

## Douglas William's **Overdrawn at the Memory Bank**

*Overdrawn at the Memory Bank*, the recently aired on CBC two-hour TV movie produced by RSL Entertainment Corp., makes one wonder how attitudes in this country toward narrative film ultimately will change as the Canadian film industry shifts its energies almost entirely into television production. Not because *Memory Bank* is a brilliant program – it isn't. In fact, if *Memory Bank* were a feature it would be a failure. But it's not a film, it's a TV program. And as television goes, one is never quite sure if this high-tech compendium of old plots and special effects isn't its own peculiar success.

*Memory Bank* demonstrates all too clearly that television programming, even films made for TV, exists according to inherently different principles than feature film. One medium's flaws can often be the other's strengths. Film people will be appalled at *Memory Bank's* cultural disconnectedness. Though it borrows liberally from the Hollywood classic *Casablanca* and George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the program reveals only a superficial affinity with the original themes and concerns of these works. However, when viewed passively with low expectations – as television usually is – *Memory Bank's* familiarity, amiable tone and daunting array of special effects lend a certain amusing appeal.

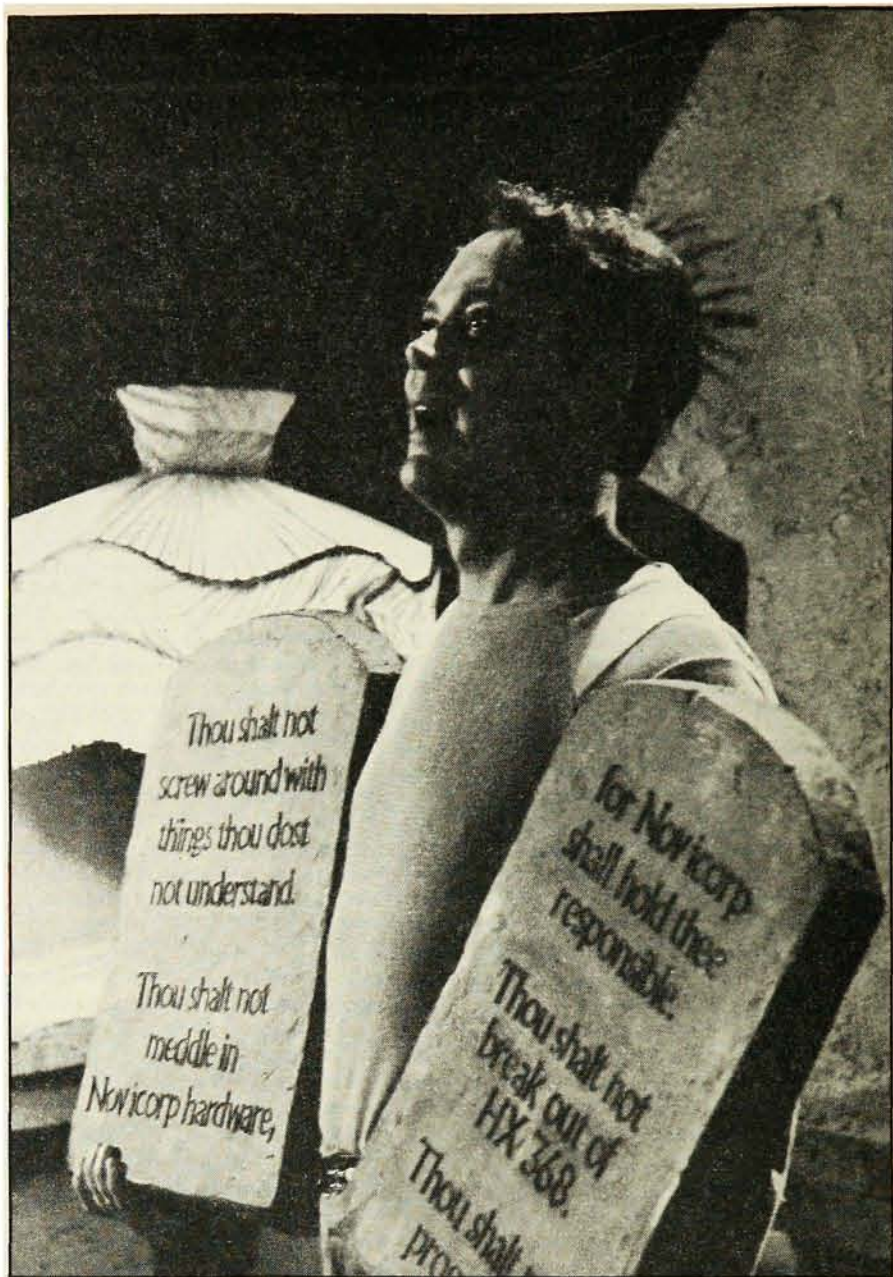
Cinematically, the show makes an intriguing, promising start. Leads Raul Julia and Linda Griffiths stand on opposite sides of a road at night as bodies are hauled away outside what looks like a hospital. The duo make first eye contact: Julia is strong but bewildered, Griffiths is wide-eyed. Griffiths narrates the opening – her voice has that marvellous quality of breathing more life into material than it often deserves – and the

mood assumes the eerie unreality of dream, establishing an ambience of tension, romance and incipient doom.

A skillful opening, say, for an ironic drama about an individual at odds with an oppressive society and the woman who loved him briefly. Yet the program inexplicably shifts gears and becomes instead a loopy comedy set centuries in the future. This is *Memory Bank's* main flaw: it tries to be both serious drama and lightweight, almost silly, comedy, and neither director Doug Williams nor screenwriter Corrine Jucker come close to finding the proper balance.

For example, after the hero, Aram Fingal (Julia) is caught watching *Casablanca* at his computer terminal (all cinema has been banned by Novicorp, the huge communications monolith where he works), one expects the worst, given the totalitarian overtones established early on. Instead, Fingal is dispatched to Nirvana Village – some future variation of Club Med – for a mandatory 48-hour "dopple", a process of exchanging human identities with animals. One asks: what is Fingal's real transgression? Some form of thoughtcrime or just goofing off on the job? Is doppling recreation or torture, or, more insidiously, torture in the guise of recreation? Do the bosses intend to kill off Fingal during his dopple, or do they actually believe a 48-hour stint as Daisy the Baboon is just the thing for his mental health?

The show fails to create a consistently believable sense of time and place, which is the cornerstone of the magic of cinema. If doppling is a tenuous concept, it does have comic potential. Indeed, the scenes of Fingal as a baboon – featuring wildlife stock footage and Julia's sardonic voiceover – are the show's funniest. But when a bevy of schoolkids touring the recovery room on a field trip is used to introduce the complication (a mischievous boy switches Fingal's identity card with a female sex-change patient, peeking up her dress in the process) both the body and the show's dubious promise are lost. The *Casablanca* sequences (Fingal gets to play out his fantasies inspired by the film in Novicorp's main computer – don't ask how he got there) and a mad chase follow, but it's hard to take



● Hi-tech decalogue: Raul Julia in *Overdrawn at the Memory Bank*

seriously. The low point has to be the truly awful scene where Appolonia (Griffiths), the technician assigned to watch over Fingal's romp through the computer, descends from the clouds as Aphrodite to hand down two Biblical stone tablets to Fingal, the first com-

mandment being "Thou shalt not screw around with things thou dost not understand."

Had the filmmakers heeded this advice, they might have reconsidered their approach. It's painful to witness *Memory Bank's* banal rehash of *Casa-*

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*blanca*, especially since this splendid film has already died a thousand deaths at the hands of advertisers and TV hucksters. Likewise with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* motif. Fingal clearly is Winston Smith, as Appolonia is Julia, and the Novicorp chairman (Donald C. Moore) a too literal Big Brother, yet the show reveals only a minimal appreciation of the deeper significance of Orwell's satire, particularly concerning the use of language to control human thought. *Memory Bank* is full of high-tech jargon, but truncating computer technician to comtech hardly reaches the same plain as Orwell's Newspeak.

What the filmmakers do understand, however, is the visual appeal of new video technology. The show's heavy use of computer-generated graphics, special effects, slow motion, mattes, split screens, pixillation and other devices is the only thing - apart from Julia and Griffiths' competent performances - that sustains viewer interest. The direct impact of the visual technique owes more to the video game than the silver screen and its format suggests that some day TV drama might feature a radically restructured narrative approach based on a synthesis of video's strengths and limitations.

One strength (some might call it a limitation) of television is that few people watch it with a critical eye. The telling detail becomes less important than the broad stroke. Thus, *Casablanca* and *Nineteen Eighty Four* are pillaged for their familiarity within the mass consciousness. Yet it almost seems as if it's not really the originals but the superficial imitations that followed - the TV commercials, magazine ads, posters,

T-shirts, comedy sketches - that are *Memory Bank's* true sources. Rather than authentically create its drama within itself, *Memory Bank* relies on the familiarity of borrowed pop images to form an easily understood shorthand. If a close look reveals the characters do not believably exist either in the future or in a particularly oppressive society, the high-tech veneer, space age fashion, wall-banks of sinister computers (sinister because they are so big) and omnipresent technical jargon serves to sketch out the viewer's pre-formed television conception of the Big, Bad Future.

It's worth pointing out that the late Superchannel, which billed itself as the pay-TV service for movie buffs, passed on *Memory Bank*. The CBC, looking to prod its moribund variety department into new directions, took a chance and licensed it. As our society shifts from an industrial to an informational base, some form a parallel shift will probably occur in motion pictures, of which *Memory Bank* affords just a vague intimation. Cinema accommodates a historical perspective. Television is now. Future films/programming may be less cultural artifacts which "say something" about the individuals and the society which created them than spectacular, ephemeral entertainments whose technical virtuosity masks their reinforcement of the status quo. *Memory Bank* succeeds only in the now.

So forget its contradictions - its visual appeal, familiarity and inevitability are as soothing as a walk in warm rain. Even if it is acid rain.

Bruce Malloch ●

## OVERDRAWN AT THE MEMORY

**BANK** p. Robert Lantos, Stephen J. Roth d. Douglas Williams sc. Corrine Jacker, based on the story by John Varley d.o.p. Barry Bergthorson p. des. Carol Spier cost. des. Delphine White mus. John Tucker ed. Rit Wallis sp. efx. ed. Jim Goessinger p. man. Gerry Arbeid post-p. sup. Jennifer Black cast. d. Liz Ramos 1st a.d. Mac Bradden loc. man. Duane Howard asst. p. man. Jeff King p. coord. Alison Oyer assts to p. Andras Hamori, Jo-Anne Bates 2nd a.d. Louise Casselman 3rd a.d. Neil Huhta cont. Nancy Eagles dialog. coach Jim Bearden asst. cast. d. Merri Toth extras Faces and Places p. sec. Jennifer Scott acct. Norma Rose focus puller Edie Craddock tech. p. John Grimditch v.t. op. Norbert Von Derheiot loc. sd. Thomas Hilderly boom Michael O'Connor sup. sp. ed. Ralph Brunjes sd. efx. ed. Christopher Hutton dialog. ed. Catherine Hutton sp. syn. efx. Peter Jermyn re-rec. mixer George Movotny asst. art. d. Dan Davis art dept. trainee Louise Doyle set dec. Elinor Rose Galbraith asst. set dec. Christine MacLean, Martin Weinryb, Bruce McKenna props Peter Lauterman asst. props Joe Hampson gaffer Richard Allen best boy Martin Harrison 3rd elec. Tom Fennessey gen. op. Randy Jones key grip Norman Smith best boy Brian Daniels 1st asst. ward. Sherry McMorran ward. mist. Mary Jane McCarty make-up Shonagh Jabout hair. Ivan Lynch unit pub. Linda Shapiro public relations stills Alex Dukay const. man. Bill Harman craft serv. Steve Payne p. assts. Ethan Rill, Bill Bannerman, David Maltese, Gabe Fallus post. p. & comp. graphic Mobile Image of Canada sp. video efx. Geoffrey Haines-Stiles and Jim Goessinger efx. coord. Erna Akuginow Dubner graphics Jennifer Black Dubner op. Heather Goldin tape op. Grant Ranalli ADO efx. Omnibus Video Inc. The producers wish to thank: Alcan Canada Foils, Bard Canada Inc. Mississauga, Ont., Fine Arts Editions, John Godfrey, A.E. LePage Limited, Jeanne Mulcahy add. comp. grafix. Cranston/Csuri Productions, Inc. Columbus, Ohio, Digital Effects New York, N.Y., Evans & Sutherland Salt Lake City, Utah, Cartos System, Columbia University, Computer Graphics Facility, Prof. Cyrus Levinthal, General Electric C.A.E. International Milford, Ohio, Geosource Research & Development Houston, Texas, Athletic Footwear Provided by RMP Athletic Locker Ltd. and Brooks Athletic Shoes, Futuristic Clothing Provided by Nicola Pelly and Harry Parnass for Parachute, Nabet AFC - Local 700, Canadian Financial Arrange-



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