

REVIEWS



Emily Perkins and Katharine Isabelle in John Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps*

chansonnier Michel Rivard – that is used throughout the film. It's a pleasure for the senses. So far so good.

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly where *Café Olé* falls apart, but it's probably somewhere around the couple's first date. Inexplicably the timeline is completely unrealistic. The two meet in a salsa bar, dance the night away, walk slowly back to her place, chat on her back porch, dare each other to jump into a pool below from her second-floor flat, jump in the pool, find their way back inside, make passionate love, talk through the small hours, sleep a little, wake up, pull out a Spanish/English dictionary so Alicia can teach the linguistically challenged Malcolm a few Spanish words (to no avail), and sleep again. But wait. It's not over! Malcolm wakes up to find Alicia fully dressed on her back porch (the sky is still as dark as ever). He jokes around and she tells him to leave. He walks home, meets his upstairs neighbour on the front porch (still dark), chats a while, then, finally, gets to his apartment. The entire sequence takes a good half-hour of screen time, by the end of which you are entirely confused. Only in later dialogue do you gather that, indeed, this is all supposed to have happened under the stars of one, magical night.

All credibility is lost and other revelations strike the viewer as odd. The tall, slim, blond Malcolm has a brother (Harry Standjofski) – not a friend as we'd been led to believe – who is stout, dark-haired, balding and much older. And Alicia, who we've come to know as buoyant and extraverted, is unable even at the most critical moment to gather the courage to tell Malcolm her predicament. Finally – and this perhaps the most striking – once Alicia is forced to return home, her house, in which she seems to live alone, is huge, luxurious and on the seafront, surrounded by land and palm trees. Which leads us to ask: why did she leave in the first place? And if she had to leave, why would she sneak into Canada as an illegal refugee?

No explanation is given by director Richard Roy (who previously directed *Moody Beach*, *Caboose*), who decides, instead, to focus all his energies on telling an elaborate, romantic fable. And though the fable may at times be beautiful and charming, it falls flat and simply can't carry the load.

ISA TOUSIGNANT **TAKE ONE**

Ginger Snaps

2001 107m prod Water Pictures, exp Noah Segal, Alicia Reilly-Larson, Daniel Lyon, p Steve Hoban, Karen Lee Hall, d John Fawcett, sc Karen Walton, ph Thom Best, ed Brett Sullivan, pd Todd Cherniawsky, c Lea Carlson, s David McCallum, mus Michael Shields, creature effects Paul Jones; with Emily Perkins, Katharine Isabelle, Kris Lemeche, Mimi Rogers, Jesse Moss, Danielle Hampton

The movie opens on a suburban neighbourhood. It looks cold and vacant; pets are getting torn to pieces by a vicious wild animal. Brigitte and her older sister, Ginger, hate this place full of dead ends. To cope with it, the burgeoning hipsters stage and photograph gruesome suicide scenes for a school project that celebrates killing yourself as the ultimate “fuck off.”

Like Joan of Arc, Brigitte and Ginger are smart teenage girls who have somehow avoided the onset of menstruation. The autumn night that 16-year-old Ginger finally gets her period, she ends up doubly cursed by being attacked and mauled by a werewolf. Soon Ginger finds disturbingly coarse hairs sprouting on her body, has trouble stuffing her emerging tail into her underwear, and develops a sexual energy that gives every misogynist big man on campus a hard-on.

Meanwhile, slouchy, insecure Brigitte starts feeling complex emotions. Jealous, abandoned, worried about the only person in the world she cares about, she warns Ginger: “Something is wrong, like more than you being just female.” Pressured into becoming stronger and more assured, Brigitte gets protective, then tries to save her sister from destroying herself without help from their ineffectual baby boomer parents.

When Ginger turns from horny to hyper violent, Brigitte's last hope is Sam, a handsome dope dealer with expertise in biology and lycanthropy. Dracula's Dr. Van Helsing crossed with the Wolf Man's gypsy-wise woman, Sam finds a cure for Ginger. Tragically, he's too late. In a blood-soaked finale, Brigitte, now also infected by the werewolf bug, confronts her sister, who has fully transformed into a howling monster devoid of all human feeling.

A sophisticated attempt at grafting teen angst onto a werewolf tale, *Ginger Snaps* shows off plenty of mood, spirit and shrewd intelligence. Among other themes, the movie covers

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female puberty, male tyranny, sibling rivalry and lousy parenting. As confused, angry, self-destructive teens, Brigitte and Ginger (vividly incarnated by Emily Perkins and Katharine Isabelle), join a long line of fictional misfits extending back to Holden Caulfield and the protagonists of *Rebel without a Cause*.

The tightly bonded sisters suffer terminal alienation because they see things for what they are: the high school they attend is a "total hormonal toilet"; most of the adults around them are hypocrites and fools. Their own mother (Mimi Rogers in a startling performance) is a clueless flake who masks her irresponsibility behind parenting-for-dummies clichés, gleefully inflicting her well-meaning crap at the drop of a hat.

Informed by ageless archetypes, director John Fawcett's and screenwriter Karen Walton's take on youth revolt also reflects our current vantage point. In 1989's *Heathers*, Christian Slater and Winona Ryder seemed cool and sexy as they murdered the soulless bitches who ruled over their hideously conformist high school. Times have changed. During an era of real-life teens who mow down classmates with assault rifles, violent revenge fantasies can seem more sinister than liberating.

Ginger Snaps offers bursts of graveyard humour and revenge-of-the-repressed thrills. Ginger herself enjoys a few moments of heightened sexual pleasure, and she enthusiastically mauls a couple of obnoxious idiots. In the end, however, the film's treatment of rampaging hormones and unleashed bloodlust veers toward a bleak cautionary tale. Ginger endures so much pain, even Jeff Goldblum in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (an obvious influence) gets more kicks out of being a monster. The movie has a gravity that's the polar opposite of similarly themed *Carrie*'s voluptuous lyricism.

Ginger Snaps does not push the tired diatribe that pop culture – Eminem, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, whatever – should be held responsible for weird and terrifying explosions of teen violence. However, the picture implies that fantasies of death and destruction sometimes lurch out of control. Brigitte discovers she has the moral fibre and detached cool to keep her violent ideas in the realm of fantasy. More narcissistic and emotional, Ginger ends up consumed by the horror she used to toy with in her school project.

In his handling of the story, Fawcett prefers suggestive sounds and images, not to mention clever sight gags, over an excess of noise and gross-out effects. (Val Lewton's and Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* might be another inspiration.) As for Walton's script, it's tight and convention busting for an era when horror is defined by self-referential slasher flicks like *Scream*. Rather than being chased by a wisecracking lunatic, the girl is the monster. And Walton's dialogue deploys a stylized language: part contemporary teen talk, part secret code.

At the film's heart lies Brigitte's determination to transcend her ambivalent feelings about her sister and come to Ginger's rescue. Like *The Fly*, *Ginger Snaps* hones in on the anguish of losing somebody you love to a monstrous transformation. As a genre picture, it tried but failed to draw major box office during its theatrical release. Maybe it has so much on its mind, it sometimes forgets to be suspenseful and scary enough to give good, basic horror thrills.

MAURIE ALIOFF **TAKE ONE**



Élyse Guilbault in
Bernard Émond's
La Femme qui boit

La Femme qui boit

2001 90m prod ACPAV, p Bernadette Payeur, d/sc Bernard Émond, ph Jean-Claude Labrecque, ed Louise Côté, ad André-Line Beauparlant, s ed Hugo Brochu, Martin Allard; with Élyse Guilbault, Luc Picard, Michel Forget, Gills Renaud, Lise Castonguay, Fanny Malette, Laurent Lacoursière, Alexandrine Agostini.

La Femme qui boit opens on a close shot of a grey-haired woman sitting with her back to us in a small, dark, desolate room. In voice-over she begins to tell us, slowly, deliberately, the story of her life, which ended, for all intents and purposes, with a fire that cost her her son and what little happiness she knew.