

Leon Marr's

Dancing in the Dark

Critics at Cannes, in Toronto and Montreal have quite correctly confirmed Leon Marr's **Dancing in the Dark** as English Canada's European film of the year. In the best tradition of the Masters, the various new waves and new national cinemas, Marr has turned his back on the California formulae. His cinema-as-opposed-to-movies work values minutely detailed characterization, inhumanly restrained action, non-linear narrative, and, above all, talk.

Marr's choice of Joan Barfoot's novel as the source of his work was his first step in crossing the Atlantic. **Dancing in the Dark** is, approximately, **Diary of A Mad Housewife**, written as if both madness and housewifery were issues worthy of serious concern. Edna Cormick, on the eve of her 40th birthday, is growing dangerously compulsive about the manner in which she cleans the little things around the house — all the little things. Her husband Harry is cheerfully mundane in his pursuit of the more conventional compulsions of the business world. Harry rewards Edna's extra efforts in so far as he can see them as being relevant. Then he pretty much ignores her.

Like the Europeans, Marr may be applauded for taking on the exploration of a female psyche. Bergman, Godard, Rohmer and now Marr seem to be telling us that the gains made by feminists will be best consolidated when men are invited to participate in a cooperative understanding. **Dancing in the Dark** stands as evidence of the mutual respect with which a male director and female writer may approach each other's talents.

Like Quebec's European film of the year, **The Decline of the American Empire**, **Dancing in the Dark** speaks to this year's headline topic on the international cinematic agenda: the care and feeding of mid-life crises. To Marr, Arcand and the other Canadian directors who have spent the first half of their creative careers waiting for the emergence of a national cinema, the creative crises of mid-life must take on an urgency beyond that endured by their more prolific European colleagues.

But there is a better reason to see **Dancing in the Dark** as a peculiarly



• One woman's descent into madness — a solid contemporary Canadian work

English Canadian version of European cinema rather than a slavish copy of the original. Roughly, it is the politeness with which Marr challenges his audience. Joan Barfoot's novel is in the form of notebooks written by Edna after she has been institutionalized for bringing things to a head. One might expect Marr's adaptation of this quintessentially literary form to take the shape of a wall to wall verbalization, a Godardesque recitation of the text. Or — à la Chantal Ackermann — the director could have forced us to catalogue the visual minutiae adding up to a desperate act.

Marr is nice enough to do both. Martha Henry's voiceover, lasting the length of the film, enhances the pleasantly unbalanced whimsy of the novel. Like a well-done NFB documentary narration, this talking book version of **Dancing in the Dark** treats the image with a carefully balanced web of illustration, commentary and counterpoint.

Given the power of the recited word, Henry's performance as Edna is constantly in danger of degenerating into pantomime. It doesn't. Her restrained rendition of compulsive anality, deep hurt, catatonia and rebirth is finally reminiscent of the best performances in silent cinema itself.

On his part, Marr never lets us forget the manner in which the fragmentation of sound and image parallels Edna's fragmented mental state. Her self-gen-

erated cure is kept in step with signs of audio/visual integration. Harry's face finally emerges from the shadows as she describes him. Harry comes to talk and act like anyone else, only more so. As Edna continues to talk, we begin to recognize the narration on pages of the diary. And, ultimately, in very small doses, Martha Henry as Edna is allowed to speak in synch.

The orderly, somewhat pedantic, progression of Edna's recovery is further underlined by Vic Sarin's cinematography. **Dancing in the Dark** presents us with a world of colour schemes rather than colours, compositions rather than shots, statements as opposed to visual information. Everything we see seems flatly rendered so as to never let us forget its place in *the visual subtext*.

What is true of **Dancing in the Dark**'s cinematography might also be said for the flagrant codification of its costuming and sets. Like Edna's too perfectly decorated house, the "look" of Marr's film seems to be setting us up for some climactic rebellion, an affirmation of an idiosyncratic self that will define the entire structure as self-conscious affectation.

That rebellion never comes. A solid contemporary Canadian work, the film is intelligent and well-crafted. It brings out the best in Martha Henry and generally assures us that our feature film industry has come a long way. The film

even speaks to something like a social concern. But, finally, the difference between **Dancing in the Dark** as a somewhat successful homage to intellectual narrative cinema and the film as a work of genius is Marr's commitment to playing by his own rules. Unfortunately, it is this self-strangulation by structure that is the work's most Canadian aspect.

Seth Feldman •

DANCING IN THE DARK d. Leon Marr p. Anthony Kramreither co-p. John Ryan exec. p. foot p. Anthony Kramreither co-p. John Ryan exec. p. Don Haig sc. Leon Marr based on the novel *Dancing in the Dark* by Joan Barfoot d.o.p. Vic Sarin prod. des. Lillian Sarafinchan ed. Tom Berner cast. Stuart Aikins Casting 1st asst. d. Roman Buchok 2nd asst. d. Jack Clements 3rd asst. d. Wendy Petrozzi 1st asst. cam. Steve Deme 2nd asst. cam. John Davidson, Martin McNally steadycam Julian Chojnacki gaffer David McNichol best boy Hugh McLean key grip Mitchell Holmes assistant grip Cynthia Barlow sd. rec. Urmas Rosin boom Chris Leech cont. Dug Rotstein set dresser Luanna Bayer asst. set dresser Mark Van Alstyne props Jesse Cohoon make-up/hair Irma Parkkonen wardrobe Nada Healy asst. prod. des. Dave Manion prod. coord. Heather Hyslop prod. acct. Nathalie Laporte prod. asst. Rene Livingstone, Michaela Morris stills Susan Shaw, John Herzog cam. equip. William F. White equip. Canadian Motion Picture & Lighting addt. cast Allsorts psych. cons. Mark Teplitsky, M.D. C.M. F.R.C.P. (C) thanks to Credit Valley Hospital asst. film ed. Anita St Denis sd. ed. Tom Berner, Kelly Hall, Anita St Denis, Teresa Hannigan, Darryl Cornford foley Kelly Hall re-rec. Tony Van Den Akker, Phil Sheridan mus. cons. Gary Gilfillan post. prod. Film Arts, The Film House Group negs. Erika Wolff titles Film Effects l.p. Martha Henry, Neil Munro, Rosemary Dunsmore, Richard Monette p.c. Brightstar Films, Film House Group, Film Arts in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation dist. Norstar Releasing Inc. Colour, 35mm running time: 98 mins.

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