

Giles Walker's
The Last Straw

The trailer for **The Last Straw** ("A Comedy Beyond Conception") is composed of a cartoon drawing of a pink condom which expands to the size

of a dirigible and then bursts. If that doesn't meet your standard of hilarity, how about this for a plot: Alex Rossi (a.k.a. Sam Grana, a producer at the National Film Board) has been informed his sperm possesses the highest "motility rate" in recorded history. Seeking to cash in on this lucrative resource, Alex sells his soul lock and sperm to a fertility clinic. Chafing under the strict physical regime (two ejaculations per day, exercise, diet and no sex) and the decidedly conservative marketing strategies of the clinic, he escapes only to fall into the oily hands of a nicotine-stained agent whose showbiz elan includes schemes of displaying Alex atop a pink elephant in shopping malls.

If that doesn't have you rolling in the aisles, the plot takes one giant leap into farce with the abduction of Alex by members of the Australian rugby team who want Alex down under to help shore up a national masculinity sorely flagging in recent years under the slings and arrows of feminists. Personally, I have been to funnier dogfights.

I am, however, fascinated and repulsed by this film and its successors, **Masculine Mystique** and **Ninety Days**, all purportedly examples of a newly sensitized male consciousness. **Masculine Mystique**, you might remember, featured the conceit of the male consciousness-raising group which included various producers and directors at the National Film Board who principally bemoan their inability to get, keep or get along with women. Out of this crew emerged Blue (Stefan Wodolawsky - big, dumb and soulful) and Alex (short, Italian and horny) as the ascending stars of **Ninety Days** (that's where Blue orders and receives a Korean bride and Alex has his first sperm count) and now **The Last Straw**.

These films, part of the NFB's "innovative"... alternative drama series, are being flaunted as evidence of the Board's continued vitality, a role which, on the English side at least, has undisputedly been upheld by the committed work of Studio D. But, perhaps, there's the crunch. If the most powerful current work in cinema concerns groups which have been marginalized and disenfranchised within society, what do you do if you are: a) white; b) straight; c) middleclass; d) male and e) utterly impervious to contemporary currents and events? Answer: flaunt it.

How else can one explain **Ninety Days'** transformation of the politically and racially sensitive issue of arranged marriages into the slapstick stuff of situation comedy? Or **The Last Straw's** aggressively oblivious glorification of sperm, in the era of AIDS and of what

philosopher Arthur Kroker terms "panic bodies"? And we are treated to images of vats of it (bulls' that is) vials of it and the whole techno infrastructure of its bottling and storage.

Now, obviously, the film does work, at some levels as parody. Alex's refusal to sell out to the Yanks, and his defence of his sperm as a Canadian national resource provide a witty take on the ongoing Free Trade debates. Parody, however, classically operates to provide a critical distance from its object. The problem with **The Last Straw** is that it all too often treads a very fine line between critical exaggeration and wholehearted allegiance to the values and obsessions being parodied.

While Alex's adolescent preoccupation with the potency of his sexual organ comes in for a certain amount of ribbing, the film clearly does not endorse modified versions of masculinity. Househusbands and members of the Canadian Feminist Men organization, are dismissed as "wimps" whose sperm motility rate is embarrassingly flaccid. Blue's worries about his appearance and potential hair loss are "funny" because they are clearly coded as aberrant and feminine. And by the end of the film when all the characters are coupled up and pregnant, including Alex and the sexually repressed nurse who finally succumbs to the charm of Alex's sperm, one really has to wonder whose fantasy is this? On that note, whose fantasy is it that imagines hundreds of women just dying to get inseminated? Apart, that is, from Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority.

Brenda Longfellow •

THE LAST STRAW A National Film Board of Canada Production. d. Giles Walker d.o.p. Andrew Kit-zanuk gaffer Roger Martin loc. sd. Yves Gendron orig. m. Robert Lauzon, Fernand Martel ed. David Wilson story by Giles Walker, David Wilson produced by David Wilson, Giles Walker assoc. p./asst. ed. Denise Beaudoin prod. man. Maurice Pilon props and cost. Janet Campbell asst. d. François Gingras asst. cam. focus Stefan Nitoslawski, René Daigle boom Aimée Leduc add. gaffer Guy Remillard elec Audrey Beuzet, Jean-Maurice D'Ernest stills Jacques Tougas 2nd asst d. Louis Bolduc add. cam. David de Volpi, Zoe Dirse add boom Claude Lahaye sd. ed. Abbey Neidik asst sd. ed. Jean-Pierre Viau m. ed. Julian Olson Foley artist Andy Malcolm asst. by Kathryn Crosthwait m. and Foley recs Louis Hone re-rec. mix Hans Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll slide show graphics Julie Stunfel TV Newscast d. Martine Bourdeau title design Val Teodori comp. des. Rod Thibeault res. Sally Bochner post. prod. co-ord Grace Avrith studio clerk Ida di Fruscia studio admin. Marie Tonto-Donati l.p. Yvan Huneault, Saverio Grana, Fernanda Tavares, Maurice Podbrey, Jim Rose, Hugo, Beverley Murray, Stefan Wodolawsky, Cristine Pak, Ken Roberts, Bronwyn Martel, Carol Shamy, Carol Ann Francis, Susan Vincelli, Wally Martin, Réal Charron, Crystobal, Paul Zakhath, Alexander Fantasy, Pauline Rathbone, John Drapery, Paul Somler, Ali Giron, Ron Lea, Pat Phillips, Bob Marler, Barry Sullivan, George Springate, Gwynne Dyer, John Jones, La Sureté du Québec. colour 35 mm running time 98 min. +2 secs

Jackie Burroughs, Louise Clark John Walker, Aerlyn Weissman and John Frizzell's

A Winter Tan

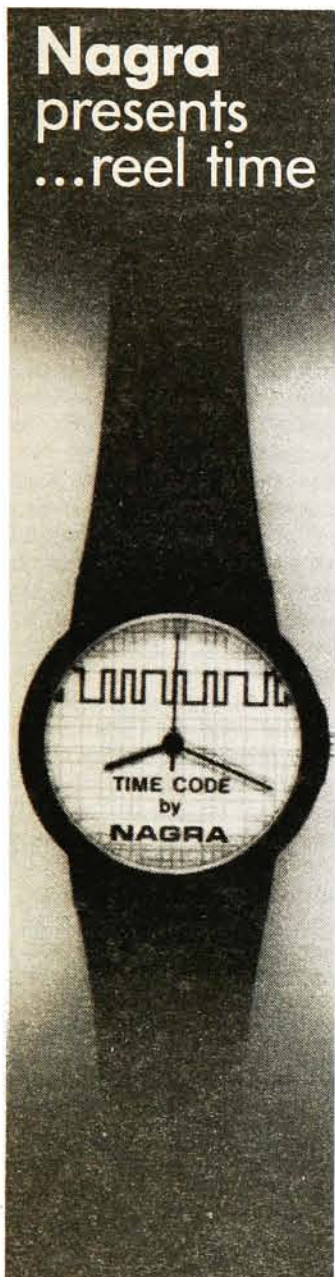
A Winter Tan, the collaborative effort that began sowing its notoriety at the Festival of Festivals last month, was greeted by many at the time with the sort of breathless reception the publicists love: "Isn't it wonderful to see a female character that..." "Isn't it fabulous to finally see an English-Canadian film where..." Gush upon gush until the salsa ran out.

What isn't so wonderful to see is the film itself. **A Winter Tan** may represent many things - English Canada's entry in the sextalk genre launched by **The Decline of the American Empire**, an alternative to the hegemony of the single director, a liberating swipe at the strictures of orthodox feminism, whatever - but it's also symptomatic of a significant blindspot in mainstream Canadian film. Despite all that it represents, **A Winter Tan** suffers from a profound, unthinking racism.

The work of five equally dedicated, talented people, the film stems from Jackie Burroughs' initial interest in the published letters of Maryse Holder, a New York professor whose compulsive sexual adventures in Mexico ended in her murder. The letters, written in a florid, self-consciously confessional style, describe Holder's rejection of academic sterility in favour of brief sexual encounters with young Mexican men.

Burroughs gives a *tour de force* performance as Maryse, all fireworks and bile. "Genie" written all over it. Maryse addresses the camera and tells her story directly to us (her friend Edith), so Burroughs is before us all the time; she *is* the film. With a central character so prominent and so obnoxiously destructive, there are only two ways the film can work for an audience: either she must be made sympathetic, or the actor's performance must be forceful enough to impress. **A Winter Tan** attempts both strategies, and with some success. Unfortunately success on that level means failure on another. The film asks us, in fact needs us, to identify on some level with an offensive, poisonous character - a racist, reactionary, irresponsible child of First World privilege. If we don't care about her there's nothing else in the film to hold our interest.

Maryse lays into feminism - "It was partly to curb my natural sluttishness I became a feminist in the first place." She widens her target - "It's too bad latin feminists are all Marxists and lesbians." She pauses for a glance back home - "How anyone who's born in our paradise of wealth (North America) is too dumb to profit by it. well, contempt my dear." And she never stops objectifying Mexican men - about one of her lovers she confides, "His cock, the usual *bug* Indian one, you know." She regularly conflates Mexico with the Mexican men she chases: she values the one as the other pleases her. "As I am for then some archetypal gringa," she explains: "they are for me a single figure of desire."



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• **The Last Straw** - Sam Grana prepares for work

