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WELCOME

to their **Nightmare:** Or to Live and Die in
Suburbia



JOHN FAWCETT & KAREN WALTON EXPLAIN WHY

GINGER SNAPS

By Steve Gravestock

STRANGE things are afoot in Bailey Downs, a sleepy suburb on the edge of nothing (or, more accurately, Brampton, Ontario). The sun appears to have gone into permanent hiding. Neighbourhood pets are being horribly mutilated. Stray body parts are turning up in sandboxes. Even the road-hockey games somehow seem sinister.

The liveliest and oddest inhabitants of this eerily normal-looking town are the Fitzgerald sisters: fiery, extroverted 16-year-old Ginger (Katharine Isabelle) and her dependent younger sister Brigitte (Emily Perkins). Gothic types, the Fitzgerald sisters are determined to keep as much distance as humanly possible between them and the other students at the conformist high school that Brigitte deems a "hormonal toilet." Banding together against an oppressive outside world, they have sworn to get out by the time they both turn 16 or die trying. Their bond has taken on an almost supernatural element (neither of them has had their period yet), and it's about to get even closer and weirder.

While executing a prank on one of their more popular and vicious schoolmates, Ginger finally gets her period and is promptly attacked by a huge, ferocious animal. The next day she starts sprouting long, bushy hairs all over her body and develops an apparently voracious appetite for sex, violence and neighbourhood pets (though not necessarily in that order). It's as if we're seeing George Bailey's ideal housing project from *It's a Wonderful Life* six decades later when the repressed have returned home to wreak havoc.

In a landscape where smart, commercial and genre can seldom be used in the same sentence, *Ginger Snaps* is a novel and welcome addition to Canadian cinema. Directed by John Fawcett (*The Boy's Club*) and written by Karen Walton, it's witty, biting and as anti-authoritarian as its heroines. Primarily a portrait of suburban teenage angst, *Ginger Snaps* feels entirely contemporary, yet it avoids the smarmy self-consciousness of most current horror films. Instead, its comic elements and allegorical equation of menstruation, adolescence and physical betrayal evoke the great American (and sometimes Canadian) horror films of the 1970s. Running underneath the film is the primal teenage fear that your body will invariably betray you, force you to enter a duplicitous world you find despicable, and make you abandon the people you're closest to.

"When you're actually considering making a horror film, you sit down and ask, 'Okay, what scares me?'" says Fawcett while being interviewed in the Toronto office of the film's distributor, TVA. "The thing that I find frightening is the idea that you could wake up one day and find that you have a tumour you didn't have last week. In a sense, your body's betraying you and that's

Katharine Isabelle as Ginger

what it's like in adolescence. You think you've got the world figured out and then all of a sudden things change on you. All of a sudden you're menstruating or you're growing hair all over your body. I think that's why teen films or films about adolescence are so interesting. It's a period of your life about extremes."

A well-matched team, Fawcett and Walton each bring something different to the film. Fawcett provides an aficionado's awareness of horror movies and an efficient, crisp directorial style, honed while working on his award-winning short, *Half Nelson*, and his first feature, *The Boy's Club* (as well as episodes of the cult television series *Xena*). Walton (whose first professional gig was on CBC's teen series *Straight Up*) brings a feminist perspective and a background in capturing the way teenagers speak, live and breathe. The end result is a film that's as sharp in its portrait of teen angst as the best of *Buffy*, *the Vampire Slayer*, even though both Fawcett and Walton were more than aware of the risks they were taking, on a variety of levels.

"I liked the idea of a transformation movie," says Fawcett. "Then I started to think about horror, and the werewolf legend, which is where a person could transform into something else. I realized that the werewolf movie hadn't been done very well too many times, so there was lots of room to explore. But it was also kind of frightening because audiences have a bad preconception about what a werewolf movie is. There's a really fine line. I didn't want the audience to hear the word werewolf. Actually, you do hear it once out of Brigitte's mouth."

Like the Fitzgerald sisters, Fawcett and Walton swore their own oath, back in 1995, when they first embarked on the project. "John Fawcett wanted to make a horror film, and he wanted to make a teenage girl horror film," recalls Walton. "When he approached me, I originally said, 'Gah! No, why would I want to do that?'" This was before *Scream*, and I was a little concerned about making horror for my debut feature because I wasn't sure we could even get it done. So we approached it this way: I said, 'Okay, but the girls can't be running around in tight shirts for the hell of it, screaming, and getting saved by a boyfriend.' That was my shtick. His shtick was, 'Let's do it, but let's break every rule that we think confines us in any way.'"

That pact was tested by a lengthy pre-production process and two false starts, including an offer to produce the film by a mid-range American company. "I got kind of afraid of them," confesses Fawcett about his last foray into Hollywood. "For one, they didn't want to put the kind of money in the film we thought it needed to pull it off even on a low-budget level. And they wanted the world for that. But then they started getting weird conceptually. They started saying things like: 'Instead of Ginger growing a tail maybe she could just get bigger breasts.' At the time, *Species II* was playing, with Natasha Henstridge on the poster looking like a babe. That was their whole angle on *Ginger Snaps*. They wanted a very sexual sort of werewolf."

So Fawcett and Walton headed back to Canada where they found more supportive backers, including Telefilm Canada. But it wasn't exactly smooth sailing. The Columbine High School massacre took place around the time Fawcett began casting, and the Taber, Alberta, copycat killing not long afterwards. These events made everyone ferociously sensitive about teens and violence, and some people in the media and the industry misrepresented the script. Long before filming even began, *Ginger Snaps* became fodder for radio talk shows and generated a variety of false reports. At one point, it was described as a vampire film and scenes that depicted accidental deaths were reported as grisly murders where corpses were dismembered.

"I think that Telefilm took a lot of flack for putting money in the film because it was perceived early on by people in the press as basically a kind of slasher, bloodletting, exploitative kind of a thing," recalls Fawcett. "They [the press] didn't understand what we wanted to do with it. That whole thing came on the heels of the Columbine killings. I thought the comparisons were

"When you're actually considering making a horror film, you sit down and ask,



Emily Perkins as Brigitte

completely unwarranted, but the story became exaggerated through several tellings. I got a little scared because I knew that Telefilm was getting swamped with emails."

The degree of misinformed reporting is painfully evident from the film's skillful opening sequence, and even more shocking when you see the scenes that were alluded to in the press. For example, the death of a classmate is, to some degree, accidental. And the body isn't cut up. It falls apart because the two girls panic, stuff the corpse in the freezer, then have to wrench it loose in order to bury it. The scene is designed, in part, to reflect a teenager's revulsion about bodily processes and other facts of life. "I was very conscious of the messages that I would be giving about being a young woman," says Walton. "I didn't want to see guns in kids' hands. I didn't want it to be a world where that was considered a viable option. Did I worry about *Ginger Snaps* glorifying violence? No, because the

entire story is about the girls trying to avoid violence and trying to stop Ginger before she loses control of herself."

"It hurt for awhile," says Fawcett of the furor that erupted around the film. "It definitely hurt while casting in Toronto. I had a partial boycott by agents who weren't passing the script onto their clients. But in the end I have to say it backfired because, frankly, the controversy was good for the film." The boycott helped the film in a variety of ways, facilitating the casting of Vancouver-based actresses Emily Perkins and Katharine Isabelle as the sisters. Both deliver stellar performances, aided by a rather unique bond. Unbeknownst to Fawcett and his collaborators, the girls had known each other since childhood. The quality of their work is evident in the way they capture not only the nuances of their own characters but the complex and sometimes parasitical bond between the sisters.

"All they have is each other," Walton says. "That relationship was crucial for both of them. It's a relationship that has to

'Okay,
what scares me?'"

change for either of them to continue. Brigitte needs to come into her own. It's her story, the story of a kid who is incredibly dependent on her sister in order to survive a day. Ginger is just as dependent, but in a different way. The dynamics of a co-dependent relationship fascinate me. People who need each other for all the wrong reasons. It's subtle, but very early in the movie you understand that Ginger is a lot of talk. But I think she's really lonely. She knows she's missing out on something and she knows she's not going to get it from Brigitte. Brigitte is the brains of the operation and Ginger is the passion. She's a rock star in her own mind and Brigitte is her only fan. She is Brigitte's mom in many respects until she can no longer fulfill that role. It's really hard for Ginger to come to grips with the fact Brigitte should be taking care of her."

Ginger and Brigitte become surrogate parents for one another, a fact that only makes their doomed relationship seem even more tragic. Their teachers are confused and uncertain how to respond to anything. Witness the quizzical reaction of Mr. Wayne, the guidance counsellor (played by Peter Keleghan) to the sisters' photo essay on life in Bailey Downs; a presentation comprised of ludicrously staged death scenes (in one of the shots Ginger is run over by a lawn mower) and garish, graphic suicides. The flustered guidance counsellor first compliments them on all the work they put into the presentation, then shifts gears, admonishing them: "Well, I was totally disgusted by that, wasn't I?"

"There's a complicated admission of defeat that Peter plays so well," says Walton. "Our parents were the rebels of their generation. These were cool people, who fought for a lot of things that we now enjoy, but it's almost as if they took early mental retirement. They're at a loss about what to do with themselves in terms of continuing to develop their own lives. So it becomes all about the kids or the house or the vacation to get away from the kids and the house. It must be hard to sit around and continue to obey the tolerant party line and not be their parents, which they try so hard not to do."

GINGER SWAPS



The key representative of the adult world is the sisters' mother, Pam, who is essentially hamstrung by her good intentions. Even when her daughters do something completely bizarre, she looks away, not wanting to be a pushy mother. She's bossed around by Ginger, and by the end of the film, Brigitte figures out how her sister manipulates her. "Karen and I had huge conversations about what that mum character should be like," says Fawcett. "We knew that she was going to be a funny character. We didn't have a problem making fun of adults. I always had this idea of her as this terry-cloth wearing, fanny-pack mum who is really interested in everything that is going on and wants to be a part of her daughters' lives. She is different from the 1950s mum because she has read enough *Chatelaine* magazines – at least enough about how to deal with teenage daughter issues – that she's taken a 'They'll talk to me if they want to' hands-off approach. It's basically trying to be a friend instead of a mother to your children. Ultimately, that character is funny because you assume that she has no idea what's happening, but she actually puts two and two together."

Fawcett's casting coup was Mimi Rogers (*Someone to Watch Over Me* and Tom Cruise's first wife) who plays Pam. While many actresses of her stature and beauty would have balked at playing such a frumpy, seemingly clueless character, Rogers embraced her role wholeheartedly, improvising one of the film's most amusing scenes. When she discovers Ginger's underwear coated in blood after she contracts the werewolf virus, Pam simply pulls out a bottle of Spray 'N' Wash and continues with the laundry. "Because of the size of picture [its final budget was \$5 million]," says Fawcett, "we were looking for an adult, an actor who had a name that we could put into that part, who would help give it some name recognition. But it's a scary business hiring actors [of that stature] because you can't get to know them. You can't call them up and talk to them. You pretty much just have to offer them the part. Mimi just went for it 100 per cent."

Like its ancestors from the 1970s, *Ginger Snaps* rests on rather uncomfortable truths. Pam and Mr. Wayne's good intentions are contrasted with the insatiable primal urges that overtake Ginger, and there are urges that can't be resolved or dealt with using advice from *Chatelaine*. (The girls' bedroom functions as a parents' worst nightmare; a private place where Brigitte pierces Ginger's belly button with a silver hook in a failed and bloody attempt to cure her.) That desperate and deluded need for comfort and security is one of the film's favourite targets; a desire for vengeance inspired in part by the creators' own spell in the suburbs.

"I was not a happy camper in the suburbs," confides Walton. "I did have belonging issues and I'd never seen anything like it. Identical homes with two cars in every driveway. Big fat wide streets that nobody parks on, freshly paved every other year. Because it's so homogeneous, culturally dry and barren, it felt like a desert. I had a keen desire to comment on that as the perfect world and for good reason. It's the classic model of suppression. Look at *American Beauty*, where you are what you keep in your garage."

Of course, ultimately what drew both Walton and Fawcett to the project is the Fitzgerald sisters themselves. "Usually [with] teenagers who are misfits, it's all about fitting in or getting accepted," says Walton. "That was important for me because my biggest personal problem in high school was I too had no desire to fit in. I really wanted two female leads to reflect that attitude." Fawcett adds, "They started off as Edward Gorey stick figures, as cartoons in my head. I knew that they were these sort of Gothic girls who didn't fit in at all. But as they grew and developed personalities, I knew what the film had going for it was different from other teen horror films. It had characters that were weirdly real. Certainly more real than we normally see teenagers portrayed in films. They're both tough characters. It's nice to see girls like that." ●

**From top to bottom:
Mimi Rogers as Pam,
Kris Lemche as Sam and
Katharine Isabelle as Ginger**

