

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



● **Incubus** love-interest Kerrie Keane gets her share of ludicrous dialogue

chance – thoroughly blown – at depth.

Back in the '60s, when AIP and Hammer were doing this sort of supernatural thriller regularly, elements like context, plot and motivation (even the demon in *Incubus* seems confused about what it's doing: if it's an instrument of revenge, why is it killing all those random teens?) were firmly and plainly in place and, for the most part, they didn't matter; they were only there to provide a springboard for the willing suspension of disbelief that makes the scary stuff work.

About the only virtue that writer George Franklin (working from Ray Russell's novel) has carried over from those dear, dead days is that of conducting the mayhem and serious mutilation off-screen. The plot, of course, necessitates it, but Hough has turned necessity into virtue and the killings are classics of their type.

Which brings us back to facet ii): this picture is making money in the States, and one wonders why. It is possible, though not likely, that there's nothing else out there at the moment to satisfy the teenage lust for blood and gore. But *Incubus* is short on those elements, anyway. It's also possible that the notion

INCUBUS Presented by Edward L. Montoro. A Marc Boyman production in assoc. with Mark Films and John M. Eckert Prods. **exec. p.** Stephen J. Friedman **p.** Marc Boyman, John M. Eckert **d.** John Hough **asst. to Mr. Eckert** Philippa King **p. man.** Mary Kahn **p. des.** Edwin Watkins **unit/loc. man.** David Coatsworth **p. sec.** Sue Murdoch **p. acct.** Rosemary McCarty **asst. acct.** Jean MacDougall **sp. efx. d.** Colin Chilvers **asst. d.** David Hood, Louise Casselman, Robert Wertheimer **sc.** George Franklin, based on the novel by Ray Russell **d.o.p.** Albert J. Dunk **cam. op.** Harold Ortenburger **cam. asst.** Neil Seale (1st), Kerry Smart (2nd) **cont.** Lisa Wilder **art d.** Elinor Fairless Hawksley, Tom Doherty, Susan Longmire **set d.** Hilton Rosemarin, Robert James (asst.), Jaro Dick (asst.) **props.** Dan Conley, Doug Shambrook (asst.) **ward.** Erla Lank (head), Mary McLeod (co-ord.), Ann Russell (asst.) **gaffer** Howie Galbraith **best boy** Brian Montague **key grip** Jon Hackett **2nd grip** Jom Kraufer **make-up sup.** Kathy Southern **sp. efx.** Martin Malivoire **Incubus des.** by Les Edwards **Incubus created** by Maureen Sweeney **music** Stanley Myers **sd.** David Lee **sd. ed.** Brian French **stunt co-ord.** Dwayne McLean **ed.** George Appleby, John Schofield (1st asst.), Michael Furoy (2nd) **stills** Horst Ehrlich **casting** Claire Walker/Deirdre Bowen **extras** Peter Lavender **p.c.** Incubus Prod., Inc./Guardian Trust Company **dist.** Pan Canadian **colour** 35mm **running time** 90 min. **lp.** John Cassavetes, John Ireland, Kerrie Keane, Helen Hughes, Duncan McIntosh, Erin Flannery, Harvey Atkin, Harry Ditson, Mitch Martin, Matt Birman, Beverley Cooper, Brian Young, Barbara Franklin, Wes Lee, Neil Dainard, Jennifer Leak, Denise Ferguson, Jack Van Evera, Helen Udy, Lisa Bunting, Michele Davros, Jeffery Mappin, James Bearden, Alan Bridle, Jude Benny, Jeremy Hole, Brian Montague, Dirk McLean.

we've been fed for years, that the teenage audience is actively hostile to anything but graphic bloodletting, is false and that they do, in fact, crave a little more in the way of storytelling and cinematic competence. For, however bad *Incubus* is, it is still incalculably better than the utter, flat mindlessness of *Friday the 13th* and its army of clones.

Andrew Dowler ●

"D.S. Everett's" Running Brave

"D.S. Everett's" *Running Brave*, the story of Billy Mills, the American Indian who won the gold medal in the 10,000 metre run at the Tokyo Olympics, is a film forced to deal with the conventions of three different genres.

First are the time-honoured conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, where the young man goes out into the world to face the encroachments of impending adulthood.

These conventions overlap with the second genre, the alien confronting white society after a life of isolation among his own people. While more literary than cinematic, these conventions then double back onto the *Bildungsroman* aspects of the story, adding the layers of institutional hatred embedded not simply within individuals but within society as well.

The third set of conventions are those of the sports-hero biography, and these are most peculiar of all. In a sports movie, heroes never win because of their skills – indeed, the level of their skills is not relevant. What is important is that they demonstrate character by overcoming adversity. Thus we celebrate *The Stratton Story* (with Jimmy Stewart) because Stratton pitched after losing a leg, Lou Gehrig (*Pride of the Yankees*) for his sudden and unexpected eloquence on his retirement because of illness, and George Gipp not because he was the first Notre Dame runner to gain more than a hundred yards in a game, but because of his famous death-bed speech ("Win for the...").

What is silly about the sports genre, in celebrating people who overcome adversity, is that it loses sight of the fact that sport is about one team having more

talent than the other. I doubt that anyone would be interested in a film about the great superbowl teams of Miami and Pittsburgh, because there, no one had to show character – they had to go out and stomp their enemies, hardly an encouragement for those who like to see underdogs rise up.

Running Brave, directed by Don Shebib (who removed his name from the film after it was recut against his wishes), tries to do its best by all three sets of conventions, and actually manages to hit most of the notes it wants.

Young Billy Mills leaves the reservation to attend the University of Kansas on a track scholarship. He is leaving behind the desperate poverty of his early life for a world where natively suited white people thrust business cards at him during suburban garden parties. After winning his first few runs, facing minor prejudice, and getting a white girlfriend (and fiancée) he is forced, after a visit from his brother, to confront the conflicted nature of his Indian roots and white lifestyle, and returns to the reservation. After his brother's suicide, he joins the Marines and makes the Olympic team. The rest, as they say, is history.

Among the picture's merits, improbable as it may seem, is a startling performance by Robby Benson as Billy Mills. Benson, who has managed in the past 10 years to become an all-purpose symbol of sensitive youth, be it WASP (*One on One*), Jewish (*The Chosen*), Chicano (*Walk Proud*) and now Indian. He is usually so sensitive that he is less a character than a quivering mass, less a human than Bambi after sensitivity training. In *Running Brave*, however, Benson gives a performance of startling strength and what looks like authentic feeling. *Running Brave* is far and away the best film he's made and the best performance he's given, and I thought, until I saw it, that it was probably a better film than he deserved.

The film's other virtues include a genuine pictorial sense of how the west looks, and Shebib's patented gift for the depiction of masculine camaraderie in both the university and reservation scenes.

Where *Running Brave* proves somewhat lacking, however, seems to be in the issue of how society's institutionalized racism affects the Indians – and they are the only visible minority in our society that faces what is legitimately institutionalized discrimination, namely, the reservation system. There is no "Bureau of Jewish Affairs" in Canada or the United States, and one can imagine the outcry if there was.

The paternalism displayed toward the Indian seems to result in a programming of failure in the people. The percentage of Indians who succeed in the white world is much lower than that of other minorities, and this has something to do with the impact of white society on Indian culture over the past three hundred years.

It seems to me that the alternatives available to Indians establish a no-win situation. On the one hand, they can stay on or return to the reservation, where even if they become successful and respected, to the outside world they are still just "reservation Indians." On the other, they can leave and confront the prejudices and splendours of white society, the lying promises of middle-class suburbs and TV commercials. In the white world, success and failure seem to be drawn in such absolute terms, that even if an Indian becomes successful – able to support himself and a family in reasonable comfort in the white world – the true success of our world almost invariably is closed to him, in large part because of the denial of educational opportunities. He has the frustrations of failure without the compensating comfort of his ethnically rooted society.

This seems an area that no fiction film

● Robby Benson startles as *Running Brave's* Billy Mills

