Dick Benner’s

Too Outrageous

Outrageous was one of the few English-Canadian films to be a critical and commercial international hit in the ’70s. The 1977 instant classic was full of low-budget energy and sleeper charm, and an expression of that strange Canadian identification with marginality. It also turned out to be an unconscious but acute parable of Canadian identity confusion: if this tale of a drag queen and a schizophrenic from Toronto making it in New York did not exist, we would have had to invent it. The only thing surprising about the appearance of the 1987 sequel Too Outrageous is that it took so long.

With Too Outrageous, writer-director Dick Benner and star “impressionist” Craig Russell have come up with an appealing, respectful updating of the material. In a reversal of the original story, Robin (Russell) and Liza (Holli斯 McLaren) return to Toronto nine years later, Robin gets a chance at the big time with a gig and a refurbished act, Liza gets published, both gamble and lose at love, and in the hands of a hunky brunet, and both end up poor and crazy but happy with each other once again. Unfortunately, despite a barrage of a favourable advance publicity and a gala premiere at the 1987 Festival of Festivals, the Outrageous formula, translated to the jaded, big-budget ’80s, no longer seems to click for either critics or moviegoers. Benner was one of many promising young directors of first films to emerge in Canada during the ’60s and ’70s who never managed to pull off that important second feature. Returning home to the States, Benner got to direct “Happy Birthday Gemini” (1980), a Broadway adaptation that sank without a ripple, and then retreated home to Kentucky to lick his wounds. As for La Russell, the hot new star with a Berlin Best Actor trophy tucked into his bra soon ran into hard times, personally and professionally. It was only 10 years later that the two careers converged again and were given their ill-fated chance to set off by the torments of his haunted roommate Liza. Russell appeals to mainstream spectators who would be threatened by Divine’s nihilism or by the proletarian desperation of Michel Tremblay’s drag queens. Russell may be closer in spirit to his friends from Liza Aux Folles. He has no such need. These dynamics are still at work in the sequel, but they’re increasingly mechanical and creepy, and too much rides on stage performances that have lost their novelty. A final soul-baring number, that presents the performer sans masques on a stripped-down stage, simply doesn’t get off the ground because, in contrast to Judy Garland’s similar numbers, the musical momentum and vocal power evaporate without the makeup and wigs. The failure of Too Outrageous needs to be explained further in terms of audience factors. Although I’ve stressed the main reaction, the specific gay constituency may be a critical factor. A crossover audience made Outrageous a hit; the film was tuned into both minority and majority factors. A crossover audience made Too Outrageous a hit; the film was tuned into both minority and majority factors.

La Russell does La Strasand in Too Outrageous

From “outrageous,” Robin has a vulnerable, teddy-bear serenity that is set off by the torments of his haunted roommate Liza. Russell appeals to mainsteam spectators who would be threatened by Divine’s nihilism or by the proletarian desperation of Michel Tremblay’s drag queens. Russell may be closer in spirit to his friends from Liza Aux Folles. He has no such need. These dynamics are still at work in the sequel, but they’re increasingly mechanical and creepy, and too much rides on stage performances that have lost their novelty. A final soul-baring number, that presents the performer sans masques on a stripped-down stage, simply doesn’t get off the ground because, in contrast to Judy Garland’s similar numbers, the musical momentum and vocal power evaporate without the makeup and wigs. The failure of Too Outrageous needs to be explained further in terms of audience factors. Although I’ve stressed the main reaction, the specific gay constituency may be a critical factor. A crossover audience made Outrageous a hit; the film was tuned into both minority and majority factors. The failure of Too Outrageous needs to be explained further in terms of audience factors. Although I’ve stressed the main reaction, the specific gay constituency may be a critical factor. A crossover audience made Outrageous a hit; the film was tuned into both minority and majority factors. The failure of Too Outrageous needs to be explained further in terms of audience factors. Although I’ve stressed the main reaction, the specific gay constituency may be a critical factor. A crossover audience made Outrageous a hit; the film was tuned into both minority and majority factors.