

Film Reviews

Rebecca Yates' and Glen Salzman's **Milk and Honey**

Milk and Honey, which opened the Perspective Canada program of the Festival of Festivals, is a laudable attempt to make drama out of that most contentious of issues, immigrant domestic work in Canada.

Commentators have called domestic work a kind of indenture in which the participants, usually Third World women, are at the mercy of their employers regardless of policy and the rules laid out by Immigration and Manpower Canada. These women are supposed to be having an opportunity to upgrade themselves and become landed immigrants. Some do. Many don't.

Milk and Honey is an earnest look at the domestic situation as experienced by one young Jamaican woman, but for all the earnestness of the attempt, *Milk and Honey* fails as a film. It fails because the film's dramatic canvas seems to be barely stretched out, and in the final version the directors did not present a coherent dramatic vision on the screen.

It is important to state here that the directors have publicly dissociated themselves from the final version of the film. But regardless of the structure of the final cut the directors are responsible for the characterization of actors, camera movement, the look and shape of scenes, composition, and the scenes that make up the script. It may be difficult to apportion blame when a film runs into trouble, but it is quite possible to see what works and does not work scene by scene on the screen and to form a judgement on the whole at the end of the process.

The story itself is simple. *Milk and Honey's* main character, Joanna Bell, arrives in Toronto to work as a domestic for a professional couple, the Winebergs. Joanna wants a better life, and while working as a nanny and domestic she attends night school and meets a school principal who is going through a midlife crisis.

Joanna has left her eight-year-old son David in Jamaica, and as months go by begins to miss him terribly. She brings him to Toronto for Christmas and realizes that the child has grown. He is jealous of the Winebergs' children and is at loose ends when Joanna leaves him in an empty apartment to go to work. After the holidays she keeps him in Toronto, thereby setting off the subterfuges and complications that entangle Joanna, the school principal, and David with Canadian Immigration.

The main problem is that the script, as we see it on the screen, is inconsistent and flawed. There are a number of story lines that are not integrated in the film. Ostensibly it is Joanna Bell's story, the "domestic with the illegal child" story, but the script tries to touch on everything—



Leonie Forbes, Richard Mills and Josette Simon in the land of *Milk and Honey*

than affects domestics and illegal immigrants—exploitative employers, exploitative countrymen, loneliness, inter-racial sex, and family separation.

These (undeniably real) issues crowd out Joanna's story, and what *Milk and Honey* gives us is a guided tour of a domestic's situation, all seen from the window of a moving bus. We get a sociological look at the problems of domestics but we never get a look at Joanna, the specific story.

This is a pity, because Josette Simon as Joanna is a luminous presence in the film. (I have heard complaints that Josette Simon does not look like a "typical domestic"—but what does a "typical domestic" look like?)

Simon takes every dramatic scene in which she appears come alive, although the critic wants to ask where her character gets the motivation to be the strong, positive character she is. She is, after all, a naive girl barely out of her teens from a remote country village and new to Canada. No matter. Josette Simon sets off sparks. She does wonders with the character she has. A stronger or more plausible script would have allowed her to fully extend herself. The scenes between Simon and Fiona Reid, who plays her young professional employer in the film, had interest and sparkle. Every time they were on screen together, there was dramatic tension and excitement.

Fiona Reid is too excellent an actress to end up with the limited screentime she has in this film. She could have been a greater asset, and is wasted in *Milk and Honey*.

At least Simon and Reid seem to have found enough in their characters to find the centre of the characters. D'Janet Sears and Errol Slue appeared to be playing without real direction. There seemed to be unmotivated character

changes in their roles that left both performers adrift in implausible characterization.

In particular, D'Janet Sears' character moves precipitously from complaining domestic to stereotypical goodtime girl and all-purpose villainess. We are given no substantial hint or warning that this will be so—except maybe that she always carried a hip flask when she was a domestic. Maybe that is motivation enough for her character. Somehow I don't think so. And Sears' character is essential to a believable plot.

Both Sears and Slue have done fine work in the past and both are veteran performers. The problem here is inadequate character development and inadequate direction.

This seems also to be true for Lyman Ward, who plays the high school principal Adam, Joanna's love interest and white knight in shining armour, who is going through a middle-age crisis and has had a marital breakup. Lyman Ward plays most of the role in a very low-key fashion, as if he isn't sure what he should be doing and so does as little as possible. He is so low-key that his TV-movie heroics to save Joanna from the immigration police seem quixotic and implausible.

(C'mon, fellas, this guy is a nice Canadian high school principal—he's gonna risk his pension for a black domestic with an illegal child and no hope of getting away?)

It's a pity *Milk and Honey* isn't a better film. Heaven knows black stories rarely get onto large or small screens. And Peter O'Brian of Independent Pictures must be complimented on taking a chance with Yates and Salzman.

But frankly, *Milk and Honey* is an opportunity missed. Good intentions are not good enough.
Roger McTair •

MILK AND HONEY exec. p. Peter O'Brian p. l. d. Rebecca Yates, Glen Salzman sc. Glen Salzman, Trevor Rhone line p. Gabriella Martinelli d. o. p. Guy Dufaux art. d. François Seguin ed. Bruce Nyznik mus. Micky Erbe, Maribeth Solomon cons. Ralph Rosenblum p. man. Mary Kahn a. d. Mac Bradden cast. Maria Armstrong, Ross Clydesdale U. K. casting Leo Davis, Just Casting ward. Delphine White sd. des. Bruce Nyznik asst. ed. Anna Pafomow loc. man. Howard Rothschild 2nd. a. d. Felix Gray 3rd. a. d. Richard Todd trainee a. d. Christopher Ball asst. loc. man. Robin Rockett, Gordon Yang p. coord. Sandie Pereira p. a. s. Bruce Robb, Julian Chapman unit pub. Janice Kaye cont. Kathryn Buck 1st. asst. cam. Donna Mobbs 2nd. asst. cam. Charlotte Dasilva cam. trainee Joe Dasilva still photo Michaelin McDermott key grip Mark Manchester grip Hugh Brule dolly grip David Hynes electric Andris Matiss gaffers Mairs Jansons, Christopher Porter best boys Cactus Simser, Ian Bibby genny op. Eldie Benson, Duane Gullison loc. sd. mix John Megill boom op. Jack Buchanan 1st. asst. art. d. Nancey Pankiw set dec. Kimothy Steede set dec. trainee Brooke Lovell prop master Vic Rigler set/props buyer Greg Pelchat props assistant Juanita Holden ward. Maggie Thomas assts. Isabel de Biasio, Silvio Berti makeup Sandra Duncan asst. Karol Jersak hair Reginald LeBlanc p. prod. sup. Gabriella Martinelli sup. sd. ed. Bruce Nyznik sd. re-rec. Paul Massey sd. ed. Alison Clark, Marta Nielsen Sternberg, Nick Rotundo asst. sd. ed. Paul Durand, Leon Wood, Anthony d'Andrea p. prod. asst. Julian Chapman jolcy Terry Burke transportation Jeff Steinberg, Richard Spiegelman, Jamie Weyman, Edward Bowman craft Emmanuel Taylor In Jamaica: p. man. Natalie Thompson, asst. art. d. Jennifer Chang loc. man. Peter Packer 2nd. a. d. Jeremy Francis 2nd. asst. cam. Christopher Browne ward. Cyprian Thomas props Michael London gaffer Keith Wheeler grips Linford Roye, Roderick Levy, Winston Hall drivers Oscar Lawson, Sonny Taylor, Albert Thompson p. sec. Totlyn Oliver p. a. s. Cecile Burrowes, Elizabeth Hall l. p. Josette Simon, Lyman Ward, Richard Mills, D'Janet Sears, Leonie Forbes, Jane Dingle, Errol Slue, Fiona Reid, Tom Butler, Tyler Oxenholm, Brandon Botham, Christopher Doherty, Jackie Richardson, David Ferry, Lubomir Mykytiuk, Robert Wisden, Diane d'Aquila, Irene Pauzer, Lucy Filippone, Richardo Keens-Douglas, Gerry Mendicino, David Smith, Christopher Benson, Charles Hyatt, Dorothy Cunningham, Ann-Marie Fuller, Marjorie Whyllie, Grace McGhie, Yero Magnus, Volier Johnson, Kevin Wynter. Post production services by Soundscore Ltd. Sound re-recording by Master's Workshop Corp. Produced by J. A. Film Company Inc. in association with Zenith Productions Ltd., with the participation of Telefilm Canada, OFDC, and First Choice.