

# TAKE ONE

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.

# REVIEWS

The woman is Paulette. Born on a small piece of land somewhere in the vicinity of Montreal, she travelled to the big city as an adolescent. Once there she found work in a factory in the poor neighbourhood of Hochelaga, spending her nights perfecting a tap-dance routine that she performed regularly in a small cabaret. One night, a judge is present for her routine and is charmed. She becomes the older man's lover and moves into a fully financed apartment in Outremont – that she is not allowed to leave in daylight nor make phone calls from – to become his kept mistress.

She lives this bourgeois life for 15 years before becoming overwrought by it and deciding to make her own way with a bartender named Frank. She leaves the judge, sells her expensive furniture, and marries the dandy Frank in order for him to avoid conscription in the Second World War. During the course of their relationship, Paulette informs us she only had Frank to herself for a period of five months, when he was housebound because of an illness. She loves him like she never loved anyone else and has his child, but he is a wanderer. He spends days without coming home, smells like other women and humiliates her publicly with his constant flirtations. Paulette takes to the bottle.

By the time her son is seven, Paulette has become undone. Her drinking takes over her life, and the boy begins spending more and more time at the neighbours. The film's central action focuses on the two days after Frank leaves her for good. Paulette stops going out and orders her booze in from a corner store. She makes phone calls to Frank's mistress's home, pleading drunkenly with him to return. She shuns her family and her son, who she believes judges her. One night she passes out in the bathroom and a cigarette she has knocked over sets the house on fire. Her son is taken away by the authorities, and she is bounced around from institution to institution for the rest of her days, left to wait for, with diminishing patience, her welcome death.

There are moments of great beauty in this film. Constructed as a series of vignettes – some set in the 1950s, some set in the 1930s, some silent, others with dialogue – *La Femme qui boit* builds its portrait of despair in increments. The film lays out the tragedy of the character's life immediately; we are informed in the first minute that this woman has no life to speak of, is a shell of her former self, and that the following story is of her breakdown. The oncoming tragedy is therefore expected; we study it objectively, clinically, for the next 90 minutes.

Scenes of crisis are interwoven with scenes of daily drudgery and familial life to form a seamless tapestry. Snippets of Paulette's (Élyse Guilbault) progressive slippage down the perilous slope of alcohol abuse and decrepitude are intertwined carefully with moments of glee – cherished times of connection with her son René (Laurent Lacoursière), moments of tenderness with her philandering husband Frank (Luc Picard) – giving the character true roundness. The camera stays close on her for most of the film, simply watching, sometimes from behind her shoulder, sometimes from across the room. All the scenes are interior, giving physical veracity to her emotional claustrophobia.

Élyse Guilbault, whose past work has been mainly in the the-

atre, gives a deep, palpable performance as Paulette, only interrupted by very occasional moments of over-expressiveness, not quite taking into account the close proximity of the watching eye. Picard's performance as Frank is also excellent, and the young Lacoursière's few moments on the screen as René are impressive. Memorable scenes include both the tragic and the ordinary, such as when Paulette and René squirm around on his bedroom floor, giggling and tickling one another, or another, in which Paulette, alone in her kitchen and too drunk to stand without support by mid-afternoon, nearly burns her hair off when lighting a cigarette off her gas stove. Moments of silence are particularly strong. Fleeting looks and listless reveries are some of the most trenchant episodes: Paulette unconscious on her bed, empty glass in hand, in various states of undress; teetering, precariously balanced on her living-room couch late at night; or a scene when, eight months pregnant, she reaches under her pillow to pull out a mickey.

Guilbault moves effortlessly from scene to scene, chronological moment to moment, transmuted convincingly from a woman in her 20s – perhaps slightly cynical but still filled with the glimmer of hope – to a woman in her 40s, long since broken. There is a subtlety to the emotional landscape director Bernard Émond paints, letting the pastels of silence blend freely with the fiery hues of drama. The film's quietness and the short, black pauses between scenes, gives it an aura of realistic ordinariness and is one of its best features.

This being said, some things, unfortunately, break irremediably with *La Femme's* attempted sophistication. The voice-over narration feels, for the most part, unnecessary and irritating, and the maddening slowness of enunciation and the monotony of intonation feel tired and false. The philosophical poetics uttered diminish the poetry of the images. There are enough emotive messages in the characters' small gestures not to warrant the simplistic musings. The film's structure, too, has some faults, such as the introduction of an adolescent Paulette (Fanny Malette) in the film's last quarter. Although Malette did a satisfactory job emulating Guilbault's mannerisms and her presence explains much of the character's past, the slow rhythm of the film and the dire subject matter made the progression toward the climax difficult to bear, and with the introduction of flashbacks at such a late stage felt excessive and exhausting.

Were it not for the voice-over and flashbacks, *La Femme qui boit* would be a better film, an impressive piece of psychological portraiture and an unusually subtle formal feat. As it is, it remains only a small step away.

ISA TOUSIGNANT **TAKE ONE**

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