

## Anne Wheeler's **Loyalties**

**A**lberta filmmaker Anne Wheeler's first dramatic feature, *Loyalties*, is, in many ways, a very laudable film. Telling the story of the friendship and loyalty between two very different women — one, a down-to-earth Métis, the other, a very proper and refined recent transplant from England — the film succeeds in being both entertaining and moving, and its honest and uncondescending portrayal of the Métis characters is one of its chief virtues. Unfortunately, the film's legitimate strengths are seriously undermined in the end by a rather contrived (albeit powerful) climax.

As the film opens, Lily and Dr. David Sutton (Susan Wooldridge and Kenneth Welsh) have just moved to the remote northern Alberta town of Lac La Biche from their native England with their three small children (an older child is still in school in England). Their reason for moving here is alluded to, but is not made clear; what *is* clear is that the Suttons have a very nasty skeleton in their family closet, and are hoping that here on "the tip of civilization" they'll be able to bury it for good.

Helping Lily with the settling-in is Rosanne (Tantoo Cardinal), a Métis woman with three kids of her own who has just left her common-law husband Eddy (Tom Jackson), and moved back in with her mother. Initially unable to see past their class and cultural differences, Lily and Rosanne eventually do find common ground and become friends. In the film's climax, however, they return home from a night out (celebrating Lily's birthday) to find that Dr. Sutton has attacked and raped Rosanne's 12-year-old daughter. (We learn here that the Suttons' 'skeleton' is

a previous rape in England.) Rosanne turns on both of the Suttons in a horrified rage. Lily, however, is almost catatonic; with her life turned inside-out (again), she finds her fortitude and her loyalties put to a cruel test.

Even in this brief synopsis, the film's two narrative threads are evident. The first, Lily and Rosanne's growing friendship, is portrayed in the film in subtle, well-acted scenes full of warmth and gentle humour; we can almost see the rapport building. The second narrative thread, the mystery surrounding the Suttons' abrupt departure from England, is presented much more one-dimensionally. The emotional wall between Lily and David — there at the start of the film — never changes, and each scene between them merely echoes the previous one. Also, because these characters are saddled with the task of maintaining the 'intrigue' element of the film, their own characterizations are forced to take a back seat, and thus they engender much less audience sympathy than Rosanne and her family do.

The problem, then, is this: when these two narrative threads — each with distinctly different dramatic tones and levels of audience involvement — are brought into collision in the climax, the realism and subtlety of the 'relationship story' are completely quashed by the mechanics of the 'mystery' (and again later by the manipulative denouement), and as a result the film plummets into the unambiguous, monochrome world of melodrama.

A good example of what direction the film might have followed, had it forgone 'family intrigue' and focused more directly on Lily and Rosanne's friendship and the contrast of their lives, is indicated in the dinner sequence. Here the film intercuts a scene of Lily and David having dinner, with a scene of Rosanne, Eddy and their kids also gathered around the meal table. The differences are very revealing. In the Sutton house, Lily and David are seen eating after their children are in bed; they are sitting at opposite ends of the dining room table; they are well dressed, mannered... and

they have very little to say to one another. The way this scene is shot — emphasizing as it does the physical space between them — also reinforces the sense that they are emotionally isolated from one another.

The scene with Rosanne's family, by contrast, is full of warmth and good feeling. Here, as Eddy talks about getting the family back together, we see the kids and Rosanne smiling, and we note that they are all gathered close together around their kitchen table; comprised mostly of medium close-ups, the scene visually makes the characters seem close to each other, thereby reflecting the mood of the dialogue.

By intercutting these two scenes the film clearly establishes, in a totally cinematic way, what the real differences are between Lily and Rosanne, differences that have nothing to do with culture or class, and everything to do with the emotional richness (or emptiness) of a person's life. With the great dramatic potential of these themes to explore, and with their unique setting and characters, why then did Wheeler and screenwriter Sharon Riis feel it necessary to make the Suttons' secret — something so monstrous? By raising the stakes so high, Wheeler and Riis have undermined their story, for at the end of *Loyalties*, loyalty and friendship are no longer the main issues, but rather it is moral integrity (Lily's). Moreover, because of the nature of the crime/climax, the audience's sympathy in the last few scenes rests almost completely with Rosanne and her daughter, leaving very little for Lily and her own trauma.

All the problems with the film's ending, in fact, center around Lily. First of all, throughout the film she is presented as a sensitive and moral character (we see this particularly in her concern for her son, Robert). However, when her husband commits the rape and we learn he has raped before, we realize that Lily has already been through this situation. How did she react the first time? Did she threaten to leave David, to expose his action? Did she try to deny the

whole thing? We don't know what her reaction was, but we do know that she stayed with him and has tried to bury the event. But while we can accept her hiding the crime once, twice is too much. Also, because the crime — and its depiction in the film — is so vicious and horrifying, the matter of Lily's 'personal loyalties' really becomes a perverse issue. In this context, we would demand that she do what is morally right whether Rosanne were her friend or not.

At this point one might argue — with considerable merit — that ultimately it is Lily's friendship with Rosanne that gives her the strength to make a moral decision, and this is no doubt the contention of Wheeler and Riis. However, making a claim and proving it are two different things, and it is here that the film most conspicuously fails to deliver. For at the moment when Lily's integrity is put to its severest test, the filmmakers — unbelievably — *abandon* her, and shift the narrative to a scene at Rosanne's house the following morning. But what happens to Lily? How does she react when left alone with her husband? Seeing what she goes through that long night and how she decides on what action to take is imperative if we are to appreciate the strength she draws from her friendship with Rosanne. By denying us the opportunity to see Lily prove to herself — and us — that she is indeed a 'woman of substance' after all (and is therefore worthy of Rosanne's friendship), the filmmakers weaken the premise of their story immeasurably. (They also deny Lily her one true moment of glory by relaying her decision to Rosanne — and us — through a minor character.)

It may seem perfunctory at this point to discuss the acting in the film, but no review of *Loyalties* should go by without a special mention of Tantoo Cardinal's performance. Her Rosanne is bright, hot-tempered and totally ingenuous, and she all but steals the film. If Susan Wooldridge had been handed a character as subtly well developed, her Lily might have been Rosanne's screen equal. And *Loyalties* might have been a more honestly affecting drama.

**Linda Gorman •**

• Hot-tempered, ingenious — Tantoo Cardinal (Here with Tom Jackson) all but steals the show in *Loyalties*



**LOYALTIES** d. Anne Wheeler p. William Johnston, Anne Wheeler, Ronald Lillie sc. Sharon Riis sc. dev. Sharon Riis & Anne Wheeler d.o.p. Vic Sarin CSC art d. Richard Hudolin line p. Rob Iveson prod. man. Grace Gilroy 1st asst. d. Brad Turner loc. man. Mike Gazley liaison-Edmonton Pati Olson sc. sup. Penny Hynam cast-Toronto Gail Carr cast-Alberta Bette Chadwick 1st asst. cam. Harvey Larocque stills Doug Curran cost. des. Wendy Partridge make-up Jan Newman hair Donna Bis sd. mix Garrell Clark boom Daryl Powell gaffer Duncan MacGregor key grip Brian Kuchera sp. efx. Dave Gauthier const. Bryan Cockroft carp. Martin Shostak ed. Judy Krupansky pub. Prudence Emery dialogue Jeremy Hart lp. Kenneth Welsh, Tantoo Cardinal, Susan Wooldridge, Vera Martin, Diane Debasige, Tom Jackson, Jeffrey Smith, Meredith Rimmer, Alexander & Jonathan Tribiger, Christopher Barrington-Leigh, Yolanda Cardinal, Dale Willier, Wesley Semenovich, Janet Wright, Done Mackay, Paul Whitney, Tom Heaton, Sam Mottrich, Eric Kramer, Wendell Smith, Joan Hinz, Jill Dyck, Colin Vint, Veena Sood, Doris Chilcot, Terri Daniels, Susan MacNeill, Ben Cardinal, Bryan Fustukian, Larry Yachimec, Larry Musser, Eddy Washington, Joyce Vold, Eiko Waida, Emilie Chervigny, Alexandra Leigh, Joan Cole, Alison Bossy, Douglas Law, Patrick Bull, Mary Skare p.c. Ronald and Lillie/Lauron International/Dumbarton Films dist. Norstar Releasing Inc. Colour, 35mm running time: 96 mins