

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 in it 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* was 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 property. In a reversal of the original story, Robin (Russell) and Liza (Hollis McLaren) return to Toronto nine years later, Robin gets a chance at the big time with an agent and a refurbished act, Liza gets published, both gamble and lose at love at the hands of a hunky brunette, 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 second chance. This lack of continuity in the two creative careers is symptomatic of an endemic problem in Canadian popular film, and is no doubt responsible for the rarity of successful sequels in general and for most of the visible damage in this one in particular.

Too Outrageous is so abuzz with little things that work or should have worked, that it's hard to pinpoint the disappointment. Benner's screenplay and characterizations are witty and well-structured, with sparkling, fast-talking dialogue that recalls the golden era of Hollywood writing idolized by both Robin and Benner. "Remember when lubricating cream went on your cock and not on your face," gripes the aging star before his dressing room mirror, a line that could well have been Bette Davis's in *All*



La Russell does La Streisand in *Too Outrageous*

About Eve... with a few changes. Benner has once again lovingly re-created the conventions of the backstage melodrama/musical, reversing the old priorities: this time it is life that must go on, not the show. The lead performances are also fine; Hollis McLaren's Liza again glows in Robin's shadow with subtle intensity. (What has happened to this talented actress/iron of the late '70s and when will Canadian producers start giving her the parts she deserves?) A few of the smaller roles stand out as well, with Timothy Jenkins as Robin's loyal aide-de-camp almost running off with the last half of the film.

The basics are there, to be sure, but writers, directors and actors all get rusty without a chance to practice and polish their craft. The script could have used more honing, and Benner's work with his actors and technicians, his *mise-en-scène*, and his comic timing are all uneven.

Russell's contribution shows similar strains. Mae (West), Judy (Garland) and Peggy (Lee) are still inspired staples, well worth the ticket, but some of the other ladies are weak or stale and often seem just to involve Russell impersonating Russell. This leads to a larger problem: is Russell's persona strong enough to carry the whole film? I always thought the main pull of the original was the strong, defiantly sentimental narrative of the relationship, as in Margaret Gibson's original story, with the drag performances functioning as a delicious sidebar. After all, film is not exactly the best medium for Russell's genius in what is essentially a cabaret art form. In *Too Outrageous*, this is brought jarringly home by Benner's excessively tight camera and the rapturous spectator reaction-shots of Robin's audience inserted to cue our response. Then and now, audiences respond to Robin's character as much offstage as on. Far

from "outrageous," Robin has a vulnerable, teddy-bear serenity that is 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 Riviera relations from *La Cage Aux Folles*, but he has much more soul. These dynamics are still at work in the sequel, but they're increasingly mechanical and creaky, 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 mainstream 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 mainstream without compromising either access. While *Too Outrageous* attempts to maintain this bridge, the variables have changed. You can tell from a lively internal debate about gay identity and self-censorship that Benner and the others have been wrestling with the delicate balance of the two audiences ("There's not that big a gay audience out there," says the nasty agent who tries to suppress Robin's campier moments—an echo of what I'm sure Benner has heard a million times). Though the compromises of such earlier Canadian films as Robin Phillips' *The Wars* are avoided, things still don't work out. Take AIDS, for example: Benner is right to insist that the pain and loss within the gay community must be acknowledged

in any '80s gay film. But his almost perfunctory attempts to do so leave great gaping gashes in the film. One character even delivers a long, heavy speech on AIDS that is potentially misleading. *Too Outrageous* was eagerly anticipated in every gay publication on the continent, but the reviews turned out to be unanimously guarded. Somehow Benner miscalculated his core constituency.

As for that other key minority audience, Canadians, *Too Outrageous's* "return-of-the-native" theme is divertingly symmetrical without being especially right. Benner's New York-Toronto opposition is less tuned in to the mythology of "us vs. them" than it was a decade ago, perhaps because the mythology itself has mutated in these days of domed stadiums. Nevertheless I enjoyed the stream of obligatory Can-Con jokes. The digs at Ottawa alone (where Robin warns Liza "they'll sterilize your mind") should at the very least have brought an honorary Genie. Robin's wrong, however, when he rules out local material for his act: "I'm too feminine to do Anne Murray. I can do the low notes, but that walk's a killer." There are other possibilities: Flora MacDonald may be too thin, but surely Forrester and Frum would be ripe material for the next installment.

That installment, alas, probably won't happen. Liza and Robin may be back in Toronto but apparently no one cares. Sequels just don't seem to come naturally to a national cinema whose hard-won success stories, in the States or elsewhere, are so few and far between.

Thomas Waugh ●

TOO OUTRAGEOUS p. Roy Krost d. /sc. Dick Benner d. o. p. Fred Guthe art d. Andris Hausmanis cost. des. Alisa Alexander ed. George Appleby orig. mus. /arr. Russ Little p. man. Dan Nyberg 1st a. d. Tony Thatcher 2nd a. d. David Till 3rd. a. d. Reid Dunlop trainee Derek Rogers sc. sup. Pauline Harlow cam. Rick McGuire 1st. cam. asst. /focus pull. Perry Hoffman 2nd. cam. asst. Audrey Smith cam. trainee Jane Davis sd. mix. Daniel Latour boom op. Paul McGlashan 1st. asst. art d. Andrew Poulos set. dec. Liz Calderhead, Marlene Grahame set dresser/buyer Thomas Rosborough prop master Paul Sweeney prop asst. Adrian Hardy ward. Maureen Gurney, Linda Leduc, Beth Pasternak, Lorraine Carson, Bruce Mellott makeup Inge Klaudi hair Madeleine Russell loc. man. Marc Dassas loc. asst. Greg Van Riel gaffer Richard Allen best boy Bryan Forde 2nd elec. Mark Woodley 3rd elec. Gabriel Chiara gen. op. Dick Wollcott key grip Dave Zimmerman dolly grip Brian Potts 2nd grip Ron Bailey 3rd grip John Hazel stunt coord. Shane Cardwell casting John Drury, Risa Gertner extras casting First Cast Extras still photo Walter Melrose asst. ed. Jay Houpt 2nd asst. ed. Kelly Makin p. coord. Justine Estee p. sec. Cathie Denison asst. to p. Lee Gordon office p. a. Chris Byford acc. sup. Doreen Davis p. acc. James Crammond asst. acc. Elaine McFeat trans. coord. Michael Davies driver captain Frank O'Neil drivers Peter Wilde, Glen Avigdor, Paul Pawluk, Mark Van Alstyne, Andres Vosu caterer Galley Kitchen Services craft service Bruce Long l. p. Craig Russell, Hollis McLaren, David McIlwraith, Ron White, Lynne Cormack, Michael J. Reynolds, Timothy Jenkins, Paul Eves, Frank Pellegrino, Norma Dell'Agnes, Norman Duttweiler, Kent Staynes, Rusty Ryan, Doug Millar, Kate Davis, Doug Paulson, George Hevenor, Jimmy James, Barry Flatman, Ray Paisley, Raymond Accolas, François Klanfer, Linda Goranson, Doug Inear. running time 105 minutes, colour. Distributed by Spectrafilm. Financial participation by Telefilm Canada, the OFDC and Dean Witter Reynolds (Canada) Inc.