

## David Wellington's The Carpenter

**A**s *The Carpenter* opens, Alice Jarret is suffering a nervous breakdown. Her husband, Martin, a professor, buys a beautiful house in a rural setting, where Alice is to convalesce while Martin screws his students. The house is in need of renovations and that is where Ed, the carpenter, comes in.

Ed and Aline become partners in home improvement. Martin is tight with the purse strings, so, to keep herself busy, Alice starts cleaning, polishing, and painting the house. Ed is a conscientious worker, not like the other guys on the crew renovating the house. Ed works day and night to get the job done. He's a man with a philosophy: "hard work builds the world." Alice, inspired by Ed's determination, finds herself a job in a paint store.

So far it's a pleasant enough story that touches on some serious subjects. Alice, for instance, was committed to a mental hospital after cutting one of Martin's suits into tiny squares. Admittedly, this is not a nice thing to do but it's the only reason for her institutionalization that is seen or mentioned – an interesting comment on power relationships in the realm of mental illness.

And Ed, an "old-fashioned" guy, has a working style in distinct contrast to the young layabouts on the renovation crew and their genial, but inept foreman. Given Ed's subsequent (and prior) history, this may be taken as an ironic comment on the prevailing work ethic.

There's a certain absurdity to all this content because *The Carpenter* is a horror film. Apart from his attitude to work, one of the things that separates Ed from the other renovators is that he's dead, has been for years. He was the original owner and builder of the house, a fact which explains his devotion to it. Ed was a perfectionist, and he wanted to do the job by himself so he would know it had been done right. Eventually, he was sent to the electric chair for letting his temper get out of hand, when the repo men came to collect his tools and materials. Now he is back, not only in the house, but as the house. Scratch the paint, and you scratch Ed.

If you don't know that *The Carpenter* is a horror film, or if that information doesn't immediately limit your expectations, there are other options while you wait for the gore. A feminist analysis of the film is certainly possible, as Alice seems to embody all of the classic characteristics that create a dependent woman. She succeeds in overcoming them, with the help of her independent sister.

Director David Wellington has a background in commercials and rock videos, which is evident during the opening sequences of the film. The film looks good, but it takes a long time to get from Alice's breakdown to the first grisly act. You don't even find out about the "story behind the house"



Lynn Adams and Wings Hauser in *The Carpenter*

until half the film has gone by. In that space, there's a lot of time to notice the music and the camera work, which together give the house a sense of atmosphere. If the audience is expecting to get right into the gore and the morally purifying experience of watching teenagers get murdered for experimenting with sex, they'll be disappointed. The actual "blood and guts", when it comes, isn't entirely out of the blue, and it also isn't gratuitous. Wellington comes up with a few creative answers to the question "how do I use this thing?", something a lot of people ask when they first lay their hands on carpentry tools.

By mid-film, *The Carpenter* is on more familiar territory, murdering sexually promiscuous people. The first victim is a construction worker, part of the crew renovating the Jarrets' house. He is interrupted by Ed as he attempts to rape Alice. A student who is pregnant with Martin's child is disposed of by Ed, as is Martin a little later on. These are all problematic deaths because they set up a situation in which Ed becomes Alice's protector.

Ed and Alice are sympathetic characters for most of the film, in fact, the only characters who are not reprehensible on some level. The ending is a showdown between Ed and Alice. On one side, a traditional guy who is not just identified, but fused with the house; on the other, a woman emerging from a lifetime of being dominated by men and the houses they put her in. Pretty scary, kids!

*The Carpenter* attempts to do more than the average horror flick, which may be responsible for its status as a film few Canadians, (or anyone else), will ever see. A 1987 film from Goldgems Canada, it seems to have been sucked into the

black hole of Canadian distribution difficulties. This failure doesn't rank as a national tragedy, but the film does have a sense of humor about itself and a refreshing freedom from the strictures of the commercial horror genre. It's probably just these qualities that have kept it from general release.

*The Carpenter* has its flaws, particularly the clumsy characterization of the policeman who delivers the story about Ed and the house. But I would recommend this film to anyone who frequents horror films as an eccentric example of the genre.

Janet Neely •

**THE CARPENTER** p. Pierre Grise d. David Wellington sc. Doug Taylor d. o. p. David Franco ed. Roland Pollack mus. Pierre Bوندock sd. Juan Gutierrez set des. Sylvain Gendron l. p. Wings Hauser, Lynn Adams, Pierre Lenoir. Produced by Goldgems Canada. col. 35mm. 87 min.

## Micheline Lanctôt's Onzième Spéciale

**E**very now and then, an old story is told in a new way, and it catches our attention. *Onzième Spéciale* is a comedy with style, the latest accomplishment of director Micheline Lanctôt. The film tells the story of Esther Camino, a woman stepping into that stage of life often termed "mid-life crisis." This is the moment we are invited to share, and the experience is surprising.

Why surprising? Is it that we don't expect – rightfully or wrongfully – such a well-orchestrated tragi-comedy from a film labelled "made-for-television"? First impressions are of clever banter, witty and alive. How refreshing it is to be with characters who take their actions and words to the extreme. Call it satire, call it buffoonery, the style is true to the excessive behaviour of a person in crisis. Cathartic, liberating. Exaggeration in writing, acting and *mise-en-scène* tell us from the very first confrontation (and there are many) that we are in for a bumpy ride.

Accompanying this all-Montreal journey is a soundtrack by jazz pianist Lorraine Desmarais. Her music punctuates Esther's search for meaning in a manner reflective of Esther's own style – passionate, improvisational, making new choices at every turn of a phrase – and keeps the mood playful and light.

What happens in *Onzième Spéciale*? Esther, 35-year-old wife and mother, could have become a "recognized" painter if she had concentrated on doing so. Instead, she feels that her life has been a somewhat haphazard chain of romantic events and creative endeavours. At 35, her dream world becomes unglued, and the lack of recognition as a painter brings on her crisis. An invitation to a high school reunion (the "Onzième Spéciale" of the title) serves as the proverbial last straw that starts her on a journey inward, outward, downward, back. For the duration of the film, Esther searches for meaning in her past accomplishments, collecting images and experiences. Together with her, we construct one large portfolio of her life and art.

There are really two themes in *Onzième Spéciale*. Woven into a story of the artist's self-doubt is bright, critical repartee about the institutionalization of the art world, with a special spotlight on bureaucrats and other "impurists" who put obstacles in the path of the true artist. Oddly enough, the character never reconciles this need for approval from those she regards with great disdain. (Whose story is this anyway?)

Lanctôt's direction of actors and camera is skillful and highly stylistic. Leading actress Sylvie-Catherine Beaudoin is a former member of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and stage actress. Her Esther is physical and sensual, curiously comfortable – even defiant – in the skin of one in such mental turmoil.

Her screen-mate, Robert Toupin, known especially for his television endeavours, is solid in a role which occasionally demands responses which don't fit the male stereotype we are otherwise encouraged to construct. The remaining cast are reminiscent more of stage than screen players, full of gesture and exaggerated personality.

I suppose we could stay at the level of story, themes and acting, when looking at this "made-for-TV" creation, but *Onzième Spéciale* merits further regard. The subtle artistry of