

# REVIEWS

## Tzipi Trope's Tell Me That You Love Me

Marriage, observed Blaise Pascal, the first existential philosopher, is the lowest condition in Christendom. In modern parlance, one could say that married life is the bottom line of ordinary human social existence, thus perhaps the secret of its endurance as an institution and its universal fascination.

As one of the fundamental vistas onto both the high hopes and the daily wretchedness of the human condition, the portrayal of marriages poses a considerable challenge to the artist. It takes the consummate mastery of a Bergman (*Scenes From A Marriage*) or, in a slightly different inflection, the eyes and ears of an Allan King (*A Married Couple*) to capture the drama of marriage.

For her first feature film, Israeli director Tzipi Trope took on a topic that might have scared off many a less gutsy filmmaker. Yet in an usually courageous kind of way, she did get it right.

*Tell Me That You Love Me* is that rare and astonishing thing: a film that's honest with itself. And this is all the more surprising given the number of reasons that might have caused *Tell Me That You Love Me* to fail.

For one it is a Canada-Israel coproduction, an approach to filmmaking that has only been used twice before and in both cases with lamentable results.

For another, the use of Canadian actors to articulate a story set in Israel might have seemed inappropriate. But it works, in part because Israel is (more or less) a Western country, and because the marital woes of the middle-classes are universal throughout that Western world.

Thirdly, the Israel of *Tell Me That You Love Me* has neither the realism of contemporary Israeli cinema nor any of the newsmedia imagery of the troubles of a local imperialism. Instead this is an Israel whose internal topography consists of the peaks and valleys of ordinary emotions and whose wars are of the common domestic variety. An imaginary Israel, some might say, but one that is perfectly adequate to the film's story.

Miri (Barbara Williams), journalist, wife and mother, appears perfectly content in her hectic, but enviable middle-class existence. She has a good job as a senior writer for a woman's magazine; a good, hard-working lawyer of a husband, Dan (Nick Mancuso); a good kid; and a best friend, her colleague Leonora (Belinda Montgomery) who is single and less happy.

Miri is working on a major expose on battered wives in the course of which she meets Naomi (Andree Pelletier) who refuses to leave her unemployed husband David (Kenneth Welsh) who beats her.

*Tell Me That You Love Me*, then, works within this triple play on relational possibilities. Miri, fascinated by her polar opposite, Naomi, does the upright, middle-class thing: she meddles. She persuades Naomi to assert her rights and move out, and after some resistance and a confrontation with David's brother,



● Belinda Montgomery and Barbara Williams trade office gossip in *Tell Me That You Love Me*

prevails and helps Naomi relocate. Naomi, however, is not at all grateful at having been liberated from male tyranny.

Puzzled, Miri returns home only to find her own husband in a rage. Dan accuses Miri of not being happy enough, of being too preoccupied with her job, of not wanting sex when he wants – and other husbandly complaints. (Actually Dan is angling for a big promotion to the New York office but it's a surprise.)

Miri abruptly discovers discontent everywhere: Leonora can't find the man of her dreams; Dan is fed up with the daily routine; and Naomi abandons her new-found freedom to return to her wife-beater. Miri's secure world totters.

She throws herself into work, and lands the editor-in-chief's job. Dan announces that they're moving to New York. Miri refuses to give up her career. Dan goes, and so does the marriage.

Now Miri becomes a single, working mother. The months go by. Miri is lonely and abandoned.

She goes off for a much-needed vacation and can't enjoy it. Life, she broods, is bitter and not at all what she thought.

But Miri and Dan meet again. She's missed him, he's missed her. As the sun sinks into the sea, perhaps they'll begin again, or perhaps they won't. There is no happy ending: only ordinary human beings seeking a moment's shelter from their solitude.

If all this sounds cliched, it is – and quite deliberately so. *Tell Me That You Love Me* is an exploration of all the cliches of the middle-class landscape, illuminated as it were from the inside. Witness the conventional décors, the harshness of the lighting, or the fact that Belinda Montgomery rises from bed, her make-up flawless.

It is wrong to assume, however, that cliches, just because they are cliches, do not need to be expressed, that because they are small and insignificant, do not merit to be inflated into artistic statements.

For it is *Tell Me That You Love Me*'s complete respect for the cliches of ordinary experience that allows the film, ever so gently, to suggest that perhaps even the cliches are less cliched than one might have assumed.

And so it is *Tell Me That You Love Me*'s unabashed lack of pretension that is precisely its charm. That this exceedingly modest little film, flaws and all, managed to sneak through the great wheels of the contemporary, global filmmaking machine is utterly delightful.

Much like the film itself, the performances reveal little out of the ordinary: Nick Mancuso is darkly handsome, Barbara Williams is nice, Belinda Montgomery is blonde, Andree Pelletier is odd as an Israeli, and Kenneth Welsh's considerable talents, except for one brief scene, are largely untapped. The little one sees of Israel makes it seem like a good place for a vacation.

Perhaps, in the end, that is what *Tell Me That You Love Me* is: a film postcard from an imaginary place that landed almost by fluke on our snowy doorstep.

Against a background of blue skies, sandy beaches and palm-trees, an ordinary modern woman sends out her message of ordinary misery. There's no extraordinary point, but, to employ the appropriate cliché, it's the thought that counts. And it does.

Michael Dorland ●

**TELL ME THAT YOU LOVE ME** d. Tzipi Trope exec. p. Harold Greenberg, Galia Albin p. des. Kuli Sander d.o.p. David Gurfinkle ed. Yves Langlois mus. Andre Gagnon sc. Tzipi Trope. Sandra Kolber sup. sd. ed. Glen Berman p. Israel Ringel, Jim Kaufman p. execs. Stephen Greenberg, Eddy Rosenberg p.c. Astral Film Productions Ltd., Roll Film Productions Ltd., a 30% Canadian-70%. Israeli coproduction colour 35mm dist. Astral Films Ltd. running time 90 mins. l.p. Nick Mancuso, Belinda Montgomery, Barbara Williams, Ken Welsh, Andrew Rubin, Andree Pelletier, Laurin Weisler, Joseph Bee, Lenny Ravitz, Rina Sheinfeld, Uri Rachlin, Lasha Rosenberg, Mark Ariel

## John Hough's Incubus

I have a filing system into which things simply vanish, specifically my back issues of *Cinema Canada*. Which is a pity, because without them, I cannot offer you, good reader, an informed and reasoned commentary on the relationship of three interesting and important facets of *Incubus*: that it is i) a Canadian taxshelter movie that has ii) made a lot of money on New York City's 42nd St. and the U.S. drive-in circuit, despite being iii) a mess.

John Harkness, who groaned with me through a showing of *Incubus* one otherwise splendid day, avers that facet iii) is a direct result of facet i). He might be right, or it may be that *Incubus* is one of those films that changed hands or went into receivership sometime after principal photography and got gutted that way. The gap between completion and Canadian release suggests this may be the case, but without my trusty back issues, I, for one, shall never know.

Not that it is badly made. Not at all. Cinematographer Albert J. Dunk has learned some of the lessons about chilly Ontario light and the horror genre that Mark Irwin demonstrated so well in *Dead Zone*. British director John Hough displays the same choppy energy and fondness for effectively bizarre, though formally unnecessary, camera angles he showed in 1973's *The Legend of Hell House*.

The acting from old pros John Cassavetes, the hero, John Ireland, the cop, and Helen Hughes, the grandmotherly font of secret lore and terrible secrets, is competently melodramatic. The younger actors, Kerrie Keane, the love interest, Erin Flannery, the daughter, and Duncan McIntosh, the twitchy teen, fall flat fairly frequently, as young actors will in films like this – though McIntosh has a couple of effective scenes as a nervous wreck when sleeplessness and his fear that his dreams are causing the rape-murders drive him around the bend.

But there isn't an actor in the film who doesn't stumble at least once over the ludicrous dialogue and I defy any actor now working to deliver Keane's "I don't like to be berated by Hank" as a convincing, spontaneous eruption of anger.

But dialogue has never been a big virtue in horror films and lines like, "My family have always been witch-hunters," and "Twenty years ago, we burned your mother for witchcraft," need a context to work in and that context is emphatically not a middle-sized, non-isolated city at the end of the 20th century. Actually, there is a line that claims we're in a small, isolated village, so the fault may lie with the locations chosen, but every image, interior and exterior both, shouts city and thus adds to the ludicrousness.

Sub-plots are introduced in mid-flight, giving us scenes of apparently unmotivated conflict that aren't given their context until we've been thoroughly saturated in the confusion of the event. Worse, the all-important (I think) flashback death of Cassavetes' young lover is never adequately explained and, given the demon's daylight identity and the fact that Cassavetes ends up embraced by said demon, that death seems to have been the movie's one