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 scours 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 one of her institutionalized absence.

The Carpenter is a horror film. Apart from its status as a film few critics have been inspired to review, it is a film whose credits seem to have been sucked into the black hole of Canadian distribution difficulties. This failure doesn't tank 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 office. Wellington comes up with a few clever banter, witty and alive. How refreshing it seems to have been nailed into

Micheline Lancot's
Onzième Spéciale

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 Lancot. The film tells the story of Esther Canino, a woman stepping into that stage of life often termed "mid-life crisis." This is the moment we are invited to view, and the experience is surprising.

Why surprising? Is it that we don't expect—rightfully or wrongly—a well-orchestrated tragicomedy 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 ill-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 somewhat hopscotched 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. Written into a story of the artist's self-doubt is bright, critical reappraise of the institutionalization of the art world, with a special spotlight on bureaucrats and other "impeccable" personalities who put obstacles in the path of the true artist. Oddly enough, the character never recognizes that need for approval from those who regard with great disdain. (Whose story is this anyway?)

Lancot'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 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
structure, direction, and image enhance this familiar story and its characters. If the term “fragmentation” can be used to describe Esther’s psychological state, it can also be seen as inherent in the montage and visual style of Onzième Spéciale, a collection of images and experiences from Esther’s life and art. This is truly an episodic film (albeit, television), and the insights are sporadic, for Esther as well as the viewer. Lacôti’s subtle images (she worked with cinematographer Pierre Mignot and art director Louise John) capture Esther in her own opaquerevealing a muted and distorted window through patterned glass, silhouettes. Esther is one against the world—her family, the organized art community, her high school alumni—and she is often filmed in perspective with the physical space around her. Perhaps most importantly, we see her against a blank canvas, unable to execute a self-portrait. The overall visual approach emerges as a metaphor for Esther’s confusion, questioning the notion of images and who creates them. Although unable to “see” herself, Esther paints images of other women, and renders them disrobed, disfigured, silenced. The work we see in point of view, full of the questions “what is woman?” and “of what is her self-image made?”

A character film, a mise-en-scène film. An editor’s film. Surprising for “made-for-television.” Not surprising considering the creative team. A look behind the camera reveals quite a constellation, so much so that is difficult to say whether aesthetic critique is appropriate here. Espionage?

What are the drawbacks of Onzième Spéciale? Lacôti offers no answers for Esther’s human drama—only windows. And surely the characters are stereotypical, and the critical player of the art world has been heard before. Yet the humour, creativity, and freshness with which the story is told merit the retelling.

Harriet Wichin •


Sylvie Catherine Beaudoin as Esther in Onzième Spéciale

The danger comes from two sources: (a) the similarity of terrain permits the Canadians to substitute fraudulently their Northwest for ours, and (b) their actors, writers and directors have managed, through years of painstaking imitation, to pass for one of U.S. Writers, were it not so commercially and near-sellout attempt to penetrate us, could be dismissed as Least Masts Godzillas, Three Days of the Ocesm or Grizzly and the War Games. The hybrid titles are a natural outgrowth of the CIA-operation-gone-wrong and danger-stakes-the-land-as-a-consequence slogan, another cloaking achievement of that all-powerful multinational conglomerate, Industrial Plot and Artistic. Specifically, Watchers deals with the escape of the “ultimater predator”, a.k.a. Outside Experimental Combat Manual or Ocoem. Ocoem Must Be Stopped, not only because it keeps on killing everyone in its way with predictable regularity and not only because it is telepathically linked to a nice doggie, but because the CIA team that created and trained it has a Hidden Agenda, wouldn’t you think?

Ocoem’s M.O. seems to be mostly ripping out esophagi and detenences, and he (she?) leaves a bloody trail until he Meets Its Match in the person of a clean-cut teenager and his rather cute Mom.

As indicated at the beginning of this report, Watchers is a force to be reckoned with. It is a professional script, with a 9.89 beating click-ratio, with fully computerized scenario and die-hard-sequenced, featuring a Syd Field-tested structure with tug-of-war dramatics and characterization.

For the most part, the direction and cinematography demonstrate schlock-proof tradecraft. Actors, with the exception of Ocoem, turn in a performance perfectly matching the exigencies of the project. Clean Teen, Punky Mom and Sneering Villain being possibly more memorable than the script called for, but this could have been caused by an error in writing. Ocoem’s efficacy is difficult to determine; possibly for budgetary reasons, he, she, it is never fully visible. Not even its status as a mammal can be certified on the basis of visual sighting.

However, we must bite the bullet: the Canadians nearly got away with successfully launching across the border a nearly-perfect pod, a deceptive well-made and commercially feasible replicate of a U.S. B-89 Bomb. Almost, but not quite.

Fortunately, Watchers has been intercepted by the undersigned before it could become part of American culture. This, thanks to the vigilance of this operative and some minor, but telltale flaws in the film’s concept and execution.