

REVIEWS

Allan Winton King's

Silence of the North

Silence of the North opened in Winnipeg to small crowds, most of them come to see themselves or their friends on screen as extras. At least they came to the cinema.

Silence of the North is the true story of Olive Frederickson (played by Ellen Burstyn), who, in 1919, left behind a stable, dull life to follow her childhood sweetheart, Walter (Tom Skerritt), into the wilderness of the great white north. It is the story of an innocent girl's growth into a strong woman; a story of courage and fortitude against all odds. It's a story that should inspire us. It does not.

It has become fashionable to make films portraying women as strong and independent, positive role models. To some degree *Silence* is a fashionable film. Nothing wrong with that, *per se*, except that too many of Olive's strengths are presented to us as axioms of her femaleness. We do see her in moments of crisis, but are given little insight into the inner conflicts she must have suffered while coming to terms with her lot in life. She appears to gather her resources overnight, and thereafter lives remarkably well in a male-dominated world. It's difficult to believe it was that easy. If nothing else, one expects at least one rip-roaring fight between Olive and Walter. Given the circumstances in which they live - cold, hungry, and very isolated - their relationship is miraculously harmonious.

There's an art to putting a true story on film, and that art demands considerably more imagination and sensitivity than *Silence* exhibits. It demands the ability to distinguish what is important in real life from what will actually work on screen.

As one example of the film's failure in this regard, on their first voyage north, Olive and Walter are accompanied by a friend. They witness his death by drowning. Who this friend is in the general scheme of things we do not know, and why we should care is even less evi-

dent. That a shot of the stormy water over his head is immediately followed by a shot of Walter smiling at his work is not a testament to the resilient human spirit, but a further negation of the friend's importance. Doubtless, the incident had an impact on the real Olive, but in terms of the story the film is out to tell, it is irrelevant.

Similarly, Olive's devotion to her mother, and her love of the violin are insufficiently documented and poorly supported by the rest of the action. They too, as used in the film become useless information. We could forgive their presence if they added anything to Olive's characterization. As used, they do not.

The fact that it's a true story doesn't make *Silence of the North* any easier to believe. Maybe it all really happened exactly as the film portrays it. More likely, the film telescopes a lot of the action in order to fit in as much as possible. Maybe their first child really did appear out of the blue. (It certainly arrives as a complete surprise to the audience.)

Raise your hand if you believe the following: after several agony-filled long, lonely winter days and nights, Olive emerges into the snowy landscape playing a violin (note: undamaged by extreme northern temperatures). Shades of Frankenstein, Walter appears like a jack-in-the-box, his beard freshly trimmed, and a song in his heart. He has just returned from a gruelling sojourn in the wilderness.

Truth is stranger than fiction, you say. Maybe so, but screenwriter Knop and director King could surely have found a better way to translate these truths into digestible screen realities.

One of the film's greatest weaknesses is Walter. He is the crux of the tale, the reason it all happened in the first place. Even for the dreamer that he is, Skerritt's Walter has altogether too many stars in his eyes. Too naive and immature to provide inspiration to anyone, it is no wonder Olive finally abandons him to his foolish dreams.

The time spent in the north and the near death of his family have no appreciable effect on him. Minutes after a "wild man" has robbed them of all he can carry, including their winter food supply, Walter is on his knees, scavenging for safety pins, a knife and hatchet, telling Olive how he'll make a fishing

rod and kill animals with his bare hands. All well and good in reality, but if one closes one's eyes and listens to the tone of his voice, it's too easy to conjure up Mickey Rooney talking to Judy Garland. The only thing missing from this display of resourcefulness is the "gee whizz" and the "golly". One only hopes the real Walter had more to recommend him.

The north too is drained of allure, robbed of its powerful presence. One does not feel cold watching this film. One does not have any sensation of space. And one never loses the feeling that the little wilderness cabin is really not too far from the next cabin, or the next. The only moments of isolation we share with Olive take place inside the cabin. While they are very powerful scenes in themselves, they are not supported by the outside environment. Olive might be an agoraphobic housewife wasting away in suburbia for all we know. It takes more than snow, wolves howling, and a grizzly in the yard to convey a rugged existence. Inside the cabin, life is certainly miserable. Outside, the north in *Silence* looks like a winter wonderland. Surviving on tree bark comes across like a romantic interlude.

What saves the film, besides getting Walter and the snow off the screen, is the introduction of John Frederickson, a lonely trapper who saves their lives during a blizzard. Gordon Pinsent is at his finest in this role. It would have been very easy to simply portray Frederickson as one of those quickly desperate men about whom all good mothers warn their daughters. While his desires are threatening - to him as well as to Olive - and may at any moment overwhelm him, Pinsent paints a complex and subtle portrait of a man, gentle to the last; a man remarkable in many quiet ways. He is a constant pleasure to watch.

Come to tell Olive of Walter's death, Pinsent imbues the screen with an awesome blend of emotions, and Burstyn responds, finding the essence of Olive and showing her to us whole, even as she crumbles under the weight of her sorrow. It is a memorable scene and one in which the talents of cast and crew shine.

Indeed, there is a chemistry created by Pinsent and Burstyn that gives life to the film. It appears that their talents in-

spired each other. The results are satisfying. Burstyn's performance improves markedly when she shares the screen with Pinsent. As the young Olive, someone should have told her that innocence is more complicated than bright eyes and a charming smile. But as the mature Olive, playing against a fine actor, her characterization rings true.

The relationship between Olive and Frederickson in depression Calgary suffers only superficial conflicts. It meanders its way towards an inevitable end, thereby draining the couple's trials and tribulations of their significance.

Conspicuously lacking real drama and hopelessly linear, the film fails to blend its various elements into a satisfying whole. The winning moments don't quite make up for the bad.

Silence of the North is not a bad film - one likes it while watching it - but afterwards, over coffee, one talks of something else.

The real Olive must be a remarkable woman. Surely her story deserves a more memorable treatment.

Jane Dick ●

SILENCE OF THE NORTH d. Allan Winton King p. Murray Shostak ac. Patricia Louisiana Knop, based on the book "The Silence of the North" by Olive Frederickson with Ben East co-p. Robert Baylis d.o.p. Richard Leiterman, C.S.C. p. des. Bill Brodie editorial consult. Eve Newman, A.C.E. ed. Arla Saare cost. des. Olga Dimitrov Song "Comes A Time", music & lyrics by Neil Young, performed by Lacy J. Dalton mus. comp. Allan MacMillan mus. adap. & scored Jerrold Immel superv. p. exec. Douglas Green p. man. Gwen Iveson mus. ed. Joan Biel loc. man. Michael MacDonald unit man. Gordon Mark asst. to p. Alma Lee compt. Lacia Kornyo a.d. Rob Lockwood (1st), Libby Bowden (2nd), Rick Thompson (2nd), Kim Winther (3rd) cast. Bill Batliner (L.A.), Claire Walker (To.), Bryan Gjaerman (extras) cam. op. Robert Saad asst. cam. Jack Martin 2nd asst. cam. Raul Randa Steadcam op. Dan Lerner Panagludie op. Craig Di Bona sc. superv. Penny Hynam ed. rec. Bruce Carwardine boom op. Glen Guthrie ed. ed. superv. Jayme Scott Parker, James Troutman, Sound Fx of Canada Inc. sd. cutters Mike Virnig, Jeremy MacLavery, Jim Harrison, Robin Leigh post p. dial. Sharon Lackie ad. rec. rec. Robert L. Hoyt, Nolan Roberts art d. Susan Longmire, Gavin Mitchell, Alicia Keywan trainee art d. Daniel Bradette head ward. mistress Linda Kemp, Nadia Ungaro (asst.) make-up Bill Morgan, Cindy Warner (asst.) hair Paul Le Blanc, Rita Steinman (asst.), Dennis Yungblut (asst.) set dec. Gery Deschênes, Earle Sewchuk prop. master John Berger, Grant Swain (asst.), Doug Shambrooke (asst.), Gus Meunier (asst.) construc. co-ord. Ron McMillan construc. business co-ord. Lynda Haller scenic artist Richard Sturm key grip Andrew Muliani, Robert McRae (asst.) gaffer Ray Boyle best boy Malcolm Kendal gen. op. Rodger Dean unit pub. Prudence Emery stills Shin Suginio stuntman Glen Randall Jr. sp. efx. John Thomas, Ken Johnson (asst.) head wrangler Norm Wells, Lyle Edge (asst.) sp. animal consult. Hubert Wells wild animal handlers Steve Martin, Mark Weiner dog trainer Marc Conway 2nd unit d. Martin Walters 2nd unit a.d. John Board, Rick Thompson 2nd unit d.o.p. Matt Tundo, Keith Woods 2nd unit asst. cam. Dave Kelly, Curtis Peterson, Zoe Dirse, Dan Heather 2nd unit sc. superv. Lily Fournier transp. capt. Nick Sweetman, Pat Brennan (asst.) asst. film ed. Gordon McClellan, Joan Giammarco, Bill Zabala p. co-ord. Trudy Work (location), Judy Roseberg (Toronto) reg. cut. Neg. prop. a. Gabrielle Clery, Dave Hone, Vonnie Hoogstratton, John Webb, Lyn Gibson craft service Roman Bochuk, Debbie Tiffin apprentices Marc Chaisson, Bruce Griffin, Jennifer Coyne, Ted Sanders post p. superv. Don Haig post p. sec. Holly Wise l.p. Ellen Burstyn, Tom Skerritt, Gordon Pinsent, Jennifer McKinney, Donna Dobrijevic, Jeff Banks, Colin Fox, David Fox, Richard Farrell, Larry Reynolds, Frank Turner, Ute Blunck, Thomas Hauff, Freddie Lang, Dennis Robinson, Robert Clothier, Brian Pustukian, Larry Musser, Leah Marie Hopkins, Ken Pogue, Ken James, Albert Angus, Frank Adamson, Murray Westgate, Kay Hawtrey, Booth Savage, Lynn Mason Green, Graham McPherson, Chester Robertson, Paul Verden, Sean Sullivan, Tom McEwen, Chapelle Jaffe, Tom Harvey, Ken Babb, Anna Freidman, Janet Amos, Frank Gay, Peter Stefaniuk, George Myron p.c. Universal Productions Canada Inc. (1979) running time 94 min. dist. Universal.

● Given their circumstances, Ellen Burstyn and Tom Skerritt create a surprisingly harmonious relationship

