

REVIEWS

Atom Egoyan's **Next Of Kin**

Seldom do you find a low-budget film – never mind a first feature – as technically accomplished as *Next of Kin*, produced, written, directed and edited by 24-year-old Toronto independent filmmaker Atom Egoyan. The narrative is engaging and crisply paced, the dialogue sure and authentic, the performances solid, the locations, sets, and small details appropriate. Then there is the camera – a camera which not only moves, but moves swiftly, fluidly, assuredly. It adds up to quite an achievement for a \$37,000 film made on Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council grants (it looks like it should have cost \$100,000). Egoyan must share the credit with cinematographer Peter Mettler (director of the praised 1982 experimental feature *Scisserre*) and a dedicated crew of young Toronto film professionals.

A cultural comedy with disturbing undertones, *Next of Kin* premiered at the Festivals of Festivals and was Canada's sole entry in October at the Mannheim Film Festival in West Germany. Egoyan's background is in theatre (he has written 10 plays, including one to be produced in New York this fall, *External Affairs*) and, to a lesser extent, film criticism (while at University of Toronto, he wrote some of the most lucid and intelligent reviews ever to appear in the student press), so, not surprisingly, his films reveal formal considerations.

His previous film, *Open House*, a half-hour drama which aired on CBC-TV, was like *Next of Kin* a deliberately self-conscious study of a family in crisis, but Egoyan's distance from the material was too pronounced: you felt you were witnessing an exploration in film form rather than a movie with characters, story and action. In this respect, Egoyan has made great progress with his first feature: *Next of Kin* is a warmer, livelier, more engaging film.

Egoyan begins *Next of Kin* in the middle of its story, structuring the first 20 minutes so that the narrative both catches up and works backward, creating a haunting, effective exposition. It establishes the surreal aspect of its story. Peter (Patrick Tierney), a 23-year-old, upper-class, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, lives at home with his quarrelling parents. He is unhappy, disaffected, aimless, spending his days "pretending" (i.e., daydreaming), which infuriates his staunchly conservative parents. Though the film never explicitly states it, Peter's problem is that he does not want to be a WASP.

The family is undergoing psychotherapy – the sessions are videotaped so patients can review them later – and one day Peter looks instead at the tape of an Armenian family, the Deryans, guilty over having given up their infant son Bedros 20 years earlier when they were poor. The father George (Berge Fazlian) takes his frustration out on his daughter Ajah (Arsinee Khanjian) while the mother (Sirvart Fazlian) suffers silently. Since Bedros would now be his own age, Peter decides to impersonate him: he seeks both to ease the family's pain

and rid himself of his own unwanted identity.

For Peter, the project is his first venture out of the home and the ultimate test of his "pretending" skills. The Deryans immediately accept him as their son. It doesn't matter that he doesn't look Armenian: all their lives they have fantasized a role their son would have played in the family, so when one arrives they don't ask questions. Playing it straight, Egoyan works this family's lavish affections toward their improbable son Peter – for whom the epithet "Whitebread" surely applies – for much deadpan humour.

Soon Peter faces a choice between his hollow WASP existence and the rich emotional life of this strange ethnic family. It sounds like a cliché, and would be a terrible cliché were it not for Egoyan's persistent undercutting of the narrative. A nightmare lurks at the edges of Peter's adolescent dream of choosing his own family, giving *Next of Kin* a quirky, unsettling feel: wholesome family drama played out in the Twilight Zone. In one scene, Peter curls up on the kitchen table so the mother can cuddle him as she did the infant Bedros; it's funny but disturbing – especially since it's the same table upon which they consumed Peter's homecoming meal. Add to this the film's roving, probing camera style, said by the director to represent the spirit of the missing son. Through this device, the film subconsciously contrasts its visual style with the family's deadening need to fix Peter/Bedros in its own image of a son – an image which remains largely infantile (they have even preserved Bedros' teddy bear).

In the ensuing contest of wills, the family easily overwhelms the hapless Peter. He finally loses control of his escapade when the Deryans throw Bedros a surprise birthday party. With the family's relatives gathered to pass judgment, Peter is presented for approval then led to the cake, where his sister beckons him to look closer, closer, until a pair of hands pop out to grab his face. They are George's hands – it's only another of the practical jokes the Deryans enjoy playing – but it signifies how completely and hopelessly Peter has plunged into alien territory.

Working the narrative against expectation, Egoyan never gives the audience the big discovery scene it anticipates.

Instead, Peter remains as Bedros, achieving his dream of family bliss at the cost of destroying himself. As he lies in bed surrounded by his new family, dread mixes with satisfaction: Peter realizes he is among strangers, strangers who love Bedros, not Peter. As his sister places his photographs into the family album during the final credits, the grotesqueness of his fate is underlined: the roving camera has represented the spirit of the real Bedros, while Peter's frozen image suggests his soul's imprisonment. The last laugh; chillingly, is on him.

Part of the story's charm is that Peter's ruse is never revealed, but this limits the film's overall scope. The ambiguous ending sidesteps Peter's identity problem, and many issues set up by the film hardly get touched – questions of culture, class differences, the gap between "real" and "pretend." Given the film's high level of accomplishment, one wishes Egoyan had pushed his material further; one senses many of these issues remain unresolved for him, to be explored in later works. Perhaps it's that the film's intellectual premise demands Peter be something of a cipher, but Patrick Tierney's performance makes him a more sympathetic character, so you want to know more than the film is prepared to tell you about his life, his relation to his parents (who are only broadly sketched caricatures), his emotions. Nevertheless, its ironic texture, visual style and feel for genuine cinematic exploration make *Next of Kin* a promising debut and should establish Egoyan as a young Canadian director worth watching – and supporting – in the coming years.

Bruce Malloch ●

NEXT OF KIN d./sc./ed. Atom Egoyan d.o.p. Peter Mettler sd. rec. Clark McCarron art d. Ross Nichol p. man. Camelia Frieberg, Jeremy Podeswa a.d. Mark R. Battley gaffer Bill Brown cont. Susan Haller grip Imre Geiszt best boy Frank Foster boom Paul McGlashan ward. Delanie Prasek asst. cam. Doug Koch sp. efx. ed. Michele Moses mus. ed. Gordon Kidd asst. ed. Bruce McDonald titled Metamedia stills Tim O'Brien, Kaloust Babian p. assts. Hagop Apkarian, David Churchill, Jim Coburn, Paul Harris, Vivian Palin, Pierre Yereimian class. guitar Atom Egoyan sd. efx. David Rokeby. Traditional folk music by The Song and Dance Ensemble of Armenia. Produced with the assistance of The Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council p.c. Ego Film Arts, Toronto colour 16mm running time 72 minutes, l.p. Patrick Tierney, Berge Fazlian, Arsinee Khanjian, Sirvart Fazlian.

● Patrick Tierney and 'family' in *Next of Kin*: wholesome drama in the Twilight Zone



Allan Eastman's **Danger Bay**

A scene from *Danger Bay*, the new half-hour drama series coproduced by Toronto independent Paul Saltzman, CBC-TV, and the Disney Channel: deep in the British Columbia interior the Bad Guy aims his rifle at the Good Guy, valiant veterinarian Dr. Grant "Doc" Roberts (Donnelly Rhodes). The good doctor escapes, though, in a helicopter piloted by the capable and lovely Joyce Carter (Deborah Wakeham), who unthinks the villain with a blast from her craft's propellers. The Bad Guy aims at his fleeing partners but they get away, too. Disgusted, he flings his rifle to the ground without firing a single shot. It's odd. Guns on TV are as familiar as the medium itself, but a TV gun that doesn't go off is rare – which says the makers of *Danger Bay* are up to something different.

Danger Bay builds its stories around real-life environmental concerns, not cops-and-robbers fantasies. Each episode tries to teach the audience some unusual facts, like the origin of the expression "Mad as a hatter." The show scrupulously avoids excessive violence, sexism, racism, and exploitation, creating its own benign unreality where guns are aimed but never fired. Using the medium's established conventions, it seeks to give disenchanted TV viewers a show which is not only good but good for them.

The question remains: can a show like *Danger Bay* improve television merely by changing the content? Much of the show's format is as conventional as any TV half-hour. The same plotlines structured around three commercial breaks – a sameness ameliorated somewhat by the uncommon flair of Doug McKay's location cinematography. Same combination of terrific job and wonderful family for Doc Roberts, whose kids (Christopher Crabb and Ocean Hellman) are as cute and likeable as any TV siblings. Same loyal supporting cast – along with Carter, there's a bright, efficient and pretty researcher (Michelle Chan) to explain the scientific stuff and an adorable seal pup, Danger. Same synth-pop score pulsing as relentlessly as any action thriller's, as if it alone were charged with putting the danger in *Danger Bay*.

Then there are the show's progressive elements. Doc's an environmental protector and crusader against injustice to man or beast. Show this public servant a wrong and he'll set it right, hang the risk, cost or paperwork. He'll also doing his best as a single father. His kids share the household chores. Joyce holds a traditionally male job. Chan's researcher is Chinese. There are welcome alternatives to the stereotyped blandness of the TV family, and if *Danger Bay* is to make a dent on public consciousness it will be through the dynamic it creates among these characters, the little daily things they do which speak of a larger context. As it stands after two episodes, the show could probably push these elements further. Doc handles only small change like rabid dogs and miscreant prospectors and still gives most of the orders.