

David Wellington's The Carpenter

As *The Carpenter* opens, Alice Jarret is suffering a nervous breakdown. Her husband, Martin, a professor, buys a beautiful house in a rural setting, where Alice is to convalesce while Martin screws his students. The house is in need of renovations and that is where Ed, the carpenter, comes in.

Ed and Aline become partners in home improvement. Martin is tight with the purse strings, so, to keep herself busy, Alice starts cleaning, polishing, and painting the house. Ed is a conscientious worker, not like the other guys on the crew renovating the house. Ed works day and night to get the job done. He's a man with a philosophy: "hard work builds the world." Alice, inspired by Ed's determination, finds herself a job in a paint store.

So far it's a pleasant enough story that touches on some serious subjects. Alice, for instance, was committed to a mental hospital after cutting one of Martin's suits into tiny squares. Admittedly, this is not a nice thing to do but it's the only reason for her institutionalization that is seen or mentioned – an interesting comment on power relationships in the realm of mental illness.

And Ed, an "old-fashioned" guy, has a working style in distinct contrast to the young layabouts on the renovation crew and their genial, but inept foreman. Given Ed's subsequent (and prior) history, this may be taken as an ironic comment on the prevailing work ethic.

There's a certain absurdity to all this content because *The Carpenter* is a horror film. Apart from his attitude to work, one of the things that separates Ed from the other renovators is that he's dead, has been for years. He was the original owner and builder of the house, a fact which explains his devotion to it. Ed was a perfectionist, and he wanted to do the job by himself so he would know it had been done right. Eventually, he was sent to the electric chair for letting his temper get out of hand, when the repo men came to collect his tools and materials. Now he is back, not only in the house, but as the house. Scratch the paint, and you scratch Ed.

If you don't know that *The Carpenter* is a horror film, or if that information doesn't immediately limit your expectations, there are other options while you wait for the gore. A feminist analysis of the film is certainly possible, as Alice seems to embody all of the classic characteristics that create a dependent woman. She succeeds in overcoming them, with the help of her independent sister.

Director David Wellington has a background in commercials and rock videos, which is evident during the opening sequences of the film. The film looks good, but it takes a long time to get from Alice's breakdown to the first grisly act. You don't even find out about the "story behind the house"



Lynn Adams and Wings Hauser in *The Carpenter*

until half the film has gone by. In that space, there's a lot of time to notice the music and the camera work, which together give the house a sense of atmosphere. If the audience is expecting to get right into the gore and the morally purifying experience of watching teenagers get murdered for experimenting with sex, they'll be disappointed. The actual "blood and guts", when it comes, isn't entirely out of the blue, and it also isn't gratuitous. Wellington comes up with a few creative answers to the question "how do I use this thing?", something a lot of people ask when they first lay their hands on carpentry tools.

By mid-film, *The Carpenter* is on more familiar territory, murdering sexually promiscuous people. The first victim is a construction worker, part of the crew renovating the Jarrets' house. He is interrupted by Ed as he attempts to rape Alice. A student who is pregnant with Martin's child is disposed of by Ed, as is Martin a little later on. These are all problematic deaths because they set up a situation in which Ed becomes Alice's protector.

Ed and Alice are sympathetic characters for most of the film, in fact, the only characters who are not reprehensible on some level. The ending is a showdown between Ed and Alice. On one side, a traditional guy who is not just identified, but fused with the house; on the other, a woman emerging from a lifetime of being dominated by men and the houses they put her in. Pretty scary, kids!

The Carpenter attempts to do more than the average horror flick, which may be responsible for its status as a film few Canadians, (or anyone else), will ever see. A 1987 film from Goldgems Canada, it seems to have been sucked into the

black hole of Canadian distribution difficulties. This failure doesn't rank as a national tragedy, but the film does have a sense of humor about itself and a refreshing freedom from the strictures of the commercial horror genre. It's probably just these qualities that have kept it from general release.

The Carpenter has its flaws, particularly the clumsy characterization of the policeman who delivers the story about Ed and the house. But I would recommend this film to anyone who frequents horror films as an eccentric example of the genre.

Janet Neely •

THE CARPENTER p. Pierre Grise d. David Wellington sc. Doug Taylor d. o. p. David Franco ed. Roland Pollack mus. Pierre Bوندock sd. Juan Gutierrez set des. Sylvain Gendron l. p. Wings Hauser, Lynn Adams, Pierre Lenoir. Produced by Goldgems Canada. col. 35mm. 87 min.

Micheline Lanctôt's Onzième Spéciale

Every now and then, an old story is told in a new way, and it catches our attention. *Onzième Spéciale* is a comedy with style, the latest accomplishment of director Micheline Lanctôt. The film tells the story of Esther Camino, a woman stepping into that stage of life often termed "mid-life crisis." This is the moment we are invited to share, and the experience is surprising.

Why surprising? Is it that we don't expect – rightfully or wrongfully – such a well-orchestrated tragi-comedy from a film labelled "made-for-television"? First impressions are of clever banter, witty and alive. How refreshing it is to be with characters who take their actions and words to the extreme. Call it satire, call it buffoonery, the style is true to the excessive behaviour of a person in crisis. Cathartic, liberating. Exaggeration in writing, acting and *mise-en-scène* tell us from the very first confrontation (and there are many) that we are in for a bumpy ride.

Accompanying this all-Montreal journey is a soundtrack by jazz pianist Lorraine Desmarais. Her music punctuates Esther's search for meaning in a manner reflective of Esther's own style – passionate, improvisational, making new choices at every turn of a phrase – and keeps the mood playful and light.

What happens in *Onzième Spéciale*? Esther, 35-year-old wife and mother, could have become a "recognized" painter if she had concentrated on doing so. Instead, she feels that her life has been a somewhat haphazard chain of romantic events and creative endeavours. At 35, her dream world becomes unglued, and the lack of recognition as a painter brings on her crisis. An invitation to a high school reunion (the "Onzième Spéciale" of the title) serves as the proverbial last straw that starts her on a journey inward, outward, downward, back. For the duration of the film, Esther searches for meaning in her past accomplishments, collecting images and experiences. Together with her, we construct one large portfolio of her life and art.

There are really two themes in *Onzième Spéciale*. Woven into a story of the artist's self-doubt is bright, critical repartee about the institutionalization of the art world, with a special spotlight on bureaucrats and other "impurists" who put obstacles in the path of the true artist. Oddly enough, the character never reconciles this need for approval from those she regards with great disdain. (Whose story is this anyway?)

Lanctôt's direction of actors and camera is skillful and highly stylistic. Leading actress Sylvie-Catherine Beaudoin is a former member of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and stage actress. Her Esther is physical and sensual, curiously comfortable – even defiant – in the skin of one in such mental turmoil.

Her screen-mate, Robert Toupin, known especially for his television endeavours, is solid in a role which occasionally demands responses which don't fit the male stereotype we are otherwise encouraged to construct. The remaining cast are reminiscent more of stage than screen players, full of gesture and exaggerated personality.

I suppose we could stay at the level of story, themes and acting, when looking at this "made-for-TV" creation, but *Onzième Spéciale* merits further regard. The subtle artistry of

structure, direction, and image enhance this familiar story and its characters.

If the term "fragmentation" can be used to describe Esther's psychological state, it can also be seen as inherent in the montage and visual style of *Onzième Spéciale*, a collection of images and experiences from Esther's life and art. This is truly an episodic film (ah, television), and the insights are sporadic, for Esther as well as the viewer. Lancôt's subtle images (she worked with cinematographer Pierre Mignot and art director Louise Jobin) capture Esther in her own opacity; we see her in and through other materials: faceted and distorted in mirrors, silhouetted through patterned glass, windows.

Esther is one against the world - her family, the organized art community, her high school alumni - and is often filmed in perspective with the physical space around her. Perhaps most importantly, we see her against a blank canvas, unable to execute a self-portrait. The overall visual approach emerges as a metaphor for Esther's confusion, questioning the notion of images and who creates them. Although unable to "see" herself, Esther paints images of other women, and renders them disrobed, disfigured, non-human. The art work we see is poignant, full of the questions "what is woman?" and "of what is her self-image made?"

A character film. A *mise-en-scène* film. A theme film. An editor's film. Surprising for "made-for-television." Not surprising considering the creative team. A look behind the camera reveals quite a constellation, so much so that it is difficult to say whether *auteurist critique* is appropriate here. *Équipe-ist*?

What are the drawbacks of *Onzième Spéciale*? Lancôt offers no answers for Esther's human drama - only windows. And surely the characters are stereotypical, and the criticism of the art world has been heard before. Yet the

humour, creativity, and freshness with which the story is told merit the re-telling.

Harriet Wichin •

ONZIÈME SPECIALE p. Roger Frappier d. Micheline Lanctôt sc. Marie Perreault, Louise Roy d. o. p. Pierre Mignot art d. Louise Jobin ed. Michel Arcand orig. mus. Lorraine Desmarais p. mgr. JeanMarie Comeau st. Yvon Benoit 1st. a. d. Jacques LaBerge cont. Thérèse Bérubé 1st. asst. cam. Christianne Guernon unit mgr. Michèle St-Arnaud hd. elect. Daniel Chretien key grip Michel Périard set des. Blanche Boileau props master Pierre Fournier boom Claude Lahaye asst. props Louis Gascon asst. cost. Josée Boisvert makeup Micheline Foisy-Trépanier 2nd cam. asst. Martin Dubois 1st. elect. Manal Hassib grip Jean-Maurice de Ernsted p. a. Maité Sarthou, Pierre Jasmin sd. ed. Paul Dion mix. Shelley Craig acct. Daniel Demers p. coord. Hélène Ross asst. to p. Lyne Lemieux still photo Pierre Drury pub. Christianne Ducas l. p. Sylvie-Catherine Beaudoin, Robert Toupin, Lorraine Pintal, Jean Beaudry, Colin Caroit, Markita Boies, André Melancon, Pierre Collin, Marie-Lou Dion, Ann Caron, Julie Vincent, Lucie Saint-Cyr, Roger Baulu, Johanne Seymour, Andrée Pelletier, Suzanne Champagne, Louise Rinfret, Josée Cusson, Louise Bombardier, Clément Schreiber, Jean-Gabriel Lambert. A co-production of Les Producteurs TV-Films Associés and the NFB, with the financial participation of SOGIC, Téléfilm and Radio Québec.

TOP SECRET

TO: Department of Puerile Entertainment Surveillance (DOPES)
FROM: Agent 008½

Jon Hess'

Watchers

Disguised as a FREAK (Film Reviewer, Exploitation / Actioners / Kitsch) I observed another Canadian attempt to penetrate U.S. drive-in circuits and video-networks camouflaged as a *bona fide* American operation.

If this observer is permitted an opinion, these Canadian undercover activities represent a clear



Corey Haim and a nice doggie foil the nasties in *Watchers*

and present danger to our balance of terror and threaten the cornerstone of U.S. policy in this hemisphere, namely the Marilyn Monroe Doctrine, according to which no other power is allowed to make American movies.

The danger comes from two sources: (a) the similarity of terrain permits the Canadians to substitute fraudulently their Northwest for ours, and (b) their actors, writers and directors have managed, through years of painstaking imitation, to pass for one of U.S.

Watchers, were it not a dangerous and near-successful attempt to penetrate our defences, could be dismissed as *Lassie Meets Godzilla*, *Three Days of the Oxcom* or *Grizzly and the War Games*. The hybrid titles are a natural outgrowth of the CIA-operation-gone-wrong-and-danger-stalks-the-land-as-a-consequence plot, another cloning achievement of that all-powerful multinational conglomerate, Industrial Plot and Action.

Specifically, *Watchers* deals with the escape of the "ultimate predator", a.k.a. Outside Experimental Combat Mammal or Oxcom. Oxcom Must Be Stopped, not only because it keeps on killing everything in its way with predictable regularity and not only because it is telepathically linked to a nice doggie, but because the CIA team that created and trained it has a Hidden Agenda, wouldn't you know.

Oxcom's M.O. seems to be mostly ripping out esophagi and defenestration, and he (she? it?) leaves a bloody trail until he Meets Its Match in

the person of a clean-cut teenager and his rather cute Mom.

As indicated at the beginning of this report, *Watchers* is a force to be reckoned with. It is professionally scripted with a 0.9/beat cliché-ratio, with fully computerized scenario and diesel-powered sequencing, featuring a Syd Field-tested structure with turgid-driven dramatics and characterization.

For the most part, the direction and cinematography demonstrate schlock-proof trade-craft. Actors, with the exception of Oxcom, turn in a performance perfectly matching the exigencies of the project. Clean Teen, Spunky Mom and Sneering Villain being possibly more memorable than the script called for, but this could have been caused by an error in wiring. Oxcom's efficacy is difficult to determine; possibly for budgetary reasons, he, she, it, is never fully visible. Not even its status as a mammal can be certified on the basis of visual sighting.

However, we must bite the bullet: the Canadians nearly got away with successfully launching across the border a near-perfect pod, a deceptively well-made and commercially feasible replicate of a U.S. B-'89 Bomb.

Almost, but not quite. Fortunately, *Watchers* has been intercepted by the undersigned before it could become part of American culture. This, thanks to the vigilance of this operative and some minor, but telltale flaws in the film's concept and execution.



Sylvie Catherine Beaudoin as Esther in *Onzième Spéciale*