysis and Simone's frantic charges. She is almost always mobile—her eyes even twitch when she's sleeping. More than half the time, Villeneuve can barely keep her in the frame. She charges out of the hospital looking for a phone, she rampages around Montreal looking for Philippe and her agent.

Un 32 ao t sur terre riffs off the old catatonic male motif, but it transcends it as well. Philippe is divided—but he's not above acting. And there's something far more crucial to the film than mere self-discovery. There are frequent intimations of mortality—Simone's accident, roadkill on the highway, a corpse they find when they're abandoned in the desert. The central motif is a recurring intertitle featuring a half-frozen calendar. (August 32 is followed by August 33, etc.) The scenes between Simone and Philippe may have a wonderfully airy quality, but Villeneuve is always quick to remind us that time is running out and decisions will have to be made.

From the top: Robbie Coltrane and Michael Riley in *Perfectly Normal*; Shauna MacDonald and John Kalangis in *Jack and Jill*; Pascale Bussi eres and Alexis Martin in *Un 32 ao t sur terre*



By far the most magical and atypical film of the group is Jerry Ciccoritti's *Boy Meets Girl*. More than any other film included here, it's a true romantic comedy—complete with an unabashed happy ending and a reasonably active

couple. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the film though is its decidedly European flair. If the other films have consciously set themselves in opposition to the classical Hollywood romantic comedy, *Boy Meets Girl* avoids this dilemma by invoking the stylized films of Jacques Demy and Euro-adoptees like Frank Tashlin—influences Ciccoritti readily acknowledges. Mike (a somewhat doughy Sean Astin) is a cynical copy writer for romance comics. His only real interest is in marrying off his best friend, Jack (Kevin MacDonald, in an over-the-top tribute to Jerry Lewis), and embarking on a trip around the world. Angelina (the luminous Emily Hampshire) lives with her aunt and spends her days terrified of the moment her intended, childhood sweetheart Paolo, will come to claim her hand. The cast also includes the neighbourhood love poet, Il Magnifico (Joe Mantegna), who seems to be both a neighbourhood legend and a semimythical figure, and widow Mrs. Jones (Kate Nelligan). She and Il Magnifico are in the throes of a torrid affair. Il Magnifico, it appears, makes a little on the side by doing renovation work—he's writing his poems on the back of the wallpaper he's using in Jones's apartment because they're too overpowering to be read by mere mortals. During one particularly steamy encounter, a section of wallpaper drifts out the pair's apartment window and into the hands of Mike. Not reading Italian, Mike just tosses it aside. It's picked up by Angelina, who assumes that Mike is in love with her. After a bewitching encounter at Jack's stag—and what's arguably one of the most charming dance sequences in all of Canadian film—the two decide to go out on a date.

Boy Meets Girl achieves the same kind of lighter than air feel of an old musical and Ciccoritti and his collaborators don't ever miss a chance to remind us of its artificial nature. It takes place in a universe that seems just a little too rich. The rooms are colour-coded, brightly if minimally decorated and furnished with kitschy retro items. The reds in Jones's apartment are impossibly, gorgeously lurid. (They look like the first valentine you ever saw.) The neighbourhood the film takes place in is just as magical. Ciccoritti and his colleagues have smartly capitalized on Toronto's Little Italy which, despite a recent influx of trendy bars, still maintains an old-world aura. The feel of the film is, at the same time, startlingly claustrophobic—a factor that is utterly crucial to the film's success. The romance is more convincing here because it seems so cut off.

Ultimately, what Canadian romantic comedies tell us is that it's important to know yourself first. If the classic American romantic comedy is about a country that hadn't yet learned to hate itself, the archetypal Canadian romantic comedy is about a country learning to love itself. So if you are looking for romance, rent a room in Little Italy; if you're looking for stability, move to Saskatchewan. ●



Tara Fitzgerald and Lothaire Bluteau in *Conquest*.