



• Aidan Tierney and Arsinée Khanjian look each other over in *Family Viewing*

## Atom Egoyan's **Family Viewing**

Looking at alienated people on a film screen can be like staring at a blob of grey — bleak, blank, blah. Atom Egoyan's **Family Viewing** is just the opposite. In his second feature, Egoyan shows us that grey can be made up of different shades, textures and even bursts of colour — that it can have depth.

In *Next of Kin*, Egoyan's first feature, he dealt with ethnicity, the family and people's inability to communicate. In **Family Viewing**, he develops those themes and also explores the idea of memory and the way technology affects it. Alienation is but one of the themes.

Egoyan's characters are trying to escape alienation, trying desperately to communicate, and by doing so, to tie into something that will make them feel good. The struggle for human contact, fought against a backdrop of the technology and isolation characteristic of modern life, is impeded by both family and the frailties of memory.

**Family Viewing** begins with a shot of a TV seen through a pile of trays. It then cuts to a young man peering across the screen at the audience (he's actually looking at a monitor). He switches channels (as if turning the audience off) and the credits appear between channel changes. At the end of the sequence, there is a freeze-frame and then the action is reversed. The scene is cheeky and playful. If it's also a bit show-offy, it's just enough to make you hope the rest of the movie will live up to the exhibition.

The young man is Van (Aidan Tierney). He lives with Stan, his WASP father (David Hemblen) and Sondra, Stan's girlfriend (Gabrielle Rose) in a co-op that has the kind of chrome and leather utilitarian look which sometimes passes for elegant. Van's mother left him and his father, but he still goes to see his Arme-

nian maternal grandmother, Armen (Selma Keklikian), who's now living in a decrepit, overcrowded old-folks' home. One of Armen's roommates has a daughter Aline (Arsinée Khanjian), who works at a phone-sex establishment and who eventually helps Van rescue his grandmother from the home and get back in touch with himself.

All of the characters are trapped. Stan's girlfriend is attracted by his son who's disturbed by the very idea. Van worries that whatever he does, he could be doing something else and it wouldn't make any difference. Armen is so unhappy in the hospital that she's a living corpse. Aline is afraid that unless she makes some money fast, her mother will be a living corpse on the street. The only flicker of life in this group comes from Van who feels good when he sees Armen.

Egoyan has shot a substantial part of the film on different kinds of video. Some scenes (those set in the phone-sex establishment where Aline works, the Montreal hotel where she prostitutes herself, and the Toronto hotel where Van and Aline have hidden the grandmother) cut away to the monitors of surveillance cameras. These murky black and white images, while showing us how anonymous the characters we have come to know can be made to seem, also contribute to the unpredictable, illicit, underworld atmosphere of the scenes.

Egoyan used half-inch VHS for the documentation of Stan and Van's time in the nuclear family and for cut-aways to everpresent, always on, television monitors whose programming either metaphorically underlines the meaning of the scene, or acts as ironic counterpoint to it.

The scenes of the broken-down nuclear family in the co-op are shot on very high-quality one-inch tape. Though these video images are the closest to film I've seen, they still lack film's high definition. Moreover, they have been shot in washed-out blueish tones. Thanks to excellent acting, the effect achieved is that of people who are not quite there — people who recognize, but who never really get to know, each other.

Egoyan intercuts the different kinds of videos with film to create a kind of visual interplay. The medium becomes metaphor. Throughout the film, ambience and even a character's state of mind can be read almost solely by the technology which is used to shoot it.

In **Family Viewing** a tangle of technology is shown to both help and hinder the reconstruction of the memory of Van's old nuclear family. Technology can contain memories, though not without distortion, only if someone interrelates with the technology.

The grandmother is important to Van because she represents an escape from the vacuum in which he lives. He senses that Armen can connect him with his childhood and a culture which, since the disappearance of his mother, has been lost to him. The cheap home-movie cassettes may make memories come alive but Armen is living memory — she carries her past (part of which is also Van's past) in herself, and though Stan has effectively banished her from their lives, Armen cannot be erased like the home-videos. She and Aline are the foundation of Van's new family.

Egoyan directs this sometimes psychologically brutal exploration of family and memory with a humour that borders on black, but it is no less funny for being so. **Family Viewing** reminds me of Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild* and Alex Cox' *Sid and Nancy* because the three directors display distinct, offbeat sensibilities; the protagonists of their films are young and, to different degrees, marginalized; and the work of all three is not only immensely entertaining, but intelligent and incisive as well. Comparisons can be overdone, however, because each director has a different style and explores different themes; I think Egoyan loves his characters more.

Egoyan's first feature, *Next of Kin* was a very good film that seemed to speak directly to many of us. If **Family Viewing** is better, it is because, without losing his wit, he digs deeper and sheds light on complex situations more eloquently. Certainly, after two such features, Egoyan has established himself as a major director with a singular voice.

José Arroyo •

**FAMILY VIEWING** An Ego Film Arts Production d./sc. Atom Egoyan d.o.p. Robert MacDonald cinematographer Peter Mettler prod. man. Camelia Frieberg m. Michael Danna art d. Linda del Rosario des. co-ord Ian Greig prod. co-ord Helen Fletcher ed. Bruce MacDonald, Atom Egoyan sd. rec. Ross Redfern sd. ed. Steven Munro sc. ed. Allen Bell 1st a.d. Camelia Frieberg 2nd a.d. Antony Anderson talent co-ord Rose Gutierrez business man. Janis Rotman gaffer Gerald Packer best boys Mike Auger, John Biggar sd. elec. Darcy Rodrigues grip Tim Sauder grippette Danni Starbuck cont. Monika Gagnon cont. apprent. Alexandra Gill boom Peter Melnychuk second boom John Paxton cam. asst.s Chris Higginson, Per-Inge Schei ward/ make-up Matti Sevink make-up consult Jacqueline Steele, Fina Khan cost. co-ord Nancy Dugan art dept. trainee Susan Wallace-Worts set carp. David Greig catering Jennifer Hazel stills Johnnie Eisen add. stills Ihor Lomega, Christopher Lowry rushes sync. Aaron Shuster titles Metamedia re-rec. Daniel Pellerin prod. lawyer Martin Krysz drivers Morten Dorrel, Adrian Iwachiw prod. assts. Gavin Coford, Frank Dorai, Karim Allag, Shelagh Cowie, Ruth Mandel, Stacey Doren, Harry Sutherland l.p. David Hemblen, Aidan Tierney, Gabrielle Rose, Arsinée Khanjian, Selma Keklikian, Jeanne Sabourin, Rose Sarkisyan, Vasag Baghboudarian, David MacKay, Hrant Alianak, John Shafer, Garfield Andrews, Edwin Stephenson, Aino Pirskanen, Souren Chekijian, Johnnie Eisen, John Pellatt. Produced with the participation of The Ontario Film Development Corporation, The Canada Council, The Ontario Arts Council running time 86 minutes. Eastmancolor Aspect ratio 1.66

Jon Pedersen's

## Tuesday Wednesday

After watching this movie, you will have a very clear view of just how frustrating, alienating, fragmented, confusing, and slow-moving an alcoholic's existence is. **Tuesday Wednesday** is a serious, hard-hitting look at alcoholism, poverty, alienation, and the effects of drunk driving on the survivors. It is also about the loneliness and despair of the reformed alcoholic.

Philip (John Alexander) returns to the small town where he has killed a small boy in a drunk driving accident in order to convince everyone that he didn't do it. In fact, Philip cannot fully recall the night in question, but he is convinced that, even drunk, he could never have killed a child.

He tries to make amends with the dead boy's mother (Liz Dufresne), and sister (Penny Belmont); he pleads with his best friend (Frank Swezey) to put in a good word at the school board office; he hopes to get back with his wife (Sherree Fitch); he reaches out to his father (Perley Haines).

The town is not at all anxious to have him back. Doors are slammed in his face everywhere he turns. He falls off the wagon. In one of the strongest sequences of the film, we watch as this mild, intelligent English teacher turns into a maudlin, then raging drunk. The audience soon becomes convinced that he could have killed the child.

In a strange twist of plot, the mother of the dead child finally reaches out to help. It is in her apartment that Philip finally realizes that he could be guilty as charged. Philip finally knows that the only way to resolve anything is to leave town.

John Alexander is riveting as Philip, the central character. For the first half of the film, he plays a relatively ordinary man, a competent performance, but nothing spectacular. Once the character goes on his bender, Alexander lets us see just how talented he is. It is not easy to play a drunk convincingly, but Alexander is magnificent. You will be hard pressed to find a finer drunk, technically or emotionally. The scenes shot in Fredericton's drunk tank are particularly frightening.

The supporting cast is drawn from Fredericton, Saint John, and surrounding areas, and they are excellent. Unfortunately, each secondary lead only appears once, with very few lines, and almost no close-ups. If this were meant to frustrate and alienate the audience, it succeeded. Which leads me to the biggest problem of the film: its script. There just was too little for the actors to work with!

I found that the basic idea of following an alcoholic through his rehabilitation worthy. Unfortunately, the actual facts of the story were almost unbelievable. I simply couldn't believe that if a drunk driver had killed my son, that I would rescue him from a fist fight with my lover, or that I would have then taken my son's killer into my own home and nursed