



Bruce Sweeney's

*Last  
Wedding*



Left: Benjamin Ratner, seated, with Bruce Sweeney; Opposite page: Ratner with Frida Betrani.

# Dumpster Sex, Leaky Condos & Relationships Gone Bad

BY JACK VERMEE

Of all the Vancouver filmmakers currently making recognizably Canadian features, such as Lynne Stopkewich, Reg Harkema, Bruce Spangler and Mina Shum, only Bruce Sweeney has carved out a genuine identity for himself. If this were a different era, one wouldn't hesitate to call him an auteur given that the feature films he has made to date – *Live Bait* (1995), *Dirty* (1998) and now *Last Wedding* – fulfill Truffaut's original criteria for auteurism, chief among them being that film is a medium of personal expression for the director. For Sweeney, the only reasons to make films are the personal ones. All his films revolve around the impossibility of relationships. "I have been devastated and rocked by relationships that didn't work out and asking the unanswerable question, 'Why did it fall apart?' is fascinating to me," says Sweeney, who is now happily married and the father of a little boy.

Each of Sweeney's films has built on the success of the previous one. The modest comedic ambitions of *Live Bait*, with its adumbrated visual style, gave way in *Dirty* to a darker, more complex view of human relationships; and as he started to dig deeper into the psyches of his characters, his camera movements and use of locations showed that he was upping the ante on the visual front as well. With *Last Wedding*, he has made his most complex work to date, one that mixes humour, pain and down-and-dirty sex with tongue-in-cheek lectures on Canadian literature, architecture and, believe it or not, a minimalist car chase, all of which serve to further his explorations of the ins and outs of coupledom.

Noah (Benjamin Ratner, the lonely lumberyard worker in *Dirty*) is a tightly wound weatherproofing specialist preparing to marry Zipporah (Frida Betrani, also from *Dirty*), a would-be country music singer. Noah's best friend, Peter (Tom Scholte, a Sweeney surrogate and star of all three of his films) is a CanLit professor who has doubts about the union, given that Noah and Zipporah have only known each other for six months. Peter's comfortable-to-the-point-of-stagnant relationship with librarian Leslie (Nancy Sivak, from *Dirty* and memorable in Bruce Spangler's *Protection*) is about to be threatened by the arrival of the beautiful student poetess Laurel (Marya Delver, *waydowntown* and also a member of the *Dirty* ensemble). (Delver's recitation of her own "One Stop Love Shop" poem is one of the film's more hilariously provocative moments.) Meanwhile, Noah and Peter's other close friend Shane (Vincent Gale, the long-haired dooper in *Dirty*), an architect, has a seemingly wonderful relationship with architecture student Sarah (Molly Parker, new to the Sweeney troupe of actors), until she graduates and gets a better job than the one he has. Care to place a bet that any of these couples will be together by film's end?

Best described as a wry drama with lots of comedy, *Last Wedding* paints a picture of its maker as one who sees life as absurd rather than tragic. It brings to mind the old Woody Allen line about life being divided into the horrible and the miserable, with most of us not realizing how lucky we are just to be miserable. Many of Sweeney's male characters – and *Last Wedding* is so much a male film that it can be read as a treatise on contemporary male dysfunction – succumb to what they perceive as the lure of something better and become the architects of their own destruction. This is at least as funny as it is



sad and is a testament to Sweeney's writing abilities and his perfectly tuned cast's performing talents.

Why is it that gifted actors like Scholte, Sivak, Ratner, Gale and Babz Chula (who plays Bobbi, Zipporah's skeptical mother) choose to work with Sweeney again and again? It's no secret that Sweeney is a disciple of Mike Leigh's working methods. When the esteemed British director of *Secrets and Lies* was in Vancouver for a tribute given in his honour by the film festival in 1992, he gave a master class that Sweeney attended. Leigh is so obsessive about the rehearsal process, and the story and dialogue contributions he can elicit from his cast members, that he would not take a writing credit for his classic 1970s and '80s films made for English television. Instead, they came with the credit "Devised and Directed by Mike Leigh."

Sweeney also has a reverence for the rehearsal process and the gems of character and story these sessions can produce. This process is a serious actor's dream, and Sweeney's actors have nothing but praise for the way they are allowed to delve into their characters prior to going before the cameras. He frequently has them try out their improvisations on location and he rehearsed and shot *Dirty* in his own house. The pre-shoot rehearsal space and one of the main sets for *Last Wedding* was production designer Tony Devenyi's and director of photography Dave Pelletier's house. Sweeney always has a camera on hand to help the cast get a feel for the scene's visual choreography. This contributes to the sense of safety the cast members profess to feel when working with him and, in turn, allows them to push the envelope a bit and go into the darker corners of their character's psyche when called upon to do so. Although the cast went through its usual improvisations for *Last Wedding*, the results were different this time. Whereas the storyline and characters in *Dirty* were almost completely improvised during the rehearsal process, *Last Wedding* used its rehearsal time primarily to establish the back stories of the three couples. After that, Sweeney took what the actors had come up with, went away and wrote the script. The subsequent shoot adhered closely to what was written.

Curious about what *exactly* went on during those long rehearsals, I met with Sweeney, Ratner, Scholte, Sivak and Chula for an around-the-table conversation and discovered that the ensemble rehearsal process can be a psychic minefield. Ratner mentions that he and Betrani, who play the most hostile couple in the film, would frequently get on the phone at night and yell about perceived slights suffered at the hands of the other during the day's work. "It's all part of the process," Ratner sighs. Scholte says there is an "essential masochism at the heart of why I became an actor, and Bruce provides an opportunity for all of us to really suffer." Although Scholte is laughing when he says this, other tidbits of conversation suggest that the rehearsal process is as much about exploring the dark side of one's personality as it

From top to bottom: Ratner and Betrani; Molly Parker; Nancy Sivak; Tom Scholte and Nancy Sivak.

# Walter Sweeney

is about coming to grips with the character's motivations. Of course, Sweeney and company tell me that this is what is needed to come to grips with their characters.

The conversation yields another interesting insight into the ensemble's workings. One of the reasons Sweeney continues to work with the same group of actors is that he knows them all quite well on a personal level. He knows which buttons to push, a fact frequently mentioned by his cast members. For example, when writing about the relationship between the professor and his student, Sweeney knew that Scholte and Delver had dated. He "loaded the dice" by putting them into some of the most overtly sexual situations in the film to see what would happen. Indeed, over the course of our afternoon conversation it becomes apparent that Sweeney frequently plunders the personal lives of his cast members for situations and dialogue. Both Scholte and Ratner agree that the characters they portray in *Last Wedding* are as close to their real lives as they are ever likely to get. There might be something a little bit repugnant about this, with overtones of manipulation and director-as-puppet-master exploitation, if the cast wasn't so willing to go along with Sweeney. That the same actors come back to work with him time and again is testament to their trust and realization, to coin the ultimate acting cliché, that it really *is* all about the work. If it turns out well, *so what* if they had to go to a few dark places to discover the best in themselves.

Sweeney has a fondness for cutting from a light scene of normal interaction to something harsh or sordid, just to keep the audience on its toes. In *Last Wedding* the most notable example of this technique is a cut from the student, Laurel, and professor, Peter, casually having drinks and contemplating a tryst to a scene of the two of them rutting, animal-like, in an alley by an open dumpster. Referring to the way Robert Altman will shift the tone of his movies by inserting a scene of horrible violence (the slashing of a gangster's moll's face in the *The Long Goodbye* or the killing of Keith Carradine's gormless young cowboy in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*), Sweeney feels that abruptly changing the tone of a movie serves to inform audiences that what they are watching is a construction, a designed piece of work, and, in a way, it's a method of asserting directorial authority. "With the dumpster sex scene, I think it works because it's so animalistic, compulsive, ugly but necessary, given the two characters and what they are about," says Sweeney. When asked if he is concerned that some people might detect a hint of misanthropy in his world view, he flatly asserts, "I'm not worried about that at all. The film is accurate. It's a critique of male behaviour. Thematically, it's perfect for me, in that it directly addresses male weakness. Each of the guys has to face up to something in their relationship and each fails miserably. And they don't really talk about things with each other. It's very male. They're best friends, but don't talk about anything. They fish, eat sushi and drink."

Sweeney's darkly humorous vision is played out in the sunny climes of summertime Vancouver, which serves as an ironic counterpoint to the action while, at the same time, bringing into focus Sweeney's other important achievement – the delineation on film of what it means to live in the city. So much of Canadian cinema is rooted in a sense of place, and Sweeney's films, to a degree, continue this tradition. However, he is different. The Vancouver he puts up on the screen owes little to the picture postcard view of life – the mountains, the beaches, the ocean – that passes for Vancouver "reality" represented in other films and media. The Vancouver of Bruce Sweeney is closer to the Vancouver depicted in local artist Jeff Wall's haunting photos of vaguely menacing places and situations or Stan Feingold's and Lincoln Clarke's *Heroines*, a provocative documentary on heroin-addicted women living in the downtown eastside.

Sweeney's films are resolutely urban, and that makes film-loving Vancouverites feel much the same way as I imagine Haligonians felt when they saw Andrea Dorfman's *Parsley Days*. The feeling of, "Hey, that's the city I know. How come I've never seen it that way on the screen before?" *Dirty* perfectly captured the dope-influenced, eastside anomie while *Last Wedding* goes for a downtown feel, dealing with what were once called yuppies and their milieu. Lofts, condos and funky old houses serve as the main settings, while the mountains hover in the background. No beaches are seen; however, gritty Hastings Street is. Sushi restaurants and bars figure prominently, while roller-bladers are conspicuously absent. Sweeney's determination to make a movie about Vancouver for Vancouverites might end up costing him a bit because some of the film's references will be lost. That Noah is a weatherproofing salesman is a nice inside joke, given the ongoing leaky condo crisis (which is discussed in the film) that has financially ruined more lives than any other urban screw-up in memory. Noah's throwaway line about a piece of Zipporah's clothing looking like it came from Surrey is quintessential Vancouver snobbery and it's funny if you know this place. If you don't, *Last Wedding* serves as the perfect introduction.

As our conversation wraps up, Sweeney takes a shot at the American films dominating the local cinematic landscape by ironically quoting Walter Pidgeon's dictate to Kirk Douglas in Vincent Minnelli's *The Bad and the Beautiful*: "I want a kiss at the end and black ink on the books." As long as producer Stephen Hegyes can keep securing the money – a trick that should be made easier since *Last Wedding* was selected for this year's opening-night gala at the Toronto International Film Festival – it will be a long time before Sweeney gives in to that kind of ultimatum. **TAKE ONE**