

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'Ernsted 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. Martyne 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, Cristobal, 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 Surêté du Quebec. colour 35 mm running time 98 min. +2 secs

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

**A Winter Tan**

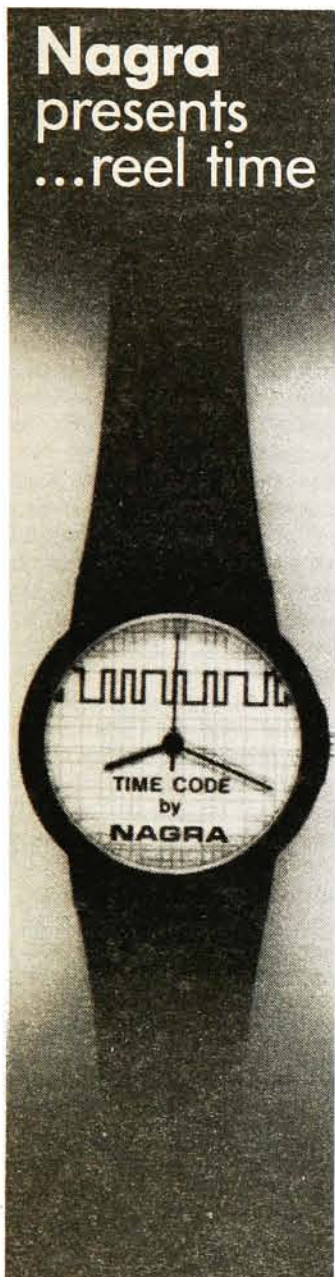
**A Winter Tan**, the collaborative effort that began sowing its notoriety at the Festival of Festivals last month, was greeted by many at the time with the sort of breathless reception the publicists love: "Isn't it wonderful to see a female character that..." "Isn't it fabulous to finally see an English-Canadian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



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; 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 sensual pleasure. The economic foundations of sexual tourism, a form of prostitution really, are also left unexplored. Tourism is an economic exchange, an industry. And though prostitution is an *exchange* of power, it's pretty clear that the prostitute's power is always limited, secondary.

None of this does the film even seem to be aware of, much less explore. Following Maryse's bad girl lead, *A Winter Tan* is a deeply reactionary film. It even participates in the same old postcard cinematography of mainstream cinema, presenting us with a Mexico that is de-



• 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 in 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.

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 •

**A WINTER TAN** sc. Jackie Burroughs p. Louise Clark d.o.p. John Walker loc. sd. Aerlyn Weissman co-d. Jackie Burroughs, Louise Clark, John Frizzell, John Walker, Aerlyn Weissman adapted from "Give Sorrow Words, Maryse Holder's Letters from Mexico", Grove Press, NY assoc. p. (Mexico) Servando Gaja gaffer/ grip Luis Lobato prod stills Anita Olanick loc. crew Maria Novaro, Jesus Anaya, Francisco Preciado add loc. sd. Bernadine Lighthart asst eds. Sarah Peddie, Leonard Farlinger sup. dialogue ed. Alison Grace dialogue ed. Greg Glynn asst. Alison Fisher sup. eff. ed. Denise McCormick fx ed. Alison Clark asst. Leon B. Wood fx rec. Gordon Thompson Foley artist Andrew Malcolm Foley asst. James Gore Foley rec. Jack Heeron sd. re-rec Don White, Michael Liota, Astral Bellevue Pathe comp. guarantor Don Haig. Film Arts lab Film House timer Chris Severn opticals Film Opticals/ effects add. new footage Courtesy Rudy Inc. sd. facilities Sound Technique prod. acc. Fischer Business Services Ltd. title and Poster Design Tim Forbes Thanks to Margara Millare, Jorge Sanchez, John Gundy, Julia Sereny, Renée Gluck, Pierre Ouellet/ Mars studio, Niv Fichman and Rhombus Media, Ada Swica, Peter Thillaye, John Pasmontier, Jorge G. Arenas Basurto, Jose Luis Cruz, Zafra Films, Tif Griffin, Ron Allen, Jesse Cook, Veronica Escobar, Chapelle Jaffee, Bruce Robb, Anna Pafomow, James Crowe, Rene Ohashi, Claudia Becker, Stephen Bush, Marcial Leal, Michael McLean, Midi Onodera, Michael O'Farrell, Douglas Barrett, Edith Hones, Lucero, Selma Yampolsky, Jean Pierre Petit, Mike Alyanak, Eric Cadesky, Zezi Tayeb, John Hunter, Lynn Parkin, Marta Sternberg, Allen Backeland and to the people of Mexico for their homes, cafes, beaches, clubs, interest, support, good humour and grace m. "Cold Song", H. Purcell. Performed by Klaus Nomi. Courtesy of RCA "Gracias a la Vida" Composed and Performed by Violeta Parra. Courtesy of RCA "Y Sin El" Las Diego Performed by Valeria Lynch Courtesy of RCA "Feliz Encuentro" Francisco Alvarado. Performed by Celia Cruz. Courtesy of Musica Latina International Inc. "Tiempos de Amistad" John Lang Performed by Zulema Clas. Courtesy of S.W.B. Music l.p. Jackie Burroughs, Erando Gonzalez, Javier Torres, Anita Olanick, Diane D'Aquila, Fernando Perez de Leon, Dulce Kuri, Ruber Dario Hernandez, Abraham Hernandez Castillo, Mari Carmen Dominguez, Reyna Lobato Mariche, John Frizzell, John Walker, Jorge Galcedo, Luis Lobato, Servando Gaja, Alverta Chalulas, Librado Jimenez, Rollo Jose Rodriguez, Bernadette Lighthart, Marie Novaro, Francisco Preciado, Guy Roset, Beatriz Novaro, Elizabetina Ruez. The fivers of Quebrada, the boys of Coyuca and the hands of Barbara O'Kelly. Produced with the participation of the Ontario Film Development Corporation, Telefilm Canada. And the assistance of the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council. colour 35mm running time. 91 min.

NO SCUM

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