

Michel Drach's
**Sauve-toi
 Lola**

Téléfilm Canada has finally found the right vehicle in which to transport what it believes the French-Canadian public wants. It may have been a costly investment, but a Lada it ain't. *Sauve-toi Lola* has "miles to go" written all over its little white-walled wheels.

A Canada-France co-production directed by Michel Drach, the film has Carole Laure, Jeanne Moreau, Robert Charlebois and Sami Frey waving from the window while Lewis Furey honks the horn. The road is strewn with cancerous potholes but able-bodied men in white gloves and lab coats (every movie loves a man in uniform) direct the traffic and gallantly retrieve the stricken women who will undoubtedly stumble over the cracks in the sidewalk. It's hard, after all, to walk in stilettos. Not to mention when you also happen to be dying of cancer.

The plot of *Sauve-toi Lola* is about seven women finding themselves, individually and as a group, coping with the horrors of cancer. The moral of the story is, no matter how beautiful or rich or happy a woman may be, cancer will seek her out like an old retribution and down she will tumble, off the pedestal Drach seems to believe she craves.

Drach attempts to combine elements of farce and slapstick with the melodramatic gravity of human drama but he does not succeed. Evoking a cinema of three dimensions, where life is unpredictable and death can laugh no less than cry, *Sauve-toi Lola* is embarrassingly burdened by its one-dimensional script and the all-too-familiar gestural theatrics of Laure.

What it draws upon instead is the "obvious" resources of a group of female characters and the unconscious audacity of the director. He prefers to shock the sensibilities of his audience by fetishistically objectifying "sick women," rather than exposing the realities of ailing and frightened human beings.

Drach may believe he is daring when he has Carole Laure touching her own breasts in a church, but while he has the redeeming presence of mind to squeeze some puritan humor out of that scene, he does not question the authority or status of any other institution or social convention, whether it be the medical establishment, the power of men, or the subjugation of women.

Drach is not denouncing either a repressive Catholicism or societal mores with their hands-off attitude towards sexuality. He is only grasping at the easy availability of contrasting images, such as a murderous priest leading the police to his victims' remains in a church (this subplot is dropped from the narrative almost immediately after its introduction). Fundamentally, then, this conservatism is not being challenged *per se*. Drach, like an errant altar-boy, just wants to have fun.

His repertoire of toys consists of the seven (sinful?) women who meet at the



• Objects of Michel Drach's fetishization of illness in *Lola* (Carole Laure and Dominique Labourier)

hospital and comprise what their doctor (Sami Frey) calls "le club du cancer." The doctors are not only glamorized but they are given the power to define the lives of their patients. These cancer victims grouping together seem to have no more significance than a bridge club; though they share treatments and trauma, their interactions consist mainly of exaggerated platitudes and quarrels with bitchy nurses.

At the center of this community are their benevolent and wise doctors, in whom they entrust their lives and, more succinctly, their bodies. The men are the icons whose mysteries work wonders. Says Frey to Laure, "When you take your car to the garage, you don't ask the mechanic how he fixed it." And, in case we don't get the analogy: "I'm sorry I compared you to a car."

What is at stake for these women is not their lives but their personifications of femininity and social status. Jeanne Moreau, who plays the wife of a diplomat, uses cancer to confront her bourgeois standing. At a party she and her husband host, she descends the staircase in white death-mask make-up and proceeds to hand out her household silver to the astonished but composed guests. This "hysteria" is only the reaction of an emotional woman in extreme circumstances. She is brought back upstairs by a caring though paternalistic husband. And it is he who will later phone Frey to administer the final needle that will let her die.

Though Moreau manages to retain some semblance of strength by her forceful acting and presence (not to mention the resonant history of her screen persona), Laure yields twofold:

to the overt ravages of her cancer, and to the covert control of the men in her life — All under the watchful eye of the director.

Like the *Story of O* which articulates what *Sauve-toi Lola* merely mumbles, nothing is her own, not even her "breasts...which we may explore at will...(she has) lost all right to privacy or concealment."

Erotic masochism is ever-present. Laure is conducted through her cobalt treatment wearing a black bra and tights. She is seduced by another doctor who is aroused by the vulnerability that frailty brings. Says he, "Women with cancer are always waiting, as if for a man." By this point she is breastless and hairless, and though she earlier feared the treatments would rob her of her feminine allure ("I will grow a beard and turn into a man!"), her subsequent mannequin appearance is still sexually satisfying. She may not be a man, but she is not her own woman: she is his.

What experience does Drach have with cancer? His attempts at psychology fail revealingly. "Don't come close, I have cancer," says Laure to a policeman who wants to ticket her car. In another scene, Laure, who plays a lawyer, successfully defends her dying friend who has been charged with running up an unpaid bill. The hardnosed judge is a caricature of a sexless career woman or repressed lesbian. But Laure seduces her by appealing to the voluptuous woman in us all: "Wouldn't you want furs or jewels or a Riviera holiday?" Apparently, dying is a girl's best friend.

In more intelligent hands, these sequences could be played out with their humanity intact, but Drach pillages them like a conquering victor whose power lies in destruction.

Even the final scene, when Laure wants to share the news of her recovery with the two remaining patients, is completely self-absorbed and bereft of sympathy. The women, one a laborer who worked at Moreau's husband's factory for 25 years, and the other a young woman whose depth of character is conveyed with a compassion that must have surprised Drach (she represents the only internal criticism the film allows, though her target is the snobbish vacuousness of "le club"), stand outside, in autumn leaves, unable to hear Laure who hovers entombed behind a hospital window. They are poignant in the beauty of nature; in spite of Drach, they are life in death. And Laure, because of him, is death in life.

Leila Marshy •

SAUVE-TOI LOLA A France Canada co-production produced by Onyx Productions and Films A2 in France and Cinepix in Canada. With financial participation from Centre National de la Cinématographie, Ministère de la Culture, Sofimage, Sofica Conseil, Gestimage and Téléfilm Canada. **d.** Michel Drach **s.c.** Jacques Kirsner **m.** Lewis Furey **1st a.d.** Xavier De Cassan **2nd a.d.** Leslie Fargue **cont.** Ariane Litaize **d.o.p.** Robert Alazraki **1st assist. cam.** Muriel Edelstein **2nd assist. cam.** Gérard Mercier **stills** Christophe Rouffio **sd.** Claude Hazanavicius **1st sd. assist.** Thierry Morlaas **ed.** Henri Lanoc **assist. ed.** Catherine Bernard **gaffer** Robert Beulens **grip** Jean-Baptiste Dutreix **set. dec.** Nicole Rachline **assist. dec.** Jean Brunet **unit man ext.** Pierre Sicre **make-up** Daniele Vuarin, Arlette Pipart **cost. design** Monique Perrot **ward.** Yvette Bonnay **prod. man** Jean Lara **prod. sec.** Caroline Perchaud **admin.** Arlette Gendrot **unit man.** Jean-Marie David **assoc. unit man.** Pierre Boustoulier **unit man.** Jean-Marie David **assoc. unit man.** Pierre Boustoulier **line p.** Gabriel Boustani **assoc. p.** Nader Attasi **c.d.** Carole Laure, Jeanne Moreau, Dominique Labourier, Sami Frey, Robert Charlebois, Jacques François, Jean-Yves Gauthier, Guy Bedos, Isabelle Pasco, Philippe Khorsand, Marilyn Even, Béatrice Avoine, Bela Szafron, Halima, Julien Drach, Alain Sachs, **colour** 35mm **running time:** 106 min.