David Wellington’s
The Carpenter

As 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 screw his students. The house is in need of renovations and that is where Ed, the carpenter, comes in.

Ed and Alice 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 off one of her fingers. What’s more, if Alice’s hand is cut off, Ed doesn’t simply replace it. He’s a man with a conscience.

Given Ed’s subsequent (and prior) history, this may be taken as an ironic 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. Admittedly, this is not a nice thing to do—but it’s the only reason for his institutionalization that is seen or mentioned—his sympathy and an interest in power relationships in the realm of mental illness.

There’s a certain absurdity to all this content because The Carpenter is a horror film. Apart from its attitude to work, one of the things that separates Ed from the other renovators is that he’s dead, dead for years. He was the original owner and builder of the house, a fact which explains his devotion to the house. Ed was a perfectionist, and he wanted to do the job by himself so he would not have it done right. Eventually, he sent to the electric chair for letting his wife and mother know it had been done right. Eventually, he sent to the electric chair for letting his wife and mother know it had been done right.

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The Carpenter attempts to do more than the average horror film, which may be responsible for its status as a film few Canadians (or anyone else) will ever see. A 1987 film from Goldkamp, it seems to have been sundered into a black hole of Canadian distribution difficulties.

Why surprising? Is it that we don’t expect—rightfully or wrongly—a well-orchestrated tragedy-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 buttockery, 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, has 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.

Lanctôt’s direction of actors and camera is skilful 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 comforting—even defiant—in the skin of one 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 players, full of gesture and exaggerated personality.

I suppose we could say 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