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The Subversive Charm of

GARY BURNS

By Sharon Corder and Jack Blum

At 20, Gary Burns was a painter, like his father and brother. His first job was painting huge pieces of equipment in the oil fields outside of his native Calgary.

At 30, he was bullying his way into film school on the basis of some student drawings and narrative poems.

Now, at 40, he has completed his third feature, *waydowntown*, which won the Citytv Award for Best Canadian Feature at the Toronto International Film Festival, awards for Best Screenplay and Most Popular Canadian Film at the Vancouver International Film Festival and a distribution deal in Canada (Odeon Films) and in that most coveted of territories, the U. S. of A.

The story of how he became an accomplished and original filmmaker is unusual to say the least. The way Burns tells it, it's like...just kind of...well, not really a fluke, more like just, you know, the way things worked out. There are a lot of disclaimers: "I don't really understand (reverential pause) *structure*. I don't have a real plan. I'm just kind of blabbing and gradually I get to the point where the blabbing makes sense"; or, "I took one acting class and one theory class and that was it. I never even took the directing class. I never felt confident working with actors. The only thing I can do is look at people and go 'that's not quite right.'"

But if you really push him, Burns begins to reveal a deeper sense of purpose: "One thing I always fought against, from the beginning, even before I was making films, is that I hate films that make you feel bad because everyone on the screen has a better life than you. They're all rich doctors and lawyers and movie stars living in Manhattan apartments. They're married to the most beautiful person in the world and all that Hollywood stuff. They have personal problems, but in the end they get the love of their life. So when you walk out of the theatre it makes you feel sort of crappy." This is the sensibility that permeates all his films – a deep, anti-Hollywood populism that quietly anchors the almost apologetic modesty of his persona. The same dynamic is to be found in his work. There's a rigorous skill and intelligence that runs beneath the "aw shucks" charm of the surface. Burns is a subversive, but one clever enough to keep his tracks well-covered.

With *waydowntown*, he brings this approach to maturity and the honours garnered by the film are well-deserved. The comedy, which revolves around four twentysomething office drones who have a bet to see who can last the longest without going outdoors, is a clever crowd-pleaser. At the same time, it's a stinging allegory for life in the 21st century. The sight gags and one-liners are funny, but they also offer sharp comment on the modern experience; the multiple storylines entertain while resonating beyond themselves into the world outside the movie.

The conceit of the film was inspired by Calgary's system of "plus-fifteens" second-storey glass walkways that connect all the major buildings in the city's downtown core, making it entirely viable to live, eat, work and play without ever taking a breath of fresh air. In real life, the effect of this indoor labyrinth has been to destroy Calgary's downtown street life, with all the stores, restaurants, offices and theatres facing in. This is Burns's point of departure in depicting an airless, artificial world that increasingly represents the future for all of us.

Working almost entirely on digital video, Burns takes full advantage of the range of effects offered by the format; for example, reversing shots in mid-scene, playing with colour, grain and movement. These cinematic flourishes do much to compensate for the visual shortcomings of the digital image, as do some other conceits that elevate the scenario into the sur-



real: his protagonist, Tom (Fabrizio Fillipo), swims/fries through the mall in mid-air with a kind of breaststroke. Like so much of the movie, the device entertains while amplifying Burns's themes, subtly reinforcing the strange artificiality of the environment.

The departure from strict realism definitely represents a leap for the filmmaker, whose early films were influenced by the hyperrealism of Jim Jarmusch and Richard Linklater. "I saw *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Slacker* and I went, 'Oh man, even I could do that.' They were very simple, especially *Stranger Than Paradise*. And if you look at my first short, *Happy Valley*, it's a complete rip-off," says Burns. His first feature, *The Suburbanators* (1995), was a wry and witty day in the life of three groups of young men. The influence of *Slacker* is easy to spot, but at the same time *The Suburbanators* displayed a unique voice and style that won the filmmaker acclaim first at the Toronto festival and later at Sundance. *Kitchen Party* (1997) again focused on life in the suburbs. A young man (Scott Speedman) hosts a party in his parents' kitchen. When someone messes up his mother's meticulously vacuumed living-room carpet, his life begins to unravel. Among its many festival screenings was one in New York as part of the prestigious New Directors, New Films series.

Burns insists that the minimalist structure of both these films derives from his lack of experience. "It would have taken me years to learn how to write a script that has all the twists and turns of a proper plot. With *The Suburbanators*, I went, 'Well, I'm not going to deal with plot right now, I don't know how to do that. I'm going to make a film that takes place on a sunny day in the afternoon, and it's just a bunch of people driving around talking.' Nothing really happens. It ends the way it begins. There's no growth, no structure. Even with *Kitchen Party*, there's very little structure. No one grows, there are no character arcs. You see these people and it's over."

While it's true that both films eschew traditional structural mechanics, what they do present is a defiantly "anti-Hollywood" view of the world. The protagonists are Burns's Everymen – twentysomethings driving aimlessly around Calgary. They are neither extraordinarily heroic, nor particularly downtrodden. Their lives are like the lives of millions of people everywhere. Shit happens and life goes on, consisting not of the catastrophes of war, famine and disease, or even the more commonplace dramas of heartbreak and longing, or political intrigue, and certainly nothing to do with hit men, hookers or vampires. The stuff of Burns's films is the way your older brother won't stop being a prick, the difficulties of scoring pot without transportation, getting a ding in Dad's car in the mall parking lot. It's the hope that your girlfriend will get the idea that the relationship is over without actually having to tell her so.

While by no means abandoning this sensibility, the script for *waydowntown* is carefully structured and multi-layered, a fact that Burns admits is no accident. "I wanted to try and do a traditional film with a bit of a story arc. I wanted the character of Tom to realize that he was an asshole and try to remedy it." Some of the script's success is shared with co-writer James Martin for whom *waydowntown* is the first produced screen credit. Burns credits Martin with suggesting the device of the bet, on which the mechanics of the structure so thoroughly depend.

The film essentially takes place over the course of a lunch hour during which the competition comes to a boil. Tom, and his three colleagues – Sandra (Marya Delver), Curt (Gordon Currie) and Randy (Tobias



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Goodson) – all hold junior positions at the same firm. As the film opens, the participants have lasted 24 days and are beginning to show symptoms of stress – jittery nerves, headaches and paranoia. Tom has adopted a strategy of maintaining a constant, low-level marijuana buzz to help get him through, but this has given rise to an uneasy interior monologue of self doubt that runs through the film. He worries that his life as a junior drone in a huge corporation is starting to affect him adversely.

Jammed into the cubicle adjacent to Tom's, is Bradley, a hapless career drudge (played with poignant, pasty despair by Don McKellar). Tom torments him mercilessly. He plays mind games on Sandra, trying to force her defeat. He suggests to Curt that he might have a good chance at bedding Vicki (Jennifer Clement), a female co-worker who seems particularly vulnerable. And when his desire to win the bet keeps him from leaving the building to help the victim of a serious fall, he wonders if he has stepped over the line. "The fish stinks from the head down," he muses. "Am I the tail? Have I started to smell?" (This imagery recurs later in the middle of a hot make-out session in the parking garage when Tom hallucinates that a giant fish is swallowing his leg). The casting of Fabrizio Fillipo (*The Life Before This*) allows Burns to push Tom's behaviour past the bounds of acceptability without losing the audience's sympathy. Fillipo has a natural appeal that keeps us hoping for his redemption. The sense of alarmed detachment he brings to his character enhances the feeling that we are visiting some strange new planet that also happens to be our own.

The whole film is suffused with a feverish, deoxygenated feeling. Suffocating in the controlled interior atmosphere, Sandra tears a perfume ad out of a magazine and breathes through it as fiercely as Dennis Hopper in *Blue Velvet*. Both Tom and Curt carry on heated sexual pursuits that are funny and entertaining but at the same time underscore the desperate escapism that fuels so much of modern life. The grim, airless atmosphere is further reinforced by the degraded, colour-bleed digital look that DOP Patrick McLaughlin achieves. It's cleverly contrasted with the bright clarity of the few exteriors, which are shot on 35mm. McLaughlin's relationship with Burns goes back to *The Suburbanators*, which he photographed, and runs through *Kitchen Party*. "Patrick has a ton to do with the visual style," says Burns. "For *waydowntown* he even did some writing. Whole lines of dialogue are Patrick's. He does more than just shoot my stuff." If it seems unusual that a cinematographer should be contributing dialogue, it is another indication of Burns's strong-minded confidence masquerading as diffidence.

So is the collaboration with Donna Brunsdale, Burns's wife and an artist and filmmaker in her own right. According to producer Shirley Vercruyse, her role went beyond that of art director. "Donna was there at every stage, Gary's constant influence and reference point. She had quite an impact on the film." As for Vercruyse herself, *waydowntown* was not only her first feature film, it was her first direct experience of film production of any kind; her background is producing special events and festivals. However, Burns seems to feel that she made the transition to film without missing a beat, even to the point of acting as post-production supervisor. "She'd be good at anything she did," says Burns. "She's the most organized person in the world. She doesn't want to bullshit her way through anything. She always wants to know what's going on."

It's clear the film benefits from a lot of collaborative, behind-the-scenes ingenuity. Tom's flying, for example, which looks like an impressive (and expensive) special effect, was achieved by placing the actor on a moving platform supported by a pole that is completely concealed by the vertical drop of his tie. This simple, surreal device lets the audience into Tom's drugged-out haze, which justifies a number of other digressions, most significantly the evocation – in comic-book style – of the entire city under a plastic bubble, ripped from its moorings and rising to float, disembodied, above the planet. The riff pays off toward the end of the film when this actually seems to happen, severing power and water supplies and leaving everyone trapped in their office towers. The event, and the seeming indifference with which this is greeted by all but Tom, reinforces both the fragility of our own technology-dependent world and the massive collective passivity with which we are witnessing the corruption of the environment.

Building on the comic-book motif, Burns introduces a recurring hallucination: a Superman clone racing hither and yon, presumably saving people in distress and fighting for goodness and justice. It's a perfect example of how the film makes its points with a light comic touch. The image is so startling and anomalous that it never fails to get a laugh while at the same time delicately suggesting that perhaps there are more valuable ways our protagonist might be spending his time. He might, for example, show some concern for the increasingly disturbed behaviour of his office mate, Bradley, who obsessively plays a computer game while stapling to his chest the ghoulish sacred credos of corporate culture ("Don't Compromise – Prioritize" and "Submit to Commitment").

One senses that Burns knows deeply the despair of being trapped in a job or career that one is simply not meant for. The



Sandra (Marya Delver) has to follow her boss around to cover up his shop-lifting habits.

life of construction painter was intolerable to him. "I hated the work," he says, matter-of-factly. He wanted secretly to pursue a more artistic path but his circumstances seemed to make that unattainable. "In high school I took art and stuff like that, and even my dad was saying, 'Why don't you go to the art college?' But in the crowd I hung around with that just wasn't really an option. It was just kind of, I don't know, 'girly,' or something. I remember I thought I wouldn't mind getting into the clothing business. That would be kind of 'creative-ish' as long as I didn't have to take *design*."

He wound up at a Montreal CEGEP studying clothing production and frequenting Cinema V, the Montreal rep house two or three times a week. Exciting as the movies were, he stayed firmly on his new career path. That led him back out west, where he was hired to help set up a T-shirt factory, but after seven or eight months he was again casting about for more satisfying work. "All I was thinking was, 'I just wanted a job that was *fun*.'" It was at that point that he bought his first typewriter and noticed a small ad in the Kelowna paper advertising a one-day screenwriting workshop. He turned up on the day to discover that not only was he the only participant, but the instructor had never taught before. Nonetheless, she went through her spiel and lent him her copy of a

half-hour teleplay from *The Littlest Hobo* series. "The script was pretty good. I never gave it back and I felt really guilty for about 10 years. I don't remember anything about the class." Eventually he returned to school. At the University of Calgary, he hopped from fine arts in his first year to drama in his second, working hard to improve his marks and writing skills.

His first application to film school at Concordia was soundly rejected. "I remember getting this letter and it kinda went 'No you can't get in and you're nowhere near getting in.'" But after his second year at Uof C he more or less forced his way in, flying back to Montreal and simply waiting around until he was granted an interview. Having never actually done anything on film or video, he armed himself with drawings from his year of fine arts "and some poems, sort of narrative little things, really bad, totally embarrassing." He was accepted. By then he was 30, and though that meant he was at least 10 years older than most of his classmates, his life as a filmmaker had begun.

However, his depictions of the grinding humiliations of being on the low rung of the ladder indicate that he has not forgotten his own early work experiences. In one of *waydowntown*'s major subplots, Sandra's assignment is to surreptitiously tail the revered, half-senile head of the firm and prevent him from shoplifting. This is a delicious metaphorical expression of the frustrations of the small cog in a big machine. The boss is an insane thief, but he never faces the consequences of his crimes because of his employees' desperate efforts to follow in his wake and cover up the misdeeds. It's a lunatic game of hide and seek that the underlings cannot win – a fact of which the boss is fully and enjoyably aware.

When asked how he sees himself in the context of Canadian cinema – a question he was asked more than a few times during the Toronto festival – Burns can barely formulate an answer. Uneasy comparing himself to Egoyan or Cronenberg, he demurs. "I was just making what I felt. I was afraid to try too big a thing at once, so I just tried small. I like to think it's realism. Of course it's not. It's just people talking basically. And the odd pratfall." At the same time, it's impossible to ignore the fact that Burns was raised and makes films in Alberta. There's an independence of spirit, a freshness, a freedom to Burns's work that seems like it couldn't come from anywhere else. So perhaps it's no more difficult placing him comfortably in the context of Canadian filmmaking than it is to place Alberta comfortably in the country as a whole.

By the same token, Burns himself is not entirely comfortable in his own hometown. "We love the mountains, we hike a lot and we cross-country ski. But politically I don't feel I really know anybody in Calgary. I mean, who are those people? They all voted Reform and every single one of them is going to vote for Stockwell Day, so you're almost afraid to say it out loud if you lean a little bit left."

In his first two films, the Albertan landscape is a constant – a vast land of sky and cars, suburban bungalows and malls. Especially malls. The mall as the centre of everything, the ancient marketplace transformed into an uneasy mixture of commerce, community and circus. In *waydowntown*, Burns goes further. The mall becomes the universe in which all of

modern life is played out, dominated by corporate culture, unconnected to any form of nature and increasingly alienated from what is human in ourselves.

At the first public screening of the film, there was a moment that scored a bull's eye, sending a huge wave of laughter through the crowd. It happens when Sandra finishes taking phone instructions from her dour supervisor. She closes her cell phone and absent-mindedly tosses it over a railing as though it were the wrapper of a candy bar. The mixture of surprise and recognition in the audience spoke to how successfully the film captures the Zeitgeist. We live in a world where our dependence on technology, under the guise of greater "convenience," distracts and ensnares us in a million different ways, from endless voice-mail loops ("your call is important to us") to computer games, to the now ubiquitous cell phone, at once both indispensable and utterly disposable. Within moments of realizing her error – watching her phone disappear down the stairwell of several levels of shopping mall – another character hands her a replacement.

At what is arguably the thematic climax, Burns shows his hand and reveals the subversive heart of the film. It is a moment that is startling in the context of our contemporary culture in which only the bottom line seems to mean anything to anyone. Sandra has finally cracked and gone outside, in no small part due to Tom's manipulations. When she angrily tells him of her capitulation she confronts him with the logical consequences of his actions. "You got your way," she says bitterly. "You're a winner!" Tom responds as though his worst fears about himself have suddenly been exposed. "You take that back," he shouts after her. "I am *not* a winner!" Clearly, in Burns's view, today's winner-take-all ethos has serious consequences, rendering impossible any nurturing or wise relationship with nature or with each other.

By far the most remarkable thing about *waydowntown*, though, is the way in which it delivers its subversive message – which at its simplest boils down to "get out while you still can" – without ever skimping on the sheer wit and comic pleasure it delivers to an audience. With *waydowntown*, Burns has produced a film that is as astute as it is entertaining, using charm and humour to make the acerbic social



Bradley (Don McKellar), the hapless career drudge who pins company slogans to his chest.

criticism go down easy. In the same way, the director's modes of affability disguises his depth and constancy of purpose, as he quietly wages his war against films where the lives of the characters on the screen are so much better than your own "that they make you feel bad about yourself." "I just wanted to show regular people. I'm saying, "Don't worry guys, you're doing great. These people on the screen are seriously fucked up."

The characters in Burns's films are indeed fucked up, in ways that make them recognizable and human. No better than us, but no worse either. And if the films don't make us feel bad about our lives, they may well leave us with the odd niggling question about how we might make better use of our own time. But not without making us laugh first. ●

waydowntown: A screamfest of despair: the film's message is "get out while you can."

