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 Gran, a producer at the National Film Board) has been informed his sperm produces 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 regimen (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 shop window includes schemes of playing 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, two 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 bear their inability to get, keep or get along with women. Out of this crew emerged films (Stefan Wodolaswky, 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 NFBI'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 Kroeker terms "panic bodies"?

And we are treated to images of vats of it (balls 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 wry take on the ongoings of the Trudeau era. However, classically operates to provide a critical distance from its object. The problem with The Last Straw is that it too often reads 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. Housewives and members of the Canadian Feminist Men organization, are dismissed as "wimpies". A personal motivation 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, o. Parody, how wonderful this fantasy is! On that note, whose fantasy is it? That images hundreds of women just dying to get infirmated? Apart, that is, from Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority.

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Jackie Burroughs, Louise Clark,
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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 that publicists love: "Isn't it wonderful to see a female character that..." Isn't it fabulous to finally see an African-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 is the sextet genre launched by The Decline of the American Empire, an alternative to the hegemony of the single director, a liberating swipe at the stigmas of orthodox feminism — whatever but it's also symptomatic of a significant blind spot 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 preceded her murder. The letters, written in a florid, self-consciously confessional style, describe Holder's rejection of academic sterility in favour of 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 Edit), 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 fluctuations I became a feminist in the first place." She widens her target — "It's too bad latifeminists 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. She occasionally objectifying Mexican men — about one of her lover she confides, "His cock, the usual hugIndian one, you know." She regularly conflates Mexico with the Mexican me she chases, sees the value in the other's pleas, her. "As I am for then some archetypal gringa," she explains "they are for me a single figure of desire."
Once you refuse to differentiate, you've decided to objectify.

All this shouldn't work, but this film will find an audience, particularly with intelligent, accomplished feminists such as the one Holder once was. I'm ready to stand corrected, but it seems that when feminists react positively to this film, it's with a sense of release, of freedom from some feminism's political correctness. But that freedom in A Winter Tan is at the expense of another group's oppression. Can we condone that? This film isn't just politically incorrect; it's politically dangerous. It's a bracing reminder that despite all the money being dumped into "multi-culturalism" in this country, there still remains a staggering insensitivity to issues of race. That it continues to exist at the supposedly informed, progressive level of Canadian culture should be a cause not just for concern or worry, but fear. This film is founded squarely upon the white rock of sexual imperialism, racism masquerading as the allure of the exotic. It doesn't 'deal' with this issue; it doesn't explore; it works by it.

There is no examination of tourism, especially sexual tourism in A Winter Tan. There is no analysis of the tacit assumption that warm-weather countries are more 'liberating' (and libidinal) than cold-weather 'civilized' countries. Nowhere does the film acknowledge that it is working from a model that exploits these countries under the banner of sexual tourism, a form of colonialism founded squarely upon the white rock of sexual imperialism, racism masquerading as the allure of the exotic. It doesn't 'deal' with this issue; it doesn't explore; it works by it.

All of this should be lessened by the fact that Burroughs' film were brilliantly adapted into the screen. One line like 'I am towed uphill by desire' just doesn't stand much of a chance. Occasionally a sequence will achieve some of the tragic degradation the filmmakers may have intended, but it's not often and it never compensates.

It should have been obvious to the filmmakers that any film about such a thoroughly nasty person would be equally nasty unless you create some distance between film and character, something A Winter Tan seems determined not to do. This is not a documentary recording of a woman's death, it is a re-creation, and as such bears the responsibility of analysis. Of course, it may be absurd to apply anything as outlandish as responsibility to this film. Maryse would think so.

Cameron Bailey


-- Jackie Burroughs gives a tour de force performance as Maryse Holder

liberately, oppressively picturesque
And far too often shots are arranged
where Mexicans just sit or stand around
in the frame waiting for Maryse to act
upon them. This Mexico and these Mexicans exist solely for her; she is the agent, they the background — passive and mostly inert. From time to time the soundtrack's latin music pops up like a cheap melodrama to signal one of two things — mystery or danger.

All of this might be lessened somewhat if the film were brilliantly executed. It's not, due mainly to the dialogue. Holder's prose is purple enough on paper, to hear Burroughs speak it to the camera, or worse, to other characters, is to cringe. A line like "I am towed uphill by desire" just doesn't stand much of a chance. Occasionally a sequence will achieve some of the true tragic degradation the filmmakers may have intended, but it's not often and it never compensates.

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