

## Eric Till's **Gentle Sinners**

One is not especially predisposed to like this film: another adolescent coming of age that takes place in another small community in the Canadian bush. And yet, as soon as we get past the bible-thumping ignominy of the caricatural parents (played in living two-dimension by Jackie Burroughs and Kenneth Pogue, not their fault one suspects), the film quite unabashedly seduces. The opening scene has Eric (known as Bobby by his parents, and played beautifully by Christopher Earle) scammed out of his money and every stitch of clothing off his untanned vulnerable hide. The shot of a youngster trying to literally find his trousers while thumbing rides on the open road as the sun is coming up is both moving and hilarious, and sets the tone for this quite delightful production.

Eric's classic search for the father culminates in his finding the wonderful Uncle Sigfus, his Icelandic bachelor uncle, who shares the duties of avuncular confident with his friend Sam. Ed McNamara as the former and George Clutesi as Sam give the most heart-wrenching and understated performances, beautiful and totally believable, so clear and elegant one simply envies the seamless quality of the acting.

The plot plots its way through finding venue to support the errant nephew, as he has forfeited his work in lumber by alienating the town grotesques, the evil Tree brothers. Sigfus and Sam take Eric trawling for fish and director of photography Kenneth Gregg gets some extraordinary moments out of the lake

scenes, while our hero, who cannot swim, is almost drowned.

Eric meets the ingenue, Melissa (Charlene Senuik) while she is collecting money for the evil Tree brothers. Director Eric Till gets the most out of these young actors, evoking with the shimmer of an impressionist painting the evanescent quality of adolescent summers of first love.

The climax of the film has all the magic, passion and dread of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. Dire threats arise for boy, man, and nature, plus our hero gets to rescue his "maiden fair." And in case we missed the allusion, the writer does throw Huck, in book form, at us more than once.

*Gentle Sinners* is such a work of art, a story worthy of telling and a Canadian film which transcends in many important ways the simple genre piece it could have succumbed to being; the cinematography is frame-for-frame most exquisitely executed, and the direction is almost flawless. And yet... again there are these nits which should not be overlooked, if only because they were not necessary. The women in this tale, most likely based on "true" or "real" ones, are, without exception, whores, witches and wimps. Ed Thomason is a writer of such apparent and rich talent, that surely he could have avoided the obvious, the cheap thrill of creating another brazen buxom lass, smothering mother, helpless housekeeper, or golly-gee ingenue who must be booked and bedded before the finale. There is so much humour and compassion and sincerity in this story, based on the Valgardson novel, that one is stunned by such lapses.

Jackie Burroughs plays without a hitch the fundamentalist mama, so why must we have her go quite over the edge as a complete witch? The slut in the team of hitchhikers is not particularly offensive - in fact she is beautiful realized - only this sluttishness is a theme amplified by

the ingenue's mother, who, as housekeeper of the evil Tree brothers, is mistress to both, and rendered helpless to protect her nubile, and presumably virginal, daughter from their lecherous advances.

Okay, enough, the heroine did have to be in some terrible danger or the hero's efforts to save her would not have been so grand or passionate. Still, she did have her own strategy for escape, and might have succeeded had she not fallen for Eric. So we come back to the bothersome wimpification of the female principal.

For all that, there shouldn't be a dry eye in front of the set when this film is screened on CBC Jan. 6. Despite its flaws, it is truly worth viewing.

Anna Fuerstenberg ●

**GENTLE SINNERS** d. Eric Till **exec. p./p.** Peter Kelly **assoc. p.** Flora Macdonald **a.d.** Tony Thatcher **2nd a.d.** Mike Williams **sc.** Ed Thomason, based on the novel by W.D. Valgardson **p. asst.** Roman Stoyko **unit man. (Tor.)** Gail Einarson-McCleery **unit man (Wpg.)** Alix Washchysyn **cont.** Kathryn Buck **p. sec.** Deborah Osborne **des. coord.** Bob Powers **d.o.p.** Kenneth Gregg **cam. op.** Michael Storey **cam. asst.** John Maxwell **lighting** Erik Kristensen **light. assts.** Len Watier, Keith Jenkins, John Wilson **sd.** Erik Hope **boom** Chris Davies **art d.** Milt Parcher **des. (Wpg.)** Stan Langtry **des. asst. (Tor.)** Catherine Baseraba **des. d. (Wpg.)** Robert Lowe **grafix** John Simons **set dec.** Peter Razmofsky, Michael Happy, Bill Chody **cost.** Betty Dowson, Michael Harris, Ruth Secord **cost. (Wpg.)** Gloria Tallman, Ted Patterson **make-up** Mario Cacioppo **make-up asst.** Barb Zaporzan **hair** Phil Benson **staging** Ralph MacDonald, Robert Wytka, Derek Loomes, T.B.A. (Wpg.) **painter** Randy Chodak **sp. efx.** Doug Wardle **des. sked. (Wpg.)** Welland Jennings **carpenters** Dave Mackling, Gerry Filby **cast.** Dorothy Gardner, Michelle Metivier **post. p.** Toni Wrate **film ed.** Ralph Brunjes **lab (Wpg.)** Mid Can Labs **p. coord.** Laurie Cook **unit pub.** Sally Swank **coffee** Kim Forrest **lp.** Christopher Earle, Charlene Senuik, Ed McNamara, Todd Stewart, Jackie Burroughs, Kenneth Pogue, Neil Bennett, John Curtis, Frank Adamson, George Clutesi, Benjamin Darvill, Jessica Steen, Jeff Hirschfield, Cathi Allen, Joanne Allen, Don Emms, Ralph Almond, Clarence Franklin, Joe Tenhaft, Gudmunder Peterson **p.c.** Canadian Broadcasting Corp.

## Don Carmody's **The Surrogate**

In spite of its terminally rotten script and direction, *The Surrogate* has something rare and valuable to offer the discerning moviegoer: dramatically functional, integrated and central-to-the-storyline sex.

Now, in the unabashed stroke movies - *Candy*, *The Story of O* - the sex is certainly necessary, there'd be no movie without it, but it's not what you'd call "dramatically functional," not when the drama is either perfunctory or totally absent, the young-woman's-sexual-odyssey storyline being a narrative rather than dramatic construction. In the ordinary dramatic movie - *Coming Home*, *Body Heat* - it is not sex that functions, but desire (with or without fulfillment) and its consequences. The sex scenes have value only as statements of fact: they did it and the earth moved, or they did it and it shows their marriage is boring. Apart from rape scenes (and without going into the question of whether they do, or do not, constitute sex scenes), sex which delineates and develops character, furthers the plot and is, itself, dramatic (that is, filled with conflict, crisis and resolution) is a rarity. In Canadian film, only James Woods' scenes with Debby Harry in *Videodrome* come readily to mind. Entire movies built on and worked out in terms of explicit sexual conflict (again excluding rape) are almost unknown. Currently, we have Ken Russell's *Crimes of Passion*, before that *The Stud* (with Joan Collins, from her sister's novel) and possibly *Lolita*, and the films of Russ Meyer. Then the idea starts getting diluted - *Shivers* might be included, but there are those parasites.

There is, of course, a perfectly good reason for the scarcity of good (or even bad) sexual drama, apart from the impositions of self, public- and governmental censorship, and that is that sex requires consent and co-operation, but drama requires conflict.

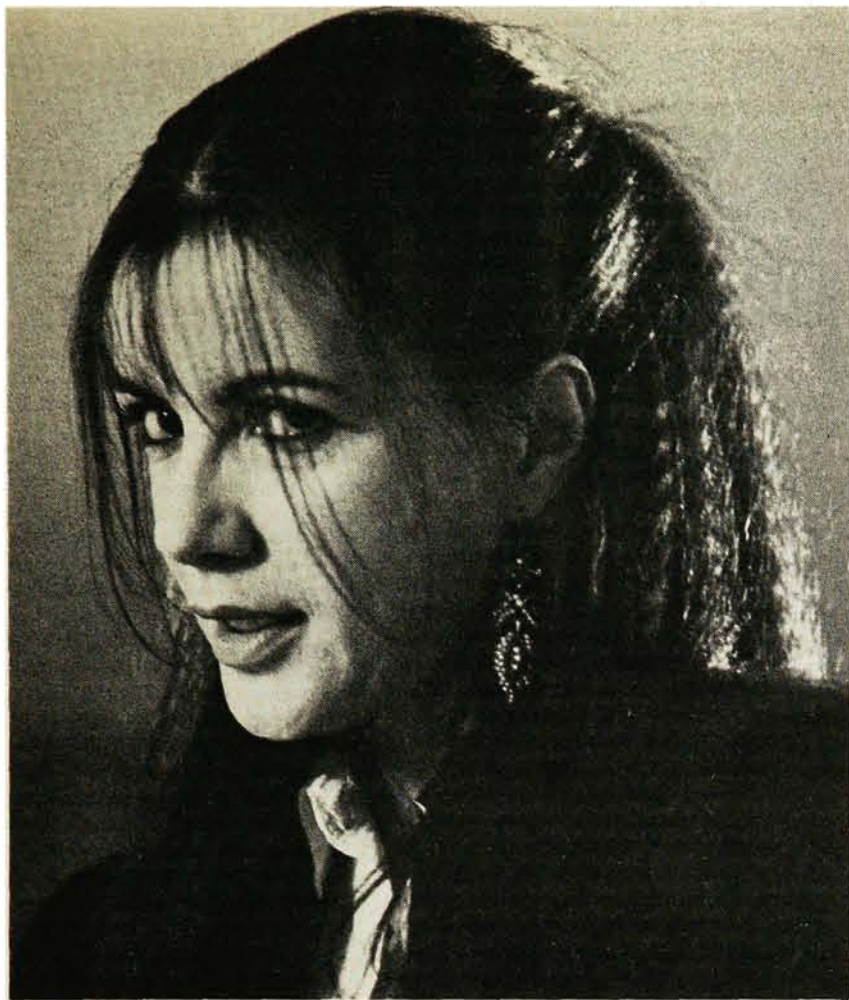
The premise for *The Surrogate* provides a fine arena for sex-with-conflict: Frank Waite (Art Hindle), an upper middle-class car-dealer, has an impotence problem and so much rage that he has blackouts from time to time, both of which he blames on his wife's frigidity - they haven't made love in a year. The wife, Lee (Shannon Tweed), does seem cold and hostile, but that could just be her response to life with Frank. We do know that she likes to masturbate in the bath and that she says she's willing to make it any time he can get it up, so we think she can't be all that frigid. Our sympathies, not high for either one, are balanced between them.

The drama starts when Frank's psychiatrist suggests the couple hire sex surrogate Anouk Ven Derlin (Carole Laure). She'll get you fucking again, through deeds not words, says the shrink, but warns that her treatments can be monumentally weird. Waiting for Anouk's first visit, Frank and Lee, who has been dragged into this against her better judgement, are clawing the walls. When she arrives, the tension escalates: they seem to be just making nervous small talk, but it's plain she's probing for an opening, a way to get



● Ed McNamara and Christopher Earle in *Gentle Sinners*: seamless acting





● Carole Laure as *The Surrogate*: more deeds than words

things rolling. It comes when Frank says Lee doesn't like to be touched. So Anouk starts touching her, sexually. How will Lee react to her first sexual touch from another woman? How will Frank react to seeing the woman he cannot arouse being turned on by another? How will Lee react when Frank's hands replace Anouk's? How will she react when the caresses get genital, when tongue replaces finger? What will Frank's attraction to Anouk do to the current situation and to later developments? Can either of them cope with this while it's happening? How will they be changed when it's over? These are dramatic questions central to the development of character and plot and their presence generates a level of tension not often found in sex scenes.

Anouk's next appearance carries the sexual drama forward. She shows up at the apartment with a sample-case in hand, explaining that the surrogate business doesn't pay the rent and wondering if Lee would like to buy some sexy lingerie. Lee isn't home, but Frank is and he's getting hot, hotter still when Anouk shows him the panties she's wearing. The action starts as a cross between a seduction and a tease, then turns violent. Frank rapes Anouk. Or does he? There is equal indication that he has been manipulated into fulfilling a violent fantasy. But Frank is terrified of his own rage. He's left weeping and huddled, not knowing what's happened (and we're not supposed to know either) and wondering what he's turning into. And what will this do to Lee when she finds out?

All this occurs against, and is given weight by, a series of murders, first of random men, then of the couple's friends and associates. We know from the structure that the killer is one of the three principals and that it will be the effects of increasingly experimental sex that

will precipitate the climax and unmasking.

Unfortunately, any but the most naive viewer will guess the killer long before the halfway mark, thanks to Carmody's hamfisted handling of verbal and visual clues and thanks, more importantly, to his rigid adherence to genre cliché. More unfortunately still, Carmody has no idea of how to make his movie move. His dialogue is banal and obvious, his camera placement tries, at best, for the functional, and sometimes misses. Trivial and irrelevant scenes are played out in full, while important ones move by too quickly. The suspense scenes, in particular, are so flat that one suspects Carmody, whose previous experience was as producer on *Porkys I and II* and *Spacehunter*, is only interested in his sexual material.

Which brings us to the most unfortunate thing of all: Carmody can't handle his sex. It's not only that his directorial ineptitude denies us the eroticism that cinema can create, but that his kindergarten-level sexuality just doesn't understand or sympathize with the more non-conformist sexual expressions his script demands. After the standard porno fantasy of Anouk as the horny Avon lady, she next shows up as a dominatrix and, sexually, the picture collapses. What happens is this: Frank arrives home to find Lee bound and gagged in a chair. Anouk, in full leather gear, rushes out and belts him with some kind of ritual baton. He grabs it and breaks it. She puts a knife to Lee's throat and demands a little bootlicking from Frank. He complies to save his wife, but Anouk comes too close. He disarms her and chucks her out. Lee, freed, reveals Anouk was waiting for her when she came home. They conclude she's gone off the deep end. Despite the wardrobe and dialogue, this is not a sex scene; it is straight melodrama from beginning to end and,

as such, a betrayal of the content and direction of the drama that has gone before. It would have taken little to fix the scene: begin with Lee, hands bound and gagged, involved with some kind of apparently consensual SM caresses with Anouk. Bring on Frank; involve him in the scene by way of seduction. Let Lee work the gag out of her mouth and holler for help. Then bring out the knife and run the melodrama. Played that way, the scene would have held the dramatic tension and raised the questions of the earlier scenes, but to do so would have required some understanding of SM as practised by real people and some sympathy for non-conforming sex. Carmody seems to possess neither.

Indeed, he seems inclined to laugh at the sexually different. Jackie Burroughs' cameo, as a middle-aged woman all dressed and ready to play a fantasy as a little girl with a policeman and some ice cream, seems structured for laughs at her expense (we know Hindle is the wrong man, she doesn't). But Burroughs plays the scene with such delight and an utter lack of condescension that the shabbiness of its intentions is at once eclipsed and highlighted.

Much the same occurs with the character of Eric (Jim Bailey), Lee's best friend. He needs to be sexually non-threatening for her, but he's written as a mincing flutney queen with a wholly unnecessary fondness for at-home drag — a typical gay caricature — so that when the script demands he develop a sexual interest in Anouk, the result is total unbelievability. Despite this, Bailey manages to inject some sympathy and real human feeling into the role, as does every other major cast member. Laure and Hindle are competent pros and they give it their all, to good effect. Newcomer Shannon Tweed handles Lee's brittleness and low-key hysteria well enough to suggest that she may grow into a good actress. Watching them work provides the main pleasure, sexual or otherwise, of the movie.

Co-producer, with André Link, John Dunning, is quoted in the press kit to the effect that what interested them in *The Surrogate* was the originality of the idea. If they'd allowed themselves at the same time to become attracted to a talented writer and director, *The Surrogate* could have been a fine addition to a badly neglected genre.

Andrew Dowler ●

**THE SURROGATE** d./p. Don Carnody exec. p. John Dunning, André Link p. Jim Hanley asst. to p. Oriana Bielawski p. man. Josette Perrotta p. office coord. Irene Litinsky loc. man. François Sylvestre craft serv. George Calamatas loc. scout Jacques Laberge p. acct. Rejane Boudreau bookkeeper Barbara Pecs 1st a.d. Jim Kaufman 2nd a.d. Elizabeth Halko script Marie Theberge sc. Carmody, Robert Geoffron mus. Daniel Lanois cast. Elite Productions, Vera Miller, Nadia Rona, Rosina Bucci d.o.p. François Protat 1st asst. cam. Yves Drapeau 2nd asst. cam. Michel Bernier stills Piroshka Mihalka sd. man. Stuart French boom Michael Berrie best boy Jean Courteau rigging Jean-Paul Houle elect. Alex Amyot key grip Serge Grenier best boy Robert Grenier trainee Borek Sedivec 3rd grip Gregoire Schmidt art. d. Charles Dunlop asst. art d. Jean Bourret set dresser Normand Sarrazin asst. art dept. Michel Boyer ward. mistress Nicoletta Massone asst. ward. Francesca Chamberland dresser Catarina Chamberland make-up Jillian Chandler daily make-up Micheline Foissy, Kathryn Casault hair Bob Pritchett hair (daily) Christianne Bleau p. assts. Harold Trepanier, Michel Chauvin transp. coord. Neil Allan Bibby drivers Joe Sanchez, Mark Hindle, Philip Stilman ed. Rit Wallis asst. ed. Susan Schneir p.c. Cinepix Inc., Telemetropole Int'l dist. (int'l) Inter-Ocean Film Sales running time: 100 mins. l.p. Art Hindle, Carole Laure, Shannon Tweed, Michael Ironside, Marilyn Lightstone, Jim Bailey.

Ronald Wilson's

## Sam Hughes's War

Early in this two-part historical drama, telecast by CBC Nov. 21-22, an aide rushes into Canadian minister of Defence Sam Hughes's office and announces: "Gentleman, we are at war." "Thank God!" says Hughes heartily, "let us pray."

From there on, World War I, the Great War, becomes Sam Hughes's abiding passion, his *raison d'être* as the drama carefully examines the complex personality of this military hero. *Sam Hughes's War* is an excellent vehicle for Gordon Pinsent's talents. His Sam Hughes is a fully realized creation: by turns blustering and pompous, vulnerable and whimpering with martyred self-pity, courageous and stubbornly nationalistic, paranoid and even pathetic. Pinsent's range here is remarkable and the role must be a landmark in his career. But what makes this production work is the subtle edge of irony, even cynicism, that runs right through the drama, carefully, quietly undercutting any simplistic notion of official heroism that such Great Wars give rise to.

Partly, this ironic edge is the result of focussing on the bureaucrats, the officers and politicians working safely behind the scenes of war's grim theatre, rather than detailing the drama of soldiers at the front. Staying mainly inside the boardrooms and offices and Cabinet meetings and Parliamentary arena and private luncheons of these war-time, male bureaucrats is both a fascinating decision and a problematic one. On the one hand, it makes the production very dependent on dialogue and rather visually static and claustrophobic. On the other hand, it is the means for depicting the personal intrigues, the political wheeling and dealing, the infighting of officers, Cabinet ministers, and Honourable Members on-the-make. To a degree, *Sam Hughes's War* becomes somewhat mired in the slough of these interrelationships. It is hard to keep track of all the players, hard to follow all the career-intrigues being advanced, especially when the British contingent of bureaucrats, officers, and politicians becomes included. But the primary relationship is that between Sam Hughes and the Canadian Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden. Pinsent's volatile Hughes and Douglas Rain's patient Sir Robert play off each other very interestingly, leading up to a crisis of opposing wills that threatens the friendship, their political party, and the Canadian war effort.

But the essentially refined politesse of these personal/political intrigues is contrasted by the occasional, brief scene at the front: scenes that quietly reveal the inferior equipment, the misery and mud of the trenches, the arrogance of the officers, the terrible anonymity of the foot-soldier. One scene stands out: a half-dozen corpses lie caught in the barbed-wire while two commanding officers stroll past the dead soldiers, talking about some abstract matter. In another brief scene, Prime Minister Borden visits the wounded at the front. He stoops down to comfort a soldier whose eyes are bandaged, saying: "Your noble sacrifice will not have been in vain." The nurse replies tersely that the