

FILM REVIEWS

Gerry O'Hara's

Leopard in the Snow

d: Gerry O'Hara, sc: Anne Mather, Jill Hyem, ph: Michael Reed, ed: Eddy Joseph, sd. mix. David Bowen, a.d. Anthony Pratt, m. Kenneth V. Jones, l.p. Keir Dullea, Susan Penhaligon, Kenneth More, Billie Whitelaw, Jeremy Kemp, Gordon Thomson, exec. p. W. Lawrence Heisey, p. John Qusted, Chris Harrop, p.c. Seastone Productions Ltd. (London), Leopard in the Snow Ltd. (Toronto) 1977, col. 35mm, dist: Danton Films Ltd, running time: 89 minutes.

Leapin' lizards, Harlequin Romance, the firm that churns out sexless, virginal paperbacks, has gone into the movie business.

With unprecedented vigor, **Leopard In The Snow**, number 74 in sequential order, opened in Winnipeg in three, count'em, three movie houses; one more than the most popular film of all times, **Star Wars**.

The Canadian-British co-production, which cost \$1.1 million, and not one penny anteed by the CFDC, debuted in Winnipeg – and for very good reason. Back in 1949, the fabulously wealthy Bonnycastle family saw the 'merits' in good ole romantic fiction. Although Toronto-based, Harlequin began here; not that it's anything to boast about, mind you.

By the time this review appears, **Leopard In The Snow** will have reached every hamlet in the province, turning a quick buck, nay, many bucks.

Since the books, with the paper-thin plots and aching sameness, were sashayed into a booming empire appealing to the lovelorn, you would have thought that with its first foray into movies, the backers would have taken a little extra care; hiring the right people, casting the right stars – that sort of thing.



Helen shares her woes with the hired-man Bolt

Basically, there is really nothing wrong with the premise of the story – a dispirited loner, wracked with guilt, is eventually brought back to life through the love of a good and gentle woman. The formula has been used and reworked ever since the flickers first flicked. Most recently, it popped up again with less-than-spectacular success in **Bobby Deerfield**.

In the hands of an innovative writer and a competent director – the director needn't be ingenious for a film like this – the formula could have come off much better than it does.

Dashing through the snow in her nifty little sports car, Helen James (Susan Penhaligon) gets stuck in the snow. We later learn that she's escaping to have a bit of a think session over an impending marriage being foisted upon her by an uncaring father.

Walking in a blizzard, her hair remaining impeccably styled as though she were doing a hair spray commercial, she is discovered by a brooding, mysterious and, of course, handsome man (Keir Dullea).

His first words of snappy repartee are: "I didn't expect to find anything worth hunting today". Wink, wink, nudge, nudge, say no more, say no more.

Oh yes, it might be worth mentioning that he has the leopard of the title with him. Anyway, he takes her

back to his abode located smack dab in the middle of nowhere with the only other human being, being a brooding hulk of a manservant.

The characters in this film brood and look morose a great deal of the time.

Onward... after a good night's sleep, poor distraught Helen wants to head off but the strange young man, who won't tell her his name, wants to keep her. After another day or two, she decides she's fallen in love him, after realizing that he's an ex-racing driver who was responsible for the death of his brother. Freudian themes of guilt are mildly touched upon, but nothing so heavy as to clutter the story. Frankly, the story could use some cluttering.

Inexplicably, he rejects her and sends her packing back to London. With a word of understanding from stepmom, who knows all about matters of the heart, Helen goes off in search of her true love. After a few more inconsequential scenes, the two walk hand-in-hand with the leopard at their sides. Credits and lights.

A good love story, even one that's a little hokey, is welcome relief in these times of ultra everything. But the major problem with **Leopard In The Snow** is its plain-awful dialogue. The book was written by Anne Mather and she so loved her characters she didn't want them fiddled with. They

Film Credit Abbreviations: d. Director asst d. Assistant Director sc. Script adapt Adaptation dial Dialogue ph. Photography sp ph. eff. Special Photographic Effects ed. Editor sup. ed. Supervising Editor sd. Sound sd. ed. Sound Editor sd. rec. Sound Recording p. des. Production Designer a.d. Art Director set dec. Set Decorator m. Music m.d. Music Director cost. Costumes choreo. Choreography l.p. Leading Players exec. p. Executive Producer p. Producer assoc. p. Associate Producer p. sup. Production Supervisor p. man. Production Manager p.c. Production Company col. Colour Process dist. Distributors narr. Narration

could have used a bit of fiddling. Co-written by Jill Hyem, **Leopard in the Snow** is riddled with banal dialogue. Example:

"You're mad," says Helen staring at Dominic Lyall as he disappears into his room. Just when silence matched with a sharp glare would have been a nice touch, Dominic instead quips: "You're entitled to your opinion."

Poor Helen, and the rest of us, are left out in the hallway looking a little dazed by such a juvenile remark. After saying such a line, it seems there should be a "nyahh, nyahh, nyahh" tagged on for good measure.

Mather and Hyem have tried to remain so faithful to the virtues of Harlequin - no overt sex scenes, no foul language, no violence - that the film is curiously lifeless. Harlequin books may be a passport to romance, but one shouldn't have to daydream to fill in what the writers dare not provide.

While Keir Dullea fills the bill physically - he's tall, dark and handsome - he seems ill-at-ease in the role of the romantic figure. He's trying desperately to escape the type-casting of the psychotic weirdos he usually plays, but the fact of the matter is, Dominic is a touch odd. Dullea's manservant, played by Jeremy Kemp, would have been better in Dullea's part. He has that aura of gothic sinisterness and swarthy attractiveness, much like Heathcliff in 'Wuthering Heights', or Rochester in 'Jane Eyre'.

Susan Penhaligon, as the daffy Helen, is rather bland and the part could have taken on some dimension and interest had, say, Hayley Mills played the role. Miss Penhaligon, who played Glenda Jackson's watergate rival in **Nasty Habits**, looks properly doe-eyed but her performance is a bore.

Leopard In The Snow features a surprisingly strong supporting cast of British actors who add some interest when they appear. Billie Whitelaw, an actress who has never received the parts due her, has a few nice bits as Helen's bitchy step-mother. Kenneth More, late of *The Forsyte Saga*, does a guest stint, wrinkling brow, looking dreadfully concerned over daughter's life. And Kemp, who specializes in tacky Germans, serves tea marvelously well.

The first half of the film, where the three are stuck in the house together, should be the most forceful, fraught with the most tension. We should be worrying about the fate of our heroine.

Is she in the home of a madman or is he really just an emotional cripple, as she suspects? Director Gerald O'Hara, who could have been creative in this latter day 'Jane Eyre', does nothing to create an ominous, spooky atmosphere.

Even when Dominic screams in terror in the middle of the night, Helen barely takes notice. I, on the other hand, would have been quivering under the sheets, while as we all know, a true-blue movie heroine would have stalked the house to see what was up.

Because there isn't that much to sustain our attention, we begin looking for inconsistencies. It didn't seem to bother the makers that the nozzle of a snowblower, creating those blizzard conditions, is crystal clear in one scene. And no one seemed to notice that while the snows are howling in the north part of England, London is green and dry.

The truest devotee of Harlequin is quite likely to find this film a hoot. Although producer Chris Harrop openly admits to wanting to create films for women, the same way Disney makes films for kids, he shouldn't insult their intelligence.

While Harlequin junkies turned out in droves on opening night, one lady who was questioned said she came because "I'm hoping to see Keir Dullea's throbbing Manhood".

Both the junkies and this lady left disappointed.

Lee Rolfe

Eddy Matalon's

Cathy's Curse

d: Eddy Matalon, **sc:** Myra Clement, Algin Sens-Cazenave, Eddy Matalon, **ph:** Jean-Jacques Tarbès, **ed:** Pierre Rose, Micheline Thouin, Laurent Quaglio, **sd:** Jean-Michel Rouard, **sd. rec.:** Jean-Paul Lelong, **m:** Didier Vasseur (Pema Music), **l.p.:** Alan Scarfe, Beverly Murray, **Randi** Allen, Dorothy Davis, Roy Witham, Mary Morter, Renée Girard, Hubert Noël, Sony Forbes, Bryce Allen, Linda Koot, Bob Gerolami, Peter McNeil, Lisa Nicklet, **exec. p.:** Nicole Mathieu Boisvert, **p:** Eddy Matalon, **p.c.:** Agora Film Prods. Ltd. (Mtl), Maki Films (Paris), 1977), **col:** 35mm, **dist:** Cinepix Inc., **running time:** 90 minutes.

Incandescent eyes on a fierce little girl, and a set of quotes calculated to chill your heart, set off the excellent poster and ads for the film **Cathy's**

Curse. All is promises, however. The clichés crowd each other as mental illness, spiritualism, perversion, a hate-filled ghost, a creepy old mansion, cluttered attic, even a murdered dog and a situation that seems to threaten death or worse at every nightmarish turn, all add up to little more than an agreeably amusing movie for the devoted and undemanding fan of horror-schlock.

There's a lot of evident dislike of females in this insipid spin-off, or should one say flick-off, from the genre of **The Exorcist** et al. In this type of film the young female frequently is used as a vague symbol of the budding menace and power of the whole female sex, and very often little girls are given strange powers, and, armed with vacant expressions or sneaky smiles, come to represent the mystery that will be woman: menacing, suggestive of death (the 'little death' men experience during intercourse?) and usually connected to blood, vomit, excrement, etc.

Cathy's curse comes from her curiosity (like Bluebeard's last wife): seeing too much, discovering too much, loving too much, and worst of all, growing up female. Eve had this problem too. But this isn't enough; the film has an Oedipal angle as well.

Oedipal in the merest sense, however. All the original problems of the story evolved from a wicked mother who took her son with her when she ran off, and left her daughter and husband behind. These two then burned to death in their car while chasing the runaways, when the father swerved to avoid hitting a white rabbit (oh, shades of Alice, alas). All this is obviously the mother's fault. But the little boy she ran off with is going to be in trouble too. Or will be when he grows up. We meet him as he moves back to the creepy old mansion with his own little girl and his neurotic wife, recently and tentatively recovered from a nervous breakdown.

Thus, Alan Scarfe, in a feeble impersonation of Christopher Plummer, tries to console his exceedingly strange wife, played by Beverly Murray in a scene-stealing non-style as if she were Viva in a Warhol film, while managing a household equipped with the customary staff for Gothic Movies, the creepy couple, suitably portrayed by Dorothy Davis and Roy Witham, as Mary and Paul. After Mary's death Paul even gets to graduate to the dirty old man.



Cathy, doing her thing, looking upset

Unfortunately, however, much of the tension of such a plot depends on the sexual innuendoes, the Lolita-like fascination of a true nymphet, and the skill of suggestion in the young actress playing the key role of the little girl. Randi Allen tramps through her part barely visibly differentiating between smug, sad and scared.

It isn't an easy part to handle though, for she is expected to be either evil or innocent, either a victim or a villainess, with both equally possible (though neither very plaus-

ible) to the very end. It creates a certain ambiguity in the portrayal, a sort of extension of the idea of little girls being sugar and spice.

But little girls are only sugar and spice when tasted. Edible. When little girls grow up to be women they tend to have appetites of their own, a frightening prospect. In order to keep them sweetly edible, they should be properly subdued. But how? A whole genre of horror film suggests the answer: beat up the little girl, terrify her, or torture her, through agents of the devil, of course, or the powers of suggestion from a malignant evil force. In **Cathy's Curse**, as in **Full Circle**, another Canadian co-production released this year in which a nasty little female is under the influence of an even-nastier former little female, there is a certain circuitousness to the path of evil. Where could it all have begun? At any rate, in this type of film the female is frightened, mystified, sometimes even mutilated, and always an attempt is made to manipulate her to being a proper subdued and helpful little creature, ready to take her place with the other growing-up females in a male society. No one says this, of course, but moviedom's little boys are seldom infested with spirits and mystery, most often being seen as forthright devil-may-care little explorers of the universe.

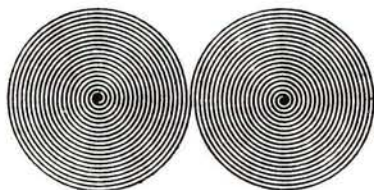
Although the plot for **Cathy's Curse** has its interesting aspects, it is neither scary enough, nor gory

enough, despite some vivid effects created by Gaetan Lafrance, nor psychologically astute enough, nor even well-performed enough, to work with any degree of effectiveness.

What will also cool the box-office for this film, is its sense of good taste and middle-class mindlessness. The performers act out a fantasy of what it is like to live in a grand hoary old mansion, without making it believable enough to allow the audience to feel in-the-know about their lives. They don't belong, but they don't seem to realize it. Audiences for horror-schlock do like to watch the rich suffer and strain, and the basic idea of placing tortured wealthy people in extravagantly beautiful old homes always satisfied audiences by permitting them to see the rich have a rough and miserable time, teetering between difficult pregnancies and mental breakdowns if they are female, or bankruptcy and impotency if they are male. Audiences like to feel they're getting a look at something they wouldn't normally see or experience. But this seemingly suburban bunch have sitcom superficiality.

Bad psychological continuity, peculiar motivations, any number of situations that seem to suggest something interesting, and come to naught, inconsistent acting styles, and a script that seems to require a few more drafts, make this offering a weak sister in the sneaky-evil little girl genre.

Natalie Edwards



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