it becomes evident, while watching Kingsgate, that one is observing the work of a Canadian "master." Jack Darcus is a director whose unique vision is fine-tuned, whose mode of expression is honed to a particular perfection for the conveyance of a powerful message.

In Kingsgate, Darcus makes creative use of a sensibility generally found in English Canadian film drama—deadened sound, overly dramatic musical effects, and theatrically "realistic" acting, all used here to alternatingly chilling and sardonic effect.

Kingsgate grapples with familiar fare: alcoholism and troubled couples. Darcus, with a tremendous script, takes these subjects (difficult ones to explore with new insight) and spins webs of emotional blackmail over a whitewash of contemporary malaise and alienation. The effect is not only thought provoking and moving (no small feat) but filled with black humour and altogether unnerving.

Kingsgate has only two principal locations: a suburban home and a country estate, the only respite being the driveways, a veranda, a country path, a motel room, a barn and a car. The result is an effective, claustrophobic atmosphere. All the scenes take place in either of these settings, then either alone or together.

There is something about Kingsgate that holds you, pulls you in close to the silences, forces you to listen and to watch. The dialogue is dense, emotion packed and often cutting. It's a literate, finely detailed screenplay. It supports the intricacies of the powerfully stylized performances of an excellent ensemble cast.

Three couples' lives are interconnected by ties of kinship and intimacy. Their individual failings lead within unsuccessful relationships. Their behaviour is constrained and distorted. These men and women do not suffer the stresses of poverty, disability or disenfranchisement. These are privileged, cerebral, white middle-class heterosexuals drowning themselves in alcohol, confused communications and repressed, misdirected emotions. And despite their efforts to push away from each other, they each crave companionship, whatever its nature. Their world is a desperate one where even the cows are drunk.

Tom (Christopher Plummer) and Marlene (Roberta Maxwell) are the overblown patriarch and matriarch who are crushed by their own destructive routines. Both alcoholics, they tear at each other emotionally, then physically in a never-ending cycle of love-hate. Tom threatens Marlene with dissolution—he's always got a younger woman on the go—an escape route when things get too hot at home, a scalding poker to thrust at his wife and stir up the flames of anguish. She vents sorrow, frustration, then anger, in tearful verbal outbursts and fits of vandalism against him. His response: running away again, always to come back.

In the shadow of this abusive rage is their adult daughter, Fee (Elizabeth Danaro). Although now living on her own, she cannot quite bring herself to pull completely away from her parents. The family ties are too tight. And when the pot boils over, and the emotional gus begin to spill, she reaches for the bottle herself.

Ellis (Duncan Fraser), her boyfriend, the invited rebound observer, is continually urged to plunge into the neurotic squabbles. He's always planning to leave but never does; his continued presence alone involves him. The only non-drinking character, the others turn to him in their desperate drunkeness to try to express what each can't bring herself to express to his/her mate. A little soft on strength of character, Ellis is a seemingly "together" guy with hardly an angry bone in his body—the perfect type to be badgered. Going with the flow or operating out of sheer desperation in situations he doesn't know how to deal with, the only trait Ellis has which colours him in any way other than passive and indecisive, is his reputation as a womanizer. However, we are left with the impression that this so-called womanizing is in effect a result of his inability to be involved in an honest, challenging relationship in the first place. Living off his tenous reputation as a professor of literature, he has one expertise: the analysis of the work of his friend and idol, the prolific writer, Daniel Kingsgate.

Alan Scarr's portrayal of Kingsgate is a tour de force. His every moment on the screen ripples with pent-up hostility and searing emotional pain.

Kingsgate is a man whose cutting wit, bitter cynism, destructive creative drive and alcoholism, fire a furnace that never cool. He smolders in his isolated country house and his surrounding expanses, about to burst into flames with the slightest gust of instigation.

With Kingsgate lives his wife, Brenda (Barbara March), also a writer, a victim of his psychological and sometimes physical abuse, who defends herself with alcohol and a running commentary on the angst that is their existence. Always wanting to escape but never acting upon the desire, she is mired in a mutually destructive relationship that has nowhere to go but down, then up.

The film has a fascinating way of alternating between high-pitched melodrama, black comedy and the edges of psychological horror. It is indeed "social horror," mirroring severe social disarray. With Kingsgate, Darcus offers up the dark side of a deadly lull.